

Josephus On Rebekah

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Module : CLAH 7018

Ancient literature very much like the ancient world remained predominantly driven by men, yet, we do come across some women that stand out as we study the ancient world. In the Jewish Antiquities, Josephus through the matriarchy aims to establish the idea of an ideal woman. The character chosen for this study - Rebekah, though known as the wife of Isaac, is the first woman to have a strong physical presence in this narrative. Unlike the first matriarch Sarah who is overshadowed by her husband, Rebekah is portrayed independent of Isaac at the beginning of the story and thus leaves us scope to study her nature further.

To understand Josephus' general take on women one cannot help but state his writing in the Vita where he states that he had married thrice¹. The obvious fact that jumps out to the readers is that though Josephus mentions the names of his sons, he does not feel it necessary to give us the names of his wives, not even the one whom he described as 'whose character was beyond that of most other women.' Now while scholars take this to be Josephus' take on women, I would like to perhaps narrow it down and state that this is probably his take on 'wives' and their significance in a purely male driven society. Furthermore, Josephus' view on wives become apparent as he writes "saith the Scripture, "A woman is inferior to her husband in all things" Let her, therefore, be obedient to him; not so that he should abuse her, but that she may acknowledge her duty to her husband; for God hath given the authority to the husband."² This spin on Biblical scripture proves the attitude of the Greco-Roman society towards women at the time. Similarly, Schwartz points out Josephus' views on intermarriage between Jews and non- Jews by using the above-mentioned text³. He states that Josephus did not believe in the concept of a non-Jewish woman marrying into a Jewish household as her religion too becomes inferior to that of her husbands and she, in turn, becomes a Jew. Thus, Josephus' misogynic approach to biblical texts is obvious in his writings.

Though Josephus in his book 'Jewish Antiquities' attempts to bring forth a historical text, yet, his approach towards the biblical stories seem to vary, though not to the extent of changing the course of events, enough to undermine the role of the characters, mainly those of women. For example, we shall investigate Josephus' interpretation of Jochebed, Queen Vashti, and Esther. In his retelling of the story of the Jewish hero, Moses, Josephus adds to Biblical texts by

¹ Josephus. Life. 1.1.75

² Josephus, Ag. Ap., 2.25

³ Schwartz 2007: 93

emphasizing on Moses' ancestry. While Septuagint does not mention Moses' parents until later, Josephus informs his readers about the noble character of Amram. It is Amram who prays for God's compassion for his unborn child and is favorably answered by God. Thus, it becomes Amram who out of concern for his child decides to leave his child in God's protection by making an ark of bulrushes and leaving it in a river. Jochebed becomes an insignificant character in the story having no direct-action effecting Moses' life. Another woman whose character Josephus may seem to twist is Queen Vashti. In Esther 1:11, King Ahasuerus in his drunken state wishes to show Vashti to the people, this command Vashti refuses this request without reason. Esther Rabbah 3:14 states that the King commanded Vashti to show herself naked to the people wearing only her diadem, in this text Vashti sends a message that the reason for her refusal is that she wished to protect him. Josephus gives us yet another picture. **Feldman** states that Josephus tries to create an erotic interest through Vashti's refusal⁴. If we keep in mind Josephus' misogynistic views, there is another interpretation we can come to, Josephus does not look at Vashti as a Queen but as a wife, and as a wife, it is her highest priority to listen to her husband's command. Vashti doesn't. This creates a problem for Josephus which he attempts to remove by stating that it was Persian law that forbade her to show herself to strangers. This is unlikely as historical texts (such as Herodotus' Histories) prove that the Queen could be present at banquets. Josephus further exaggerates Ahasuerus' behavior to his wife's disobedience. The Bible states that the King was enraged, and his anger burned within him⁵, Josephus says that the King was so irritated that he broke up the entertainment.

In his narration of the life of Moses, the events mentioned regarding the daughters of Raguel call for interpretation. In this narrative, Moses looks out for the seven daughters of Raguel, who have come to a well to tend to their flocks but they are driven away by the shepherds who come in after them. Moses cannot bear to see the injustice and in turn, drives out the shepherds and helps the virgins tend to their herd. Now while this follows the biblical narrative (Exodus 2:16-21), Josephus changes the story here. In the biblical version the virgins do not extend their hospitality to Moses:

When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?" ¹⁹They said, "An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." ²⁰He said to his daughters, "Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread." (Exodus 2:18-20)

⁴ Feldman 1998 : 510

⁵ Esther 1:12

In Josephus version:

Who, when they had received such a benefit from him, came to their father, and told him how they had been affronted by the shepherds, and assisted by a stranger, and entreated that he would not let this generous action be done in vain, nor go without a reward.⁶

While Matthews interprets this as Moses aiding these women who reciprocate this by rewarding him⁷, it may be read as Josephus tackling a problem. Keeping his audience in mind Josephus does not wish to portray a story where the Jewish hero is not recognised by women, nor do I think that it sat well with him either that Moses' aid should go unrecognised. And it was his need for misogyny that allows him to change his story.

Josephus' characterization of his women models is noticed from the first matriarch. In his portrayal of Sarah, Josephus brings to notice a woman beautiful and invisible to the readers. This invisibility is achieved by never giving Sarah the opportunity to speak in his narratives. While he faithfully includes all the stories about the couple (this he ignores to do with Isaac and Rebekah), he minimizes Sarah to an anonymous servant in relation to Abraham⁸. In the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt, Josephus states that Abraham directed her to pretend to be his sister to save him from the Pharaoh, the Bible, however, has Abraham convincing his wife to participate in this ruse to protect himself. In Genesis 18 Abraham asks Sarah to prepare a meal for the three men that he had invited to his tent, Josephus however, states that Abraham orders for cakes of meals to be made, with no mention of Sarah⁹. Josephus waits to portray Sarah's character when he narrates the story of Hagar. While the Bible (Genesis 16:2) portrays Sarah as impatient and thus insisting Abraham to bed Hagar, Josephus instead removes her impatience and instead writes that Sarah did what was commanded by God. When Hagar, in turn, shows contempt towards Sarah after conceiving a child, the Bible states that Sarah blames this behavior onto Abraham first and when Abraham hands Hagar over to Sarah she treats her harshly (Genesis 16:6), Josephus though does not allow Sarah to be portrayed as a harsh woman. He not only ignores Sarah's dialogue with Abraham but states that Abraham handed Hagar to Sarah for her behavior and softens Sarah's image by stating that Hagar

⁶ Josephus. Ant.2.11.2

⁷ Matthews 1999: 210

⁸ Niehoff 2004: 416

⁹ Josephus. Ant. 1.11.2

received forgiveness when she returned. Thus, while Josephus undermines the wife he does give his audience an obedient and forgiving mistress.

Rebekah the Virgin

In Josephus' retelling of Rebekah, if looked at microscopically, one finds deviations from the ancient religious texts at once. Josephus starts off by stating that Abraham had already decided to make Rebekah, the granddaughter of his brother, the wife of his forty-year-old son making marriage an institution governed by the head of the family. And that Abraham makes his servant promise to this condition. What Josephus plainly ignores and what is stated in the Septuagint (Josephus' primary source) is that the promise made by the servant to Abraham was that he would not take a wife from among the Canaanites for his son but only take a wife from his kindred. The reason for this omission as noted by James L Bailey is the need to create a different image of the Jews to the outer world, an image more accepting of outsiders¹⁰. What Josephus also fails to add is the servants call to take Rebekah's willingness into account. While in Genesis 24:5 the servant provides an alternative should the woman in question refuse to accompany him on his journey back and should he then take Isaac back to his kindred, to which Abraham refuses on account of God's will but states that should the woman not wish to accompany him on his journey he would be free from his oath. Getting on to Rebekah, while the Bible calls her an attractive woman, Josephus steers clear of her physical attributes but emphasizes her just and generous nature as she not only gives the servant water to drink but chastises the women who refuse to do so for which she was duly rewarded with rare and priceless by the servant later, an incident which is not mentioned in the Septuagint. Unlike his characterization of Sarah, Rebekah can be vocal in her narrative employing a direct speech. Here we have Rebekah introducing her family and further stating her brother Laban as the guardian of her 'virginity' giving power to the male presence in her life. This same power is again presented to Laban as he is responsible for sending Rebekah away, which is very different from the narrative in the Bible where Laban requests for Rebekah to remain at home for a while, the servant then proceeds to ask Rebekah, and she is the one who ultimately decides to leave her family and go to Isaac. While in ancient Mesopotamian culture women had the power to determine whether they wished to marry, Josephus ignores this at it was unlike the Greek where the daughter was not even required to be present while the men got her married. Thus, he states

¹⁰ Bailey 1987: 162

that "(a man must) demand her in marriage of him who hath power to dispose of her, and it is fit to give her away by the nearness of his kindred."¹¹

Betsy H Amaru's study on biblical women primarily deals with the characterization and Hellenization of the matriarchs rather than the gender politics that remains in the background of his narratives. She brings to attention the methodology Josephus uses to portray the matriarchs, and how he removes characteristics from his heroine that he does not see fit for the Hellenistic audience for which he writes¹². He thus removes all traits of assertiveness from Rebekah and portrays her as a soft and suitable wife for Isaac. Even in the scene where Rebekah chastises the other women, it is in keeping with the power politics of that time, as this outburst is in front of women and a servant. But as she leads the servant to her mother's house she falls into the background and the focus shifts to the conversation between the servant and Laban. A typical example for a 'Rebekah-like' personification, though non-biblical, in Josephus would be Queen Helena of Adiabene¹³ (Amaru uses the Rebekah model for the Witch of Endor, Ruth, Rahab where Josephus true to his style removes their flaws and creates a character suitable to his audience). In his attempt to portray Jewish women as ideal, the Queen, because of her conversion to Judaism, is characterized as one with wisdom and generosity. Here, like Rebekah, she is given 'direct speech' but lets the governors make decisions for her. During the scene when the governors advise her to kill Izates brothers, she prefers to wait for a decision by her son instead. Helena plays the role of a thoughtful mother and advisor, but it becomes obvious that Izates does not require her advice as he is the one with better Godly wisdom. Even later, the Queen is shown asking permission for her son to visit Jerusalem to worship at the temple of God. Thus, given her status, Josephus undermines her role greatly as he only focuses on her like a worried and kind-hearted mother than anything else. Her generosity and care are shown when she distributes corn and figs to the people of Jerusalem which parallels with Rebekah's generosity towards the servant.

Rebekah as a Wife

¹¹ Josephus. Ag. Ap. 2.25

¹² Amaru 1998: 144

¹³ Josephus. Ant. 20.2.1

After a brief break in his narrative of Rebekah and Isaac as Josephus cuts off to state the death of Abraham, Josephus resumes his story of the married couple. Here the narration starts with 'Isaac's wife' being with a child, what I wish to bring to notice is that the woman that Josephus was talking to his readers about by name until now, is now addressed as 'Isaac's wife.' Unlike the start of her story, Rebekah is no more given the 'privilege' of having a direct speech, as her previous outburst was recorded to emphasise her character and prove her worthiness for a patriarch like Isaac. Now, as she becomes a wife her character diminishes with respect to the patriarch in the scene.

There are two major differences in the narration of this story when compared to the Bible. The first is that Josephus states that it was Isaac that enquired to God as to why Rebekah's belly was burdened. The second is that Josephus ignores to retell the story of Isaac and Abimelech, here Isaac like his father conceals Rebekah's identity as his wife to protect her from the people of Gerar, this point is discussed by James L Bailey as he suggests this was in keeping with the characteristics of Rebekah that Josephus wished to portray and beauty was not one of them¹⁴. Thomas Franxman states that Josephus may have not it unlikely that both father and son try to deceive the man with the same method¹⁵.

Coming back to Josephus stating that Isaac and not Rebekah was the one that inquired to and was answered by God, the only reason for such a change would be the fact that Josephus believed that God should speak to the head of the house and not a woman. This view is debated by Tal Ilan and Mark Roncace who do not feel that Josephus dramatically diminishes the role of his female characters¹⁶. Roncace uses the prophet Deborah to validate his side argument, and he states that unlike the Bible Josephus further empowers Deborah's character by giving her command over Barak and the army and that it is through her prayer and not of that of the people that God answers. While Barak is shown fearful and ready to retreat it is Deborah who takes charge and commands the men into battle. Now the reason for the different treatment given to Rebekah and Deborah is that while Deborah was a prophet, Rebekah was supposed to be the ideal housewife. Josephus' wrote to an audience that did not provide rights for women and considered them to be the property of a man (excluding Sparta), though they did highly consider their female oracles and vestals thus making the story of Deborah acceptable to the audiences. Unlike the matriarchs, Josephus here completely ignores the man Deborah is linked to. While the Septuagint addresses Deborah as the wife of Lappidoth, Josephus ignores this fact as the oracles and vestals were

¹⁴ Bailey 1987: 164

¹⁵ Franxman 1979: 177

¹⁶ Ilan 2015: 211 and Roncace 2000: 250

supposed to be virgins. Further, Josephus tends to diminish the importance of Deborah by consciously etymologising her name meaning Bee¹⁷. Cheryl Anne Brown notes that unlike Pseudo-Philo in his *Biblical Antiquities*, Josephus portrays Deborah less positively. While Pseudo –Philo exalts Deborah to a male counterpart such as Moses, Josephus restricts her movement to that of only the spiritual realm.

There is another account in which a woman is given divine messages instead of a man. In the report of Samson's birth, the Bible (Judges 13: 3) tells us that the angel of the Lord came to his barren mother and predicted the birth of her child and instructs her on her diet during the pregnancy and on how the child should be raised. This story is recorded well by Josephus with one significant change. While the Septuagint and the Bible just state that the angel comes to the wife of Manoah, Josephus explains the reason for this event. Josephus narrates that it was Manoah, a man of great virtue, who asks God for a child. And though he was a good man he was so consumed by the love for his wife that it led to jealousy and further led to the distrust of his wife as she told him of the messenger. Josephus thus indicates that it was because of this sin that the Angel preferred to speak to his wife than to Manoah¹⁸. Therefore, we are led to believe that according to Josephus and his Greek audience, a woman may only hear the voice of God should she be a prophet or her male companion so flawed that perhaps God has no other option. Since Rebekah fell into neither category, we see Isaac receiving the news of his boys rather than Rebekah.

Rebekah as a mother.

In Genesis 27 we see an old Isaac asking his older son Esau to prepare him a meal so, he could bless him before he dies. This dialogue is heard by Rebekah, and she then commands Jacob to bring her the meat instead so that she may prepare it and Jacob could bring the meal to his father. Josephus in his attempt to a flaw such as eavesdropping, states that Rebekah thought it right for Jacob to receive his brother's blessings (Josephus removes this flaw with Sarah too, by vaguely stating that she laughed when the three men informed Abraham that she would give birth to his son¹⁹). What is strange here is that Josephus does not give us a proper reason for Rebekah's action. Throughout his treatment of the matriarchs, he either tries to hide them in the background or state that their actions were

¹⁷ Feldman 2001: 195

¹⁸ Josephus. *Ant.* 5.8.2

¹⁹ Josephus. *Ant.* 1.9.2

instructed by God, why then is this step by Rebekah unexplained. Rabbinic tradition states that all the matriarchs were prophetesses and that Rebekah did not wish her husband to be misled and the wicked rewarded thus bringing condemnation for the righteous including her husband²⁰. Though Josephus was aware of the Rabbinic literature, his unflattering treatment of the matriarchs makes it improbable that he believed that Rebekah served as a divine agent of God. Another possible reason may be that since Rebekah was unhappy with Esau's choice of wives (whom he married without the consent of his father), she manipulated the transfer of blessings to the son who would obey the commands of his parents and lead to the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. This, however, does sit in accordance with the Greco-Roman readers who were well aware of the women in Herodotus' Histories who manipulated the situation for their interests.

In Genesis 27 Rebekah plays an essential role in the deceit of her husband, she not only commands Jacob to participate in the deceit but she cooks the meal for her husband, and she covers Jacob with Esau's clothes and goat skin so that should Isaac touch Jacob he may be deceived. In the Bible Jacob is portrayed as frightened and unsure of this plan put forth by his mother, who goes on to say that should he be found out and cursed she would take that curse upon her. Rebekah thus plays a very strong-minded and assertive mother to her son. Josephus however, does not approve of this portrayal and pushes Rebekah into the background. Rebekah becomes the initiator of this deceit but does not participate in it. Jacob is the one who prepares the meal and clothes himself in goat skin to deceive his father for he feared being cursed. Josephus once again states that Rebekah delivers her son from Esau's anger but does not mention how she receives this knowledge. Josephus implies that motherly wisdom and worry is what makes her send Jacob away from his brother, rather than the fact that she had Esau's plan reported to her. Rebekah then convinces Isaac to send Jacob to her kindred, what Josephus ignores is that she makes this request because she loathes the Hittite wives of Esau and worries for her own life. Another reason for Rebekah's persistence to save Jacob could be that Jacob was put into this dilemma because of her. Though not put negatively, Josephus creates emphasis on Rebekah's command to Jacob to leave the house. For this purpose, Josephus adds a scene when Jacob is received in the house of Laban. Laban questions him regarding the reason for the visit for which Jacob credits Rebekah for her wisdom that gave him his father's blessings. Josephus reiterates that it was Rebekah who bid him to leave and make an alliance with her brother's household²¹.

²⁰ Genesis Rabbah 67

²¹ Josephus. Ant. 1.19.6

Conclusion

The matriarchs Rachel and Leah have an even lesser role to play in their narratives. Genesis 29:11 creates a weak image for Jacob, a model that would not suit the patriarchal society that was Josephus' audience. Therefore, Josephus changes Jacob's image by interchanging roles and stating that Rachel was the one who was excited to meet a relative and calls her behaviour childish. Unlike the relationships of the previous patriarchs and their wives, Josephus shows passion in the love that Jacob has for Rachel. Rachel thus becomes a woman of greatest beauty and deserving of her husband's love. Like Sarah Rachel too becomes an individual with no firm characteristic other than her beauty.

Rebekah, on the other hand, is the most assertive of the matriarchs. From the beginning, she has been given a voice of her own. She proves herself to be suitable for the son of Abraham not by beauty but by character and genealogy (Josephus notes that a woman's lineage must be checked before a man marries her). In Rebekah, Josephus forms a perfect woman, a woman with the right spirit. She is a daughter and sister much loved by her family, a wife with wisdom and a mother who guides the rightful son for the fulfilment of God's promise. Both Sarah and Rebekah share a collective feeling of protectiveness over their favoured son, and thus Sarah has Ishmael sent away so that he may not lay claim on Isaac's blessings and Rebekah shows the same character as she instructs Jacob to run away from Esau's wrath.

By giving and taking away dialogues, Josephus creates a woman who understands her place in society and the household. Yet, she never completely loses her assertiveness nor is she allowed to overpower the males in the story. This is consciously created by Josephus to use the 'Rebekah-like' formula to mould various other biblical and non-biblical characters in a Hellenised form for his audience.

Yet, Josephus is not entirely unaware of the power of a woman. He narrates the stories of Poppaea, whom he characterizes as God-fearing, on two occasions. In the first, Poppaea stands in against Festus and Agrippa II as they order to demolish the wall built by the Jerusalemites in the temple. The wall was constructed to obstruct Agrippa's view into the temple. The Jerusalemites respond by approaching Nero, of this Josephus, records the following:

And when Nero had heard what they had to say, he not only forgave them what they had already done, but also gave them leave to let the wall they built stand. This was granted in order to gratify Poppaea, Nero's wife, who was a religious

woman, and had requested these favours of Nero, and who gave orders to the ten ambassadors to go their way home; but retained Helcias and Ishmael as hostages with herself.²²

Another story regarding Poppaea is recounted when Josephus claims he implored her, instead of Caesar, to set the captive priests free and not only was Josephus granted this favor but Poppaea sent him back with many presents. Josephus narrates the same about Domitia, the wife of Caesar who continued to be kind to him.²³

As Matthews further notes, there is a clear distinction between the treatment of Jewish women and the Gentiles²⁴. Yet, there are some parallels we can draw, Poppaea is given some Rebekah-like characteristics as she makes decisions that prove to be advantageous for the Jews and she is portrayed by Josephus as God-fearing and kind. On the other hand, the sister of Agrippa I's and the wife of Herod is characterised as Eve. Her persistence led Herod to ask promotions from Caius, this in turns results in Herod and Herodias' exile from their land²⁵. What Josephus further mentions is that God punishes Herod for listening to the chatter of a woman. We see the same punishment given to Adam for listening to the words of Eve, which resulted in him being exiled from the garden²⁶.

If we are to allow Hillard's reasoning for the above, these strong Gentile political women help feminise their male counterparts. Therefore, he writes:

(1) practically all such information [of women's political activity] is transmitted as allegation, which highlights the unsubstantiated nature of each claim, and the fact that an active political role for women was regarded as undesirable; and (2) the women concerned were politically irrelevant in that they were not the primary targets of this hostile material; rather, their alleged roles were a means of attacking the politically potent, that is, their male kinsfolk or associates²⁷

Thus, for his misogynistic aim to prove strong independent Jewish men, Josephus disregards the roles of women, especially of the matriarchs, and therefore makes men the most important characters in his narratives.

²² Josephus. Ant. 20.9.11

²³ Josephus. Life.1.76

²⁴ Matthews 1999: 212

²⁵ Josephus. Ant.18.7.2

²⁶ Josephus. Ant. 1.1.4

²⁷ Hillard in Matthews 1999:216

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