

## Marriage: Isaac and Rebekah (Draft Sermon)

Genesis 24:1-67

### A. INTRODUCTION

#### *1. Different Cultures*

When faced with a different culture, we have two alternatives. We can try to understand it from our own perspective—with the risk of getting the whole thing terribly wrong—or we can put aside our way of thinking and try to understand it from a different point of view.

Now, of course, reading our own culture into a situation doesn't make sense. Because all we will end with is a distorted understanding of what is going on. But then trying to remove all our modern understanding isn't easy either. Because, no matter how we try, putting aside our own thinking—in its entirety—is not an easy thing to do, and invariably we will make assumptions based on our own thinking.

So, being determined to at least try to understand the thinking of events, which would otherwise by quite foreign to us, makes much more sense. Because if we don't, we will only end up with a distorted image of what is going on.

#### *2. The Bible and Marriage*

Different cultures, then, need a bit of effort to understand. And there is perhaps no better example of that than biblical culture. A culture that if we look at it from the perspective of living in the west in the twenty-first century, we will have a very high chance of misunderstanding what is happening.

And one such example of that is the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. It is an example that has much to teach us. Not least of which is because, at the time, marriage was the basis of the family unit, which in turn was the basis of a healthy community. But how they came to be married was very different to how people in the west get married today.

### B. ISAAC AND REBEKAH

#### *1. Abraham's Takes the Initiative (Genesis 24:1-9)*

Indeed, the very first thing we learn in the story, is that it wasn't Isaac who took the initiative in finding a wife for himself, it was Abraham. Abraham was very old, Sarah was dead, and Isaac was about forty years old. He hadn't married and he had no children. Furthermore, as we are later told he was still mourning his mother's death (and he could have been mourning the death of Sarah for a very long time). So Abraham took the initiative.

Indeed, Abraham told his servant to go to his family in Nahor (in what is now south-east Turkey) and get a wife for Isaac from among his own clan. But under no circumstances was he to get him a wife from the Canaanites. But, if the servant was unable to find anyone suitable who was willing to come back, Isaac was to remain in Canaan and not go to live in the land where Abraham's family lived

either. And the measure of the seriousness of Abraham's command is seen in the fact that he gets his servant to swear an oath to that effect. But not just an ordinary oath, but one of a most sacred nature.

Now the story doesn't say why Abraham objected to Canaanite women. But clearly the Canaanites had gods of their own, which he didn't want Isaac to either adopt or be included in his household. But then Abraham's family believed in different gods too. Indeed, Abraham's father, Terah, believed in many gods (Joshua 24:2), and Laban, Rebekah's brother had his own household gods (Genesis 31:19). The reality is, that it was Abraham who was the odd one out. It was only Abraham that worshipped YHWH, the only true God. As a consequence, he would not have expected any wife for Isaac to be a believer in the one true God.

As a consequence, the religious beliefs of the wife-to-be would not have been the real issue. There was something else. And, although we cannot definitively say what his motivation was, I would suggest that Abraham wanted there to be some sort of continuity with his family, and his family's way of thinking.

Having said that, his objection to Isaac going back to live with his ancestors, clearly reflects a desire to take God's promise to him seriously—the promise to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan.

### *2. The Servant's Journey (Genesis 24:10-27)*

And so, the servant went off. He travelled north to Nahor, stopped at a well and prayed to God that he might be successful in his endeavour. And before he had even finished praying, Rebekah—Abraham's brother's granddaughter—came out to fill a jar with water. He then had a short exchange with Rebekah, during which time Rebekah provided the servant with water and offered to water his camels too. Which she did, all the while being closely monitored by the servant.

The servant, then, hoping that she was the one, took out a gold nose ring and two gold bracelets, in anticipation. But before giving them to her, he asked her about herself and whether there would be room in her father's house for him and his camels to stay the night. To which she responded with the information the servant had hoped. So, he gave Rebekah the nose ring and the bracelets, and immediately bowed down and worshipped God, thanking him for guiding on his way.

### *3. The Servant's Success (Genesis 24:28-54a)*

Meanwhile, Rebekah, excited, ran on ahead and told her mother's household what had happened. And in response her brother, Laban, rushed out to the man. He had listened to Rebekah's tale and had seen the ring and the bracelets. So having prepared a place for him and his camels, he led the servant back to the house.

The servant, his men, and the camels were then offered hospitality, but before the servant and his men ate and drank, he insisted on telling them all why he was there. He then asked Bethuel (Rebekah's father) and Laban (Rebekah's brother) whether he had been successful in seeking Rebekah as a wife for his master's son, Isaac. To which Laban and Bethuel acknowledged that Abraham's God had indeed, directed the servant, and that he was free to take Rebekah and go.

The servant then brought out costly gifts for Rebekah, and for her mother and brother. And only then did the servant and his men eat and drink and stay the night.

### *4. Rebekah Returns with the Servant (Genesis 24:54b-66)*

But having succeeded in his mission the servant was keen to head back. But Laban and her mother were keen to delay Rebekah's departure. As a consequence, Rebekah was called upon to have her say, and Rebekah agreed to go straight away.

So, Rebekah was sent off, with her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men. And she was given a blessing, hoping she would become the mother of thousands.

Sometime later, Isaac had gone out to a field to meditate, and he saw camels approaching. Rebekah too saw Isaac in the field, but didn't know who it was, so she immediately got off the camel she was riding, found out who it was, took her veil, and covered herself. In other words, she veiled herself as the prospective bride.

Then, after the servant told Isaac everything that he had done, Isaac took Rebekah into his late mother's tent, and he married her. And so, we're told that he was comforted after his mother's death.

### C. UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL CULTURE

Now the story of the servant and Rebekah (and others) is one that may be familiar. It is also a story that has been written with a fair bit of repetition. However, it's also a story that reflects a very different view of the process of getting married than which many of us are familiar with today.

#### *1. Arranged Marriage*

Because the first and perhaps most obvious thing about this story is that it is about an arranged marriage. It wasn't a love match. Isaac and Rebekah did not choose each other. Indeed, Abraham arranged the marriage with his family in Nahor, through his servant (who is not given a name from beginning to end).

And that is in stark contrast to Isaac and Rebekah's children, Esau and Jacob, who both chose their wives for themselves. That is, Esau chose his three wives, and Jacob chose one of his two wives (Rachel) although he was tricked into marrying Leah.

Indeed, in the case of Isaac, he had no say in it whatsoever. It was arranged for him. They had not met each other before. Indeed, the first time that either of them met was when the servant returned from Nahor and presented Isaac with his wife-to-be.

#### *2. Betrothal*

Well, I say wife-to-be, because without even meeting her, he had actually become engaged, or betrothed to Rebekah. And he had become engaged when the servant presented the gold nose ring and the two gold bracelets at the well, and confirmed that with giving of the gifts, firstly to Rebekah, and secondly to Laban and her mother.

In those days, betrothal was taken seriously. It was the point when a couple committed themselves to each other. And that is why, when we come to the New Testament, when Joseph found that Mary was pregnant, he decided to divorce her, even though at the stage they weren't actually 'married' as we understand marriage.

And, in the case of Isaac, just as he wasn't there when the servant found Rebekah, neither was he there when he became betrothed either.

#### *3. Marriage*

But he was there when they became married. Indeed, we are told that no sooner than he was introduced by the servant to Rebekah he . . . organised a wedding ceremony and provided a feast? No! He simply took her into his late-mother's tent and married her. In other words, they became married by sealing their relationship with intercourse.

In other words, there was no ceremony; there was no public celebration. And from a biblical point of view you need to distinguish between the two. Because the Bible describes many public celebrations of marriage—celebrations which become more and more elaborate. But there are no ceremonies recorded whatsoever.

And there's a reason for that. Because in biblical times it is at the betrothal that the commitments were made—not at the wedding. And that is why historians in the first century were able to record the exchange of vows and rings at the betrothal, but are totally silent in regard to any wedding ceremony whatsoever.

(And for those who are interested, the recording of marriage relationships by the church only dates back to the Middle Ages, and the church's insistence of a wedding ceremony only dates back to the sixteenth century.)

#### D. APPLICATION

What we have recorded in the story of Isaac and Rebekah, then, is a very different perspective on getting married than what we are familiar with today.

Isaac wasn't there when the servant found Rebekah; he wasn't there when he became betrothed; and when the two finally got together there was no ceremony or public celebration. And we need to know that, to have any real understanding of biblical culture and biblical beliefs.

But, as a consequence, how does this fit in with our 'so called' biblical model of marriage? Because, if the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah does indeed portray a biblical view of marriage, what does that say about our practices today?

##### *1. Wedding Ceremonies*

Well, I have to say, firstly, that the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, is probably an illustration of God's gift of marriage to his creation in its purist form.

Indeed, in the book of Genesis, at the conclusion of the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, the writer of Genesis finishes the story with these words, 'For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother. He will be stuck fast to his wife; they will be as one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). Full stop.

In other words, the Bible offers no further requirements about marriage until the Laws of Moses were given on Mount Sinai. And those instructions were simply about prohibited relationships. The biblical idea of God's gift of marriage, then, does not require a ceremony. But it does require a commitment, so that the two people can live as 'one flesh'.

And that, of course, that opens up a whole can of worms, regarding our current requirement for people to go through a legal ceremony before they are considered married (which, unhappily, the church endorses and promotes).

##### *2. Wedding Celebrations*

The second aspect, of course, is that wedding celebrations are not required either. Because they don't fit into God's definition of marriage either.

Now we know that Isaac and Rebekah didn't have one. But we do know that at least one of their sons did. Indeed, Jacob had two celebrations—one for his marriage to Leah and the other one for Rachel. We also know that as the Bible progresses, those public celebrations became more and more elaborate. Indeed, Jesus's story of the ten virgins, with the procession to the wedding feast would

have to be the most elaborate (Matthew 25:1-13). But even in biblical times, it was probably only the rich who had such celebrations—because they were expensive. But the poor wouldn't have had them at all.

And that of course opens up another can of worms: the expectations, put on couples, for some sort of wedding breakfast or celebration which, from a biblical point of view, is not one that is required for a couple to be married at all.

### *3. God's Idea of Marriage*

And that leads us, thirdly, to what God intended for marriage. Because this is where we, as Christians and the church, should be headed. And what God intended was that marriage—beginning, middle, and end—was to be between two people—a man and a woman—and that they would leave their families, come together, and be committed to live as 'one flesh'.

And even though Isaac was not at his own betrothal, that's clearly what he did. Because in a sense, whatever commitments were made on his behalf, he confirmed them when he took Rebekah as his wife.

## E. OTHER

Now of course there is much more we can say about Isaac and Rebekah. Not least of which is that Rebekah later gave birth to twins—Esau and Jacob—and that there was turmoil in the family over the brothers. Esau, the firstborn, was Jacob's favourite, Jacob was Rebekah's, and the brothers didn't get along very well at all. Indeed, the friction between them fuelled a whole new series of events.

But it all began with the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, and in circumstances very different to what many of us find familiar.

## F. CONCLUSION

As a consequence, understanding the culture from the perspective of the culture of the day, is vitally important. And when we do that, the story of Isaac and Rebekah, opens up not just one can of worms, but several. Not least of which is because the way things are done today are very different to the ways things were done in biblical times.

As a consequence, we do have to ask the question, 'Which way is right? Is it the biblical way or is our way?'

Well, I would have to say that regarding marriage, the lack of a need for a ceremony and the lack of the necessity of a celebration is far more true to the biblical model, than we see weddings today. But that doesn't mean that there can't be celebrations. I believe they can. But they shouldn't be something that is required before couples are considered to be properly married at all.

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