



Rediscovering the ancient hermeneutic of Rebekah's character



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A careful evaluation of well-documented historical data, along with ancient and modern theological writings, reveals the matriarch Rebekah as one of the most important and controversial individuals of the biblical narrative. Her exceptional beauty, hospitality, morality, faithfulness and sacrificial love were highly admired and praised as iconic by ancient historians, philosophers, the Hebrew community, the Church Fathers and numerous other scholars; yet, some theologians and clerics of the past few 100 years have depicted Rebekah in a negative light. This article intends to highlight this contradiction for the contemporary community of believers by providing an insightful description of the ancient hermeneutics of Rebekah's story. It further aims to encourage biblical scholars to methodologically re-evaluate Rebekah's life, investigating possible reasons as to why the positive image of Rebekah has been overturned in recent years, and thereby determine the cause of such a conceptual paradigm shift in interpreting this key biblical narrative.

Keywords: the ancient Jewish; Christian; and extra-Biblical view of Rebekah's character; Luther; Calvin; the shift in the paradigm of interpretation; the Protestant Reformation.

Introduction

From Second Temple Judaism to the mid-16th century, the historians and philosophers of the Jewish and Christian communities, as well as the authors of non-biblical, secular and religious literature, portrayed the matriarch Rebekah positively. According to the biblical narrative, Rebekah was personally selected by God as the suitable wife for the patriarch Isaac and thus the mother of the chosen people, preserving the Messianic line, and therefore bringing blessings upon every human tribe (Gn 3:15; 12:1–3). Ancient believers were confident that this divine choice was attested to by Rebekah's precise ancestry, appearance, physical strength, remarkable morality, sexual purity, strong will and ability to communicate with the Most High God directly (Gen 24, 25). The *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* points out that:

[R]ebekah is 'God's [chosen] instrument' in *Friar's Tale* ... in the fragmentary play of Isaac in the Towneley cycle. Rebekah appears as a wise counselor to Isaac. She is [also] mentioned in Pope's paraphrase of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, in [a] list of virtuous women. (Jeffrey et al. 1992:657)

In addition, experts have observed that (Jeffrey et al. 1992):

[I]n medieval art, Rebekah is usually depicted as the exemplary bride at the well, serving the camels of Isaac's slave, as the crafty servant of God hiding in the background while Jacob obtains the blessing, or as the bride of Christ (Ecclesia) holding her pitcher or adorned with bracelets and earrings. (p. 657)

On the other hand, a large number of contemporary biblical commentators primarily use a negative adjective or phrase to depict Rebekah, such as a manipulator, liar, deceiver, swindler, trickster or, as Bruce Vawter says, the 'Lady Macbeth of the Bible' (Vawter 1977). Walter Brueggemann argued that in the biblical narrative, Rebekah should not evoke any positive emotions from the modern listener (Brueggemann 1982). John Skinner went further and sarcastically suggested that the jealous Rebekah is an illustration of the Jewish concept of femininity (Skinner 1951). Therefore, this article aims to depict how, over the centuries, different groups of people have looked at Rebekah's character; secondly, it intends to find out why Rebekah's life began to be interpreted differently during the Protestant Reformation.

The Jewish view of Rebekah

The Hebrew community understands Rebekah in the Genesis portrayal as the answer for a need or a prayer, as well as the person who strengthened others by giving them water to drink. For example, Dr Meir Sternberg points out that Rebekah is the water-drawing woman whose

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performance surpasses even the most optimistic human expectations (Sternberg 1985). As a matter of fact, the very first words in the Bible from the mouth of Rebekah are 'Drink, my lord' (Gn 24:18). The narrator emphasises that Rebekah was simply asked by Abraham's servant, Eliezer of Damascus, 'Please give me a little water from your jar' (Gn 24:17); however, 'when she [Rebekah] had finished giving him drink, she said, I will draw water for thy camels also until they have finished drinking' (Gn 24:19). According to Genesis 24:10, Eliezer came to Mesopotamia with 10 loaded camels belonging to his master Abraham. A farmer who breeds livestock would point out that a typical camel can drink over 50 gallons of water at a go. Nonetheless, this woman was willing to scoop up, with her own jar, perhaps over 500 gallons of water to satisfy 10 thirsty animals, which implies major hard work.

Thus, Rebekah is not only a model of hospitality but also a pious woman who is willing to do much more than asked.

The early Rabbinical homiletical interpretation of the *Book of Genesis* points out that Abraham knew, long before Isaac and Rebekah were wed, that Rebekah would be his daughter-in-law (Gen Rabbah 57.1) (Neusner 1985).

As a demonstration of Rebekah's worthiness to become the new matriarch of the chosen family, the Bible describes her ancestry, outstanding physical strength, appearance, hospitality and sexual purity, which is critically important for the biblical standard of holiness. In addition, Rebekah was a very beautiful woman: 'a virgin; no man had ever slept with her' (Gn 24:16). Some readers have thus raised the question: 'Why does the Bible refer to Rebekah as "a virgin," and then add that "no man had ever slept with her?"' The medieval French rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, well known by the acronym of Rashi, in discussing this passage, expresses that 'not every virgin is necessarily "innocent!" In ancient times, a young woman could guard her virginity, but still act promiscuously in a sexual manner with men'. Rashi then adds: 'Therefore, Scripture teaches us that she [Rebekah] was innocent of all this' (Gn Rabbah 60:5). Similarly, Rabbi *Michael Leo Samuel* argues the following:

[O]bviously, if she was a virgin, then no man 'knew her'! There are two kinds of virginity. One type pertains to young females who have not yet had sexual intercourse and have preserved their sexual innocence. (Samuel 2017)

Then, Samuel adds that, 'The second kind of virginity pertains to an innocence of soul. Rebekah's virginity consisted of both types' (Samuel 2017).

In her article in *Conservative Judaism*, Dr Menorah Rothenberg argues that the biblical narrative portrays 'Rebekah as Abraham reincarnate', the new mother of the chosen people and the one with the best moral qualification (Rothenberg 2002). Thus, 'Rebekah has to repeat the step once taken by Abraham. She has to leave her family, her town, and her country' (Gn 24:57–61) (Teugels 2004). Midrash, the ancient

Hebrew commentary on part of the written and oral Torah, has always considered her a 'lily among the thorns!' (Teugels, n.d.). Talking about this powerful metaphorical expression, Dr Deborah A. Green points out that 'R. Hanan of Sepphoris describes the person who performs "acts of loving kindness" (*gemilut hasadim*) as a "lily among the thorns"', going on to point out the following: 'In the same page, the matriarch Rebekah is described as a lily among the thorns because she is a "righteous one" (*tzadeqet*) among many tricksters' (Green 2011). Similarly, one of the oldest Haggadic Midrash on Song of Songs supports this same hermeneutical view of Rebekah (Song of Songs Rabbah 2.2).

The Hebrew sages emphasise that the narrative describes Rebekah as a woman who brought much comfort into Isaac's personal life (Gn 24:67; Gen Rabbah 60.16). Furthermore, rabbis state that Rebekah's 'beauty and her virginity, incorporate the interlocking of the "human" condition for Isaac's wife with the divine hand' (Rothenberg 2002). Other details portraying Rebekah as the ideal wife, presented through action and speech, will supplement this impressive list. The Hebrew sages also point out that Rebekah is among seven well-respected biblical women who had difficulty conceiving. Nevertheless, because of her righteousness and Isaac's prayer, the Lord God miraculously intervened in her life (Gen Rabbah 53.5; 63.5):

[I]saac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife ... The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, 'Why is this happening to me?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. (Gn 25:21–22)

Many commentators point out that 'Rebekah is the first human being to have sought God' (Zornberg 2009).

Furthermore, she is the very first woman of the Bible to whom God spoke directly (Friedman 2001). Therefore, in Judaism, Rebekah is considered a prophetess (Midrash Tanhuma, Gen. Wayehi 12.16; Gen Rabbah 67.9) (Neusner 1985).

[T]he Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger'. (Gn 25:23)

Hebrew scholars and linguists often highlight this oracle as not mainly about the two individuals to be born but about the two great nations, Israel and Edom (Rom), these two distinctive persons are going to establish. As has been known throughout history, Esau and Jacob hold opposite ideological beliefs, life values, political beliefs and spiritual characteristics. According to Midrash Rabbah, 'Esau was the one who stretched out against his brother Jacob, even while still in the mother's womb'. Thus, the psalmist, talking about Esau, said: 'The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent' (Ps 58:3–4) (Rabbah 1961). The Hebrew commentators regularly highlight the fact that the psalmist describes Esau as a liar who poisons like a serpent. Thus, people should not trust

the man associated with the deceiver serpent (devil). Moreover, the Hebrew commentators argue that the Lord God foresaw and revealed to Rebekah that Jacob and his offspring will serve Yahweh ('ja:hwei) – the Lord God of the Israelites – and that Esau and his descendants would primarily worship idols (Bereishis 2009).

To emphasise Rebekah's excruciating pregnancy and life-threatening difficulty during delivery, rabbinic sources claim that during birth, Esau ripped up his mother's womb such that she could not have more children (Pesikta de Rab Kahana, Piska 3.1). In spite of this, and later disregarding the dysfunctionality of Esau's family, Rebekah was always a loving mother to both her children (Leibowitz 1981). The Hebrew sages believe that as an illustration of Rebekah's love towards Esau, the narrative deliberately describes that, instead of his personal tent (house), Esau, even at the age of 77, kept his valuable clothes, which he inherited as a firstborn son, in the house of Rebekah (Gn 27:15). Without a doubt, both children had equal opportunities and access to food, clothing, shelter, moral support and education (Townsend 1989). In support of this view, the Midrash Rabbah highlights the fundamental rabbinic affirmation that Esau and Jacob had equal chances, and that for the first 13 years of their life, both went to school under the supervision of Rebekah (Rabbah 1961).

Speaking about education, it is important to highlight that for the first 15 years of their lives, the boys had a unique opportunity to play, walk and learn directly from their grandfather Abraham, who was called 'God's friend' (Is 41:8). Knowing the faithfulness of the patriarch Abraham (Gn 26:5), it would be fair to suppose that he taught Esau and Jacob the whole truth about the Lord God Almighty, the creation of the world, the importance of man's obedience to God, the fall of the human race, the judgement of God by the flood and the promise of restoration of the creation order through the righteous offspring of Abraham, which must bring blessings upon every human tribe (Gn 3:15; 12:1–3). Thus, having knowledge of the exceptional calling of their personal family and having been in the covenantal relationship with God through the ceremonial circumcision revealed to Abraham's family earlier (Gn 17:1–27), both Esau and Jacob should have stepped into adulthood with the complete knowledge of God's will towards man and a comprehensive understanding of what is wrong and right.

According to Jewish custom, at 13, every boy becomes an adult and is 'completely' responsible for fulfilling the commandments of the Torah as duty. Thus, *The Bar Mitzvah Book* emphasises that when an individual (Paterson 1975):

[H]as entered the adult world where, as a Jew, a specific code of behavior must govern his actions, actions which give him a great responsibility and for which he himself is now answerable. (p. 25)

Nonetheless, the biblical narrator points out that on having grown up, Esau despised the value of his birthright and freely sold or legally transferred the birthright to his brother Jacob by an oath (Gn 25:30–34). This occurred as a result of Esau's

low esteem for the covenant of God. *A Commentary on the Bible* edited by Arthur S. Peake summarises this as the following: 'Esau was a man with no depth of nature and no outlook into the eternal'. In addition (Grieve & Alexander James):

He was not a man of faith who postpones present gratification for future good, but one who lived like an animal "tame in earth's paddock as her prize" with no spiritual horizon. (p. 1952)

Hebrew scholars recognise the patriarch Isaac as an important link in the patriarchal chain who played an essential role in his children's lives. Alternatively, as Ephraim Avigdor Speiser has pointed out, 'the vitality of the [righteous] line will now depend on the woman who is to become Jacob's mother' (Speiser 1964). As a consequence, the context makes known what Rebekah said to Jacob (Gn 27:5–10):

[L]ook, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau, 'Bring me some game and prepare me some tasty food to eat, so that I may give you my blessing in the presence of the Lord before I die'.

Then, she added (Gn 27:5–10):

[N]ow, my son, listen carefully ... I can prepare some tasty food ... Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies.

At that time, to strengthen her hesitant son Jacob to do what she passionately believed was right, 'Rebekah took good clothes of her eldest son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them upon Jacob, her younger son'. Furthermore, 'she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands and upon the smooth of his neck' (Gn 27:15–16). Deliberating this passage, Hebrew sages share the view that as Jacob had legally bought the birthright from his brother Esau, Rebekah must have thought, 'Jacob has bought the birthright from Esau, it is only right that he should wear these clothes' (Tanhuma 1989).

In light of this conversation, it must be emphasised that Hebrew scholars take seriously the fact that Isaac never condemned his wife Rebekah for her deeds; he also fully agreed with her plan to send Jacob to Mesopotamia to find a suitable wife (Brown 1968). For example, Jay Hillman, Doctor of Juridical Science, points out that the patriarch Isaac never expressed that he had been cheated or deceived by Rebekah (Hillman 2001). In addition, the general editor of *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Allen Clifton, stated that 'Rebekah is not blamed for her wickedness' (Allen 1972). Based on the original textual observation, rabbis, sages and biblical scholars point out that, as a prophetess, Rebekah always acted in response to the divine commandment (Allen 1979).

The extra-biblical view of Rebekah

A well-known example of extra-biblical literature is the *Book of Jubilees*. Modern scholars believe that this was compiled in the 2nd century BCE. In general, the book re-tells, in its unique way, all the biblical stories recorded in the Book of Genesis and the first half of Exodus. In his commentary on this book, a Hebrew scholar Dr James L. Kugel fully

recognises the positive description of Rebekah, terming her as ‘the powerful woman of Jubilees’ (Kugel 2012). Similarly, the Catholic scholar John C. Endres rightly has pointed out that *Jubilees* devotes an unusual amount of attention to Rebekah, depicting her as the model matriarch with a highly important role in establishing and strengthening the chosen Abrahamic family. ‘Rebekah formed an indispensable element in the structure, and she emerges as the central character’ (Endres 1987). Likewise, the protestant scholar James C. VanderKam (2001) suggests that the *Book of Jubilees* completely approves of Rebekah’s actions:

[A]ppropriate usurpation of the paternal role in blessing her son – something she could do because she, like Abraham and unlike Isaac, recognized his [Jacob’s] true character and superiority over his older brother. (p. 62)

VanderKam concludes that (VanderKam 2001):

[S]omething simply had to be done to avert his ill-conceived plan, one that ran contrary to the insights of Abraham and Rebecca into the souls of the two young men. (p. 62)

According to the context of the *Book of Jubilees*, the patriarch Abraham evidently recognised during his lifetime that his grandson Jacob would be his true spiritual heir. Consequently, Abraham blessed Jacob with Rebekah being present (VanderKam 2001):

[M]y dear son Jacob whom I myself love, may God bless you from above the firmament. May he give you all the blessings with which he blessed Adam, Enoch, Noah, and Shem. Everything that he said to me and everything that he promised to give me may he attach to you and your [descendants]. (p. 58)

Afterwards, the patriarch instructed Rebekah to watch over Jacob, because the covenantal blessing would be exclusively prolonged through Jacob and not Esau (Jubilees 19). Following the personal revelation of God and the instruction of Abraham, Rebekah dedicated the rest of her life to faithfully fulfilling her destiny – to protect and support Jacob (Gen 25, 27; Jubilees 25). Furthermore, the context of the *Book of Jubilees* reveals that Rebekah’s actions towards all members of her family were entirely formed in heaven (Jubilees 25–26).

The ancient manuscript *Joseph and Aseneth* is another early extra-biblical text that describes Rebekah positively – as the model of women’s beauty. This manuscript mainly depicts the romantic relationship of Jacob’s beloved son Joseph and his Egyptian spouse Aseneth. The amazing beauty of Joseph’s wife was compared to the Hebrew matriarchs, Rebekah being one of them. A contemporary scholar John J. Collins highlighted that the narrator of the text comments that Aseneth did not look like Egyptian women, but was rather, ‘in every respect similar to the daughters of the Hebrews; and she was tall as Sarah, handsome as Rebecca, and beautiful as Rachel’ (Collins 2005).

In light of this discussion, it should be noted that Rebekah is positively characterised through the writings of a 1st-century historian Titus Flavius Josephus, a personal friend and advisor of Vespasian’s son Titus, serving as a translator when

Titus – the future Emperor – led the Siege of Jerusalem (the First Jewish–Roman War 70 CE). Throughout his outstanding works, Josephus often describes Rebekah’s noble status, the goodness of her heart, her hospitality, hardworking attitude and profound personal wisdom (Josephus & Maier 1988). In addition, the matriarch Rebekah is characterised positively throughout the writings of the most famous ancient philosophers such as Philo of Alexandria. For example, Markus H. McDowell stressed that throughout Philo’s writings, ‘Rebekah represents Patience’ (McDowell 2006). Similarly, Craig S. Keener pointed out that ‘elsewhere, Philo seems ready to allegorize Rebekah as a true disciple of [the Lord] God able to teach wisdom to men’ (Keener 2012).

Furthermore, it is necessary to re-emphasise that since the beginning of the current era to the mid-16th century, Rebekah has always been positively depicted on artefacts as well as secular and religious literature. Contemporary scholars note that:

[R]ebekah is ‘God’s instrument’ in *Friar’s Tale* ... in the fragmentary play of Isaac in the Towneley cycle, Rebekah appears as a wise counselor to Isaac. Rebekah enjoys an even more prominent role in the comic interlude *Jacob and Esau* ... She is [also] mentioned in Pope’s paraphrase of Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*, in [a] list of virtuous women.

In addition, scholars have noted that (Jeffrey et al. 1992):

[I]n medieval art, Rebekah is usually depicted as the exemplary bride at the well, serving the camels of Isaac’s slave, as the crafty servant of God hiding in the background while Jacob obtains the blessing, or as the bride of Christ (Ecclesia) holding her pitcher or adorned with bracelets and earrings. (p. 657)

The patristic view of Rebekah

A modern professor of theology and ethics, Dr Russell Ronald Reno elucidated the following historical fact (Reno 2010):

[I]n their concern for the moral character of the patriarchs, the Church Fathers differed very little from the ancient Jewish reader. They were also anxious to minimize the apparent immorality of Rebekah’s and Jacob’s deceptions. (p. 227)

Similarly, the *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* points out that ‘on the matter of the deception of Isaac by Jacob when coached by Rebekah, biblical commentators from early times through the 16th century tended to sanction Rebekah’s conduct’ (Jeffrey et al. 1992). It had been assumed by the Early Church, based on personal experience (starting during the pregnancy), the prophecy of God, the fathers’ warning and personal observation, that Rebekah had been veritably forced by these surrounding circumstances to protect her youngest son Jacob from his ungodly oldest brother. This is similar to the conduct of her predecessor, the matriarch Sarah. The ancient Christian view observes that in the case of Sarah, God himself even commented to Abraham the following: ‘Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac [the youngest son] that your offspring will be reckoned’ (Gn 21:12). Therefore, the Church Fathers were convinced that as in the case of

Sarah, the Divine Will was manifested in the affairs of Rebekah as well (Sheridan & Oden 2002:169).

There is much evidence that the ancient Christian community was also highly positive about Rebekah and her support of Jacob, in particular in her support of Jacob receiving the blessing of his father Isaac (Gen 27). For instance, Quodvultdeus, a 5th-century Church Father and the Bishop of Carthage, taught that Rebekah was (Sheridan & Oden 2002):

[T]he mother, who had heard the promise of the blessing for the elder brother, since she was divinely inspired, prepared a mystical plot made with prophetic art in order to direct the blessing to Jacob. (p. 169)

Likewise, Robert Graves and Raphael Patai (1964) note that:

[R]ebekah who overheard Isaac's words, summoned Jacob as soon as Esau was out of sight. 'Your father means to bestow a blessing on Esau. This must not be, since you are now his first-born!'

In addition, through the course of history, some theologians have argued that later 'Jacob did not lie to Isaac saying only: "I am your first-born son,"' which was the truth – since he had bought Esau's birthright' (Robert & Patai 1964).

It seems that Jacob was concerned about being a part of his mother's strategy when he said the following (Gn 27:11–12):

[M]y brother Esau is a hairy man, while I have smooth skin. What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing.

Rebekah replied, 'My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say' (Gn 27:13). The ancient Christian community recognised that in her willingness to take the curse upon herself, Rebekah exhibits amazing spiritual maturity (Chrysostom 1992). Following this orthodox view, Dr James Jordan (2011) stated the following:

[W]e see again that it is [the] woman who [tricks] the serpent, eye for eye and tooth for tooth. Even more importantly, we see that Rebekah was willing to die for the covenant. She offers her life and all her happiness to secure God's will. In her willingness to die, Rebekah is nothing less than a picture of Jesus Himself.

It is truly remarkable that most ancient and some contemporary theologians compare Rebekah to the image of Jesus Christ – the one who sacrificed his life for the benefit of others. Moreover, Christine Garside Allen emphasises the fact that Rebekah 'is also the first person in the Bible to offer herself in reparation of someone else' (Allen 1979). Like Abraham who, in his obedience to God, was willing to sacrifice his youngest and beloved son, Isaac, Rebekah, as a symbol of her obedience to God, demonstrated her willingness to sacrifice her own life for the sake of her youngest and beloved son, Jacob.

The considerable writings of the Church Fathers have determined Rebekah's actions to be an act of obedience

to God. For example, John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, spoke about Rebekah as an extraordinary woman who 'was not concocting this only out of her own thinking but was also implementing the prediction from on high'. Chrysostom concludes that 'Jacob and Rebekah had done what was expected of them, the one needing his mother's advice, the other playing her part completely' (Chrysostom 1992). Likewise, Augustine of Hippo, reflecting on the orthodox understanding, stated that Jacob 'disguising himself in goat's skins, placed himself below the paternal hands as though he were a scapegoat bearing away the sins of others' (Augustine 1952). It is thus obvious that by connecting Jacob with a scapegoat described in Leviticus 16, Augustine gave a positive view of his actions and approved of the same. Concurrently, realising that Jacob's action might be confusing to some uneducated people, Augustine wrote the following:

[T]his trick on the part of Jacob may easily be mistaken for fraudulent guile, if we fail to see in it the mysterious intimation of a great reality. That is why the Scripture prepares us by the word: 'Esau became a skillful hunter, but Jacob [is] a simple man living at home'. (p. 16, 37)

Thereafter, Augustine (1952) explains that:

[S]ome translators have [connoted] 'guileless' in place of 'simple'. But, whether we say 'guileless' or 'simple' or 'without pretense', for the Greek *áplastos* there can be no real guile in getting this blessing, since the man [Jacob] himself is guileless. (p. 16, 37)

Following the ancient patristic view, Martin Luther (1955) interpreted Rebekah's behaviour as an 'obliging' action, as:

[I]t not only serves the advantage of someone [but] prevents a sin. Therefore, it is not proper to call it a lie; for it is rather a virtue and outstanding prudence ... and advantages of [others] are served. For this reason, it can be called a pious concern for the brethren, or, in Paul's language, zeal for piety. (p. 292)

In addition, it is important to emphasise that throughout history, the Catholic Church has had a predominantly positive view of Rebekah and her son Jacob. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas stated that (DeLapp & Henkel 2016):

[J]acob's assertion that he was Esau, Isaac's firstborn, was spoken in a mystical sense because, to wit, the latter's birthright was due to him by right: and he made use of this mode of speech being moved by the spirit of prophecy, in order to signify a mystery. (p. 181)

Throughout his life, Thomas Aquinas also strongly insisted that, 'it is not a lie to do or say a thing figuratively (Summa Theologica 2–2.110.3)' (Jeffrey et al. 1992).

Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that the biblical narrator never condemned Rebekah's deeds. The Church Fathers' writings reasoned that the absence of any condemnation in his speech can mean only one thing: Isaac did not consider Rebekah's and Jacob's actions either deceitful or evil. In line with this orthodox understanding of the early Christian community, Augustine calls the reader to

'notice that Isaac makes no complaint that he has been deceived!' (Augustine 1952). Moreover, speaking lately with his son Esau, the patriarch Isaac informed him of the following: 'I have blessed [*Jacob*] and he shall be blessed' (Gn 27:33).

The shift in the paradigm of interpretation

The first to sharply question Rebekah's character and thereby cast a shadow on her whole life was the French theologian John Calvin (1510–1564 CE). In his commentary on the *Book of Genesis*, Calvin implemented into public thoughts the idea that Rebekah as a human being was not praiseworthy, as her attitude 'was ill regulated'. Then, he added, 'and on this point the corruption of nature too much betrays itself' (Calvin 1948). It must be noted, however, that in his commentary, John Calvin does not provide any patristic, historical or linguistic-grammatical reason for such a far-reaching, innovative hypothesis. Nonetheless, his new drastic interpretation of Rebekah's life overturned the traditional exegetical approach and laid the foundation for a radical change in outlook on Rebekah's life, which has since become negatively reflected in connection with her son Jacob and vice versa (Probst 2012). In the 17th century, Calvinist interpretation gained many more followers and exerted great influence on the clergy and parishioners of the rapidly growing Protestant communities.

In a relatively short period of time, the negative opinion of the matriarch Rebekah was raised up and cultivated by Matthew Henry (1662–1714 CE), whose biblical commentaries also had a massive impact on the Christian community. For instance, in his interpretation of Genesis 27, Henry stated that 'Rebekah is here plotting to procure for Jacob the blessing which was designed for Esau. The means were bad, and in no way justifiable' (Henry, Church & Peterman 1992). It is certainly impressive that Calvin suggested the hypothesis that Rebecca's attitude was 'poorly regulated', and Henry a short time later decisively asserted as an indisputable fact that Rebekah was a sinner who taught her son Jacob how to lie and deceive. A few years later, Charles Henry Mackintosh (1820–1890 CE) stated that in 'Rebekah and Jacob, we see nature taking advantage of nature ... There was no waiting upon God whatever'. Mackintosh also argued that 'as to Rebekah, she was called to feel all the sad results of her cunning actions' (Mackintosh 1879). In the same way, Friedrich August Dilman (1825–1894 CE) also sharply criticised two of these people, stating that 'Rebekah's fraudulent deceit and Jacob's sin are not unpunished' (Dillmann, Knobel & Knobel 1897). In the meanwhile, the most devastating blow for Rebekah's reputation came from Samuel Rolles Driver (1846–1914 CE), an English scholar at New College and Oxford. His opinion was taken as the new standard by many scholars during the post-Enlightenment time. According to Dr Driver, 'the

action of Rebekah and Jacob was utterly discreditable and indefensible' (Buss 1979).

What is the reason for such a radical change in the paradigm of interpreting?

Modern anthropologists and historians have argued that after the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 CE), the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648 CE) was the most significant religious event, wielding widespread influence over the course of history, the social order of society and inspiring political, intellectual, and cultural upheaval that began in Europe and went round the world. The Protestant reformers contended to have broken from the Roman Catholic Church precisely on the issue of the source of authority. In theory, the Protestant rallying cry of 'Sola Scriptura' implied the rejection of the authority of Catholic tradition, in favour of returning to the Holy Bible as the foundation for moral and theological decisions. However, in reality, the Reformation opened the door to interpreting the biblical narrative without any reference to traditional approaches.

For example, in his book *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism*, the Lutheran theologian Dr Eric W. Gritsch argued that even Martin Luther was mistaken in some of his teachings and interpretations of the Scriptures, even taking a few passages completely out of historical context (Gritsch 2012). As a matter of fact, that is what Martin Luther said in his book *On the Jews and Their Lies* (Luther 1948):

[T]he sun has never shone on a more bloodthirsty people than they [*the Jews*] are who imagine that they are God's people who have been commissioned and commanded to murder and to slay the Gentile. (p. 17)

Modern scholars agree that Luther's harsh anti-Semitic doctrine echoes the dogma of replacement theology. Thus, a historian Dr Michael Bruening noted that Luther promoted the idea that (Bruening 2017):

[F]irst, to set fire to their [*Jews*] synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone ... Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. (p. 257)

Certainly, if he were here today, Luther, as a German man, would not support the view that all Germans are bloodthirsty people based on Adolf Hitler's actions. Hitler was a German man; however, the present German nation should not be responsible, or punished, for what this evil maniac and his horrible regime did during the 20th century. Similarly, the Hebrew community should not be responsible today for what their leaders did to the Messiah. It is important to emphasise that the Lord Jesus Christ has already forgiven the sins of his opponents on the Cross of Calvary, including the people who betrayed him at the crucifixion. Jesus asked during his prayer, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Lk 23:34). Furthermore, preaching the gospel after the miraculous resurrection of the Lord Jesus

Christ, the Apostle Peter highlighted to the Hebrew community at Jerusalem, 'you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers'. Then he pointed out, 'God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways' (Ac 3:25–26).

If a free interpretation of the traditional approach led Luther to some fatal errors, is it possible that the unconventional teaching of Calvin and his followers about Rebekah's life is likewise flawed? The answer to this question deserves an even more in-depth study. However, we now have evidence that from Second Temple Judaism to the mid-16th century, the matriarch Rebekah found positive depiction in the writings of the ancient historians, philosophers, the Hebrew community, the Fathers of the Church and numerous scholars. However, in his own uncommon way of thinking, John Calvin eclipsed Rebekah and began the momentum for a radical shift in viewing Rebekah's life, which since that time has been negatively depicted in conjunction with her son Jacob and vice versa. As a result, the last few 100 years have witnessed an unusual tendency among the biblical commentators to portray Rebekah in a negative light.

Based on the historical evidence and the ancient traditional approach, this article suggests that Calvin's teaching may be mistaken. This research paper thus aims to encourage the scholarly community to conduct a methodological re-evaluation of Rebekah's narrative, to investigate deeper as to why the positive hermeneutic of Rebekah has been neglected in recent years, and determine what precisely caused such a conceptual paradigm shift in the interpretation of the key biblical narrative. The outcome of such a study will have far-reaching implications for a correct understanding of the biblical storyline in general and, in particular, for a right exegesis of Rebekah's life, which had been highly praised during the ancient times.

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