

JUBILEES: REWRITING REBECCA'S REPUTATION

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Seeking strong female role models in the biblical period, a prime example is the Matriarch Rebecca. Time and again she shows her willingness to take charge of her own life, and to guide the destiny of her husband and children. Yet Rebecca is a complex and controversial figure. She is the young woman at the well who labors tirelessly to provide water for the camels of Abraham's servant in Genesis 24, even as she greets him and welcomes him to Aram-naharaim, the city of Nahor. This kindly person contrasts with the determined Rebecca who, in reacting to a difficult pregnancy goes to inquire of God why this is happening to her (Gen. 25:22). It also differs from the Rebecca who, at least on a surface level in Genesis 27, appears to contravene the explicit wishes of her husband Isaac. There, she rearranges events so that Jacob receives the primogeniture blessing. Understood in this light, Rebecca is seen to be a manipulative, scheming woman who undermines her husband's wishes. The Early Extra-biblical *Book of Jubilees* presents a very different figure. In *Jubilees* Rebecca does what she does because she works not only in concert with her father-in-law Abraham, but she follows God's wishes for the future destiny of her son Jacob. *Jubilees* rights Rebecca's reputation even as it rewrites the narrative in Genesis.

THE VIEW FROM GENESIS

Rebecca appears to have a difficult pregnancy. She goes to seek guidance from God. God tells her that she is carrying twins, and that they have different destinies (Gen. 25:22-23). Years later when her husband Isaac wants to give the primogeniture blessing to their firstborn son, Esau, Rebecca intervenes in the process, perhaps reflecting her understanding of what God said to her concerning her sons. On a *pshat* (simple literal) reading of the text in

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Genesis 27, it appears that Rebecca, consciously and premeditatedly goes out of her way to see that the special blessings go to Jacob. Rebecca's actions are detailed in just over a dozen verses (5-17). She overhears Isaac's directions to Esau to make the proper preparations to receive this blessing. Rebecca then seeks out Jacob and arguably browbeats him to take action. Twice she says, *listen to my voice* (vss. 8 and 13) and do what I say. This is not just a simple idiom saying, "pay attention to me." The phrase *sh'ma b'qoli/listen to my voice* is redolent with divine force. A generation earlier God had said to Abraham, *sh'ma b'kola/listen to her voice*, i.e. the voice of Sarah (Gen. 21:12). When Abraham listened/followed the request of Sarah, Isaac's life took a dramatic turn.

When he hears his mother's statement, Jacob is reluctant to act. It is not that he challenges the intent of his mother's wish; he appears to be fine with such a subterfuge. No, Jacob's hesitancy is that he might be caught out, bringing a curse not a blessing. Rebecca is not to be denied. She says, the curse will be on me, *sh'ma b'qoli/listen to my voice* (v. 13). Jacob listens, and after Rebecca makes certain clothing and culinary preparations he goes to his father and presents himself as faux Esau.

CONTEMPORARY ANALYSES OF REBECCA'S ACTIONS

Describing this scene, Nahum M. Sarna writes of the "strong-willed, artful Rebekah" who hovers "inconspicuously in the background, manipulating the situation." Artful and manipulating are words of criticism, not compliments. Gerhard Von Rad, labeling this scene as the "Cunning Acquisition of the Blessing" notes that "the mother had really thought of everything." Bruce Vawter compares Rebecca to Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Pamela E. Adelman uses words like 'manipulation' and 'devious' when describing Rebekah.¹ Reading this narrative on its surface level, Rebecca and Jacob are guilty of what in modern terms would be described as elder abuse. They purposely take advantage of Isaac's self-described limited years and failing eyesight to substitute Jacob for Esau. They contravene his stated wishes at the beginning of Genesis 27. Another explanation is that this is all an elaborate ruse, worked out ahead of time by Rebecca working in tandem with Isaac, and that it is Jacob, not his father, who is in the dark.² Those explanations to the side, the fact remains that as noted above and below, many traditional as

well as contemporary commentators fault Rebecca for her various (mis)deeds.

TRADITIONAL COMMENTATORS AND MIDRASHIC ANALYSES OF REBEKAH'S ACTIONS

Two 19th century commentators (S. R. Hirsch and Malbim) suggest that the matter is more complex. Isaac believes that the blessing should be split between Isaac and Jacob, that the spiritual blessing should go to Jacob, and the more material to Esau, but that Rebecca wants both aspects to go to Jacob. The concept of a split blessing is anticipated by Sforno (16th cent. Italy), although he deals with different issues. He refers to Gen. 25:22-23 when Rebecca goes to inquire about her difficult pregnancy, *She went to inquire from YHWH and YHWH answered her, "Two nations [ge'im, but following Rashi read as goyim] are in your womb, two separate peoples [l'umim] shall issue from your body."* Sforno writes about the word *goyim*, explaining "two nations with opposing ideas of religion," and in terms of *l'umim*, he explains "two people who have opposing ideas about nationalism." The first refers to a community of faith, the second to a political, national entity.³

Midrashic comments generally support Rebecca, yet it is approval with a negative edge. She is praised with having the gift of prophecy (*Genesis Rabbah* 67:9), but this is not direct prophecy from God, which is at a higher level. Instead, she gains her knowledge through the medium of Shem, Noah's son (or from Abraham according to Ibn Ezra on Gen. 25:23). *Genesis Rabbah* 60:15—likewise links Rebecca with Tamar of Genesis 38, another woman who practices subterfuge. In its own way this is a backhanded compliment. *Genesis Rabbah* 65:4 says clearly, "Rebecca being the child of idolatrous priests did not (or did not sufficiently) object to the pollution of idolatry," referring to the fact that her daughters-in-law were only a bitterness to her, a sentiment that could have been described using a more forceful statement. In fact, that section goes on to say that Rebecca was the cause of Esau's wickedness, she coming from a family of idolatrous priests. BT *Yevamot* 64a indicates that God responded to Isaac's call for a child, and not Rebecca's, because he was a righteous person, the child of a righteous person, and she was the child of wicked people. Sforno suggests that there was some negative influence from Rebecca's family that she carried within herself and passed on

to Esau (comment on Gen. 25:20, probably based on *Genesis Rabbah* 65:4, or BT *Baba Batra* 110a which suggests that children follow the ways of their maternal uncles). Ramban (13th c. Spain) stands out when he praises her actions in securing the blessing for Jacob, since she knew that she was following what God had wanted. He terms Rebecca as *haTzadeket*, “the righteous one.” Generally among traditional commentators there is a sense of mild censure, of a certain criticism when it comes to Rebecca’s deeds; they do not quite approve of her or her actions.

THE BOOK OF JUBILEES

In startling contrast to these, at best lukewarm endorsements (Ramban excepted) of Rebecca, the early extra-biblical *Book of Jubilees* presents a radically different picture of the second Matriarch. This work, *Jubilees*, according to James C. VanderKam was composed in the Maccabean period, between “160-150 BCE ... [or possibly at] a slightly earlier date.”⁴ *Jubilees* is a form of literature that is termed “reworded” or “rewritten” Scripture. *Jubilees* ignores or excises some material found in Genesis and early Exodus and also features material not found in the Masoretic Text. “The book of Jubilees is a Hebrew document [which in its fifty chapters, is] a rewriting of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus ... Jubilees was one of the most popular Jewish books in the late Second Temple period ... The identity of the book’s author, and the manner in which the book was written, are unknown.”⁵

Two important considerations for the author of *Jubilees* are the warm relations between the Patriarchs-Matriarchs, and the active promotion of endogamy and criticism of exogamy.

The surface reading of Rebecca’s intervention seems to suggest ongoing tension between Isaac and her. This is dealt with later in *Jubilees* when Isaac specifically tells Rebecca that now he favors Jacob over Esau (*Jub.* 35:13). *Jubilees* praises Rebecca because she follows the wishes of her father-in-law Abraham, and his understanding of what God wished to happen. By sending Jacob away to her brother’s home, Rebecca also ensured that he would marry within the family (endogamy). As Simkovich explains, the author of *Jubilees* “perceives Rebecca...as the parent *whom God tasks* with preserving the Abrahamic dynasty...Rebecca was a *prophetess* who was fulfilling God’s

will by making sure that Isaac gave Jacob, rather than Esau, a firstborn blessing" (emphasis mine).⁶

REBECCA IS A PRAISEWORTHY WOMAN

The figure of Rebecca in *Jubilees* is that of a praiseworthy woman; she is a powerful and strong figure. As John C. Endres explains, "Rebekah's role in the ancestral history" is prominent, for she "supplements the obvious inadequacies of her husband. She functions as the real link between God and Jacob."⁷ Eileen Schuller points out that Rebecca has a sterling part in *Jubilees*, and that her place in this Pseudepigraphic work far outshines the Matriarch that appears in Genesis. "Although the author of *Jubilees* can be very harsh in his treatment of women, especially foreign women (*Jub.* 25:1-2), he does devote an unusual amount of attention to Rebecca, developing for her a role that goes far beyond the biblical text (she counsels Jacob about his marriage 25:1-3, gives a lengthy maternal blessing 25:11-23, and speaks a final testament 35:1-27); although the revised picture of Rebecca is shaped by certain theological and exegetical concerns, the result is that 'a woman has taken her place in the company of men; a matriarch has joined the patriarchs.'"⁸

As mentioned earlier, commentators, rabbinic, Medieval, and modern generally criticize the figure of Rebecca. *Jubilees* offers a very different evaluation. As Endres points out, in "*Jubilees* ... she cannot be considered a trickster because the author characterizes her predisposition toward Jacob as inspired by Abraham (*Jub.* 19:15-20)."⁹ Note that the time sequence of the lives of the major players in this drama differs radically in the Genesis and *Jubilees* accounts. Furthermore, *Jubilees* at times changes wording in comparison to the biblical text. In the Bible Abraham dies and is buried (Gen. 25:8-9) before the birth of Esau and Jacob in Genesis 26.¹⁰ In *Jubilees* Abraham makes judgments about the deeds of his grandson Esau, and he interacts with his grandson Jacob. For example, *Jubilees* 19 begins with a variation of the words in Genesis 25:28, *Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game, but Rebecca favored Jacob. Jubilees* offers material totally different from the Masoretic Text.

"And Abraham loved Jacob, but Isaac loved Esau, [explains the text of *Jubilees*]. And Abraham saw the deeds of Esau, and he knew that in Jacob a name and seed would be named for him. And he called Rebecca and he

commanded concerning Jacob, because he knew that she loved Jacob much more than Esau. And he said to her: ‘My daughter, guard my son Jacob for he shall be in place of me upon the earth and for a blessing in the midst of the sons of men, and for the glory to all the seed of Shem because I know that the LORD will choose him for himself as a people who will rise up from all the nations which are upon the earth. And behold, Isaac, my son loves Esau more than Jacob, but I see you as one who loves Jacob rightly... let your eyes be lovingly upon him because he will be for us a blessing upon ... the earth. Let your hands be strong and let your heart rejoice in your son Jacob. Because I love him more than all of my sons (*Jub.* 19:15-21).’¹¹

A few verses later Abraham “called to Jacob in the *sight of Rebecca*, his mother, and he kissed him and blessed him” (*Jub.* 19:26).

Abraham unambiguously endorses Jacob as his successor; he makes this choice clear to Rebecca. As in the Genesis account Rebecca’s “prodigious agency is evident in almost every verse. She positions herself to *overhear* Isaac, *listening attentively* to his instructions to Esau. Rebecca then springs into action, not only telling Jacob to *listen* to her but as if expecting him to demur, she preemptively *commands* him to do so. Thus we hear Rebecca’s *voice* emerging in its fullness” (emphasis in original).¹²

DIVINE APPROVAL; MATERNAL CONCERN; AVOIDING DISASTER

When it comes to the deception in Genesis 27, Isaac is taken in by the ruse, despite his famous words, *The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau* (v. 22). *Jubilees* features those selfsame words but then it offers its own explanation for Isaac’s error. The next verse in Genesis is *He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like those of Esau, so he blessed him*. In contrast to the biblical text, *Jubilees* invokes a heavenly spirit, “And he did not know him *because the change was from heaven in order to distract his mind*, and Isaac was unaware because his hands were hairy like the hands of Esau so he blessed him” (*Jub.* 26:18). This is as good as saying that God approves the ploy used by Rebecca-Jacob. Quite importantly, later in *Jubilees*, after many years Isaac will come around to Rebecca’s way of thinking. This is stated unambiguously. Isaac explains to Rebecca, “I first loved Esau more than Jacob because he was born first, but now I love Jacob more than Esau” (*Jub.* 35:13).

Jubilees writes that “the change was from heaven.” That selfsame idea that God approves of this action is reflected centuries later in the Targum Onkelos to Genesis (probably redacted in the end of the third century CE). According to Onkelos, in Genesis 27:13 Rebecca says to Jacob, “To me it was said in prophecy (*b’neuvah*)” that this is the correct thing to do, referring back to God’s revelation in Genesis 25:23 that she was bearing twins who had different destinies.¹³

As in the Genesis text however, on some level in *Jubilees* Rebecca still appears to deceive Isaac. “Maternal concern is the primary theme in the characterization of Rebecca in the *Jubilees* family saga,” explains Betsy Halpern-Amaru.¹⁴ “Whereas in Genesis Rebecca’s conniving and Jacob’s compliance seems underhanded, in *Jubilees* they appear as commendable efforts by concerned people to thwart a disaster.” This concern is not merely because Rebecca loves Jacob more than Esau. Rather she realizes that something “simply had to be done to avert [Isaac’s] ill-conceived plan, one that ran contrary to the insights of Abraham and Rebecca into the souls of the two young men.”¹⁵

In *Jubilees* Rebecca converses with Abraham at length and she also has extended conversations with Jacob. Rebecca praises Jacob, professing her love for him, and she literally blesses him (*Jub.* 25, vss. 19 and 23). In *Jubilees* Rebecca expands on the terse advice she gives to Jacob in Genesis 27:43, *Now my son, listen to me* [once again this crucial phrase, *sh’ma b’qoli*]. *Flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban*. When addressing Jacob she is much more vehement in her condemnation of her Hittite daughters-in-law than her words in Genesis. They have embittered her soul “with all their impure deeds, because all of their deeds (are) fornication and lust” (*Jub.* 25:1). Rebecca then speaks further words which in the Genesis 28:2 are spoken by Isaac to Jacob. In an extended discourse, Rebecca reiterates to Jacob that endogamy, not exogamy, needs to be his goal. He is not to take for himself “a wife from the daughters of this land, but from my father’s house and my father’s kin ... [so that] the Most High God will bless you, and your children will be a righteous generation and a holy seed” (*Jub.* 25:3). After a confirmatory response from Jacob, in priest-like fashion Rebecca “then lifted her face toward heaven and spread out the fingers of her hands ... and blessed the Most High God who created heaven and earth” (*Jub.* 25:11).

CONCLUSION

Rebecca's voice and her roles are both greatly expanded in *Jubilees* when compared to her place in Genesis. She is a heroine in *Jubilees*. Through her actions in *Jubilees* Rebecca moves to center stage; she is neither inconspicuous nor does she work in the background. Further, the Rebecca of *Jubilees* acts like a woman priest, one very concerned with the purity of the Abrahamic bloodline.

Two major concerns for *Jubilees* are good relations and marital harmony between the revered ancestors, and the promotion of endogamy. The author of *Jubilees* consciously chooses to stress, when possible, the positive relationship between Rebecca and Isaac. The Rebecca-courting scenes found in Genesis 24 and the sister/wife motif in Genesis 26 either were of no interest to the author of *Jubilees*, or they cast doubts about the Isaac-Rebecca relationship, so these sections were excluded from the book. The differences between Isaac and Rebecca concerning their sons in Genesis 25 and 27 were apparently too well known to be deleted. Consequently *Jubilees* features those matters, but recasts them offering a different interpretation. *Jubilees* shows that Rebecca's actions were her way of consciously promoting the stated dictates of her father-in-law Abraham, the first Patriarch. As pointed out above, in time Isaac comes around in his opinion; he specifically tells Rebecca that now he favors Jacob over Esau (*Jub.* 35.13, see also *Jub.* 27.14-18). Rebecca is the most voluble of the Matriarchs in Genesis, and arguably the most influential of her peers. In Genesis Rebecca is a strong personage. The Rebecca of *Jubilees* is an even more commanding, authoritative and visible figure than her biblical counterpart. *Jubilees* rights and rewrites Rebecca's reputation; promoting her place in biblical history.

NOTES

For a chapter by chapter analysis of Rebecca in *Jubilees* see David J. Zucker, "Rebekah Redux: The View from *Jubilees*," *Biblical Theological Bulletin*, 2019, Vol. 49, No. 2, 71-81.

1. Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Bible Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1989), p. 189; Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 273, 277; Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 299; Pamela E. Adelman, *The Female Ruse: Women's Deception and Divine Sanction in the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), chapter one.

2. David J. Zucker, "The Deceiver Deceived: Rereading Genesis 27," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, January-March 2011, 39:1, pp. 46-58. See also Adrien Janis Bledstein. "Binder, Trickster, Heel and Hairy-man: Re-reading Genesis 27 as a Trickster Tale Told by a Woman" in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, edited by Athalya Brenner, pp. 282–95 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).
3. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Genesis, Vol. 2* (New York: Judaica, 1971), pp. 393-394, and Malbim, *Commentary on the Torah. Sforno: Commentary on the Torah*, Trans. Raphael Pelcovitz. (New York: Mesorah, 2001).
4. John C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 21.
5. Malka Z. Simkovich, *Discovering Second Temple Literature: The Scriptures and Stories That Shaped Early Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society/Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2018), p. 178. See also Gideon Bohak, "Book of Jubilees" *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, R. J. Z. Werblowsky and G. Wigoder, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Zvi Ron, "The Book of Jubilees and the Midrash, Part 2: Noah and the Flood," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 42:2, April-June 2014, p. 103.
6. Simkovich, pp. 224-225 see also p. 182.
7. John C. Endres, *Biblical Interpretation in the Book of Jubilees*. The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series, 18. 1987, p. 73.
8. Eileen Schuller, "Women of the Exodus in Biblical Retellings of the Second Temple Period," in Peggy L. Day, Ed., *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 183. The quote is from John Endres, *Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 25-26. Endres' statement that "a matriarch has joined the patriarchs" refers to Rebecca's place in *Jubilees*. Menorah Rotenberg argues that the biblical presentation of Rebecca in Genesis "matches Abraham's towering stature ... Rebecca is Abraham incarnate ... she is his double and the inheritor of his spiritual mantle" (emphasis in original). M. Rotenberg, "A Portrait of Rebecca: The Devolution of a Matriarch into a Patriarch," *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. 54, no. 2 (Winter 2002), p. 46.
9. John C. Endres, "Revisiting Rebekah of the Book of Jubilees." In *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. VanderKam, Vol. 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 769.
10. On the other hand, there is a tradition that Abraham lived until his grandsons were fifteen years old. See <https://thetorah.com/abrahams-premature-obituary/> See also ibn Ezra on Gen. 25:23.
11. *Jubilees* quotes taken from James L. Kugel, "Commentary to *Jubilees*" in Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, Lawrence H. Schiffman eds., *Outside the Bible: Ancient Writings Related to Scripture* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society/Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2013). Kugel featured the text, with small changes, from *Jubilees, A New Translation and Introduction*, O.S. Wintermute, trans., in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. (New York: Doubleday, 1983-1985).
12. Rotenberg, "A Portrait of Rebecca," p. 55. Rotenberg refers to Genesis 27, but her description of Rebecca also matches *Jubilees* 26.
13. M. Aberbach and B. Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis. A Critical Analysis With an English Translation of the Text* (New York: Ktav, 1982), p. 9. See also Simkovich on Onkelos, Simkovich, pp. 218-219.
14. Betsy Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in Jubilees* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 63.
15. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, p. 62.