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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

The Courting of Rebecca: A Yahwistic Portrait of the Ideal “Bride-To-Be”

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The projecting of group values on individuals has always been a characteristic of human society. The Yahwist writer of the tenth century B.C.E. is one who appears to incorporate the group values and norms of his era in the portraits that he presents of the personages of Israel's ancestral history. The purpose of this article is to carefully study Rebecca's encounter with the servant of Abraham and to discover what the ancient writer considered the ideals, values and norms of a woman to be betrothed.

Introduction

The projecting of societal expectations on individuals has long been a characteristic of human society. An examination of the writings of a people's life and culture will, generally, reflect the social milieu of the author's era and disclose the ideal norms and values in all areas of its life to which the members of that society are expected to adhere. The ancient Israelites were no exception. Consequently, within the pages of Sacred Scripture, one can find, in the portraits of individuals who are described by the biblical writers, the expected norms, values, and customs of Israelite society at the time of the author.

The Yahwist writer of the tenth century B. C. E. is one of those authors who appears to have incorporated group and societal expectations of his era into the portraits and descriptions he presents of the personages of Israel's ancestral history. The purpose of this study is to carefully investigate the story of Rebecca's encounter with Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, in order to discover what the ancient writer considered the ideal values and norms for the ideal “bride-to-be”.

Rebecca, the Daughter of Bethel

As the Yahwist begins to unfold the person, life, and role of Rebecca in God's plan of salvation history, the audience is informed that the servant of Abraham has been commissioned by his master to search for a wife for Isaac (Gen 24:4). In the sequence of events that follows in this Yahwistic narrative, the author presents Rebecca as the ideal bride for Isaac. The Yahwist accomplishes this task in three ways: 1) a description of Rebecca with words; 2) the manner in which she is portrayed in her actions; 3) finally, a contrasting portrait of her and her brother Laban. The norms, values, and customs that emerge could well be called those of the ideal "bride-to-be" in the tenth century B. C. E., as idealized by the Yahwist, but retrojected on a character of the eighteenth century B. C. E.

Rebecca at the Well

Upon the servant's arrival at Aram-Naharaiim, he prays to YHWH for a sign that his mission would be successful: the young woman whom he asks for a drink will not only give him a drink, but will also offer to draw water for the camels (v 14). Thus the Yahwist has now set the scene and prepared the audience for its introduction to Rebecca who is to become the wife of Isaac.¹

The servant has gone to the well just outside of the town, knowing that this is where he would have the best opportunity to encounter the young women of the village. In the evening, they would come to draw water for the evening meal and for the livestock before bedding them down for the night. Since this would appear to have been a customary routine for the young women of this period,² it would have been the most likely place for the servant to meet a

¹ I knowledge the Gunkelian hypothesis of the two strands, or recensions, of J: J^a and J^b (see Herman Gunkel, *Genesis*, 8 Aufl. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969] 244-246). I will, however, not make a distinction between these two strands and will treat the text as the accepted text by the final redactor.

² See Gen 29:2-10; Ex 2:16; 1 Sam 9:11.

young woman who was conscientious of and faithful to the responsibilities and duties which were normally considered a part of her daily routine.

Rebecca Described in Words

The term *na'ara*.³ As Rebecca approaches the well with a water jug upon her shoulder, the audience is at once presented with a first impression of her: a young woman attentive to her normal duties of the household (v 15). Rebecca is then described as a *na'ara*,⁴ a term that simply indicated that she was a young woman, a damsel, and one who had attained a marriageable age,⁵ a term often used by the Yahwist in this narration and in other texts attributed to him.⁶ The Yahwist continues his description of Rebecca: she is beautiful. He stresses that she is not only beautiful, but that she is very (*me'od*) beautiful 24:16). In this aspect of the Yahwist's description of Rebecca, there appears to be a deliberate effort to draw a parallel between the beauty of Sarah and that of Rebecca. Here again, the national pride of the Yahwist appears to assert itself: he is

³ For the transliteration of the Hebrew consonants I will follow the system preferred by the CBO. When a vocalized transliteration is used, I do not use the various diacritical marks to distinguish vowels, since they complicate the printing process, are distracting to those who know Hebrew, and are not helpful to those who do not know Hebrew.

⁴ As the term *na'ara* is found here (v 16), and also in verses 14, 28, 55, 57, it is in the masculine consonantal form. However, the adjective modifying is the feminine consonantal form. Furthermore, the Massoretic pointing of *na'ra* is that of the feminine form *na'arah*. The feminine form *na'arah* is found, however, in two other manuscripts, *Pentateuchi Textus Hebraeo-Samaritanus* and *Qere* (see the *apparatus criticus* on Gen 12:14 in *Biblica Hebraica*).

⁵ For a complete discussion on this term, see H. F. Fuhs, "נַעֲרָה *na'ar*," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Bd. V, ed. Helmer Renggrin and Hein-Josef Fabry (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1986) 507-18.

⁶ Gen 34:2, 12. This term is also found frequently in the legal writings that treat the laws and regulations of marriage in Deuteronomy.

convinced that the Israelite women are the most beautiful in the world. He has described Rebecca's beauty by using the intensifying particle me'od, which occurs once here and on two other occasions in conjunction with the beauty of women (2 Sam 11:2; 1 Kgs 1:4). It is the second time the Yahwist has used it in reference to the beauty of an ancestress.⁷

The Term betulah. The Yahwist concludes the verbal description of Rebecca by informing the audience that she was a virgin (betulah) "whom no man had known" (Gen 24: 16). Betulah is an ambiguous word. It appears to be derived from a common Semitic root that normally denoted a young, unmarried woman who was still under the control and auspices of her father.⁸ It does not necessarily have the connotation of a young woman who is virgo intacta, but it could simply imply that a young girl had reached puberty and was of a marriageable age.⁹ This meaning is found to be true not only in Hebrew and Aramaic, but also in the other related Semitic languages.¹⁰

⁷ Gen 12:12.

⁸ For a complete analysis of the usages of this term, see Gordon J. Wenham, "B^tulāh 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972) 326-348; Jan Bergman, Helmer Ringgren, and Matitahu Tsevat, "בְּתוּלָה" b^tulāh *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol 2, ed. G Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) 338-343.

⁹ Otto Procksch (*Die Genesis*, 3. Aufl. [Leipzig: A. Deichertsche, 1924]), opposed to this interpretation of betulah, comments that, "Ihre Junfräulichkeit (betulah) soll ihre Reinheit, nicht ihre Mannbarkeit betonen..." (151). This would also appear to be the position of Albert Clamar (*La Sainte Bible: Genèse* [Paris: Letouzey et Ané, Éditeurs, 1953] 330): "L'hébreu betulāh est le terme spécifique signifiant la virginité. . . . Aussi l'addition 'aucun homme ne l'avait connue' semble bien superflue."

¹⁰ Bergman et. al. comment that, "Akk. batultu . . . means primarily a young marriageable woman. . . . Ugar. btlt is an epithet of the goddess

Not only does the narrator refer to Rebecca as betulah, but he also expressly states that, in this usage, the term is to be understood and interpreted by the audience as a young woman who is a virgin (virgo intacta), for which there is no word in ancient Near Eastern languages.¹¹

Although betulah is found in the legal writings presupposing the state of a young woman's physical integrity,¹² the Yahwist adds the qualifying phrase "no man had known her". This qualifying phrase would have removed any doubt or ambiguity from the minds of the audience that may have been created by the use of the term betulah alone.¹³ The Yahwist makes it clear that there was no question about the state of Rebecca's physical integrity, stressing that she was, in fact, virgo intacta.

Virginit as a Value. Virginit

'Anat. . . . Obviously 'Anat is not a virgin in the modern sense of the word, since she had sexual intercourse repeatedly" (339-340).

¹¹ Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965) 378a.

¹² Ex 22:17; Lev 21:13-14; Deut 22:28-29; Ezk 44:22. It should be borne in mind, however, that all of these texts come from, and comment on, a period much later than the writings of the Yahwist. See also Gordon, 329-340, who seriously questions whether the usage of the terms in the legal statutes does, in fact, mean "virgin" in the sense of virgo intacta.

¹³ A similar expression occurs only on one other occasion qualifying the term betulah in Judg 11:39. In this case the phrase is "she had known no man" (*'ish lo' yad'ah*).

¹⁴ Virginit

itself: A woman was literally brought for a price and virginity was demanded for the highest price. This commercial value can be seen in the early legislation. When a man had destroyed what was considered another man's due, the father of the woman had to be recompensed, who, for the reason his daughter had lost her virginity, might have had a difficulty in disposing of her. The offender was obliged to marry the woman, unless the father objected; and, in any case, he (the offender) was required to present to the young woman's father the mohar as a fine (Ex 22:15-17). This would seem to indicate, however, that the apparent value, at this time in Israel's society, was primarily monetary.¹⁵ In this case, the father of a non-virgin daughter would not be able to demand as high a bride-price (mohar) for her as would the father of a virgin daughter. Even though virginity in a young woman was apparently valued for "commercial" reasons, this status would, nonetheless, certainly have been viewed as a quality most befitting a young woman who would become the succeeding matriarch.

Rebecca Described by Her Actions

The character and person of Rebecca and the other persons of this narrative are depicted not only in words, but also through actions. This was another method employed by the author to allow the audience to become acquainted with this ancestress-to-be.

The servant of Abraham has asked YHWH for a sign by which he will know that his mission is to be successful (Gen 24:12). By the sign for which the servant has asked, however, the audience would have realized that he was seeking more than a sign: it was, in reality, a test to determine the young woman's suitability to become

¹⁵ This same attitude toward the value of a virgin is also found in the Assyrian Law Code (see Elizabeth M. McDonald, *The Position of Woman as Reflected in Semitic Codes of Law* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1931] 38-39; James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 185; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Aufl. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 253; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks, 3rd rev. ed., London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972) 256.

the wife of Isaac and the succeeding matriarch, a test to discover her willingness to help, her kindness, and her readiness to serve. All in all, it was a test of her *Liebenswürdigkeit*.¹⁶ Consequently, the manner in which the Yahwist has describes her actions would have given the audience an indication of her personal qualities.

The Use of maher. Three times in this episode the Yahwist stresses the fact that Rebecca “hurried” as she assisted the servant of Abraham. She quickly lowered the jar to give the servant a drink (v 18); she quickly emptied the pitcher of water into the trough for the camels to drink (v 20); finally, the servant recounted to Laban the events that had taken place at the well, that “she quickly let down her jar. . .” (v 46). The Yahwist achieved this impression of “hurrying” by the use of the verb mahar in the piel (maher).

The meaning of this verb, “to hasten,” takes on an adverbial force when it is used in conjunction with another verb, either as an infinitive or, more frequently, a finite verb preceded with the inseparable prefix -w, as is the case here.¹⁷ In the Yahwistic narratives this construction occurs with relative frequency.¹⁸ For the Yahwist, it appears that this construction is used normally to indicate that a person is acting willingly and voluntarily in whatever he or she is undertaking. It is intended to indicate, in other words, kindness, hospitality, friendless, and willingness in the individual’s actions.¹⁹ In our passage under study, the author’s use of this verb

¹⁶ Gunkel 253; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks, 3rd rev. ed., London: SCM Press Ltd., 1972) 256.

¹⁷ On the use of this verb as an “auxiliary verb”, see Helmer Ringgen, “מָהַר,” trans. Douglas W. Scott, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol 8, ed. G Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) 138-139.

¹⁸ E. g., Gen 18:6, 7; 19:22; 27:20; 43:30; 44:11.

¹⁹ We find this exemplified in the case of Abraham and the three visitors at Mamre who have come to announce the conception of Isaac. Three times in two verses the Yahwist uses this construction either with the infinitive

creates an amicable atmosphere: Rebecca's concern to make the servant and his retinue feel welcome and comfortable. The audience would have looked upon this trait as one which would have been very befitting for a young woman about to become a bride.

The sign that the servant sought was two-fold. The second part, the watering of the camels, is also fulfilled: Rebecca offers to draw water for the camels when the servant had finished drinking (24:19). The audience would have looked upon this spontaneous gesture as quite unusual, not even to mention that there were ten camels to be watered.²⁰ Such an action would have been a mark of a kind, generous, and understanding disposition.²¹

At the conclusion of this scene, the Yahwist presents, through Rebecca's actions, one final gesture of her hospitable and generous character. She assures the servant and his retinue that not only is there room for them to spend the night at her family's home, but that there is also fodder and straw for the camels (v 25).²² Offering

or the finite verb form (Gen 18:6-7). The result is that an atmosphere of "hurrying" is created. Thus Abraham is presented as eager to make his guests feel welcome and comfortable.

²⁰ William M. Thompson (*The Land and the Book*, 3 vols. [London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1881-86], vol 1, 261) comments that ". . . such an expedition [offering to draw water for the ten camels] would not now be undertaken . . . with any other animal, nor with a less number. . . . She [Rebecca] drew water for all his camels, and for nothing, when I have often found it difficult to get my horse watered, even for money."

²¹ Paul Heinisch (*Das Buch Genesis* [Bonn: Verlag von Peter Hanstein, 1930] 275) comments that, "Rebekkas Sorge um die Kamele verdient um so grössere Anerkennung, als in der Beleitung des Alten sich mehrere Männer befinden. Aber sie denkt, daß den Reisenden eine Stunde Ruhe zu gönnen ist, und übernimmt sie für jene die Arbeit."

²² In respect to Rebecca's invitation, Hubert Junker (*Genesis*, 3 Aufl. [Wützburg: Echter-Verlag, 1955] 73) comments that, "Das Mädchen selbst darf nach orientalischen Sitte den Gast nicht zur Einkehr einladen, aber

to water the camels in itself would have shown a special kindness and obliging personality, for such an offer would have been rather extraordinary. In addition, however, she also offers to feed and bed them down, showing also sensitivity not only for people but for animals as well.²³

Laban: A Portrait of Contrast

Rebecca's actions speak for themselves, describing her as a friendly and kind young woman, conscientious of her tasks. The Yahwist, however, underlines this even more as he contrasts her personality, friendliness, and generosity with that of her brother, Laban.

Rebecca has eagerly run home to share with her family the excitement of the events that had taken place at the well. In contrast to Rebecca's character, the Yahwist now gives the audience a description of Laban with a bit of sardonic humor. He is portrayed as a greedy and selfish individual whose only interest in the servant is motivated by greed: "It is the sight of gold that seems to stimulate his courtesy to the servant."²⁴ Upon seeing the ring and bracelets which the servant had presented to Rebecca, Laban ran out to welcome him and his companions (vv 29-33), providing the promised straw and fodder for the camels and water for the customary washing of the feet, a normal ritual of welcoming guests.²⁵ The narrator makes it clear, however, that all of Laban's efforts to fulfill the norms of hospitality are performed not out of the spirit of kindness or hospitality, as were the actions of Rebecca. Rather, Laban's actions appear to be but solely out of greed in the

den Knecht oft nach ihrer Heimkehr von dem Herrn des Hauses eingeladen werden." See also Gunkel 255.

²³ Von Rad 256.

²⁴ Herbert Ryle, *The Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1941) 257; Gunkel 256.

²⁵ See Gen 18:4 and 19:2. See also Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, trans. John McHugh (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961) 10.

hope that he would be handsomely recompensed, in some manner, by the servant.²⁶

Rebecca and the Marriage Arrangements

At the time of the betrothal/marriage arrangements, the audience is again shown aspects of Rebecca's personality and character, insofar as all appears to have been done according to the customs of the day. Rebecca is not consulted as to whether she wished the marriage itself. She is offered gifts, however, as were her brother and mother, perhaps the customary mohar, although described in more refined terms.²⁷ She is, however, consulted as to the time of her departure with the servant and her return to Isaac's home.²⁸

The final scene in this episode would have indicated to the audience that Rebecca possessed a certain sense of social awareness and, once again, observance of the customs of her day. As she saw Isaac

²⁶ Heinisch (276) comments that, "Vs. 30 gibt der Erzähler an, was die Triebfeder für dessen Eile für die unterwürfige Höflichkeit dem Fremden gegenüber ist: nicht nur Liebe zu den Verwandten, sondern vornehmlich Eigennutz." See also John Skinner, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) 344; von Rad 257.

²⁷ There is general agreement among commentators and critics that the presenting of the gifts is a remnant of an older tradition of bride-purchasing. See Joseph Chaine, *Le livre de la Genèse* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1951) 289; Gunkel 258; Ryle 260; Skinner 246; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964) 182.

²⁸ Clamar (336) comments that, "La demande faite à Rebecca porte moins précisément sur son mariage avec Isaac que sur départ de la maison familiale. . . . Or il est remarquable que le *Recueil de Lois assyrien* ne contient pas moins de huit articles qui concernent l'épouse demeurant dans la maison de son père. . . ." These particular laws (nos. 25-27, 30, 33, 36, 38-9) can be found in Pritchard 182-83. On this point see also Roland de Vaux, "Les patriarches hébreux et des découvertes modernes," *Revue Biblique* 44 (1935): 397-412.

approaching, although she is still unaware at this time that he is the one to whom she is betrothed, she dismounts from her camel (v 64). From other texts in the Old Testament,²⁹ this gesture of dismounting from one's camel or donkey appears to have been an act of respect in the Ancient Near East.³⁰

The Wearing of the sa'iph.

Upon learning that the man who was approaching was to be her husband, Rebecca placed her veil (*sa'iph*) over her face (v 65). This act appears to have been the custom that involved the betrothal/marriage ritual.³¹ From other texts in the Old Testament, however, it is clearly evident that it was not the custom of the Hebrew women to be veiled in the presence of men. Certainly, there is no indication that Rebecca was veiled at the outset of this episode, when she first arrived at the well. Neither was she wearing a veil when she and Isaac arrived at Gerar (26:7) nor when she entered Egypt (12:14).

The wearing of the veil, as Rebecca met Isaac and was told that he was her betrothed, undoubtedly had some special significance and importance to the narrator of this story and the audience in respect to marriage customs. In the story of Jacob, the audience is told of his marriage to Rachel, which apparently involved the veiling of the betrothed. However, on the wedding night Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel (29:23-30). That such a substitution could go undetected seems highly improbable, if the newly wedded woman was not

²⁹ 1 Sam 25:23; Josh 15:18.

³⁰ Claus Westermann (*Genesis 12-36*, trans. John J. Scullion, S. J. [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985] 390) comments that, "She wants . . . to comport herself as custom demands."

³¹ It is generally agreed that the custom in the Ancient Near East was that the fiancé was not allowed to look upon the face of his betrothed until after the marriage. See de Vaux 33-34; Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, NJ: Double Day & Company, Inc., 1977) 277; Gunkel 260.

veiled at the time of the wedding ceremony and the consummation of the marriage.³² All in all, therefore, Rebecca is presented to the audience as one who followed faithfully the customs and traditions of betrothal as they were observed in her day, even in the strangest of circumstances. (Gunkel 260)

Conclusions

With the meeting of Isaac and Rebecca, and his taking her for his wife (v 67), the introduction of Rebecca to the audience comes to a close. The Yahwist has now introduced Rebecca as the ideal betrothed. She is portrayed as beautiful, kind and considerate of others, a virgin (*virgo intacta*), and possessing a social grace and awareness of the customs of the day.

The importance of this portrayal of Rebecca as the ideal “bride-to-be” is not found in the fact that she fulfilled specific tasks, e.g., going to the village to fetch water, drawing water for the livestock, wearing a veil, etc., or even, for that matter, that she was a virgin. These traits or qualities, in one sense, are only the “accidents” of group expectations of the members of a the tenth century B. C. E. society projected on a young woman of the eighteenth century B. C. E. by a narrator. These “accidents” could, and would, change for the ideal “bride-to-be” over the millennia. The importance of the portrait presented by the Yahwist is to be found in the “substance” of that era’s expectations: Rebecca was, in fact, faithful to and conscientious of the traditional norms, values, and customs of her time, thus making her an ideal “bride-to-be”.

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³² Von Rad (291) notes that, “. . . the narrator transports us at once to the beginning of the wedding, the particular customs of which he, of course, assumes are known to the reader. He mentions, . . . not, however, what is indispensable to an understanding, the evening escort of the heavily veiled bride to the groom’s apartment.” See also Vawter 321.