

Morningside

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Family difficulties

Genesis 25: 19-34

Episode One. Before Online Dating

An old man sends his servant on a mission. "I don't like any of the girls around here. They are not my people. I want my son to marry one of our own. So go. Take riches with you and find a woman for my son from the old country and bring her here." The servant does as he is told and makes the journey, puzzling all the way how he is supposed to do the job. How will he know who to choose? How can he persuade her – or, more importantly, since her wishes would not count for much – her father?

After many long days he knows he is in the right area. He sits beside a well and asks God for a sign. As if in answer to prayer a girl appears. A brief conversation leads the servant to her father, who learns of the wealth of the old man in the far country and in a trice the deal is done.

The servant brings his prize back to the old man. As the procession of caravans comes into sight the old man's son is walking in the field. The girl dismounts and in a moment the man is conquered: she was very pretty. He takes her home and they are married almost immediately. And the story says that he loved her.

It never says a word about what she felt.

Episode two. Before epidurals

It was a terrible childbirth. She was anything but young, and when her time came she was enormous. They were all saying it might be twins and she was sure. She was sure that she could feel the two of them kicking and struggling inside her. She was howling and screaming and they heard her yell "Why go

on living? Why should I go on living?” Sure enough, twins it was. They looked quite different even at birth, and they grew up very different.

The first-born was a great hunter, big and strong. The younger one was a quiet lad, who preferred the indoor life. The story says that the woman loved her second son. It never says a word about what she felt about his brother.

Episode three. Before the writing of wills.

Time passed and Isaac – for that was the father’s name – knew his days were drawing to a close. Because he was faithful to the traditions of his people he wanted to give his blessing to his elder son. So he called him and said, “My dear Esau, grand hunter that you are, go to catch a tasty dinner for me, cook it and bring it to me: then I will bless you before I die”. And off the big lad went.

However, guess who was eavesdropping. Rebekah, his wife, was lurking outside and heard every word. And Rebekah hated the very thought that the old man’s blessing would be given to that big lump who was her elder son. And nothing for her darling! It must not be. So her scheme was hatched. “Jacob!” she called out to her precious, “We must be as quick as quick can be. Your father has sent your brother to kill some game, to make his dinner; and then your brother will receive the blessing. Here’s what you must do. Run to your father’s flock of sheep and kill a lamb and bring it to me. I’ll make a tasty stew that your father will love”.

“But Mum”, Jacob complained, “it won’t work. Dad may be blind, but he will know that my hands are not hairy like my brothers.” So Rebekah thought quickly, and they agreed that he would wear Esau’s clothes and wrap the skin of the dead lamb on his hands and the old man would be perfectly duped.

And so it is. Isaac falls into the trap. The woman's plot works perfectly and the ancestral blessing from God, handed down traditionally from father to eldest son, is whispered by his dying lips to the younger one, the usurper. Then all hell broke loose.

Episode four. Before Skype

Her husband has just died. Her son is distraught, finding that he has lost what he always believed would be his. He is in despair and almost delirious with rage, screaming out his hatred of his younger brother. And who is she thinking of? Is she thinking of her husband? In all the story tells us it never once says she loved him; and she is not thinking of him now. Is she thinking of her elder son, frantic, burning with disappointment, consumed with a sense of betrayal, and mourning his father? In all the story tells us it never once says she loved her first-born; and she is not thinking of him now. In the crisis it is the young one, and only him, and no-one else. The story tells us that she loved Jacob.

She has been up to her old tricks. Once again she has been listening outside the door and she has heard the raging one vow to kill her adored one. "Run! Run! At Once! You must flee! Go to my brother in the far country. You will find him near the very well where I was once found and brought here to marry your father. Run! And please come back as soon as you are safe again."

She never saw her beloved again. The story never hints that she ever heard from him. Can you picture her, a lonely old woman, still hoping for some message? And in her loneliness nursing her bitterness. Bitter against the feeble man she married, bitter against the son she bore but never loved, bitter against God. Did she turn bitter against her greatest treasure also? Who can tell?

All the story does say is that when she died she was buried in a cave somewhere. Years later Jacob was buried there too. Someone later wrote *One can imagine her happy at last to be lying there side by side with the*

beloved boy for whose sake she had betrayed not only Isaac her husband, and Esau her son, but God himself, in whose name the fateful blessing had been given.

Episode five. Before computers

He unrolled his scroll of papyrus, dipped his sharpened reed into the pot of black ink and began to write. It took him a long time and he had plenty of time to think. To think about the old stories his people had been telling for many generations, the stories of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob; the stories of the beginnings of the history of his people. And as he wrote he thought about Rebekah. Should he put her in, or leave her out. What would she bring to the tale of God's people and of God's dealings with his people?

He made up his mind and he wrote her story. He wrote her story not because she was holy and pure and loving. The way he told the story she was none of these things. But she was the mother of Jacob. And Jacob was the father of the twelve sons who were to become the twelve tribes of Israel. So he wanted them to know the origins of their own people. He realised that, whatever she was like, she was a key part of the forming of the people God was choosing to make his own.

And for Christians centuries after him, the miracle is this. From Rebekah's tarnished, disappointed, embittered genetic material, countless generations later, her descendant Jesus is born. In the miracle of the incarnation God becomes one with human flesh and that human flesh can trace its history back to the womb of Rebekah. God can do wonders with the most unlovable people. It is not because we are lovable that God loves us. It is because God loves us.