

The Good bad book and the easy yoke

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 9 July 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 6 A

Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

The Bible is known to many as *'The Good Book'*, but is it actually a good book, morally speaking? In the USA this has become a political, as well as a theological, question. A Utah school district recently banned the Bible from its elementary and middle schools for what it named as *'vulgarity and violence'*.¹ This followed a parent's complaint that the Bible has material unsuitable for children, after Utah's Republican government had passed a law in 2022 banning *'pornographic or indecent'* books from schools.

This is not an isolated case. For recent conservative bans on books have been particularly aimed at education around LGBTIQ+ issues. Yet this can easily rebound, as it draws attention to the Bible's moral ambiguities. Religious conservatives often assume the Scriptures to be unadulterated good news for all. Meanwhile some secularists tend to assume bad news.

However, read as a whole, the Bible's reality is that it rarely offers simple black and white morality. Rather it invites us to wrestle with its challenges, and inspirations. From this we can indeed grow in the faith, and power, of God to which the Scriptures witness. We do so however by deepening our sense of God working with and through our very human realities, not escaping from them. This is certainly true of Rebekah and Isaac, centre-stage in our Genesis story (in chapter 24) today.

Do Rebekah and Isaac act as good role models? Commentators down the centuries have given different answers, particularly about Rebekah. Of particular concern have been her actions in enabling Jacob to gain the so-called birthright of his brother, Rebekah's other son, Esau. This story is told in Genesis chapters 25 and 27, part of which will be one of our lectionary readings next week.

In his linkage of four key faith foremothers in Genesis, one modern writer thus talks of Rebekah as *'the Conniving Mother'*: in contrast to Eve, *'the Mother of all the Living'*; Sarah, *'the Laughing Mother'*; and Hagar, *'the Crying Mother'*.² As we have reflected recently, there is more to say about those other women than that. However, Rebekah seems especially ill-served by the title of *'the Conniving Mother'* alone.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65794363>

² <https://www.rayfowler.org/sermons/famous-mothers-in-the-bible/>

Other modern biblical commentators have been even more scathing. Bruce Vawter called her the '*Lady Macbeth of the Bible*'.³ Even the usually insightful Walter Brueggemann declared Rebekah should not evoke any positive emotions from modern readers.⁴

What a strange set and change of perspectives! For, until the mid-16th century of the Christian era, Jewish and Christian commentators, and other literature, held a very positive view of Rebekah. They pointed to how Rebekah, in the biblical narrative, is personally selected by God for Isaac, and, as a great mother of God's people, is given a similar blessing and promise to that given to Abraham.

They also affirmed how Rebekah's high standing is scripturally attested to by her ancestry, her beautiful appearance, her physical strength, her moral and sexual integrity, her hospitality and strong will, her ability both to shape her people's life positively and, most strikingly, her capacity to communicate with God directly.⁵

As highlighted earlier, Protestant theology and modern pre-judgements have typically cast Rebekah in a very different light. This seems to have started with Jean Calvin, who rejected traditional interpretations of Rebekah as praiseworthy, saying her attitude '*was ill regulated*' and '*the corruption of nature too much betrays itself*.'⁶

Others followed, creating a new paradigm, or way of interpreting the Rebekah narratives, not least the influential commentator Matthew Henry, who asserted, as an indisputable fact, that Rebekah was a sinner who taught her son Jacob to lie and deceive.⁷ By the 19th century, others, such as Charles Henry Mackintosh, were alleging that '*in Rebekah and Jacob we see nature taking advantage of nature*' There was no waiting on God whatever.'⁸

Now, Rebekah, with others in Genesis, are not uncomplicated role models. Nor do we need to rehabilitate pious readings of them as outstanding saints. The point is, that, when we come to biblical texts, we need to be aware of our own perspectives and not read them in a surface manner, or without a listening dialogue with others. For, apart from vexed past debates about the relationship of grace to nature, the negative critiques of Rebekah do have a touch of anti-semitic and sexist tendencies. These can easily be coupled with a lack of due regard for both the depth of Christian Tradition and Jewish, especially Jewish women's, understandings.

As with the Hebrew scriptures as a whole, the Rebekah narratives are not straightforward. That is precisely their glory and their invitation. For they come to us from very different contexts to our own, with ambiguous human figures whose stories are told from particular perspectives which are not usually our own. This is why they are helpful, as they provide us with horizons of difference as well as identification. They have also lasted as inspirational literature through which God can speak because of their very human moral ambiguities, not despite them.

³ Vawter, B., 1977, *On Genesis: A new reading*, 1st edn., p. 299, Doubleday, Garden City, NY.

⁴ Brueggemann, W., 1982, *Genesis*, p. 234, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching

⁵ Tsymbalyuk.O & Melnik.V '*Rediscovering the ancient hermeneutic of Rebekah's character*' in *HTS Theologisches Studien/Theological Studies* 76(1) a5526. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5526>

⁶ Calvin, J. '*Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*'

⁷ Tsymbalyuk.O & Melnik.V '*Rediscovering the ancient hermeneutic of Rebekah's character*' p.6

⁸ *Ibid*

Let me therefore briefly offer three renewing aspects of Rebekah. Each is strongly affirmed by Jewish female scholarship and a gift to us all.⁹ Indeed, it is almost always helpful to check out Jewish wisdom when we are a little perplexed with the Hebrew scriptures, and, of course, in particular, to ask what women think, especially when we are puzzled about particular women!

Firstly, Rebekah reminds us that God has always worked powerfully through women as well as men. This is core to our Faith, even when it has been honoured in the breach. Yes, patriarchal power has been significant in Christianity and Judaism, but it is not the whole story. Typically, the key moments are shaped or inspired by women and other gendered people. Indeed, in affirming this, we do not help ourselves by simply calling the Genesis, and other Hebrew texts, stories of the patriarchs, or patriarchal narratives. Rebekah's story shatters that, just as it shatters the oft repeated line about the Faith of '*Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*': that is, just the leading men.

There is a reason why Rebekah's story is told at length in Genesis. For it proclaims the power of women in living Jewish and Christian Faith. We therefore ought at least to speak about the patriarchal and matriarchal narratives. We might also consider at least speaking of the Faith of '*Abraham, Rebekah and Jacob*'. For it is through Rebekah that second generation leadership comes, not through Isaac. Isaac after all seems to be a decent kind of guy. Why, we are even told he '*loves*' Rebekah, which is not something we hear much about in regard to the supposedly heterosexual heroes of the Bible.

Such modern companionate ideas are hard to find in the Bible, at least among 'straight' people. Yet Isaac is clearly not the powerful force we see in Abraham, or Jacob. The mantle, as Abraham perceives, must be carried through Jacob via Rebekah, not through Isaac, or Esau. No wonder Jewish women have never been pushovers. For the faith and blessing of God in Rebekah typically flows through them, and through all Christian women, and others, who take up the mantle of this great elder of Faith.

Secondly, Rebekah's prominence in Genesis reveals the kind of resources we are called to share. This partly comes from Rebekah's groundedness in her own culture. We must not forget that, at this point, Abraham's people were a fragile migrant band in alien circumstances. Arranged marriage may seem strange to modern westerners but Rebekah's marriage was thus vital to help reconnect and renew. For Rebekah not only brought new wealth to the struggling tribe but also deep cultural strength. Note how Rebekah's generosity extends beyond willingness to share water with Abraham's men - to their animals and band as a whole. Through Rebekah, the Abraham tribe draws more deeply on the wells of life itself.

Thirdly, and most powerfully, in both Jewish and pre-Reformation Christian thinking, Rebekah is a figure for the role of humanity as a whole in God's purposes. Jewish scholarship has indeed offered us the concept of '*tikkun*' or 'repair' as a way of understanding Rebekah and Jacob's usurpation of Esau.

This is the Jewish perception that, whilst recognizing God's grace and sovereignty, human beings have an active role in healing the world and its ills and redirecting it along God's path. This, it is suggested, is what Rebekah does, as a kind of new Eve, or giver of life. Significantly the structure and language of both the Garden of Eden and the Rebekah and Esau stories are similar. ¹⁰

⁹ For an overview and further reading suggestions see <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rebekah-bible>

¹⁰ <https://www.lookstein.org/professional-dev/bible/tikkun-rebekah-eve/>

What the wise and resourceful Rebekah does is to intervene in repairing the divine pathway which is going wrong. Esau, frankly, would be a disaster to lead the struggling needy people. Everyone knows this, including Esau himself. He may be a good hunter, but much more is required in leadership than a self-concerned macho man. Rebekah's trickery thereby puts God's people back on God's track. Instead of offering the wrong food, as Eve does to Adam, Rebekah helps Jacob offer savoury food to Isaac, and secures the blessing.

All of this may seem strange to us. Yet why would we want to think that the extraordinary principle of primogeniture, leadership of the first born, is in any case satisfactory. God, after all, does not work in straight lines. Sometimes a little intervention is needed, queer as it may seem to others.

We must indeed be careful with books, especially those, in the Bible, with great potential for good and ill. How we handle them is vital. Perhaps, if we handle them with the kind of generosity of spirit and resourcefulness we see in Rebekah, we may do a little better for ourselves, and others. For as our Gospel today says, God is constantly speaking to us, calling us to dance.

Sometimes that voice speaks to us in strange, even discomfoting ways. We may find ourselves challenged. Yet, as Jesus says, God's yoke, God's call, is easy.

Neither the Bible, nor anything else in Christian Faith is meant to be burden, never mind a means by which we are to burden others.

Rather, we are invited into a dance of discovery, taking up the tunes passed down to us, and, like Rebekah, playing new notes too, sharing both the wisdom of our inherited Faith and new waters of life.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.