

# GENESIS 24

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## A WIFE FOR ISAAC

### Overview

Although scholars assign Genesis 22, 23, and 24 to three different sources, all these chapters share similar themes relating to the continuity of covenant posterity.<sup>1</sup> In chapters 22 and 23, Abraham faced Isaac's near death and Sarah's actual death, while in chapter 24 he was assured that new generations would succeed Isaac. "As long as Isaac is unmarried, the divine promise of posterity remains unfulfilled."<sup>2</sup> To show us this, chapter 24 recounts the marriage of Isaac.

That said, the whole of chapter 24 seems outsized when we consider how few verses it would have taken to say simply that Isaac was betrothed and married to a divinely chosen relative, the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor.<sup>3</sup> We should ask ourselves why the details of this story have been preserved with such care.

One obvious reason for the length is that the chapter gives subtle hints of the selfish and conniving nature of Rebekah's brother Laban, whose difficult character will be more explicitly revealed through his later dealings with Jacob's marriages to his daughters, Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29–31).

But there certainly must be a more important function of the story than forewarning the reader about Laban. BYU professor Dennis J. Packard suggested that one of the most important things to look for in the chapter "is how a good steward acts."<sup>4</sup>

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1 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 125.

2 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 161.

3 Note that Nahor had also married a close relative: Milcah, his niece, the daughter of his brother Haran. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was, of course, an even closer relative—his half sister.

4 Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard, *Feasting upon the Word* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1981), 66.

The King James Version of Genesis 15:2 tells us that Eliezer of Damascus was the “steward of [Abraham’s] house.” However, throughout Genesis 24 the name of the steward who acts on Abraham’s behalf in finding a wife for Isaac, most likely Eliezar, “is never referred to by name. Why? Perhaps he is supposed to be remembered not as a particular individual, but as a steward, or even more, as a good example for all stewards.”<sup>5</sup>

The Hebrew phrase found in Genesis 15:2 translated as “steward,” *ben meshek beiti*, is unique in scripture, so its exact meaning is uncertain.<sup>6</sup> However, most ancient and modern scholars have taken it to mean that Eliezer was in a high position of trust for everything that Abraham possessed. And, observing the context of this phrase in verse 2, some have suggested that “Abraham had adopted Eliezer [as his heir], on the presumption, of course, that he would have no children of his own.”<sup>7</sup> If true, this would have made Eliezer’s selection as the one responsible to choose a wife for Isaac doubly poignant. In this event, the successful betrothal of Isaac would guarantee that Isaac’s seed would inherit what Eliezer’s children would have inherited had Isaac remained unmarried.

The chapter highlights the serious nature of the oath that Abraham made with his steward to ensure the success of his journey to find a wife for Isaac. In the negotiations with Rebekah’s family, the steward represented Abraham himself in a very real sense. The promises God made to Abraham about his seed were literally entrusted to the hands of Abraham’s steward.

The seriousness of the oath that Abraham made with his steward is a good illustration of the nature of covenants in the ancient world. Latter-day Saints can apply the ancient understanding of covenants directly to the covenants they make with God. But, Bible scholar Scott Hahn correctly observes that in order to do so,

we have to move beyond certain modern assumptions and retrieve the sense of covenant as it was lived in biblical cultures—and not only in the Hebrew and Christian religious cultures, but also in the Gentile and pagan societies of the ancient world. For covenant was the foundation of these societies. It gave individual persons their sense of kinship, their sense of relationship, their sense of belonging—to a family, a tribe, and a nation. The covenant oath was the foundation of family, national, and religious life.

In today’s legal usage, the words contract and covenant are almost interchangeable. But that was not true in the ancient world. Every covenant was based upon a contractual agreement, but a covenant differed from a contract in many ways. I’d like to mention just a few.

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5 Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 66.

6 For a discussion of options for the meaning of the phrase, see Sarna, *Genesis*, 382–383. Robert Alter suggested that there may be a play on words between Damascus (Dammasek) and *mesheq* (household maintenance) (Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* [New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019], 1:48n2). Alter further noted that Eliezer would be an unlikely name for someone from Damascus.

7 Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible, Featuring the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35nn2–3.

- In contracts, the terms are negotiable; in covenants, they are not. God sets the terms of the covenant. The people may freely choose to accept or reject those terms, but rejecting the terms means the loss of any share in the covenant blessings.
- Contracts are based upon the parties making promises; while covenants are only entered through the solemn swearing of an oath (*sacramentum* in Latin).
- Contracts are normally based on profit; covenants are based on love. The former speaks to self-interest, while the latter calls us to self-sacrifice.
- Contracts exchange goods and services; covenants exchange persons.
- Contracts are legal devices; they are conditional, and they can be broken. A covenant is more of a social organism; it is unconditional and ongoing. Even when it is violated, it is not thereby dissolved.
- Contracts are limited in scope; covenants affect many (if not all) areas of life.
- Contracts are limited in duration; covenants last for life, even extending to future generations.

We could list many other differences between contracts and covenants, but these will suffice. For we can see in these differences that every covenant includes a contractual element, but also that the covenant far surpasses the mere contract and establishes a much different kind of relationship.

The differences show us that God's covenantal relationship with humankind is non-negotiable, but freely accepted; that it is based on love; that it involves a sharing of our very lives—and His very life; that it is unlimited in scope. And that it is forever. In all of this, the divine covenant is very much like a marriage.<sup>8</sup>

There is an additional observation that should be made for the sake of modern readers who may not notice what would have been obvious to ancient readers: Eliezer was almost certainly a Canaanite, born of a people with a reputation, among the later Israelites, for dishonesty (see, for example, Hosea 12:8). However, in fulfillment of God's promise that Abraham and his seed would "bear [God's] ministry and Priesthood unto all nations" (Abraham 2:9), Eliezer is reputed in Jewish tradition to have become the greatest disciple in Abraham's household. Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz wrote:

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<sup>8</sup> Scott W. Hahn, "The World as Wedding," in *Catholic for a Reason IV: Scripture and the Mystery of Marriage and Family Life*, ed. Scott W. Hahn and Regis J. Flaherty (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2007), 6–8. For an in-depth study of covenants in the Bible, see Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). On the differences between covenants and contracts in scripture, particularly with reference to marriage, see Scott W. Hahn, *Swear to God: The Promise and Power of the Sacraments* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004); John Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 32–38; Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1995), 185–279; Paul F. Palmer, "Christian Marriage: Covenant or Contract?," *Theological Studies* 33 (1972): 617–665; G. M. Tucker, "Covenant Forms and Contracts Forms," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 487–503.

It is no small matter that Eliezer is described in such lofty spiritual terms. Following the rule that the physical details given by the Torah have spiritual significance as well, the Sages derive that Eliezer was as much in control of his Evil Inclination as was Abraham, that he was as great as 318 of Abraham's students combined, that he knew all of Abraham's teachings and transmitted them to others—even that he came to resemble Abraham.

This resemblance can be understood only in spiritual terms. It is surely impossible that Eliezer the Canaanite could have physically resembled Abraham the Semite. But on a scale of values where spiritual attainment is paramount, people are envisioned in terms of wisdom, righteousness, and kindness. In our own experience, we often see how a person's developing character stamps itself on his features.<sup>9</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 161.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 24

## **Genesis 24:1–9. Abraham Commissions His Servant**

As is often true in biblical narrative, the setup of the story in the initial verses provides important clues to the unfolding of the plot in the rest of the chapter. Readers can gain insights into such a story by comparing what *actually* happens with hints about what is *supposed* to happen. Without getting too far ahead of the story, it can be safely said that in contrast to frequent disastrous surprises in other Old Testament accounts, the events (and possible threats to the success of the mission) took place as predicted thanks to the preparation and inspiration of Abraham and Eliezer.

**24:1. “And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age.”** Abraham was one hundred years old when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5), so he would have been one hundred and forty years old when Isaac was married at age forty (Genesis 25:20). But, as Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard pointed out, Abraham “was far from being on his deathbed. He died when he was 175 (Genesis 25:7–8), and in the meantime had another wife and six children (Genesis 25:1–2).”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1:844–45.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard, *Feasting upon the Word* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1981), 66.

**24:2. “Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh.”** “The ancients put their hand on a symbolic object when they made oaths, just as we lift or put our hands on a Bible.”<sup>11</sup> Here the thigh probably represented the male organ, just as offspring are described elsewhere in Hebrew as coming out of their father’s thigh. (See Genesis 46:26; Exodus 1:5. In English, it is often translated as “loins.”) Jewish tradition sees this act as symbolizing the oath’s relevance to Abraham’s posterity “because circumcision was the first precept given to Abraham and came to him only through much pain.”<sup>12</sup>

Note that the Joseph Smith Translation changed this to read, “Put forth I pray thee thy hand under my hand.”<sup>13</sup> However, no change is made in a similar verse in Genesis 47:29. Packard and Packard suggested, “Perhaps the idea was for Abraham to hold Eliezer’s hand under his hand and against his thigh.”<sup>14</sup>

**24:3. “thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites.”** “Inter-marriage with the Canaanites, a lethal threat to Abraham’s identity and destiny is strictly forbidden in Deuteronomy 7:1–4.”<sup>15</sup> According to Meir Zlotowitz, “it was not a question of racial ‘purity’” but rather of maintaining religious orthodoxy.<sup>16</sup> Note that “the prohibition is extended to other groups in Ezra chapters 9–10.”<sup>17</sup> Of central concern was the widespread practice of idolatry.

But weren’t the members of Abraham’s family also idolaters? In this respect, Abraham’s extended family was apparently less of a religious risk than the Canaanites. Packard suggested, “Perhaps his kin were the best available people that Abraham knew. Even though it appears that they were idolatrous (Genesis 31:19), which was most likely the reason the Lord wanted Abraham to leave them in the first place, still it is likely that they had some understanding of the Lord and devotion to him (see Genesis 24:31). Marrying next-of-kin wasn’t imperative, however. Joseph married ‘Asenath the daughter of Potipherah priest of On’ (Genesis 46:20), and their son Ephraim received the birthright blessing.”<sup>18</sup>

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11 André Chouraqui, *La Bible : Entête (La Genèse)* (Paris, France: JC Lattès, 1992), 242n2.

12 Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1:893n2.

13 Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 663 (see OT2, page 56). OT1, page 58 (page 149 in Faulring, Jackson, and Matthews, *Original Manuscripts*), says, “hand under my head,” which is presumably a scribal error.

14 Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 66–67.

15 Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible, Featuring the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2004), 48n3.

16 Zlotowitz, *Bereishis*, 1:895n3.

17 Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, 48n3.

18 Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 68.

**24:6. “Beware thou that thou bring not my son thither again.”** The dangers of Isaac himself returning to Canaan and intermarrying with the local people seemed to have been foremost in Abraham’s mind, hence the strictness of these injunctions to the steward. In hearing these injunctions, the steward was likewise careful. Packard and Packard noted,

Eliezer’s mind is quick and active in the exercise of his stewardship; in this, as in other incidents, he is the model of a good steward. He is also conscientious—he doesn’t want to take an oath he might not be able to keep. And of course, he won’t be able to keep it if the woman won’t follow him. Abraham is sensitive to Eliezer’s unspoken wish not to make an oath he can’t keep, and in verse 8 states the conditions that will free Eliezer from the oath.<sup>19</sup>

**24:7. “The Lord God of heaven . . . shall send his angel before thee.”** Once again, Abraham demonstrated his faith that God’s promises to him were sure. Robert Alter noted that although Abraham explicitly stated the covenantal promises God gave him, “later in the story, when the servant gives the family a seemingly verbatim report of this initial dialogue with his master, he discreetly edits out this covenantal language,” which might have otherwise offended his hosts.<sup>20</sup>

**24:8. “then thou shalt be clear from this oath.”** Packard and Packard observed that

Abraham’s answer to his servant in verses 6 to 8 forms a chiasmus:

- a. Bring not my son
- b. Lord’s oath
- c. Angel to go before
- d. take a wife from thence
- c. Woman to follow
- b. Abraham’s oath
- a. Bring not my son<sup>21</sup>

Note that as in most chiasms, the most important phrase is placed in the middle of Abraham’s speech: “Take a wife from thence.” Nahum Sarna noted that the Hebrew verb corresponding to “take” (meaning “to seize, possess, marry”) had legal force in Abraham’s culture. “These terms define the marriage institution from the perspective of the groom. The narrative also reflects the custom of the parent initiating the marriage transaction.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Alter, ed., *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 78n7.

<sup>21</sup> Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah

Significantly, while Abraham used the common word for “oath” in these verses, the steward used a different word, related to the verb “to curse,” when he described the oath to Laban (Genesis 6:41). As Victor Hamilton observed, “every pact (that is, here between Abraham and his [steward]) is sealed by an oath . . . that contains an imprecation or sanction [penalty].”<sup>23</sup>

**24:9. “And the servant . . . swore to him concerning that matter.”** Note that the structure of the dialogue between Abraham and the steward resembles the general narrative pattern that is followed in scriptural accounts of the divine calling of prophets: commission (verses 3–4, 37–38), objection (verses 5, 39), words of reassurance (verses 6–8, 40–41), and finally, a confirming sign (verses 42–48).<sup>24</sup> “Now that the terms of the oath are perfectly clear, the servant commits himself.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Source**

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### **Related verses**

Genesis 24:1–9

## **Genesis 24:10–14. The Servant’s Prayer**

**24:10. “took . . . departed . . . went.”** The journey of the steward would have taken at least a month, perhaps up to twice that long.<sup>26</sup> Nahum Sarna noted that “in conformity with the nondescriptive biblical narrative style, the details of the long journey are ignored. Only the goal and its achievement are considered worthy of description.”<sup>27</sup>

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Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 162n4.

<sup>23</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 141–142. Compare Ezekiel 17:18, where spurning the oath is equated with violating the covenant. Hamilton also listed the common term for covenant (*berit*) but referred readers to Genesis 26:28–31, where the Hebrew terms related to *curse*, *covenant*, and *oath* occur as part of the same event.

<sup>24</sup> Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 140–41. See also Stephen D. Ricks, “The Narrative Call Pattern in the Prophetic Commission of Enoch,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1986): 97–105.

<sup>25</sup> Chouraqui, *Entête (La Genèse)*, 244n9.

<sup>26</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 145.

<sup>27</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 163n10.

**24:10. “camels.”** The ten camels, laden with luxuries, were no doubt part of the expected bride-price. The caravan served not only to impress Rebekah and her relatives but also to provide the means by which the betrothed and her entourage would return to Abraham.<sup>28</sup>

Since the time of the famed Bible archaeologist William F. Albright (1891–1971), camels in the story of Abraham have been a problem for Bible scholars. In 2014, two archaeologists made headlines in popular news outlets reaffirming the idea that camels were not domesticated in Israel until the late tenth century BC, centuries too late for Abraham.<sup>29</sup> This is a conundrum to the Hebrew Bible scholar Robert Alter, who wrote:

What is puzzling is that the narrative reflects careful attention to other details of historical authenticity: horses, which also were domesticated centuries later, are scrupulously excluded from the Patriarchal Tales, and when Abraham buys a gravesite, he deals in weights of silver, not in coins, as in the later Israelite period. The details of betrothal negotiation, with the brother acting as principal agent for the family, the bestowal of a dowry on the bride and betrothal gifts on the family, are equally accurate for the middle of the second millennium BCE.<sup>30</sup>

That said, as in all study of ancient texts, readers need to keep an open mind for new findings and interpretations. While the results of the 2014 study have not been faulted per se, Bible scholar Mark W. Chavalas observed in 2018 that “Abraham was not from Israel, but from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and inland Syria). Scholars studying this area know of textual, artistic, and archaeological evidence for camels long before the supposed time of Abraham and his family. . . . [For example, a] two-humped camel with riders appears on . . . an 18th century cylinder seal from Syria. . . . The relatively poor representation of camels in these texts does not imply their relative rarity; they may have been prestigious. So the Biblical writers may have been highlighting Abraham’s great wealth by mentioning camels.”<sup>31</sup>

**24:11. “even the time that women go out to draw water.”** “The wise [steward] goes directly to the place where he is sure to find young women: assembled around the wells where they are exchanging the news of the day.”<sup>32</sup> A friend once recounted to me that he had installed a faucet in an African village that greatly increased the flow of water each morning from the stream to the buckets of the waiting women. When he went to watch one morning, he noticed the water tap had slowed to a trickle and found, to his relief, there was no problem with the supply—someone had just turned the tap way down, so he

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28 Sarna, *Genesis*, 163.

29 Lidar Sapir-Hen and Erez Ben-Yosef, “The Introduction of Domestic Camels to the Southern Levant: Evidence from the Aravah Valley,” *Tel Aviv* 40, no. 2 (November 2013): 277–285.

30 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:78n10.

31 Mark W. Chavalas, “Did Abraham Ride a Camel?,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 44, no. 6 (November/December 2018): 52, 64–65. See also Sarna, *Genesis*, 96n.

32 André Chouraqui, *La Bible: Entête (La Genèse)* (Paris, France: J-C Lattès, 1992), 245n11.



turned the tap up again. Indignantly, the next woman in line turned the faucet down again, saying in a voice everyone could hear, “What’s the hurry?” What my friend had failed to appreciate is the essential and enjoyable social function that the leisurely drawing of water enabled.

**24:12. “And he said, O Lord God of my master Abraham, I pray thee.”** The standard Jewish intonation for this verse mandates a pause—something that occurs only four times in the first five books of the Bible—after “and he said.” “It has been suggested that its placement here possibly indicates the servant’s hesitation to address God directly.”<sup>33</sup> Tradition also notes the servant’s humility, observing that he felt himself unworthy to address deity as “God of the heaven and God of the earth” as Abraham had done. Instead, he addressed the Lord as the “God of my master Abraham.”<sup>34</sup>

Dennis and Sandra Packard observed that the steward “proposes a plan to the Lord and asks for his help in making it successful. Eliezer tells the Lord, ‘This is what I propose to do. Please help me do it,’ not, ‘What shall I do?’ . . . Eliezer does the thinking and leaves it to the Lord to confirm or disconfirm. Elsewhere in the scriptures, the Lord approves of this (see Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–8; 58:26–29).”<sup>35</sup>

**24:12. “send me good speed.”** “Hebrew *hakreh*, literally ‘make it occur.’ What appears to an observer to be the happy result of chance (*mikreh*) may, in reality, be a deliberate determination of God.”<sup>36</sup>

**24:12. “shew kindness unto my master Abraham.”** Note the strict focus of the steward on what would bring joy to his master. Even Isaac’s future happiness remained at the periphery of Eliezer’s thoughts and failed to enter his prayer.

**24:14. “the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac.”** The conditions the steward gave to the Lord for the choice of the young woman for his master expressed his wise intention: “Nobility of heart will be the fundamental criterion.”<sup>37</sup>

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33 Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1:907n12.

34 Zlotowitz, *Bereishis*, 1:907n12.

35 Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard, *Feasting upon the Word* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1981), 71.

36 Sarna, *Genesis*, 164.

37 Chouraqui, *Entête (La Genèse)*, 245nn12–14.

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## **Related verses**

Genesis 24:10–14

## **Genesis 24:15–27. The Servant Encounters Rebekah**

**24:15.** “*And it came to pass, before he had done speaking, that, behold, Rebekah came out.*” Rebekah’s sudden appearance before the steward had finished his prayer is highlighted by the visual cue “behold.”

**24:16.** “*And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her.*” In other words, Rebekah was both beautiful and virtuous. The Joseph Smith Translation says that she was “a virgin, very fair to look upon, such as the servant of Abraham had not seen, neither had any man known like unto her.”<sup>38</sup>

**24:16.** “*well.*” Probably better translated as “spring,” “which means the water may have been on the surface rather than underground. This would have made the task considerably easier, though still difficult enough to be selective.”<sup>39</sup>

**24:20.** “*hasted . . . emptied . . . ran again . . . drew for all his camels.*” This was an astounding athletic feat for a young woman who wanted to show her valor.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, “she went about her business briskly and conscientiously. . . . This made a great impression upon the servant.”<sup>41</sup>

**24:21.** “*And the man wondering at her held his peace, to wit whether the Lord had made his journey prosperous or not.*” The narrator leaves readers in suspense up to this point, wondering with the steward if the young woman belonged to Abraham’s family.

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38 Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), OT1, page 59.

39 Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard, *Feasting upon the Word* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1981), 73.

40 Compare André Chouraqui, *La Bible: Entête (La Genèse)* (Paris, France: JC Lattès, 1992), 246n20.

41 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 165n16.

**24:21. “the man.”** Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard noted that “Eliezer is referred to as ‘the man’ until after he reveals his identity and mission beginning in verse 34. This gives us a feeling for the curiosity that Rebekah and her family must have felt about this ‘man,’ until he did tell them his purpose in coming.”<sup>42</sup>

**24:22. “the man took a golden earring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold.”** A princely gift, given in recognition for her “self-imposed, arduous labors,”<sup>43</sup> even before she revealed her parentage.

**24:22. “a golden earring.”** Why only a single earring? Because the ring was a nose ring (see note 47a in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible).

**24:27. “And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham.”** Packard and Packard commented:

Eliezer doesn’t pat himself on the back for his cleverness, but worships the Lord, acknowledging his guidance. He also humbly acknowledges his position as Abraham’s emissary, and the fact that the Lord has done it for Abraham, not for him.

Verses 26 and 27 are worshipful and beautiful. Part of this beauty comes from the phrases bound together by repeated sounds. For example, in verse 26 the repeated “ow” and “d” sounds bind together the phrase, “bowed down his head.” [Also:] worshipped the Lord; Blessed be; Lord God; my master Abraham; not left destitute my master; Lord led; house of my master’s brethren. Note also how the s sounds bind the whole of verse 27 together.<sup>44</sup>

### **Source**

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### **Related verses**

Genesis 24:15–27

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<sup>42</sup> Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 165n22.

<sup>44</sup> Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 77.

## Genesis 24:28–61. The Betrothal of Rebekah

**24:29. “And his name was Laban.”** “Hebrew *lavan*, meaning ‘white.’ The feminine form *leveanah*, ‘the white one,’ is a poetic term for the moon. This association is in keeping with other names in Abraham’s family that have a connection with the lunar cult.”<sup>45</sup>

Like his namesake in the Book of Mormon, Laban’s “whiteness” had nothing to do with the spiritual quality of purity. King David’s adversary, Nabal (Laban spelled backwards) is similarly depicted as “churlish and evil in his doings” (1 Samuel 25:3).

**24:30–31. “when he saw the earring and bracelets upon his sister’s hands.”** Laban’s haste to welcome his guests outwardly resembled Rebekah’s running, but the phrase “when he saw the earring and bracelets” suggests that “he is motivated by greed.”<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Laban’s enthusiastic greeting in verse 31, “Come in, thou blessed of the Lord,” “does seem a little strange”<sup>47</sup> coming out of the mouth of an idolator. Dennis and Sandra Packard concluded that “Laban is playing a part—that of the good host. . . . Laban’s showiness and back-handedness contrast with Rebekah’s modesty and directness.”<sup>48</sup>

**24:35. “the Lord hath blessed my master greatly.”** By beginning his speech with allusions to Abraham’s wealth, Eliezer appealed to Laban’s mercenary interests.

**24:36–48.** The steward rehearsed his story in detail to Laban with great diplomacy. Readers may profit by looking carefully at the details repeated in the narrative to see similarities and differences to earlier accounts of the same events. Note the following variations in the version of the story told to Laban:

- Eliezer emphasized his “master’s great wealth.”<sup>49</sup>
- He told of “Isaac’s extraordinary birth and subtly informs his audience that the prospective groom is the sole heir to his father’s fortune (compare 25:5).”
- “Mention of the oath demonstrates the great seriousness of the matter at hand, which is a delicate form of flattery to the bride and her family. So is the reference to the rejection of a Canaanite wife, which also happens to explain why Isaac has not yet married.”

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<sup>45</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 166n29.

<sup>46</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 166n30.

<sup>47</sup> Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard, *Feasting upon the Word* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1981), 80.

<sup>48</sup> Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 80.

<sup>49</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 167nn34–39. The information and all quotes in this list come from this source.

- “Tactfully, the narrative leaves unmentioned Abraham’s original separation from the family and the proscription on bringing Isaac to them.”

Robert Alter noticed one other detail from the previous narrative that differed in Eliezer’s account of events—namely, that he placed his question about her parentage before rather than after his putting the ring in her nose. Alter explained that although the steward knew his prayer had been answered even before he asked Rebekah the question, “to the family, [the steward] does not want to seem to have done anything so presumptuous as bestowing gifts—implicitly betrothal gifts—on a young woman without first ascertaining her pedigree.”<sup>50</sup>

**24:50. “Then Laban and Bethuel answered.”** Sarna found it “not only strange that Laban takes precedence over his father but also that the father plays no further role in the proceedings.”<sup>51</sup>

**24:50–51. “The thing proceedeth from the Lord: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good. . . . [T]ake her, and go.”** Although the recounting of these marvelous events left the audience almost speechless (with nothing to say, whether bad or good), some commentators see a hint of resentment in the expression “take her and go,” which has “harsh overtones reminiscent of Pharaoh’s statement to Abraham in Genesis 12:19.”<sup>52</sup> It was almost as if Laban and Bethuel felt their hand was forced by events, giving them no opportunity for further bargaining with the representative of their wealthy cousin Abraham.

**24:55. “Let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go.”** The next morning, Laban apparently had second thoughts about letting Rebekah leave so soon. For readers familiar with the later story of Laban’s deceptive tactics to delay Jacob’s departure, his request that Rebekah stay “a few days, at the least ten” will set off alarm bells. Consistent with this threat of a speedy journey to Abraham and Isaac, medieval commentators noticed that the Hebrew term “‘days’ (precisely in this plural form) sometimes means ‘a year,’ in which case the ten would refer to ten months.”<sup>53</sup>

**24:56–58. “Hinder me not.”** Eliezer was justifiably firm in his response to these tactics to delay Rebekah’s departure. Anticipating Rebekah might be hesitant to leave so soon with “this man” (note how they refer to him with an impersonal reference), they called her to get her opinion. Her courageous and faith-filled answer of “I will go,” no doubt surprised her relatives and delighted Eliezer. Her unwavering

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50 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:82n47.

51 Sarna, *Genesis*, 168n50.

52 Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1:948n51.

53 Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 1:83n55.

response to leave her family behind at the Lord’s call is reminiscent of Abraham’s original departure from Canaan in Genesis 12.

**24:60. “And they blessed Rebekah.”** The fact that the blessing given by Rebekah’s relatives was similar in some ways to the earlier blessing given by the Lord to Abraham should again prompt readers to look for subtle differences. For example, Packard and Packard invited us to notice that

in giving the [earlier blessing], the Lord is metaphorical while Laban is not. The Lord says, “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore,” but Laban says, “Be thou the mother of thousands of millions.” . . . Is the Lord’s attitude any different from Laban’s?

The Lord is serious; Laban we’re not so sure about. He appears to be exaggerating. Perhaps he’s showing off. Perhaps his exaggeration shows his reluctance to see Rebekah go.<sup>54</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 166–169.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 24:28–61

## **Genesis 24:62–67. Rebekah and Isaac**

**24:63–64. “Isaac . . . lifted up his eyes, and saw. . . . Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and . . . saw Isaac.”** The parallel between Isaac and Rebekah lifting up their eyes to see one another depicts their excitement in a vivid word picture. “It’s as if they were attuned to each other, a suggestion of the oneness that marriage brings.”<sup>55</sup>

**24:65. “my master.”** The reference of the steward to Isaac as “my master” subtly conveys the passing of the torch from Abraham to Isaac. Emphasizing this transition is the omission of any account of Abraham meeting Rebekah. Such a meeting no doubt happened, but the narrator wanted readers to focus solely on Isaac and Rebekah as the chapter closes.

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<sup>54</sup> Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 88.

<sup>55</sup> Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard, *Feasting upon the Word* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1981), 90.

**24:67. “And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent.”** Dennis J. Packard and Sandra Packard saw a double significance to this phrase:

First, Rebekah literally takes Sarah’s place, living in her tent and probably taking charge of her responsibilities at Lahairoi (Genesis 25:11). Rebekah also takes Sarah’s place in Isaac’s affection, at least as far as that is possible. Isaac and his mother were likely very fond of each other; it was Sarah who guarded Isaac’s birthright and protected him from disrespectful Ishmael (Genesis 21:8–12). So, to say Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death is to emphasize how much he loved Rebekah. . . .

Why is the line “and she became his wife; and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” a fitting conclusion for this story in which Eliezer has played such a central role? We see here the result of Eliezer’s faithful service: a wife that Isaac loves.<sup>56</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 169–170.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 24:62–67

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<sup>56</sup> Packard and Packard, *Feasting upon the Word*, 91.