

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 24 – Isaac and Rebekah

OUTLINE OF THE ABRAHAM STORY

- Genesis 12: 1– 9 God calls and blesses Abram and he moves west into Canaan.
- Genesis 12: 10– 20 Abraham risks his blessing in Egypt by giving up Sarai.
- Genesis 13: 1 –18 Abraham and Lot divide their territory and Abraham receives Palestine.
- Genesis 14: 1– 24 Abraham shows himself a hero and blessed in warfare.
- Genesis 15: 1– 21 God renews promises and makes a covenant with Abraham, but after declaring a curse.
- Genesis 16: 1– 16 Abraham risks the promise of a son by taking Hagar to bear Ishmael.
- Genesis 17: 1– 27 God renews his covenant and promise of a son, but commands Abraham to take on the sign of circumcision.
- Genesis 18: 1– 15 God renews his promise to give a son to Sarah and Abraham.
- Genesis 18: 16– 33 Abraham shows his blessing by interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Genesis 19: 1– 38 Lot proves to be the only faithful person in Sodom; it is destroyed.
- Genesis 20: 1– 18 Abraham risks the blessing to Sarah with Abimelech, the king of Gerar.
- Genesis 21: 1– 21 God gives the blessing of a son, Isaac, and sends Ishmael away.
- Genesis 21: 22– 34 Abraham makes a treaty with Abimelech and his people.
- Genesis 22: 1– 24 Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God.
- Genesis 23: 1– 20 Abraham lays claim to possession of the land by buying the cave of Machpelah
- Genesis 24: 1– 67 Abraham arranges a wife for Isaac to continue the blessing.**
- Genesis 25: 1– 18 Abraham’s death and burial; Ishmael’s descendants; the blessing passes to Isaac.

In chapter 23, we learned of Sarah’s death and burial in the cave of Machpelah (23:9), which Abraham purchased from Ephron for four hundred shekels of silver (23:12-16).

CHARACTERS

ABRAHAM אַבְרָהָם – is the one whom God has chosen and promised to bless (12:1-2).

ISAAC יִצְחָק – is Abraham’s only son through Sarah, now of marriageable age. His name means “laugh, joke, toy with, play with.”

ELIEZER אֵלִיעֶזֶר – the servant of Abraham who was mentioned prior to Isaac’s birth as a potential heir to Abraham (15:2). His name means “My god is aid/strength.” He is “the elder of Abraham’s house, who ruled over all that he had” (24:2). In Genesis 15:2–3 Abram complains to Yahweh “I go childless; my house is ben-mešeq, that is, Damascus Eliezer (alternatively: ‘the ben-mešeq of my house is Damascus Eliezer’) ... Since you have not granted me progeny, a member of my household is my heir.” The words ben-mešeq have not been translated because we do not know what they mean, though at least since Aquila (1st century C.E.) mešeq has been regarded as a variant or defective spelling of mašqe, “cup bearer.”

REBEKAH רִבְקָה – Wife of Isaac, mother of the twins Esau and Jacob, daughter of Bethuel (Abraham’s nephew), and sister of Laban (Gen 22:23). She is thus also Isaac’s cousin once removed, since her grandfather Nahor was Abraham’s brother. Older etymologies derive the name from the root *rbq*, “to tie fast” (cf. the Heb *ribqâ*, “a looped cord for tying young animals”). It may also constitute a wordplay on the Heb *baqar*, “cattle” (note the metathesis of the *reš*), thus making it analogous to other names in the patriarchal narratives, such as Rachel (“ewe”), or Leah (“cow”), and Zilpah (“short-nosed animal”).

LABAN לָבָן – According to the genealogy given in the book of Genesis, Terah was the father of Abraham (Abram), Nahor, and Haran (Gen 11:27). Nahor, through his wife Milcah, was the father of eight children (Gen 22:20–22). His eighth son, Bethuel, was the father of Rebekah (Gen 22:23) and of Laban (Gen 25:20). Laban was the father of Leah and Rachel (Gen 29:16); Leah and Rachel later became Jacob’s wives. He also had several sons (Gen 30:35; 31:1) who probably were born after Jacob joined Laban’s family through his marriage to Leah and Rachel.

So, he is Rebekah's brother (v. 29), who takes an active role in dealing with Abraham's servant regarding Rebekah's betrothal to Isaac—acting almost as if he were Rebekah's father, even though their father, Bethuel, is alive and present (v. 50). In years to come, Laban will have dealings with Jacob, Isaac's son—taking unfair advantage of his nephew Jacob wherever possible—deceiving the deceiver (Genesis 29-31).

BETHUEL בְּתוּאֵל – is the father of Laban and Rebekah. He is the son of Nahor, Abraham's brother (v. 47; see also 22:20)—making Bethuel, Abraham's nephew and Isaac's cousin. A son of Nahor by Milcah (Gen 22:20–22) and the father of Rebekah (24:15) and Laban (28:5). Bethuel played no significant role even in his daughter's betrothal, where her brother was prominent. Rebekah ran to her mother's house (Gen 24:28); Laban prepared the welcome (vv 29–32); then Laban granted consent to the servant to explain his mission (v 33); and gifts were presented to Rebekah, Laban, and her mother (v 53). In the actions of vv 55–60 her brother and mother were the players. Furthermore one notes that peculiar order of names in v 50, where the father's comes after his son's. Perhaps Bethuel had already died. Josephus (*Ant* 1.16.2 §248) does claim that Bethuel was dead and that Laban, with the mother, directed the whole household and was guardian of Rebekah's maidenhood.

MILCAH מִלְכָּה – Daughter of Haran, and therefore also sister of Lot, who married her uncle Nahor (Gen 11:29). Because she was the mother of Bethuel, Milcah also became the grandmother of Rebekah (Gen 22:20–33; 24:15). Whatever was the text is to be understood in terms of original sources, the present text relates Milcah to Abraham through both of his brothers, Haran and Nahor. See Gen 11:29, 22:20, 23; 24:15, 24, 47 (all J source). The name “Milcah” is a feminine form of the root *mlk*, “ruler.”

LOCATIONS

HEBRON הֶבְרֹן – An important city located on the crest (ca. 3350 ft. elev.) of the Judean mountain ridge ca. 19 mi. SSE of Jerusalem and ca. 23 mi. NE of Beer-sheba. The place where Sarah died. Hebron is in the southern hill country of Judah some twenty miles south-southwest of Jerusalem. Hebron is situated at one of the highest points (about 3,040 feet above sea level) on the central mountainous ridge and is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the Near East. It's original name was Kiriath-arba (“fourfold city” or “city of four”; possibly because four villages were connected with the city).

MAMRE מַמְרֵא – The name “Mamre” appears in several different contexts, all in the book of Genesis and all related to the patriarch Abram/Abraham. In only one passage (Gen 14:24) does the Bible unquestionably depict the name as belonging to a person, an Amorite who was one of Abram's allies in the battle against Chedorlaomer's coalition (on the problematic 14:13, see below). In a number of other passages the name is clearly portrayed as belonging to a place W of the cave of Machpelah, which Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite (23:17; 25:9; 49:30; 50:13), a place identified with (a district of?) Hebron/Kiriath-arba (23:19; 35:27; cf. 23:2). Two passages, in recounting the migrations of Abram/Abraham, note that the patriarch pitched his tent by “the oaks of Mamre” (13:18; 18:1), while a third passage (14:13) seems awkwardly to combine this toponymic reference to “the oaks of Mamre” with the personal name “Mamre the Amorite, ‘brother’ of Eshcol and of Aner.” Thus, in two passages (14:13, 24) Mamre appears (along with Aner, Eshcol, and Abram) as one of four allies (covenant-partners) who joined forces on a specific occasion. According to biblical tradition, Abraham built an altar at Mamre (Gen 13:18) which is why Abraham frequently returns to the location. It was at Mamre that God told Abraham that Sarah would have a son (Gen 18:1-15). And it was there that Abraham pleaded with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16-33).

MACHPELAH מַכְפֵּלָה – A field with a cave purchased by Abraham as the burial site for family members (Gen 23). References to the site identify it as “the cave of Machpelah” (Gen 23:9) and “the field of Machpelah” (Gen 23:17). Originally purchased for the burial of Sarah (Gen 23), other family members were buried there, including

Ant Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* (= *Antiquitates Judaicae*)

W west (ern)

Abraham (Gen 25:9), Isaac (Gen 35:29; 49:31), Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob (Gen 49:31; 50:13). Stephen’s sermon implies that Jacob was buried at Shechem “in the tomb that Abraham had bought” (Acts 7:16); however, the OT identifies Shechem as the location at which Joseph was buried (Josh 24:32). Machpelah is located in Hebron, el-Khalil, and is labeled Haram el-Khalil, the Enclosure of Abraham. The OT simply locates it “east of Mamre” (Gen 23:19; 25:9).

ARAM-NAHARAIM אַרַם נַחְרַיִם – Geographical name of an area in upper Mesopotamia, located around the great bend of the Euphrates River in Northern Syria. The name occurs five times in the Bible, and is often translated “Mesopotamia” in English versions, following the LXX rendering. It appears as the name of the ancestral home of Abraham’s family in Gen 24:10 (the same area seems to be designated Paddan-Aram in the Priestly Pentateuchal source). Precise boundaries of the land of Naharaim cannot be determined from the preserved texts, but the towns said to be located in the land include Harran, Nahor, Pethor, and Tunip. These indicate that the designation covered areas on both the west and east sides of the Euphrates.

NAHOR נָחוֹר – A city in Aram-Naharaim named after the brother of Abraham and the place where the servant stopped to water the camels. It is reasonable to assume that “the city of Nahor” is not necessarily a city whose name is Nahor but the city occupied by Nahor. If so, it may refer to Haran, a city in which Abraham sojourned with Nahor before traveling to Canaan (Gen 11:29–31). This is also the city from which shepherds who knew Laban, son of Nahor, came (Gen 29:4–5).

FOUR SCENES – A SUMMARY

The narrator has arranged (chapter 24) clearly into four scenes:

- vs. 1-9 Eliezer and Abraham
- vs. 11-27 Eliezer and Rebekah
- vs. 32-60 Eliezer at Laban’s house
- vs. 62-67 Rebekah and Isaac

SCENE 1: Abraham and his servant (vv. 1-9). Abraham, not wanting Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman, sends his trusted servant to “go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac” (24:4). When the servant shows concern that the right woman might not want to come with him to Canaan, Abraham tells him that God will provide the right woman. If not, Abraham releases the servant from this obligation.

SCENE 2: The servant and Rebekah (vv. 11-27). The servant goes to Aram-Naharaim in Mesopotamia, where he prays, “Yahweh, the God of my master Abraham, please give me success this day... Let it happen, that the young lady to whom I will say, ‘Please let down your pitcher, that I may drink,’ and she will say, ‘Drink, and I will also give your camels a drink,’—let her be the one you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master” (vv. 12-14). God answers the servant’s prayer “before he had finished speaking” (v. 15). Rebekah appears, and performs in accordance with the servant’s prayer. The servant gives her an expensive gold ring and two gold bracelets, and asks if he might stay at her father’s house.

SCENE 3: The servant at Laban’s house (vv. 32-60). Rebekah tells Laban about Abraham’s servant, and Laban goes to invite the servant into their home—no doubt influenced by the expensive gifts that the servant gave Rebekah. The servant tells Laban of Abraham’s wealth and his desire to find a wife for Isaac among his father’s house. He then tells of his prayer at the well and Rebekah’s response, making it obvious that she is God’s answer to pray. He then asks Laban if he “will deal kindly and truly with my master” (v. 49). Laban tells him to take Rebekah as requested, and Rebekah agrees to go.

SCENE 4: Rebekah and Isaac (vv. 62-67). As the servant arrives at home with Rebekah, they see Isaac “walking” in the field. The servant tells Rebekah that the man is Isaac, and she veils herself. The servant tells Isaac all that has transpired, and Isaac takes Rebekah as his wife.

This story is about God’s providence as that relates to the fulfillment of God’s plan for Abraham, the nation Israel, the Messiah, and the salvation of the human race. Isaac must have a wife if God’s plan is to be fulfilled— Sarah’s empty tent must have a woman to carry on the legacy. Abraham does his part by sending his best servant to find a wife among Abraham’s people and the servant does his part by carrying out his duties faithfully, but it is God who makes the journey a success (vv. 21:40, 42, 56).

Genesis 24:1-9 (NRSV)

¹ Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. ² Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh ³ and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, ⁴ but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac.” ⁵ The servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land; must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?” ⁶ Abraham said to him, “See to it that you do not take my son back there. ⁷ The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, ‘To your offspring I will give this land,’ he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. ⁸ But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there.” ⁹ So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

Source Theory: All of chapter 24 is believed to have come from the J-Source.



24:1–9 An oath is always sworn in the name of a god. This places a heavy responsibility on the one who swears such an oath to carry out its stipulations, since he would be liable to divine as well as human retribution if he did not. Sometimes, as in this case, a gesture is added to the oath. The gesture usually is symbolic of the task to be performed by the oath taker. For instance, by placing his hand inside Abraham’s thigh (in the vicinity of or on the genitals), the servant ties his oath of obedience to the acquisition of a wife for Isaac and thus the perpetuation of Abraham’s line.

24:2 The rabbinic tradition assumes that Abraham’s senior servant is Eliezer, but the latter is never termed a “servant” (15.2– 4), and precise identification of the man, unnamed throughout the story, is unnecessary. Putting the hand under the thigh, an old form of oath taking (47.29), reflected the view that reproductive organs were sacred. Earlier in Genesis, God established the covenant between himself and Abraham and the sign of the covenant is circumcision. Thus, the oath is taken with the hand under the sign of the covenant with God. Thigh seems to be a euphemism for the male organ (cf. 46.26; Exod. 1.5). Perhaps by touching it, the person swearing the oath calls sterility or loss of children upon himself, should he violate it. The parallel in Gen. 47.29 suggests that ch 24 once functioned as Abraham’s last request.

24:3 The text describes a concern by Abraham about intermarriage with Canaanites that is otherwise seen primarily in late materials from Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut 7.3–4) and texts influenced by Deuteronomy. The prohibition is extended to intermarriage with other groups in Ezra chs 9– 10.

24:4 The phrasing rather precisely recalls God’s original commandment to Abraham in 12.1 (cf. 24.7, 38, 40). Similarly, Rebekah’s consent (“I will [go],” v. 58) recalls God’s first word to Abraham in that same verse, “Go.” Rebekah thus becomes a kind of Abraham figure in her own right. Abraham’s dispatch of his senior servant back to his native land and his kinfolk brings his story full circle and ensures his legacy will continue in the next generation.

24:4 marrying from same tribe. The practice of marrying within one's own tribe or family is called endogamy. Endogamy could be the result of religious, social or ethnic concerns. In this text it appears to be ethnic in that there are no suggestions that the family of Laban, Rebekah and Rachel shares the religious beliefs of Abraham and his family. Likewise social standing is usually an issue only when nobility and commoners are involved or certain classes of urban society are seen as necessarily distinct. Ethnic concerns usually center around clan traditions or family land holdings. At times they represent long-established hostilities between two groups. In this text the endogamy seems motivated by the covenant that seeks to prevent Abraham and his family from simply being assimilated into the ethnic melting pot in Canaan.

24:1–9 Abraham was advanced in years; the reason for the urgency to find a wife for Isaac. We learn retrospectively that Isaac has been deeply affected by his mother's death (24.67), and Abraham turns to his servant for aid. The unnamed servant is Abraham's chief steward (v. 2) and may be the same character as Eliezer of Damascus, mentioned in 15.2. Put your hand under my thigh, a ritual component of the servant's oath that seems to signify (either literally or by proximity) Abraham's reproductive organ, an appropriate source of authority for the patriarch (cf. 47.29). He will send his angel before you (v. 7), an assurance that indicates Abraham's status as a prophet (20.7) and God's predestination of a positive outcome. God of heaven (v. 7), a divine title common in postexilic writings (e.g., Jon 1.9; 2 Chr 36.23; Neh 1.4; and often in the Aramaic of Ezra and Daniel).

Genesis 24:10-14 (NRSV)

¹⁰ Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all kinds of choice gifts from his master; and he set out and went to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. ¹¹ He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water; it was toward evening, the time when women go out to draw water. ¹² And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. ¹³ I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴ Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please offer your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master."

24:10–11 camel domestication. Although camel remains in Arabia date back to 2600 B.C., domesticated camels were not common in Palestine until 1200 B.C. The occasional references to them in Genesis are authenticated by evidence of domestication in an Old Babylonian text from Ugarit from the early second millennium. Evidence that the camel was used as a beast of burden in Arabia dates to the end of the third millennium. The stages of domestication may be traced by the development of the saddles. Camels were extremely valuable animals capable of carrying heavy loads through hostile desert terrains. Thus they were seldom used for food and would have been a sign of wealth.

24:10 Aram Naharaim. Aram Naharaim (Aram of the two rivers), containing Haran on the Balikh River, includes the general area between the Euphrates River and the Habur River triangle in northern Mesopotamia. The name also appears in Deuteronomy 23:4, in the superscription of Psalm 60 and in 1 Chronicles 19:6. It may be the same as Nahrma in the fourteenth-century B.C. El Amarna letters between the Egyptian Pharaoh and the rulers of Canaanite city-states.

24:11 well at evening time outside of town. The cool of the early morning and evening would have been the best times for women to go to the village well for water. Since the well was often outside the town to accommodate watering of animals, women would normally travel in groups for protection. Strangers could be expected to use the well, but it may be assumed that they would ask permission of the villagers. Hospitality custom would have necessitated offering them a drink.

24:10 Aram-naharaim, the upper Euphrates region of northern Syria, in which Haran, Abraham's original home, was located.

24:12 Steadfast love, NRSV's translation of Heb *hesed* that signifies the loyalty arising from a relationship (e.g., friendship; see 1 Sam 20.8). Applied to God, it means benevolent action, loyalty manifest in deeds.

24:11, 13. spring versus well. The difference in terminology between verse 11 ("well") and verse 13 ("spring") may reflect a variety of water sources available. There are examples where a water source originated from a spring but as the water table shrank it became necessary to dig down, thereby forming a well. This is the case at Arad, where a deep well now replaces the original spring.

24:10–14 The detail that the servant took ten...camels provides the vehicle through which the servant will know God's choice: the girl who offers to water the camels (v. 14). This is an offer of extraordinary hospitality and labor (cf. Abraham's hospitality in 18.1–8). City of Nahor, Haran (see 11.31; 28.2). Aram-naharaim means "Aram of the two rivers," referring to the region from the great bend of the upper Euphrates to the Habur River, in which Haran is located. The meeting of the future wife at the well (v. 11) echoes similar scenes in the stories of Jacob (29.1–14) and Moses (Ex 2.15–22). In Middle Eastern tribal societies, the well is one of the few places where a man can meet an unmarried woman. The servant's plan relies on God's manipulation of events for the sake of his steadfast love (Hebrew *chesed*, v. 14) for Abraham (this theme word also appears in vv. 12, 27, 49).

Genesis 24:15-21 (NRSV)

¹⁵ Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, coming out with her water jar on her shoulder. ¹⁶ The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. ¹⁷ Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me sip a little water from your jar." ¹⁸ "Drink, my lord," she said, and quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. ¹⁹ When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." ²⁰ So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. ²¹ The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful.

24:15–21 Before he had finished speaking. The servant's prayer is immediately fulfilled in spectacular fashion. Rebekah is fit in terms of kinship (she is Isaac's second cousin on his father's side), physical beauty (very fair), and marriageability (a virgin, v. 16). There is suspense as she initially says Drink, my lord (v. 18) without mentioning the camels. Only after he has finished does she offer to water the camels, emphatically showing her hospitality and passing the test of recognition. Her haste in watering the camels (v. 20) is reminiscent of Abraham's haste in tending to his visitors in 18.1–8.

24:20 Rebekah's running to serve the visitor (who has not yet introduced himself) recalls Abraham's response to the visit of the unidentified men in 18.6–7.

24:19–20 how much camels drink. Camels drink only as much water as they have lost and do not store it in the hump. The concentration of fat and the coat of hair allows dissipation of heat, less sweating and a wider range of body temperature during the day and night. The camel also is able to maintain a constant amount of water in its blood plasma and thus sustain higher water loss than most animals. A camel that has gone a few days without water could drink as much as twenty-five gallons. In contrast, the jars that were used for water would usually hold no more than three gallons.

Genesis 24:22-27 (NRSV)

²² When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, ²³ and said, "Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?" ²⁴ She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." ²⁵ She added, "We have plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night." ²⁶ The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD ²⁷ and said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of

my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin."

24:22. nose rings. Nose rings were especially popular during the Iron Age (1200–600 B.C.), though there are examples from earlier periods. Made of silver, bronze and gold, and often tubular in design, they were round with two ends for insertion and sometimes included a tiny pendant. The beka is the half-shekel measure of weight, equal to one-fifth of an ounce.

24:22. jewelry. The bracelets would have been bands worn around the wrist as bangles. They were very popular items and are often found on the arms and wrist of females in tombs. By placing them on her arms, the servant may be symbolizing the marriage contract. A ten-shekel bracelet would weigh about four ounces. Legal materials from the first half of the second millennium suggest a worker might expect to make at most ten shekels per year and often less. These would typically be shekels of silver—gold would be more valuable.

24:22 The servant's gifts show Abraham's wealth and, subsequently, Laban's greed. Laban's hospitality (in contrast to Rebekah's) seems to be activated by seeing the gifts (v. 30). This aspect of Laban's character will later come into play in his dealings with Jacob (29.27; 31.7, 14–15, 41).

24:24 Rebekah modestly identifies herself not by her name, but by her father and paternal grandparents. This expresses her intuitive sense of the importance of the patriarchal lineage and her identity as the divinely chosen bride for Isaac.

Genesis 24:28-33 (NRSV)

²⁸ Then the girl ran and told her mother's household about these things. ²⁹ Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban; and Laban ran out to the man, to the spring. ³⁰ As soon as he had seen the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, "Thus the man spoke to me," he went to the man; and there he was, standing by the camels at the spring. ³¹ He said, "Come in, O blessed of the LORD. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?" ³² So the man came into the house; and Laban unloaded the camels, and gave him straw and fodder for the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. ³³ Then food was set before him to eat; but he said, "I will not eat until I have told my errand." He said, "Speak on."

24:28 mother's household. It would be natural for a young, unmarried woman to refer to her home as her mother's house until she was wed (see Song 3:4).

24:30 Laban's instantaneous notice of the jewelry suggests the materialism and stinginess that he will display in dealing with his own son-in-law, Jacob (29.27; 31.14– 16, 33– 43), and contrasts with his sister's innate generosity.

Genesis 24:34-41 (NRSV)

³⁴ So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. ³⁵ The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. ³⁶ And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. ³⁷ My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; ³⁸ but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.' ³⁹ I said to my master, 'Perhaps the woman will not follow me.' ⁴⁰ But he said to me, 'The LORD, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and make your way successful. You shall get a wife for my son from my kindred, from my father's house. ⁴¹ Then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my kindred; even if they will not give her to you, you will be free from my oath.'

24:35 The servant draws attention to Abraham's wealth as an incentive for Laban to cooperate. He further establishes that the Lord has blessed Abraham, implying the Lord's approval of Abraham's character. He then

establishes that Abraham “has given all that he has to him Isaac)” (v. 36), making it clear that Rebekah will enjoy great wealth if she marries Isaac.

24:37-38 The servant relates Abraham’s instructions, but leaves out the part, repeated twice, where Abraham forbade the servant to take Isaac with him to Abraham’s homeland (vv. 6, 8). The servant is putting his (and Abraham’s) best foot forward in an attempt to secure Laban’s cooperation. Abraham has obviously chosen his emissary well. The servant demonstrates both loyalty to Abraham and good ability to present Abraham’s case persuasively.

24:41 The servant strategically rephrases Abraham’s statement for Laban’s benefit, from if the woman is not willing to follow you (v. 8) to if they will not give her to you (v. 41). The deciding agent is now the family (and its male heads), not the woman. As it happens, the male heads of household (Laban and Bethuel, v. 50) and Rebekah (v. 58) give their assent.

Genesis 24:42-49 (NRSV)

⁴² “I came today to the spring, and said, ‘O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! ⁴³ I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, “Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,” ⁴⁴ and who will say to me, “Drink, and I will draw for your camels also”—let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master’s son.’ ⁴⁵ “Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, ‘Please let me drink.’ ⁴⁶ She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels.’ So I drank, and she also watered the camels. ⁴⁷ Then I asked her, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ She said, ‘The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor’s son, whom Milcah bore to him.’ So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. ⁴⁸ Then I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master’s kinsman for his son. ⁴⁹ Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.”

24:42 The servant recounts to Laban his prayer of verses 12-14, using essentially the same words. He addresses God as “Yahweh, the God of my master Abraham” but the servant clearly seems to have adopted Abraham’s God as his own. He prays in faith that God will respond, and his prayer is direct and personal. This is not the prayer of a man unaccustomed to praying.

24:45 The servant next recounts how quickly God answered his prayer—and how perfectly Rebekah matched the specifications that the servant had outlined in his prayer. The obvious implication is that God has identified Rebekah as the woman whom God has chosen to become Isaac’s bride. If God has chosen her, Laban must comply with God’s will by allowing Rebekah to go to Isaac with Abraham’s servant. As he relates this story, the servant doesn’t mention his request to Rebekah to stay at her father’s house (see v. 23), presumably because Laban might have taken offense. Once again, the servant demonstrates his ability to present himself well.

24:47 The servant reverses the order of events given in vv. 22– 23 to give Rebekah’s family the impression that it was her pedigree rather than her character that most commended her.

24:49 The servant asks for clear guidance so that he will know which way to turn. Shall he stay and expect cooperation, or shall he look elsewhere?

Genesis 24:50-51 (NRSV)

⁵⁰ Then Laban and Bethuel answered, “The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good. ⁵¹ Look, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master’s son, as the LORD has spoken.”

24:50 Bethuel, Rebekah's father, whose name means "house of God," appears only here. Elsewhere in the story Rebekah's brother, Laban, acts as the responsible male of the family. The appearance of Bethuel here is very strange, since everywhere else in the chapter it is his son, Laban, sometimes together with the girl's mother, who conducts the negotiations (vv. 28–29, 53, 55, 59). Perhaps Bethuel was aged and the management of the household had fallen upon Laban. Or he was dead.

Genesis 24:52-61 (NRSV)

⁵² When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the ground before the LORD. ⁵³ And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. ⁵⁴ Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they rose in the morning, he said, "Send me back to my master." ⁵⁵ Her brother and her mother said, "Let the girl remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go." ⁵⁶ But he said to them, "Do not delay me, since the LORD has made my journey successful; let me go that I may go to my master." ⁵⁷ They said, "We will call the girl, and ask her." ⁵⁸ And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." ⁵⁹ So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. ⁶⁰ And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes." ⁶¹ Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

24:50–59 presents of betrothal. For a marriage to be arranged, the groom's family must provide a bride price, while the bride's family provided a dowry. The silver and gold objects and the garments presented to Rebekah are part of her transformation into a member of Abraham's household. The word used in the text denotes metal worked into useful items, whether jewelry or plates and other utensils. The presents given to her brother Laban and her mother demonstrate Abraham's wealth and the desirability of the marriage.

24:53 The gifts bestowed here seem to be the bride-price for Rebekah; cf. Jacob's labor as his bride-price for Rachel (29.20, 30).

24:57–58 Rebekah making decision. It was unusual in the ancient world for the woman to have any part in major decisions. Rebekah was not consulted with regard to the marriage (vv. 50–51), but when the servant asked to leave right away the men looked to Rebekah for consent. Marriage contracts of this general period show a great concern for maintaining the woman's security within her husband's family. The presence of her family was one of the guarantees that she would be cared for and treated properly. The ten days that Rebekah's family requested (v. 55) would have given them a little more opportunity to make sure that everything was as it appeared to be. It is likely that she was consulted because of the substantial risk that was involved in leaving the family protection under such unusual circumstances.

24:59 accompanying nurse. It would have been suitable for a woman betrothed to a wealthy man to have an entourage of servants. The nurse, however, would have higher status as the nurturer of the child who would now remain as part of her new household and serve as a chaperon on the return journey.

24:60 This verse spells out their blessing, which calls for Rebekah to have many offspring who will "possess the gate of those who hate them." This blessing of Rebekah dovetails nicely with God's promise to Abraham, "I will bless you greatly, and I will multiply your seed greatly like the stars of the heavens, and like the sand which is on the seashore. Your seed will possess the gate of his enemies" (22:17). It will be through Rebekah that God will fulfill his promise to Abraham.

24:61 Consider for a moment how Rebekah and her parents must have felt as she left with the servant. A day earlier they had never met Abraham's servant or imagined that Rebekah might leave soon. The distance from their home to Abraham's home is approximately 500 miles (800 km), but would be unimaginably distant to people accustomed to living in one place. Rebekah leaves to join a husband whom she knows only through the

brief introduction given by Abraham's servant, and her parents allow her to depart while wondering if they will ever see her again. It is a happy parting in the sense that Abraham's servant has promised Rebekah a great future, but it must also be a wrenching experience for Rebekah and her family—especially for her mother.

Genesis 24:62-67 (NRSV)

⁶² Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. ⁶³ Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴ And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, ⁶⁵ and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶ And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. ⁶⁷ Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

24:62–67 The scene shifts to Isaac's perspective as he strolls aimlessly in the field. He looks up and sees camels, but Rebekah sees him. She veils herself, an enticing form of concealment, as a marriageable woman before a marriageable man. Isaac is a passive figure and needs to be instructed by the servant. Thereupon his fixation on his mother is redirected toward Rebekah, with whom he falls in love.

24:62 Beer Lahai Roi. The place name means "well of the living who sees me" and is first associated with Hagar's theophany in Genesis 16:14. It would have been southwest of Hebron in the Negev. Either Isaac and Abraham have moved their encampment south or Isaac is now living separately. The Negev (or Negev) is the area southwest of the Dead Sea that links Canaan with Egypt. It is an arid, sparsely populated land that few people would find appealing, but is important because of its trade routes between Egypt and the lands to the north of Egypt. The pregnant Hagar earlier encountered an angel at Beer Lahai Roi after Sarah pressured Abraham to expel Hagar from their household. The angel assured the despairing Hagar that she would not only bear a son, but that the son would survive and become a wild ass of a man (16:11-14). In the next chapter we will learn that Isaac and Rebekah settle in Beer-la-hai-roi after Abraham's death (25:11).

24:62–66 use of veil. Since she had gone unveiled during the journey, Rebekah's veiling herself once Isaac is identified to her suggests that this is her way of demonstrating to him that she is his bride. Brides were veiled during the wedding but went unveiled as married women. Veil customs differed in various locations and times. Asiatic women on the Beni Hasan tomb painting (early second millennium) are not veiled, but in the Middle Assyrian laws (late second millennium) all respectable ladies went about veiled in public.

24:65 Everywhere else in the chapter, my master refers to Abraham, and Isaac has been called "his/ my master's son." Perhaps Abraham has died while his steward was on his sacred mission. If so, the events narrated in 25.1– 18 had happened beforehand.

24:67 tent of his mother. Sarah's tent, due to her status of mistress of the household, would have been empty since her death. By taking Rebekah into his mother's tent, Isaac demonstrates that she is now the mistress of the household. This is similar to the importance placed on entering the house of the bridegroom in Ugaritic texts.

A DIFFERENT INTERPRETATION – Most people remember the precise moment they first laid eyes on the love of their life. Perhaps they saw each other across a crowded cafe or on a dance floor. Perhaps a friend introduced them at a party, or maybe they were in the same bowling league. But few of us first saw our lover while he or she was using the latrine. Yet that's precisely what may have happened to Rebekah, the wife of Isaac.

The mystery resides in a particular word in the story of how Rebekah met Isaac. Isaac's dad, Abraham, had sent his servant to get Isaac a wife from among Abraham's own relatives who lived far away. Like some families of today, Abraham didn't want his son marrying outside "his people." And since Abraham was living among Canaanites, there weren't a lot of local Hebrew women hanging around. The servant took a long

journey and had great success. He found a woman he believed was God's choice for Isaac. Her name was Rebekah, and according to the Bible account, she was a peach. She offered to water his camels, which was a lot of work considering how much camels can drink. And just like Abraham, she took a gigantic leap of faith, leaving her home and family behind to go where she believed God was directing her. She was also Isaac's cousin. Guess it ran in the family. The servant brought her back to Abraham, and while the caravan was approaching, Rebekah saw her soon-to-be husband, Isaac, for the first time. He was doing something in the field. What exactly Isaac was doing in the field is not known because the meaning of the verb used here is uncertain. The NRSV translates it as "to walk." But careful readers will notice a footnote in their Bible stating, "Meaning of Hebrew word is uncertain."

Rendsburg is a professor at Rutgers University. Rendsburg proposes a word similar in meaning to "dig a hole." He does not, however, think that it is a euphemism. Rather, he compares it to a root found in Arabic and other Semitic languages that has the sense "excrete, urinate, defecate." Why even consider this possibility, except for the fact that it's gross and funny? It has several things going for it—chiefly, that it is used elsewhere in the Bible with this same meaning.

One of these occurrences is in the Book of Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, expresses great anger against his people and describes a time when God caused the corpses of the people to be like excrement (NRSV "refuse") in the streets. The root is the same as that of our mystery word, though it is spelled slightly differently.

Another example is in a Proverb that discusses the ill effects of drunkenness, such as quarrels, woes, unexplained wounds, and bleary eyes. In the list, a form of our mystery word pops up too. It is sometimes translated "complaint." And this translation, though vague and bland, is certainly possible. However, one of the obvious effects of drinking too much wine is frequent urination, so Rendsburg's interpretation fits particularly well with the point of the passage.

The best example of this Hebrew root referring to bodily functions is in the famous story about the prophet Elijah engaging the priests of the Canaanite god, Baal, in a test to prove whether Baal or Yahweh was the true God. Each side placed a sacrifice on an altar. The worshipers then called upon their respective deities to send fire from heaven to burn up the sacrifice. Elijah eventually won the contest because Yahweh responded when he prayed, while the priests of Baal failed to summon fire from heaven. But during the contest, the mystery word is used. The priests of Baal had spent the entire morning praying to Baal. At noon Elijah started to make fun of them. He told them to cry louder because Baal was otherwise occupied. Elijah suggested that Baal was taking a trip or sleeping or going to the bathroom. The last option is an expression that contains our word. Its interpretation has also been debated, and "meditating" has been suggested for it. But in light of the way Elijah was ridiculing the priests of Baal, it almost certainly means "defecating" or "urinating."

Rendsburg's proposal has one significant disadvantage: it doesn't speak to the idea that Isaac was comforted after his mother's death by marrying Rebekah. For that reason, and perhaps from simple revulsion, some readers may prefer to understand the mystery verb as "complain" or "meditate," as their Bible probably states. Fine. But it's still possible that Isaac was answering nature's call in the field when Rebekah first laid eyes on her dreamboat.