

WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

Old Testament

Bible Study



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Rose Visual
Bible Studies

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Rose Visual Bible Studies

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*“Charm is deceptive, and
beauty is fleeting; but a
woman who fears the LORD
is to be praised”*

Proverbs 31:30

Women of the Old Testament



There are over one hundred women who are named in the Old Testament, and many more who are in the narratives but remain unnamed. Some of these women held significant leadership roles in their communities, while others led a more quiet life. Stories about women are not as plentiful in the Bible as the ones about men, and yet, women played important roles in the unfolding story of biblical history. Their stories deserve our careful attention.

The biblical writers do not give us all the details we might want about these women's background, family life, thoughts, and desires. Instead, we are shown more of a snapshot of these women than an opportunity to follow them through all stages of life. Yet their stories are preserved in the Bible for a reason. So ponder these narratives and reflect on what we can learn about God by paying attention to these women.

This study highlights six stories of women from different Old Testament time periods. We start with Rebekah, one of Israel's earliest matriarchs, and then we consider five sisters who influenced the Israelite law code while the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. Among the tribes of Israel who entered the land of promise, we meet a national leader

in Deborah and a feisty non-Israelite warrior in Jael. From the time period of the Israelite monarchy, we examine the lives of two women whose names have been lost in history. Finally, we conclude with Lady Wisdom from the book of Proverbs.

In this study, we'll ask questions of the women in the biblical text:

- Do we know their names?
- Where did they live?
- What was life like for them?
- What cultural expectations did they honor, and which ones did they challenge?

You may encounter women who encourage you, or maybe they frustrate you. Perhaps you have heard some of these stories before, but some will likely be unfamiliar. When you get to the unfamiliar stories, ask yourself why you don't know them. Is it because you are new to the Bible? Or maybe your church doesn't teach these narratives? When we skip over biblical stories, we lose a portion of the narrative of how God interacts with diverse people in society.

Bring an attitude of curiosity into these lessons. Explore the lives of people who lived in a different place, during a different time period, and with different cultural expectations from your own. Despite the differences, these women knew the same God you are studying now. Can we see the story of God through the eyes of Old Testament women with the eyes of modern women? By asking that question, we will discover more about the God of the Bible and our own transformative roles in God's larger narrative.



REBEKAH

*A Matriarch
in the Making*

Rebekah

Much of the book of Genesis is focused on Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were the patriarchs of the family God chose to work through to bring hope and restoration to the world. But woven into four chapters in the middle of Genesis (chapters 24–27) is the story of the great matriarch, Rebekah. These chapters give us an unusual glimpse into what life was like for Rebekah—from the time she meets Abraham’s servant at the well, through twenty years of infertility, to helping her son Jacob receive the coveted blessing of the firstborn. Rebekah emerges as a primary character in these chapters of the story of God’s people.

In this session, we’ll focus on Rebekah’s character in her early years. We meet her for the first time when she goes to a well to collect water and encounters someone from a faraway place. The man was a servant of Abraham, Rebekah’s relative. The servant was on a quest to find a wife for Abraham’s son Isaac. Would Rebekah take the risk of leaving everything she knew behind to become the wife of Isaac, a man she had never met, and become the new matriarch of Abraham’s family in a distant land?



Read It

Key Bible Passage

For this session, read Genesis 24:1–67.

Optional Reading

Rebekah’s infertility and pregnancy: Genesis 25:19–26

Rebekah’s role in the blessing of Jacob: Genesis 27:1–46

As you read, pay attention to the details given in the narrative, like how Rebekah’s character is set in contrast to her brother’s, or how she talks about her family home. When does Rebekah speak and when is she not heard? Consider the characteristics necessary to be invited to become the new matriarch of Abraham’s family.

“Before [the servant] had finished praying, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder.”

GENESIS 24:15





Know It

1. List the actions Rebekah takes in the following verses in Genesis 24. Consider how this helps us understand her role in the story?

Verse 18: _____

Verse 20: _____

Verse 28: _____

Verse 58: _____

Verses 64–65: _____

2. Abraham gave his servant a monumental task, to choose the next matriarch. Pay attention to the servant's prayer (Gen. 24:12–14). What might he have been looking for in the character of the woman he would choose to be Isaac's wife?

3. What are some questions this story brings up for you—especially about cultural customs, how the characters interact, and what they do?



Explore It

Culture

Ancient societies were organized around a *patriarchal* structure in which the family identity was defined by the father of the house. Such societies were often *patrilocal* as well. This means that when two families joined through marriage, the woman moved into the man's house with his extended family. Each of these elements sit in the background of Rebekah's story. The patriarch Abraham was the head of the household, and from his two sons, God chose Isaac to inherit the promises of the covenant God made with Abraham (Gen. 12). Abraham lived in Canaan but did not want a Canaanite wife for his son Isaac. Since Abraham and his wife Sarah had both come from Mesopotamia, that is where he sent his servant to find a wife for his son. The patrilocal element is evident in the story, as we see it's assumed that Rebekah would leave her homeland to join Isaac where he lived.

Rebekah's narrative gives us a view of life for women at that time. Many Old Testament stories focus on the public sphere—like royal courts, military campaigns, and civic issues—where men had more authority than women. We do not often see inside the home to consider all that women did. Recent studies in archaeology and anthropology emphasize the real influence women had in their communities. Males were the head of the household who provided the public face for the family, but women created unseen networks

Patriarchal: A family organized around the authority and privilege of the oldest living male.

Patrilocal: A concept of living space centered around the male members of the family. The woman moves into her husband's house after marriage.

that sustained the community. Women shared work, cared for each other's families, supplied medical aid for the sick, and created goods that were sold to support their families. As we follow Rebekah's story, we move from the public space at the well into the private space of her family home.

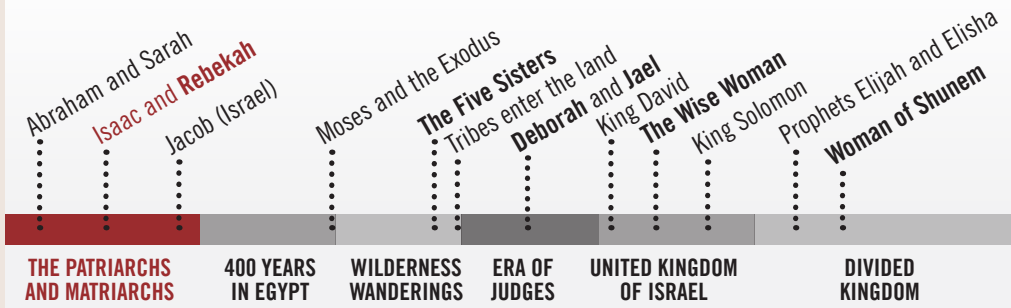
Geography

Rebekah's story is situated in two vastly different geographical arenas: Mesopotamia and the biblical Negev. Mesopotamia benefited from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that provided a constant source of water and fertile soil. It was a well-resourced land with international connections. The Negev, on the other hand, was a marginal land without a reliable water source, except the rain from heaven, which, at most, only totaled twelve inches a year. The type of soil covering the ground created a hard, thin crust that required constant breaking apart so the rain could soak into the ground. The limited rain meant farmers could grow cereal crops like wheat and barley, but the dryness pushed most residents to also raise sheep and goats. Like a frontier land, the region was promising, but it was also very dangerous. In our story, we watch in awe as Rebekah chooses to leave the easier lands of Mesopotamia to join her future husband in the Negev.



Tel Arad, an archaeological site in the northern Negev, with a walled Canaanite city and fortress

Time Line



Narrative

Genesis 24 opens with an aged Abraham sending his trusted servant to Mesopotamia to accomplish a daunting task. The servant was to find a relative from Abraham's family tree who was a suitable spouse for Abraham's son, Isaac. As the servant completed the long journey to Mesopotamia, he stopped at a well on the outskirts of a town. His decision was practical, because as an outsider to the area, the well was where he could make helpful contacts. Wells were also the local gathering places for young unmarried youth who were often tasked with minding the flocks. If you wanted to find the marriageable young women and gain some information about the local surroundings, the well was the perfect place to go (a decision also made by Jacob and Moses in Genesis 29:1–14 and Exodus 2:15–22).

When the servant arrived at the well, he prayed an earnest and dramatic prayer for God's chosen woman to not only offer him water to drink, but also to offer water for his camels. Even by modest estimates, a camel can drink more than twenty gallons of water at a time, with each gallon weighing over eight pounds. For any young woman to fulfill the servant's requirement, she would have to pull up more than two hundred pounds of water for each of his ten camels (Gen. 24:10). Basically, the servant was asking God to let the young woman be a superhero—or at least someone

with a deep-seated character of selfless generosity. Although the story doesn't say what the servant's motivation was for this unique request, it's quite possible he knew that these characteristics were essential for a future matriarch, because they were characteristics Abraham himself displayed (Gen. 18).

When Rebekah enters the scene, only the reader is told of her patriarchal lineage. She was the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother (Gen. 24:15). The writer tells us that she



Rebecca Meets Isaac by the Way
by James Tissot

was very good in appearance and an unmarried virgin. Certainly, Abraham's servant saw her outward appearance, but he watched closely to see what her character was like. Only after that was proven to be outstanding does he lavish on her gifts and ask for a place to stay. Rebekah immediately ran to her mother's house to share the news.

Despite the servant's determination to quickly return to Abraham with Isaac's bride-to-be, Rebekah had the freedom to make the decision when to leave. What an enormous decision, too! She did not know much about what she was going into except for Abraham's reputation, his family's origins in her country, and their wealth. She would

be leaving all she had ever known behind without having a long time to say goodbye. When asked whether she would leave with Abraham's servant, she answered simply but decisively, "I will go" (Gen. 24:58). Before she left, her family sent her away with a blessing of abundant descendants and security. (God gave a similar blessing to Abraham in Genesis 22:17).

Like the patriarch Abraham decades earlier, our "matriarch in the making" left her homeland to travel to a land of promise

(Gen. 12:1–4). The long and arduous journey she took to the Negev is not described in the Bible but is noticeable on a map. Traveling between the richly resourced lands of Mesopotamia to the southern dry lands of the Negev was over five hundred miles (800 km) and would have taken weeks to cover. What did Rebekah and her female attendant discuss on the way? Did Rebekah talk with Abraham’s servant about her future husband? How did Rebekah react to the change of scenery and to her new challenging landscape? Many details are not given, but we are told that one evening Isaac was in a field and he looked up and saw the approaching caravan, just as Rebekah looked up to see Isaac. They were married and Isaac took Rebekah into the tent of his mother Sarah, the biblical writer’s way of indicating that Rebekah had stepped into the matriarchal role vacant since Sarah’s death.

Family Dynamics

Rebekah describes herself as the “daughter of Bethuel” (Gen. 24:24), but her father fades into the background of the story. He may have been sick or aged, and thus unable to take on the role of the family patriarch. The narrative says that Rebekah ran to her “mother’s household,” not her father’s (verse 28). Laban and Bethuel are mentioned, but Laban’s name is listed first suggesting Laban was the one making decisions (verse 50). When the servant wanted to return to Abraham, Rebekah’s brother and her mother protested and tried to delay his departure (verse 55). These details suggest that Rebekah’s father was not present for the marriage negotiations. As the older brother, Laban may have been stepping into the patriarchal role, but Rebekah’s mother, as well as Rebekah herself, had input on the marriage.

Our study ends with Rebekah and Isaac beginning a life together, but their story in the Bible is not over. For twenty years, they did not have children. When Rebekah finally got pregnant, God told her the younger twin boy, Jacob, was the descendant God would use to turn their family into a nation. Rebekah favored her younger son and helped him receive the blessing of the firstborn. Her actions can be interpreted in many ways, but Rebekah remained a decisive woman throughout her whole life. Though Scripture doesn't record her death, we're told later in Genesis that Rebekah was buried in the promised land alongside Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac (Gen. 49:31).

Rebekah's Journey to the Negev



(Exact starting location in Mesopotamia is unknown.)



Live It

In this narrative, Rebekah was a matriarch in the making. When choosing a wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant looked for a woman who had depth of character, and Rebekah's shined through. The servant noticed her instincts for hard work, generosity, and hospitality before inviting her to step into the role of the young matriarch in Abraham's family.

Life Application Questions

1. What do you think motivates Rebekah's actions in this story? (You might find different motives for different actions.)

2. How do Rebekah's words and actions reveal her character? Reflect on how others would describe your character by looking at your words and actions.

3. Do you have women in your life who hold the role of matriarch in your family, church, or community? What, if any, characteristics do they share with Rebekah?

4. Rebekah gave up so much to be the matriarch in the family God chose to use for the redemption of the world, and she did so without knowing the full story. Can you think of a time when you followed God's calling for you without knowing the full story?

5. Rebekah was decisive throughout her life, but making big decisions often doesn't come easy for most of us. What decisions are you wrestling with right now?

Prayer

God of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel

God of mothers and those who long to be mothers.

God of the outspoken and the silenced.

God of those who plead, wait, and struggle.

Remember your daughters today.

Remember those who long for love

Remember your promises to those who carry your image in
the world.

Remember those to whom you gave a message to share and a part
to play in your story.

Remember those to whom you gave a voice and sense of purpose.

(Closing prayers in this study are adapted from Rachel Asproth's "A Prayer for Women: Remember Your Daughters." Used by permission.)