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### Israel's Culture and the Bible

In Matthews and Benjamin's book, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, they cover many aspects of the culture of Israel when it was in a village context and a state context to help readers of the Bible understand the thoughts and mindsets of the Israeli people of that time, which in turn helps with interpretation of Biblical text. One aspect of the Israeli culture that they cover is the role of the mother in the village context. The mother of the household played an important role in Israeli culture as they sought to protect and provide for the land and children<sup>1</sup>. This paper will use the information learned from this chapter of Matthews and Benjamin and apply it to the passage of Genesis 27, which documents the story of Jacob and Esau, when Jacob takes the blessing of Esau. From the application of the mother context to this story it will be seen that this information demonstrates that women were not seen as less than men and insignificant in the Israeli village context. Additionally, it shows how God uses the culture and women to fulfill his good purposes.

In *Social World of Ancient Israel*, the authors describe that mothers of a household were the ones who managed the household by bearing children and arranging other wives to bear children, supervising various tasks, teaching clan traditions, mediating domestic conflicts and designating heirs<sup>2</sup>. Several of these aspects of the mother's role in the Israeli village context are seen in the passage of Genesis 27. Rebekah, who is the mother of this household, is seen to

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<sup>1</sup> Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 22.

demonstrate several of these duties in this passage as one would expect in this cultural context to protect and provide for her land and children.

In this passage we see that Rebekah demonstrates how she protects and provides by designating an heir. Going back to Genesis 25, it is seen that Esau came out of the womb first and was designated as the first-born son. Fast forward to Genesis 27:4, and it is seen that Isaac is preparing to designate Esau as the heir of the household when he asks him to prepare him a meal so that he may bless him before Isaac dies. It is seen in Genesis 27:5-10, that upon hearing this, Rebekah tells the younger son Jacob what she has heard and that she instructs him to take food to his father so that, “he may give you [Jacob] his blessing before he dies.”<sup>3</sup> In this moment it is seen that Rebekah is attempting to designate the heir as Jacob instead of Esau. The passage does not explicitly state exactly why Rebekah decides she would rather have Jacob as the heir over Esau, but there are a couple things that could have been a contributing factor. One reason could be that Esau had not proven to be a good choice for an heir because of his choice for wives. In Gen 26:34-35 it says that Esau took Hittite women to be his wives and that it was “a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah”<sup>4</sup>. The choice of a wife was important for the heir because their wife would eventually become the mother of the household. As stated already, the mother of the household had very important tasks that helped keep the household protected and provided for. Per the *Social World of Ancient Israel*, it was the mother of the household’s job to, “manage the household by supervising domestic production, rationing and preparing food, processing and storing beer, grain, vegetables”<sup>5</sup>. It was not easy work and if not done properly, it would threaten the whole household. Since they were a source of grief for Rebekah and Isaac, it alludes to the

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 27:10, NIV

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 26:35, NIV

<sup>5</sup> Matthews and Benjamin, 22.

fact that Esau's parents did not see these women as well suited for Esau or the task of eventually being mother of the household. Another reason that Rebekah preferred Jacob to be heir could be because of what God had told Rebekah when she was pregnant with Esau and Jacob. In Genesis 25:23 (NIV), God says that, "two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger". It could be that what God told her she carried with her and felt that she needed to make that happen. One may not know the exact reason why, but Rebekah obviously felt a need to intervene and designate the heir as Jacob instead of Esau.

Another cultural reference that is seen in relation to the mother role in ancient Israel is how Rebekah acts as mediator. In Genesis 27:41, it is seen that Esau holds a grudge against Jacob for stealing his blessing and that he plans to kill his brother once their father is dead. In verses 42-45 Rebekah tells Jacob to flee to his uncle Laban's place until it is safe to come back. In the *Social World of Ancient Israel*, it states that "the mother of the household also attempted to defuse conflicts...In the world of the Bible, the mother often mediated disputes involving the appointment of an heir"<sup>6</sup>. Rebekah does this when she sends Jacob away until Esau's anger diffuses. She knew her role as mediator and she understood the consequences if she did not fulfill this role. Rebekah states "Why should I lose both of you in one day?"<sup>7</sup>. This demonstrates that she knows the severity of the consequences if she does not act as mediator. Mothers of the household had the roles they did in order to help the household survive. She knew that it would threaten the household's survival if she did not intervene.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 27:45, NIV

Overall, this text demonstrates that women were significant in this context and had more power and authority than some may think. In the *Social World of Ancient Israel*, the authors state that, “those who have the power to cultivate land and bear children often lack the authority to determine when and how to use it.... But sometimes, those without authority manage to exercise power. For example, the father of the household in the Bible has the authority to select an heir, but the mother, in fact, often exercises that power (Gen 27:1-17)”<sup>8</sup>. The authors go on to further state that the mother of the household had, “significant power and authority over decision-making and problem-solving for both land and children”<sup>9</sup>. Someone in today’s context who thinks a patriarchal society is “sexist” may think it was unusual in a patriarchal society for Rebekah to do this, but from the above information it can be seen that it is not that unusual in this culture. Women who were the mother of the household were seen to do this and it was in order that the land and children were provided for. They had a significant role in helping their household survive. As stated in the *Social World of Ancient Israel*, “Patriarchy in ancient Israel was based not on the subordination and exploitation of women, but rather on the efforts of all the men and women in its household to survive”<sup>10</sup>. This sheds a whole new light on this passage that shapes the understanding of why Rebekah did what she did. It can be seen that she took seriously her role as mother of the household and most likely was doing what she thought was needed in order that the household may survive.

Additionally, this text shows how God uses the culture and women to fulfill his good purposes. God uses the actions of Rebekah and the cultural expectations of her to fulfill his good purposes. This in no way applauds or condones how her and Jacob tricked Isaac, but it is seen

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<sup>8</sup> Matthews and Benjamin, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

what God does through this situation. If one looks ahead in scripture, they see how God is faithful to the promise he gave to Abraham that he would become a great blessing and that his descendants would be a blessing<sup>11</sup>. It was through Jacob that his son Joseph would eventually be used to help save the family from starvation due to famine<sup>12</sup>. There are many more examples of what was done through that line that kept the family alive and kept the promise God gave to Abraham. Overall, it can be seen how God worked through this particular situation for the good and to show how He is a faithful God in all circumstances.

Overall, it can be seen how understanding cultural context sheds new light and provides a whole new level of depth to a passage. In this passage it was seen how the role of the mother in this cultural context was very evident through the actions and reactions of Rebekah. Through this it is seen how women were very significant in the Bible and were an important part of the survival of the household. Additionally, it could be seen how God worked through the cultural role of the mother to keep His promise to Abraham and use it for His good purposes. It is a great reminder that God is in control and can use all things to do good, keep His promises and bring Him glory.

## **Bibliography**

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 12:2, NIV

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 46, NIV

Matthews, Victor H. and Don C. Benjamin. *Social World of Ancient Israel*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993.