

Lotta Valve
Åbo Akademi, Theologicum
Biskopsgatan 16
FIN-20500 Åbo
lotta.valve@abo.fi

The “Wooing of Rebekah” and the Methodological Rift between Tradition History and Reception History

1 Introduction

The story in Gen 24 is often known by the title “Wooing of Rebekah.” As this name suggests, the negotiations to acquire a wife for Isaac from Abraham’s own family line are in focus in the lengthy chapter. The subject of the story thus makes it an integral part of the plot of the extended Abraham cycle in Genesis. Abraham himself is the initiator of his servant’s journey to Haran (24:1–19), and while in Haran, the servant acts as his master’s proxy, constantly referring to Abraham in his speech (vv. 12, 27, 34–49, 56). Isaac, who ought to be an implied protagonist in the story, is largely absent from it, except in the coda where he is finally met in person (vv. 62–67). As family history, the story has additional weight in that it serves to strengthen the bonds within the larger Abrahamic family by describing an instance of endogamous marriage.

Gen 24 has received the attention of scholars from many angles during several decades. Questions which have been posed have pertained to source- and redaction-critical and tradition-historical issues as well as matters of narratology. In addition, the interesting interpretations and retellings of the story in post-biblical material have received some consideration. In this article, I shall undertake a short exploration into these different explanations of the origins and meaning of Gen 24, as well as some aspects of the postbiblical afterlife of the story. How does the narrative contribute to our overall understanding of Abraham’s family history, and are there alternative ways to interpret the story, ways which ancient interpreters have already sensed? By means of this case study, I also want to raise the larger methodological question of whether and when it might be possible to know when a certain ancient interpretation of a story really is reception history, or whether we should be more open towards the possibility that retellings can contain tradition-historical material which has not been included in the biblical text.

2 Form and Redaction-Historical Considerations pertaining to Genesis 24

Form History

As regards form history, there have been elaborate attempts to find a plausible *Sitz im Leben* for the lengthy chapter. Thus Wolfgang Roth came to the conclusion that the prominence of Abraham's servant as a major character in the story is indicative of the use of a similar example story "in the training and supervision of court officials in the monarchic period," and this story was, then, "used, historicized and re-interpreted by the Yahwist."¹ Kenneth Aitken, on the other hand, saw the text rather as an example story intended for a bride who is about to leave home and be married off to a somewhat unknown man, which might have been the case at least with many arranged marriages.² Aitken does not, however, discuss and present any plausible date for the origins of this kind of an example story.

Source and Redaction Criticism

The length of the chapter, the detailed description of the events, and the many repetitions in Gen 24 have also been a pertinent source for literary critics' troubles with the text. As summarized by Claus Westermann in 1981, the first generation of scholars, represented by August Dillman and Julius Wellhausen among others, saw Gen 24 as a unity which they attributed to the Yahwist. The following generation of scholars (R. Smend, H. Gunkel and O. Eissfeldt among others) tended to divide the story into two different layers, by the Yahwist and the Elohist respectively. They saw the repetitions in the text as indicative of these origins. Finally, a third generation (e.g. M. Noth, G. von Rad, J. van Seters) saw the text again as a unity attributable to J.³ Westermann himself, however, compares Gen 24 with the two other "betrothal by the well" type scenes in Gen 29 and Exod 2 and is of the opinion that Gen 24 is unquestionably ("ohne Frage") younger than the two other accounts, which he still attributes to J.⁴ In slightly later times, discussion has moved on to concern especially linguistic details which could shed light on the question of dating. Thus Alexander Rofé has strongly argued for a Persian period origin for Gen 24 by paying attention to the apparent Aramaisms in the language.⁵ Gary Rendsburg has questioned this dating by using the same linguistic evidence and arguing for a stylistic use of Aramaisms by a very early author. According to Rendsburg's view, an early monarchic-period author has utilized Aramaisms "as a

¹ Wolfgang M. V. Roth, "The Wooing of Rebekah: A Tradition-Critical Study of Genesis 24," *CBQ* 34 (1972), 177–187, quotations from p. 187. Roth's approach can possibly be compared with that of Andrew Schein, "The Test of Rebecca," *Tradition* 31 (1997), 28–33, who is of the opinion that the servant probably made extensive enquiries before the selection of Rebekah and only set the scene so that the election would appear providential and thus convince Rebekah's family of the existence of a divine plan.

² Kenneth T. Aitken, "The Wooing of Rebekah: A Study in the Development of the Tradition," *JSOT* 30 (1984), 3–23, esp. 19–20.

³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, Teil 2 (12–36) (BKAT, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag 1981), 469.

⁴ Westermann, *Genesis*, 470.

⁵ Alexander Rofé, "An Enquiry into the Betrothal of Rebekah," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. E. Blum, C. Macholz, and E. W. Stegemann; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 27–39.

literary device adding local color to the story set in Aram.”⁶ Rendsburg’s thesis has not met wide acceptance.

As I view the matter, it is plausible that Gen 24 has to do with the final redaction of Genesis, and Rofé’s suggestion of a postexilic date for the final composition of the chapter thus seems reasonable. The question which then naturally arises is the relationship of the chapter to priestly-related theology. It is true that the chapter does not display any of the marked characteristics of the commonly-agreed P material in Genesis, and it is also possible that there never was any coherent Priestly story about the patriarchs.⁷ But we also know that Rebekah is specifically mentioned in the genealogy of Nahor in Gen 22:20–24. It is commonly agreed that most of the genealogies in Genesis are P material, even if the genealogy in Gen 22:20–24 has traditionally been attributed to the Yahwist due to the very presence of Rebekah.⁸ But if Gen 22:20–24 indeed were P material, could it then be so that the P-like ideology in Genesis is being further expanded by the inclusion of Gen 24 by a postexilic redactor? It is attractive to think that the marked stress on endogamy, which is so evident in Gen 24 (and also in other stories of the patriarch cycle, cf., e.g., the polemics towards Esau’s Canaanite wives in Gen 26:34–35), could be connected to post-exilic concerns regarding purity of family line, visible in Ezra-Nehemiah and Malachi.⁹ Aitken may thus be right in that the story of the “Wooing of Rebekah” in its present form and setting is indeed an example story concerning marriage. It could be directed towards the bride, as Aitken suggests, but equally well towards all Jews, and perhaps especially to Jews of the Diaspora. We do not know if there ever was a custom of family-arranged marriages between inhabitants of Judah and Diaspora Jews during early Second Temple times, but Gen 24 would serve perfectly as an example story in such a setting.

3 Genesis 24 from the Viewpoint of Narrative Criticism

⁶ Gary A. Rendsburg, “Some False Leads in the Identification of Late Biblical Hebrew Texts: The Cases of Genesis 24 and 1 Samuel 2:27–36,” *JBL* 121 (2002), 23–46. The quotation is from p. 35.

⁷ For an exhaustive discussion about the Documentary Hypothesis with regard to the patriarchal cycle, see especially Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), esp. 23–24; and, regarding the P material, 169–192.

⁸ Thus, e.g. Baden, *Composition of the Pentateuch*, 70–71; cf. the discussion in Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis vol. 1B 11:27–50:26* (The New American Commentary; Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 306–310.

⁹ Similarly also Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 356: “Since the form of the story as we have it has late expressions, it seems certain that the story is at least revised in the later period. I agree with Rofé that the story as we have it is part of the polemic of the Ezra-Nehemiah period - - -.” Cf. the opinion of Benedikt J. Conczorowski, “All the Same as Ezra? Conceptual Differences Between the Texts of Intermarriage in Genesis, Deuteronomy 7 and Ezra,” in *Mixed Marriages: Intermarriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period* (ed. Christian Frevel; New York & London: T & T Clark International, 2011), 89–108, here 90: “Genesis 26:34–35 and 27:46–28:9 are generally ascribed to the Priestly source and should be the starting point of our investigation, since Gen 24 certainly represents a later position.”

Contrary to the enterprise described above, many scholars inclined towards narrative criticism have highlighted the function of the variations in the repetitions in Gen 24 and claimed that these are essential for a more exhaustive treatment of the story as we now have it. In their view, there is no redundancy in the narrative. On the contrary, by means of the repetitions, different people come to the fore and their differing perspectives towards the events are highlighted.¹⁰

I agree that in the specific case of Gen 24, these observations are completely valid, and examining the story from the viewpoint of narrative criticism may thus prove more fruitful for the internal understanding of the story than any source-critical study can do. Of course, source-critical questions must be asked especially in order to find out how this story found its way to Genesis in the first place (cf. #2 above). However, the story as it now stands in Genesis is a rather coherent literary unity, a “novelette,” with the Book of Ruth as its nearest biblical counterpart. This character of the story justifies, in my opinion, its treatment as primarily a piece of literature. In this regard, Menakhem Perry’s view of stories and counter-stories in the Bible is noteworthy, and his highlighting Rebekah helps to open fresh viewpoints which have all too often been neglected in the scholarly treatment of Gen 24.¹¹

Discussion of Menakhem Perry’s View of Genesis 24

To Perry, viewing the story from Rebekah’s perspective turns it “into a tale about ‘when a slave reigns’ and about bridegroom-swapping.”¹² This is indeed a radical transformation of the perspective from which Gen 24 is usually viewed, namely as a story about a perhaps cunning but still honorable and trustworthy servant and a noble Rebekah who conforms humbly to the circumstances where she is put and places no obstacles in the way of the divine plan.¹³ In Perry’s reading, the story turns into a tale of a servant who perhaps takes too many liberties, and a

¹⁰ For this, see especially Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1985), 129–152; Lieve M. Teugels, “‘A Strong Woman, Who Can Find?’ A Study of the Characterization in Genesis 24, with Some Perspectives on the General Presentation of Isaac and Rebekah in the Genesis Narratives,” *JSOT* 63 (1994) 89–104; eadem, “The Anonymous Matchmaker: An Enquiry into the Characterization of the Servant of Abraham in Genesis 24,” *JSOT* 65 (1995) 13–23; eadem, *Bible and Midrash: The Story of ‘The Wooing of Rebekah’ (Gen. 24)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

¹¹ Menakhem Perry, “Counter-Stories in the Bible: Rebekah and her Bridegroom, Abraham’s Servant,” *Prooftexts* 27 (2007) 275–323.

¹² Perry, “Counter-Stories,” 279.

¹³ Teugels emphasizes this character of the servant, but sees it primarily as a positive trait which ultimately serves the divine purpose, which is manifested especially in how the servant manipulates Laban (and Bethuel) by his speech, thus forcing them to give Rebekah away. See especially Teugels, “Anonymous Matchmaker.” Most commentaries advocate the humble portrayal of Rebekah, which somewhat resembles that of Ruth in the Book of Ruth, and serves clearly as one typological prefiguration for Jesus’ mother Mary.

young woman who is attracted to him and only later finds out that she has been betrayed by this man, as well as by her own family.¹⁴

Perry pays attention to the portrayal of Rebekah as a self-confident girl who displays no hesitation in her actions towards the stranger.¹⁵ This is indeed a noteworthy feature in a setting within a patriarchal framework where relations between men and women were supposedly very strictly regulated. By his meticulous reading and interpretation of every word and nuance, Perry succeeds in showing that especially in the “betrothal type scene” at the well, the servant acts quite as a man in search of a wife for himself, and Rebekah, for her part, clearly shows such eagerness and enthusiasm that would be fit for a young woman who finds the wealthy stranger attractive and wants to impress him. Perry pays attention to small nuances that betray the eroticism in this scene. For example, the “watering” of the servant really means that the man asks Rebekah to pour the water down directly from her jug into his mouth, which indicates rather close physical proximity between the two.¹⁶ Also the details that the man “hurried” towards the beautiful Rebekah (v. 17), and that he was “silently gazing” at her when she watered the camels (v. 21) can, despite the normal “pure and pious” interpretation of the scene, quite easily be seen as indicative of a masculine-possessive attitude towards Rebekah on the servant’s part, and this might well be how Rebekah interpreted the situation. Perry argues that Rebekah’s offer to water the camels should also be seen as an effort from her part to make the situation last longer, and to please and impress the stranger whom she had begun to fancy. And, indeed, when she finishes her task, the stranger quite concretely and physically *puts* heavy and expensive jewelry *on her*. He even does this before asking anything about her descent, and thus it is entirely natural that Rebekah assumes that she has succeeded in her task and that this wealthy stranger likes her on her own account and has serious intentions towards her.¹⁷ Rebekah brings the news to her brother Laban, who hurries out to welcome the man. As Perry puts it, “There can be no doubt that right up to the moment the servant opens his mouth, neither Rebekah nor any other member of her family can possibly know that he is not an actual suitor.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Perry, “Counter-Stories,” esp. 306–307.

¹⁵ Perry, “Counter-Stories,” 297–298.

¹⁶ Perry, “Counter-Stories,” 295–296. – For this detail, I viewed a number of paintings of the scene, ranging from antiquity to modern times, and noticed that this was indeed also how most painters had transmitted the scene. However, in these paintings Rebekah is quite often standing on a stair or stone and/or the servant is kneeling, which increases the physical gap between them. See, for example, the illustration of Rebekah at the well in the Vienna Genesis, 6th century, Vienna, ON, Cod. theol. gr. 31, f. 7; Robert Gavin (1827-1883), *Rebekah at the well*, 1879, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; Harold Copping (1863-1932), *Rebekah at the well*, early 1900s, illustration.

¹⁷ Perry, “Counter-Stories,” 297–299.

¹⁸ Perry, “Counter-Stories,” 300.

Now, for this interpretation to be psychologically convincing, we perhaps need to assume that Abraham's servant was not a very old man, by our modern standards – a detail which Perry does not discuss. The ancient interpreters univocally identified the servant with “Eliezer of Damascus” mentioned in Gen 15:2. We cannot know how old this Eliezer was at the time of the scene of Gen 15:2, but assuming that he was twenty by then, he would, with regard to the time frame of Genesis, with an estimated age gap of thirteen years between Ishmael and Isaac, probably have been over seventy when the events in Gen 24 took place – since we also know from Gen 25:20 that Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah. Indeed, in some paintings depicting Gen 24, we can see a very old servant of Abraham, which indicates that these painters adhered to the tradition that the servant was Eliezer (or at least to the statement in Gen 24:2 that the servant was “the oldest in Abraham's house,” which was taken quite literally so that he must have been old by more modern standards too); also, more often than not, these paintings bear the name “Eliezer and Rebekah” (though, obviously, the name of the painting might sometimes be a secondary label).¹⁹

However, even if the patriarchs, according to the chronology of Genesis, lived extremely long lives, this might not have been the case with regard to their servants in the chronological framework; and in any case the interpretation that the servant is Eliezer is, of course, a later reception-historical layer, even if an ancient one. It could perhaps be more plausible to assume that a servant who was “oldest in the household and in charge of all Abraham's possessions” (Gen 24:2) was about the same age as Isaac, i.e. forty or possibly near fifty, in any case at an age in which it still was possible to make the long and exhaustive journey. And, indeed, turning to the paintings again, this seems to be the age that most painters have ascribed to Abraham's servant – even if some have portrayed him even as considerably younger, thirty or so, which at times seems to add to the eroticism of the well-scene so much that only the presence of camels (and absence of sheep) betrays that it is not Jacob and Rachel of Gen 29 in the picture. This may be rather intended on the part of the artists, and one may only wonder whether they have thought along the same lines as Perry and apparently some ancient interpreters.²⁰

An intrinsic part of Perry's interpretation of the episode is also the claim that Rebekah was not present when the negotiations about her fate were made (vv. 32–52). In the patriarchal frame-

¹⁹ See, e.g., Paolo Veronese (1528–1588), *Eliezer and Rebekah*, second half of 1600th century, Versailles Palace; Giovanni Battista Pittoni (1687–1767), *Eliezer and Rebekah*, ca 1725, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux; Giuseppe Zola, (1672–1743), *Eliezer and Rebekah at the well*, first half of 1800th century, Museo della Città di Bologna.

²⁰ See, e.g., Johann Karl Loth (1632–1698), *Eliezer and Rebekah at the well*, 1670s, the Hermitage, St. Petersburg; cf. also Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), *Eliezer and Rebekah at the well*, 1640s, USA National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Griffith Foxley (1912–1964), *Rebekah at the well*, ca 1950s, illustration. – Regarding ancient interpreters of Gen 24, see the discussion below.

work, this is perhaps a plausible option. Regarding the statement in verse 53, that the servant gave valuable gifts to Rebekah and her mother and brother (but not to her father), ancient interpreters had serious trouble with the absence of Bethuel and came to the conclusion that he must have died in the short interlude.²¹ Perry, for his part, pays attention to the variation between “father’s house” and “mother’s house” in the text and concludes that the house had two wings, and the negotiations were made in Bethuel’s house where the strangers also ate and slept, whereas the servant came out and gave presents to Rebekah and her mother in or perhaps rather outside the “mother’s house,” which Laban, as son and brother, also had permission to enter.²² This is indeed an ingenious proposal and a nice explanation to the absence of Bethuel from v. 53, but I think that apart from the problem of the absence of Bethuel (which is difficult to explain by other than redaction-critical means²³), the verse can also be taken so that the gifts were intended for Rebekah and her mother and brother, perhaps according to established custom, and were not necessarily given over personally to all of them precisely at that time, in the middle of the night. In favor of this possibility is also that it was necessary on the following morning to summon Rebekah separately to be heard (v. 57), so that she apparently was in any case not present to hear the foregone conversation between her mother and brother and Abraham’s servant.

If the aforementioned scenario is presupposed, then it is no wonder that Rebekah answers her brother’s question, “Will you go with this man?” shortly and promptly with “I will go” – as if it were indeed a marriage ceremony. In this same spirit she may also have understood the blessing concerning fertility that her family utters to her at her departure (v. 60). A very noteworthy detail which Perry pays close attention to is that the variations between the appellations for Abraham’s servant in Gen 24 indicate shifts of perspective throughout the long chapter. For Rebekah, he is always “the man” (in verse 18 even “my lord”) and never a servant, throughout verses 21–33 and again in verse 58, even if the man’s real identity has become clear in the meantime for the rest of the household, and the narrator has accordingly shifted the appellation back to “servant.” When the chapter is read in awareness of this tendency, the double perspective becomes almost painfully clear in verse 61.²⁴

Perry stresses that his interpretation of the story is in no way alien to its internal logic, but rather stands firmly within its limits. This is indeed an important aspect and an undeniable strength in his argument. By bringing Rebekah’s perspective to the fore Perry succeeds in trans-

²¹ *Yalkut Shim‘oni* on Genesis §109.

²² Perry, “Counter-Stories,” 304–305.

²³ In redaction-critical considerations, it is often assumed that the word “Bethuel” in v. 50 is a later gloss. For this view, see e.g. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 184.

²⁴ Perry, “Counter-Stories,” 305–306.

forming the story in the eyes of the reader so that it is never the same again. Then the reader may begin to think that Rebekah's life-long problems with her husband, narrated in Gen 25:19–27:46, have a background in this disappointment and deceit, a pattern of behavior which she and her younger son then continue on their own terms (Gen 27–31). In this way, it becomes evident that the patriarchal stories also have a darker side; a “counter-story,” as Perry would put it.

2 Genesis 24 in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters

I shall now continue my survey by highlighting some details in the most important retellings of the “Wooing of Rebekah” in post-biblical literature, which in this case mostly means rabbinic literature. It is namely a quite astonishing detail that what happened in Gen 24 is swept over in just a few words in works of the “rewritten Bible” genre, for example in *Jubilees* (19:10) and in the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (8:4), so that it is merely related that Isaac married Rebekah, and her genealogy is given. The *LAB* does not display much interest in the patriarchs in general: chapter 8 with its fourteen verses is, in essence, mostly a genealogy from Abram to Joseph, with a brief account of God's promise to Abram and an explanation of how the Israelites came to Egypt. But concerning *Jubilees*, its omitting of all details in the story recounted in Gen 24 is striking, given how much text is devoted to Abraham and then to Jacob and his descendants. In these latter chapters, due attention is given also to Isaac and Rebekah as parents to Esau and Jacob, and the author's view of Rebekah is here very positive.²⁵ The reader may get the impression that either the author of *Jubilees* is not very interested in the episode narrated in Gen 24, or alternatively, he has chosen to omit it for some other reason. One could cautiously suspect that he perhaps does not want to actualize such discussion that later pops up in rabbinic literature, but there might of course be other reasons as well.²⁶

As is well known, ancient interpreters were very attentive towards details in the biblical stories, but these details they interpreted from their own specific viewpoints. This becomes visible in a quite exemplary way in the rabbinic interpretations of Gen 24. From the statement in Gen 24:16 that Rebekah was “a virgin” and that “no man had known her,” the rabbis, sharing the presupposition that nothing in the Torah was written in vain, initiated a long and detailed halachic discussion of whether it was possible for a girl to be technically a virgin and still “known by a man” in another way, i.e. to have sexual experiences nevertheless, or, alternatively, to have lost her hymen but still be without any actual sexual experiences (i.e. to be a *mukat ez*, literally “a female injured by a piece of wood”), and whether and in which cases this should affect her marriage-

²⁵ For this, see, e.g. Betsy Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), esp. 37–64.

²⁶ On this see the contribution by van Ruiten in this volume ##.

contract sum (*ketubah*).²⁷ The rabbis thus use Gen 24:16 as a proof text to illustrate the case. And therefore, according to them, the very words were written about Rebekah to emphasize that she, in any case, was a virgin in every possible respect.²⁸

However, this general thematic receives an initially quite surprising turn in later midrashic interpretations, where the statement can be found that Rebekah, when she fell off the camel (Gen 24:64), herself became a *mukat ez*. This interpretation is later than the rabbinic era and can be found only in medieval sources²⁹, and therefore the development may be viewed solely as an extension of the halachic discussion. It may be that somehow the topic of the *mukat ez* had become so closely intertwined with Rebekah, due to the use of Gen 24:16 as a proof text in the halachic discussion, that the step to a combination of Rebekah as person and the term *mukat ez* was not very great.³⁰ This is an entirely possible and even plausible option, but there may be additional reasons as well. Perry writes about the servant and Rebekah's journey back home, which in the Genesis text constitutes a gap between Gen 24:61 and 24:62:

In a short cut, the story shifts to the Land of Canaan, without supplying any information about the long journey. This place of indeterminacy is filled in by a series of midrashic flights of fancy, according to which the journey makes a leap forward to prevent the servant from coupling with the young girl at night, but nevertheless Isaac, who "did not find hymen in her," suspects the servant and blames Rebekah. Eventually Rebekah is cleared, but it would seem that these midrashic stories anticipated my article.³¹

Now the question is whether these exegetes of old read the story in Gen 24 as closely as did Perry. I am not entirely sure that they were interested in actualizing Rebekah's perspective in the same way as Perry has later done, but without doubt they were close readers on their own terms and noticed the instances where the servant's words and actual behavior were in contradiction (especially when the servant gives a rather modified account of the previous events to Laban

²⁷ Rabbi Meir has the more lenient opinion, according to which, in a case of *mukat ez*, the girl's *ketubah* should be 200 *zuz*, i.e. the sum assigned for a virgin, whereas the majority opinion of the Sages is that her *ketubah* is only 100 *zuz*, i.e. the same sum as for a divorced woman or a widow.

²⁸ See *Genesis Rabbah* 60:5 and *p. Ketubot* 1:3. Cf. the detailed analysis and discussion of these texts in Teugels, *Wooing of Rebekah*, 193–207. See also M. J. H. M. Poorthuis, "Rebekah as a Virgin on Her Way to Marriage: A Study in Midrash," *JSJ* 29 (1998) 438–462, esp. 439–444. – As regards the original meaning of the term *בתולה* in Gen 24:16, it is probable that it denotes a young woman who has not given birth, so the emphasis was not on virginity in a technical sense, and therefore, further precision (*וְאִישׁ לֹא יָדְעָה*) was needed in the text. See G. J. Wenham, "Betulah, 'A Girl of Marriageable Age,'" *VT* 22 (1972), 326–348.

²⁹ See, e.g., *Yalkut Shim'oni* on Genesis §109; for a complete list of texts, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, V (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1925), 263, note 301.

³⁰ Cf. Teugels, *Bible and Midrash*, 210–211. – This phenomenon could be compared with the development of the theme "Jacob the Scholar" which James Kugel has used as an example of a chain of exegesis and reception history, where the later outcome of a tradition finally bears only vague traces of the basic exegetical problem out of which it began to develop. See James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 354, 365–366; idem, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 137–138.

³¹ Perry, "Counter-Stories," 306.

and Bethuel in verses 34–49) and therefore had reason to suspect that perhaps he was not an entirely trustworthy person.³² In addition, of course the mere thought about the long journey may have caused this kind of reasoning in the minds of interpreters concerned with matters of sexuality, even if there were, according to the text, other people present on the journey beside Rebekah and the servant (v. 59).³³ But whatever the reason for the emergence of these traditions, it gives the impression that a thought which either had occurred, or possibly was in danger of occurring, to readers of Gen 24, is refuted in this way: “It is true that Rebekah was no longer technically a virgin, but there is good reason for this.” This way of explaining the situation and possibly refuting some undesired tradition is, in fact, not very different from how Matthew in his Gospel explains to the reader the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus (1:18–25), or reacts to the apparent rumor that the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body from the grave (28:11–15). Therefore, I think that the consideration which Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch have given to the story in Gen 24 deserves some attention.

Tradition-Historical Considerations pertaining to Genesis 24

Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch suggest in a chapter entitled “The Story of Rebekah and the Servant on the Road from Haran” in their book *From Gods to God* that the later midrashic expansions of the story of Gen 24 are perhaps not merely reception-historical, but rather tradition-historical elements that have survived beside the biblical narrative.³⁴ Initially, they suggest that there are principally three options for the origins of the tradition of Rebekah as a *mukat ez*:

1) Rebekah’s non-virginity is a non-Jewish tradition, created in order to mock the Jews and their sacred traditions. This option Shinan and Zakovitch deem as improbable and dismiss with a few words. They find it hard to believe that the tradition would be so often repeated in Jewish literature.³⁵ However, this kind of procedure of acknowledging the existence of an established tradition and simultaneously refuting it may lie in the background for example in the Gospel texts that I referred to above, and therefore I think that this option is not entirely impossible, given that the attestation of this Jewish tradition comes from as late as medieval documents, when the

³² *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* 16 contains a story according to which Abraham suspected Eliezer, and Isaac had to examine Rebekah, which then proved that she indeed was a virgin. The *mukat ez* motif is still absent from this story. Cf. Poorthuis, “Rebekah as a Virgin,” 456, who emphasizes the negative view of slaves which the Rabbis had.

³³ Poorthuis, “Rebekah as a Virgin” (esp. pp. 459–462), emphasizes this “pansexual” attitude that the Rabbis had, specifically with regard to this story, but also otherwise.

³⁴ Avigdor Shinan & Yair Zakovitch, *From Gods to God: How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends* (tr. Valerie Zakovitch from the Hebrew *Lo kakh katuv ba-Tanakh*, 2004) (Lincoln & Philadelphia: University of Nebraska Press & Jewish Publication Society, 2012), 230–236.

³⁵ Shinan & Zakovitch, *From Gods to God*, 233.

hegemony of Christianity and the relative suppression of Jews was a reality in many places in Europe.

2) Rebekah's non-virginity is a Jewish, midrashic tradition. For this possibility, Shinan and Zakovitch elaborate on the possible connections (of the *gezera shava* type) of Gen 24 to other biblical texts where sexual aspects are clearly present, e.g. that the servant's request of water reminds the reader of Sisera's request to Jael (Judg 4:19; 5:25), that a nose ring and bracelets are often symbols of adultery (Ezek 16:11–17; 23:42–43; Hos 2:15), or that Rebekah covers herself with a veil (Gen 24:64), as Tamar later did (Gen 38:14). As the authors point out, this latter similarity was noticed even in rabbinic times, as it is stated in *Genesis Rabbah* 60:15 that, "Two were they that covered themselves with veils and gave birth to twins."³⁶ Shinan and Zakovitch do not discuss the possible midrashic development of the originally halachic *mukat ez* tradition from the angle that it could have been extended to Rebekah's person, and this can be seen as a weakness in their argumentation. However, their observations regarding the biblical parallels are interesting, and as my personal conviction is that the *gezera shava* is one of the earliest exegetical techniques and has generated traditions which have a very long afterlife, it is entirely possible that such reasoning has been operative in this case too.³⁷

Therefore, a redaction-critical hypothesis might even be raised, according to which the redactors of the latest stratum in Genesis saw some inherent dangers in this story which was at that time found in an earlier form and could be compared to the Judges, Hosea and Tamar traditions mentioned above as an exercise of "inner-biblical exegesis." Rebekah's initial barrenness was, according to this hypothesis, thus emphasized in the final redaction, in order to refute all possible suspicion concerning Isaac's paternity. This is, of course, pure speculation, but is reminiscent of a redaction critical question concerning the death of Bathsheba and David's firstborn son and the birth of Solomon (2 Sam 12:15b–25): it would be more natural for the flow of the story if Solomon were the child who was born of the first union between the couple, but it is emphasized in the narrative that Solomon was their second child. Is this because of a Deuteronomistic doctrine that adultery must be punished, or because it would be unfit for a king to be born of an adulterous union, or because it must be emphasized that Solomon was not, at any rate, Uriah's son but David's?

3) Rebekah's non-virginity is an ancient folk tradition which was rejected from the Pentateuch. It is, then, a tale about a cunning servant who deceives his master in a most scandalous way. This

³⁶ Shinan & Zakovitch, *From Gods to God*, 233–235.

³⁷ See Lotta Valve, *Early Modes of Exegesis: Ideal Figures in Malachi as a Test Case* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2014), esp. 28–38.

option is the most compelling one according to Shinan and Zakovitch, but they do not really elaborate on their hypothesis other than by stating that “[p]eople have always enjoyed tales of cunning and deceit, especially those in which someone from society’s lower ranks outwits his or her superiors.”³⁸ They thus postulate that this unsavory tale was tamed by incorporating it into a seemingly innocent frame, but without complete success in the enterprise. Teugels refutes this theory (which Shinan and Zakovitch have earlier presented in a more extensive Hebrew article), deeming it very speculative.³⁹

There are however also other, quite different possibilities to posit influence from earlier traditions in Gen 24. Jack Sasson has drawn attention to certain similarities between the story of Gen 24 and documents concerning marriage conventions among high ranks of society in the ancient Near East.⁴⁰ In the letters concerning the marriage negotiations between King Zimri-Lim of Mari (ca. 1775–1761) and the daughter of Yarim-Lim of Yamhad, many details resemble those named in Gen 24. Also these negotiations were conducted through a proxy, or actually two trusted persons who reported about their progress to the king in letters. There is reference to ample gifts to the bride and her immediate family, as well as to the detail that the “mother” (former wet-nurse) of the bride was to accompany her to the new homeland (cf. Gen 24:59; 35:8). The contents of the letters also testify to the diplomatic skills of the main delegate Asqudum, as he is able to tackle unexpected difficulties in a clever way. This detail is also consistent with the common way to interpret Gen 24 where the quick wit of Abraham’s servant is highlighted. With this Near Eastern background in mind, it could be possible to conclude that the “pure and pious” interpretation of Gen 24, which a superficial and/or traditional reader of the chapter probably always applies to it, might be the one intended by the original author(s) after all.

Conclusion

This brief survey has demonstrated that there are and have been several alternative ways to view the story recounted in Gen 24. These alternatives involve tradition-historical and redaction-critical as well as reception-historical considerations. I find Shinan’s and Zakovitch’s writing helpful because they very clearly demonstrate the different possibilities for how a postbiblical tradition may have emerged. They make their own preferences clear in this regard, but I think the question still remains which one to choose, or whether it is possible that the truth about the emergence of the postbiblical Gen 24 traditions lies, in a complicated manner, somewhere between the different options. There might possibly be a slight kernel of truth in Shinan’s and Zakovitch’s claim that a morally doubtful folk tradition lies in the background and has been reject-

³⁸ Shinan & Zakovitch, *From Gods to God*, 235–236, quotation from p. 236.

³⁹ Teugels, *Wooing of Rebekah*, 207–208 n. 22.

⁴⁰ Jack M. Sasson, “The Servant’s Tale: How Rebekah Found a Spouse,” *JNES* 65 (2006), 241–265.

ed in the version of Gen 24 which we now have; but simultaneously, the similarities between the diplomatic strategy in Gen 24 and the Mari letters highlighted by Sasson are also compelling.

In my opinion, the problem of the final redaction of Genesis is central and cannot be left aside from any considerations pertaining to the Genesis stories. The question which would need an answer is thus whether the story in Gen 24 has some older kernel (whatever that may be) which could still be recovered; or whether the story is a mere “priestly fabrication” out of a genealogical frame. The alternative that the primary lesson of the tale, in its present form and setting, is to promote arranged marriages between inhabitants of Judah and Diaspora Jews is very compelling.⁴¹ It is however possible that the tale nevertheless includes a “counter-story,” as Perry has demonstrated; but whether this counter-story is a modification belonging to an earlier version of the tale (cf. Shinan’s and Zakovitch’s option #3) is difficult to evaluate. In this regard, I side with Teugels that at least the tradition according to which Rebekah herself became a *mukat ez* when she fell off the camel is probably only a later development out of the halakha which was earlier developed from Gen 24:16. This does not preclude, however, that readers might have sensed some morally dubious features in Gen 24 even before the relatively late emergence of this tradition. Therefore the silence of the earlier writings of the “rewritten Bible” genre concerning the tale of Gen 24 may indeed be a loud silence.

In sum, the tale in Gen 24 is an important and integral part of Abraham’s family history in Genesis, but it is passed over in comparative silence in reception history, apart from some relatively late sources. This scarcity may be due to the relative weakness of Isaac as a character in Genesis; a significant topic which, in turn, would require separate treatment which has not been possible in this article. Isaac is important mainly as a link between Abraham and Jacob who, with his twelve sons, becomes a predominant figure in the patriarchal history. In this development, his mother Rebekah plays a central role already in the Genesis account of the story, and even more so in post-biblical literature like *Jubilees*. However, in these retellings there was no need to emphasize any aspects relating to Rebekah’s past, not even that Abraham’s servant functioned as a matchmaker between Isaac and Rebekah.

⁴¹ Cf. Conczorowski, “All the Same as Ezra?” 106: “Gen 26:34–35 and 27:46–28:9 emphasize a diffuse moral evaluation of Canaanites, while Gen 24 is silent about it and simply takes it for granted. The focus here is on the topic of marrying inside or outside the land, as well as people related or unrelated to a community defined by a common meta-narrative. Perhaps here we find the adaptation of an older custom of only marrying kinsfolk, which now appears to be used in the construction of an identity based on a narrative of common descent.”