

# OpenTheo

## January 24th: Genesis 24 & John 12:1-19

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A bride for Isaac. Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## **Transcript**

Genesis chapter 24. Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge over all that he had, Put your hand under my thigh, that I may make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.

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? Abraham said to him, See to it that you do not take my son back there. The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, 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. 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. So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter.

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master. And he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water.

And he said, O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the young woman to whom I shall say, Please let down 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. Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebecca, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder. The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom no man had known.

She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, Please give me a little water to drink from your jar. She said, Drink, my lord.

And she quickly let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking. So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw water, and she drew for all his camels.

The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the lord had prospered his journey or not. When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing half a shekel and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels and said, Please tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night? She said to him, I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milca, whom she bore to Nahor.

She added, We have plenty of both straw and fodder and room to spend the night. The man bowed his head and worshipped the lord 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 in the way to the house of my master's kinsman.

Then the young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things. Rebecca had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out towards the man to the

spring.

As soon as he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms and heard the words of Rebecca his sister, thus the man spoke to me. He went to the man, and behold he was standing by the camels at the spring. He said, Come in, O blessed of the lord, why do you stand outside? For I have prepared the house and a place for the camels.

So the man came to the house and unharnessed the camels and gave straw and fodder to the camels, and there was water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. Then food was set before him to eat, but he said, I will not eat until I have said what I have to say. He said, Speak on.

So he said, I am Abraham's servant. The lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male servants and female servants, camels and donkeys.

And Sarah, my master's wife, bore a son to my master when she was old, and to him he has given all that he has. 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 dwell, but you shall go to my father's house and to my clan and take a wife for my son. I said to my master, Perhaps the woman will not follow me.

But he said to me, The lord before whom I have walked will send his angel with you and prosper your way. You shall take a wife for my son from my clan and from my father's house. Then you will be free for my oath when you come to my clan.

And if they will not give her to you, you will be free for my oath. I came today to the spring and said, O lord, the god of my master Abraham, if now you are prospering the way that I go, behold I am standing by the spring of water. Let the virgin who comes out to drink water, to whom I shall say, Please give me a little water from your jar to drink, 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. Before I had finished speaking in my heart, behold, Rebecca came out with her water jar on her shoulder, and she went down to the spring and drew water. I said to her, Please let me drink.

She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder and said, Drink, and I will give your camels drink also. So I drank, and she gave the camels drink also. 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. Then I bowed my head and worshipped the lord, and blessed the lord, the god of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now then,

if you are going to show steadfast love and faithfulness to my master, tell me, and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left.

Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, The thing has come from the lord. We cannot speak to you, bad or good. Behold, Rebecca is before you.

Take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the lord has spoken. When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the lord. And the servant brought out jewellery of silver and gold and garments and gave them to Rebecca.

He also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. And he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they arose in the morning, he said, Send me away to my master.

Her brother and her mother said, Let the young woman remain with us for a while, at least ten days, after that she may go. But he said to them, Do not delay me, since the lord has prospered my way. Send me away, that I may go to my master.

They said, Let us call the young woman and ask her. And they called Rebecca and said to her, Will you go with this man? She said, I will go. So they sent away Rebecca their sister and her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men.

And they blessed Rebecca and said to her, Our sister, may you become thousands of ten thousands, and may your offspring possess the gait of those who hate him. Then Rebecca and her young women arose and rode on the camels and followed the man. Thus the servant took Rebecca and went his way.

Now Isaac had returned from Beelahiroi and was dwelling in the Negev. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening. And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, there were camels coming.

And Rebecca lifted up her eyes. And when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel and said to the servant, Who is that man walking in the field to meet us? The servant said, It is my master. So she took her veil and covered herself.

And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother, and took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Genesis chapter 24 is a fascinating narrative in part because it is the longest single narrative in the story of Genesis and also because it lies at the very heart of the book. It begins with Abraham giving a mission to his faithful servant, the oldest servant in his house, presumably Eleazar of Damascus, the home-born servant that was going to inherit everything that Abraham possessed. The angel of the Lord is going to go ahead of

him as the angel of the Lord goes ahead of Israel in the Exodus.

The servant sets a particular test, a test by which he will know in God's providence who the person to be the wife of Isaac would be. There is a meeting at a well. Once again in the book of Genesis we see a number of connections between wells and women.

The well is a sort of life and fertility. It is connected with the giving of water and Rebecca within this story is a giver of water. She's the one who gives life to the camels, life to Eleazar, and in that sense she's set apart as someone who's suitable as a bride for Isaac.

However, she needs to be not only the wife of Isaac but also the new matriarch of the people after the death of Sarah. At the end of the passage we see her brought into the tent of Sarah. She's filling the spot that Sarah has left behind.

So the choice of Rebecca is hugely important. This chapter has lengthy telling and retelling of details. First of all, it describes the visit of the servant, the conversation between him and Rebecca, and then how he recounts again some of the things to her and then later on to Laban and her family.

The Bible can be extremely brief when it wants to be so we should wonder why it isn't here. Why does it repeat all these things and why, more importantly, are there variations and discrepancies in the retelling later on? If we take the way that the events are originally described by the narrator and then by Eleazar to Rebecca and contrast and compare those with the way that things are described to Laban and her family, a number of variations and discrepancies emerge. For instance, when speaking to the family he mentions going to Abraham's father's house and family to look for a wife but that isn't mentioned the first time in his original instructions.

He prays for kindness in the first occasion and focuses upon a prayer for success in the second. He gives the jewellery first and then asks who she is in the first account as it's narrated and then the second time as he recounts it to the family that is flipped. He talks about who she is first and then gives the jewellery.

The second account also emphasises that everything has been left to Isaac by his father who is very rich. It doesn't mention God's kindness to Abraham in the same way. It focuses upon the success that God has given him but not so much upon the kindness.

Laban doesn't serve Abraham's servant in the same way that Rebecca does and this might be a helpful clue. He doesn't seem to be as characterised by kindness as Rebecca is. So that contrast, I think, helps us to see that there are two characters here from the same family.

One who is characterised by incredible hospitality and kindness and another who isn't. It seems in the text, if we read it very quickly and without paying close attention, that Laban invites the servant in and then provides everything for his camels etc. But look

more closely and it seems to be the man that has to do that for himself.

He's not treated in the same way as he is by Rebecca. It's important to notice the significance of Laban as the brother within the marriage negotiations. This is something we've commented upon previously as Sarah declared Abraham to be her brother.

The brother had an important role to play in negotiating marriage plans and also Rebecca seems to have had veto power. Rebecca would have become both the sister and the bride of Isaac, adopted into the family of Abraham but then someone who becomes the wife as well. There is the provision of some degree of financial security as she's given costly jewellery and there is a gift of various items to her family as well to provide further security with the males of her family given wealth that they can use to act in her favour and for her aid.

Later on we'll see Laban acting in a way that does not respect these sorts of customs, consuming the money that has been given to him for his daughters. That money should have been preserved for their well-being but he uses it himself. Laban wants to delay and we'll see later on in the story of Jacob that that delay is a fateful thing.

It's not something that you want to get trapped in. Laban will end up chewing up years of Jacob's time and so it's important that Eliezer does not allow that to happen to him. He wants to head straight back and Rebecca is happy to go.

Rebecca is a new Abraham. She leaves her father and mother, her people, her land and her kin and is prepared to go where God will lead her. She follows this servant and she follows him on the basis not of the tale of great wealth that is focused upon when speaking with Laban but on the basis of God's kindness and his goodness to Abraham which is more emphasised in the first account.

She is a new Abraham in other respects. She's an Abraham in the way that she acts in the test of hospitality. In chapters 18 and 19 we compared and contrasted two stories of hospitality, the story of Abraham and then the story of Lot.

One a successful story of hospitality and the other a failed one and one leading to fruitfulness, the other leading to barrenness. And that story of Abraham's extreme hospitality is mirrored here in the extreme hospitality of Rebecca who will become his daughter-in-law. She is a new Abraham leaving father and mother and being joined to her husband.

Another thing to notice is that she is the granddaughter of Milcah who is the daughter of Haran who is the dead brother of Abraham and that dead brother of Abraham has children raised up for him by his brother Nahor. Rebecca is herself then a sort of life from the dead. What she does as well is in being the child of or the descendant of Haran raised up by Nahor she is going to, in marrying Isaac, bring the three threads of Terah's

house together in the receipt of the promise.

This is the first formation of a new union and it's a formation of a union that brings all the children of Terah together in the first act of union with those outside of that immediate group. Abraham has been given the promise but this is the first time that there's really been a marriage bringing in of a new party and here we see that the first recipient of this is other parts of Terah's line and that I think is important. One question to reflect upon.

A passage that has great many similarities to this is found in 1st Samuel chapter 9 when Saul comes and he sees the women at the well and eventually he is told that he will be the king of the people, that he is the one that has been searched for, the one who will fulfil God's purpose in establishing the kingdom. What can be learned in comparing and contrasting these passages? How can the character of Rebecca shed light perhaps upon the character of Saul? John chapter 12 verses 1-19. Six days before the Passover Jesus therefore came to Bethany where Lazarus was whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he who was about to betray him said, Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor? He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief and having charge of the money bag he used to help himself to what was put in it. Jesus said, Leave her alone so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.

For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me. When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there they came not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel. And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, Fear not, daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they had heard he had done this sign.

So the Pharisees said to one another, you see that you are gaining nothing, look, the world has gone after him. In John chapter 12, Passover has nearly come. Jesus goes to Bethany where there is a meal celebrated in his honour, perhaps because he has returned to the area, perhaps because he has just raised Lazarus.

It's hosted seemingly by Mary and Martha. Martha is serving and their brother Lazarus is celebrating with Christ at the table. While this is going on, Mary takes a pound of expensive ointment and it's pure nard and anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes his feet with her hair.

This is an event that has similarities to other records of the anointing of Christ or the wiping of his feet with hair and tears elsewhere in the Gospels. Those other accounts have seemingly significant differences from this account which suggest the possibility that there were two different events or at least that John is very strongly highlighting certain dimensions of it for the purposes of his argument. Some of those purposes might be the connection that he draws between Mary's action in this chapter and the action of Christ in washing his disciples' feet in the chapter that follows.

Mary's radical act of service anticipates and prepares for Jesus' own radical act of service. There's also connections looking back. John 11 verse 2 mentions the events of verses 1 to 8 of this chapter before they occur, connecting the story of the raising of Lazarus with this.

The stench of Lazarus' dead body is now replaced with the fragrant oil, the nard, that's placed over the living person but over a living person in anticipation of his death. The house is described as filled with the fragrance. I would suggest that there's possibly a reference here to Isaiah chapter 6 verse 4 where the smoke that fills the house is probably the fragrant smoke of incense filling the temple.

This is an understanding that you see within certain of the church fathers. Martha serves but Mary is known for her love and devoted presence at Jesus' feet. You see this in Luke chapter 10 verses 38 to 42.

In the previous chapter she also throws herself at Jesus' feet. That connection between Mary and Jesus' feet, Mary and Jesus' personal presence is one that characterises her in both of the Gospels. However, in the previous chapter we saw her as a wounded figure, someone who felt, in some respects she may have felt betrayed and bereft of hope after the loss of her brother and more importantly the fact that Jesus didn't come when he had heard the news.

It seemed as if there was some act of betrayal or at least some failure to live up to the love and expectation and the high regard that she had for him. And what we see here is a loving act that is extravagant in its extent. This loving act is also contrasted with Judas' betrayal and wickedness.



Judas' love of money contrasts with the extravagant gift of something that would cost an enormous amount of money. This oil would have cost more than many women would have inherited. So this was a remarkable act.

Jesus is anointed for his burial. It's a preparation for his death but also has overtones of a coronation. It's an anointing and in the resurrection these two themes can be reconciled.

Christ is being glorified and throughout the rest of this chapter there are various references to Jesus being glorified by the Father. Other thing to notice is the way that there may be themes of marriage and love at play here. In the book of Song of Songs verses 12 of chapter 1 we read, while the king was on his couch my nod gave forth its fragrance.

John does a lot of work with the material from Song of Songs. You have in the book of Revelation Christ knocking on the door. As the lover knocks on the door of the beloved in Song of Songs you have the same sort of language of the bride saying come, calling for the beloved to come to see her.

And we have various other references within the Gospel of John that bring forward marital themes. John the Baptist is the friend of the bridegroom. Jesus is the bridegroom who is coming.

Jesus begins his work in a wedding feast providing the wine as the bridegroom would have been expected to provide wine. In chapter 4 Jesus meets a woman at the well much as women were met at wells in Old Testament meetings with the patriarch's brides. So in these ways we can see marital themes playing beneath the surface of the story.

And the action of Mary at this point would really fit into that mould. She is acting in a way that is not just an expression of discipleship. It's an expression of deep passionate love for Christ.

A love that has some sort of marital flavour to it. She wipes his feet with her hair. She undoes her hair in a way that a bride might for the bridegroom.

This is an act that seems to go beyond the bounds of propriety. This is something that is a startling and even shocking act for a hostess to engage in. She is showing an attachment to Jesus as his personal presence, his bodily presence in a way that goes beyond what would typically be seen as seemly.

And that action is one that I think fits into this deeper theme within the Gospel. After this, the Jews seek to destroy not only Jesus but Lazarus. The evidence of one who has been raised from the dead is a threat to them.

The news of this person gets around and the more that people are led astray in their understanding by Lazarus and by Christ, the more that their position is in threat. And so

when these people try and destroy Christ, they're also trying to destroy the new life that he has created in others, that he has brought others into. The next day, Jesus is surrounded by a great crowd that take branches of palm trees, go out to meet him saying, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.

This is a great welcome to the city as a returning king, as a military deliverer, as God returned to his people. These are statements that we find echoing the prophets. And John points the reader's attention to the prophecy of Zachariah at this point, Fear not, daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

And this highlights, perhaps more than the other Gospel accounts, which talk a lot about how the donkeys were found and particular events surrounding that, this highlights the witness of the crowd, the way that they declare him to be the king of Israel, the one who has come in the name of the Lord. The crowd is described as bearing witness to him. Witness language is very important within the Gospel of John as we've seen and so I don't think it's unimportant that they're described as a witness at this point.

One final question for reflection. Within the Gospels, we see Jesus' disciples associated primarily with his mission. His disciples are committed to his mission and when he dies and is buried, it seems as if the mission has ended and they go their different ways and there is a crisis point for them.

But the women in Jesus' life seem to have a greater connection with his body, his presence, not just his mission. It might be worth reflecting upon the character of Mary here and her act towards Jesus' body. Why is this such a significant act? Why is this an act that anticipates the action of Christ in the next chapter? What are some of the ways that it could be connected with Mary Magdalene's actions later on after the resurrection? One second question.

In the Gospel of John, there's mention made of the many spices, again, an immense quantity of spices brought to the tomb of Christ by those who buried him. It's not mentioned in other Gospels. What connection can we maybe draw between Mary's action and the action of those who buried Christ later on?