

**BABY BECKY, MENARCHE AND PREPUBESCENT MARRIAGE
IN ANCIENT ISRAEL**

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Abstract

Physiological factors must to be taken into account when reading and interpreting texts from ancient time periods or when studying the religious life of populations different from one's own. Focusing on the Biblical figure of Rebekah, this study observes that given a later age for the onset of menarche in ancient times, Rebekah was likely not being depicted as an adult in the story but merely as a child when she married Abraham's forty year old son, Isaac. Delayed childbirth in the marriage is not to be attributed to barrenness in the mind of the storyteller but to her prepubescent state. Prepubescent marriage in ancient Israel was practiced when religious, economic, social or political factors warranted it.

Although scholars are well aware of the political, social, economic, linguistic, religious and cultural changes that have occurred over the course of history, there is a general assumption that physiologically, except in terms of height and weight, the human race has remained constant. There is a tendency, therefore, to interpret ancient texts based upon current biological norms. Given that biological considerations shape to a great extent family, religious and other social structures, it is imperative that changes in biological functions be studied with an eye toward learning how those changes have affected social institutions and our understanding of the content and meaning of ancient religious texts.

Like contemporary texts, ancient texts reflected the real social, institutional, biological and natural settings in which the people who told, composed, translated and passed on the texts lived. The norms of their society (or more particularly the norms of their social group in society and

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Menarche and Prepubescent Marriage

their interpretations of the entire society) became the norms of their stories. Until recently, the marriage of prepubescent females was common in many parts of the world. Even in the 21st century, the practice is well attested in some African, Asian and even Latin American nations.²

There is a genre of material in the Hebrew Bible that scholars refer to as “barren women” stories. The Rebekah narrative of Genesis 24 and 25:21-26 is one such story. Interpreters of this story have generally assumed that Rebekah would have been understood by early readers to have been an adult when she married Abraham’s son, Isaac because the norms of the societies in which the interpreters live assume that marriage occurs between adults. Rebekah’s marriage was followed by an extended period of infertility. Contemporary readers interpret that to mean that Rebekah is to be understood as being infertile because infertility is an increasing problem in industrialized nations.³ But what if, in fact, those ancient readers would have understood her to be a prepubescent female because the marriage of prepubescent females was a known practice in their societies? Then her inability to give birth would have to be attributed to her prepubescent status rather than to barrenness and miraculous intervention would no longer have been required to enable a pregnancy. She only need come of age. This author is arguing that the Rebekah story and certain others focusing on so-called barren women should be studied in light of the phenomenon of prepubescent marriage, a phenomenon that was well known in many ancient societies and unfortunately not unknown even today. The “barren women story” is no longer the appropriate genre for this narrative.

The Declining Age of Puberty

How can we possibly know the age of puberty in ancient times and therefore whether prepubescent marriage was practiced in ancient Israel?

² United Nations Population Fund: State of World Population, 2005, http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_child_marriage.htm (Nov.26, 2007).

³ Dennis H. Wrong, “Trends in Class Fertility in Western Nations”, *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science / Revue canadienne d'Economie et de Science politique*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (May, 1958), pp. 216-229.

Menarche and Prepubescent Marriage

In medical circles, it has long been noted that the age when girls experience menarche⁴ has been declining. According to one study that tracked the age of menarche for Norwegian women (both urban and rural) over a period of 130 years, in 1830 the average age for the onset of menses was over sixteen; by 1960, it had dropped to thirteen.⁵ A similar decline over a shorter period of time has been documented in studies by Ulijazek, Evans and Miller of European, Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Pakistani girls living in London.⁶ Tanner confirms a drop from over seventeen years in the 1840s to twelve in the 1970s in girls residing in London, Oslo, Copenhagen, the Netherlands and Hungary.⁷ Both year of birth and

⁴ Menarche is the age at which the first menstrual bleeding occurs. It is the culmination of a two year process (on average) that begins with breast development and pubic hair growth. See Karen D. Bradshaw, M.D., "Diagnosing and Treating Precocious Puberty: in *Hospital Medicine*, vol. 33 no. 9 (Sept. 1997).

⁵ M. Rosenberg, "Menarcheal Age for Norwegian Women Born 1830-1960" in *Annals of Human Biology*, 18 no. 3 (1991): 207-219. This study recorded the recollected age of menarche of 9050 Norwegian women, who lived or live in both rural and urban areas. Physical location had some influence on the age of menarche. Rural women reported reaching menarche slightly later than urban women in this study. Social class, also, affected the age at which a woman experienced menarche, with those in lower socio-economic classes arriving at menarche at a later age.

⁶ S.J. Ulijazek, E. Evans and S. D. Miller, "Age at Menarche of European, Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Pakistani Schoolgirls Living in London" in *Annals of Human Biology*, 18, no. 2 (1991), 167-175. A total of 2177 girls were interviewed for this study in 1980 and 1981. The data was compared to that collected in 1966 in the same areas of London.

⁷ J.M. Tanner, "Trend Towards Earlier Menarche in London, Oslo, Copenhagen, the Netherlands, and Hungary," in *Nature* 243(1973), 95-96. The article, "Secondary Sexual Characteristics and Menses in Young Girls Seen in Office Practice: A Study from the Pediatric Research in Office Settings Network" in the journal, *Pediatrics* (April 1997), 505-511 authored by Marcia E. Herman-Giddens, et. al, reports a similar trend in American girls with an average age of 12.16 for African-American girls and an average age of 12.88 for Caucasian girls. This study has unleashed a storm of controversy. It has been challenged because of the method that was used and because of fear that girls with conditions requiring medical attention will not receive them if physicians assume that early signs of puberty are normal. The data was collected from visits to physicians' offices. Those challenging the method state that girls visiting doctors' offices are experiencing something unusual. Normal patterns cannot be based on observations in physicians' offices. However, with increasing engagement of girls in school sports that require physical examinations, normal girls may, in fact, be visiting physician's offices

environmental factors determined the age of menarche in these studies.⁸ A variety of factors contribute to the age at which girls reach menarche in a population; however, any particular consideration, such as diet, is mitigated by the number of girls participating in these studies across racial, ethnic and time boundaries. This trend towards an earlier menarche has been widely documented from the mid-nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century and is generally accepted.⁹ Questions have been raised, however, as to whether the trend has continued from the mid-twentieth century until the present or whether the age of menarche is

more frequently than in the past. The question is whether young girls who show signs of puberty are experiencing normal puberty or precocious puberty, which is not normal, or showing evidence of diseases or conditions that require correction. See Paul B. Kaplowitz et. al. "Reexamination of the Age Limit for Defining When Puberty Is Precocious in Girls in the United States: Implications for Evaluation and Treatment" in *Pediatrics* vol. 104 no. 4 Oct. 1999; Martina D. Letco, "Is Puberty Occurring at Younger Ages?" in *AWHONN Lifelines*, vol. 1 no. 4 (1997):23. An article in *The New York Times* dated October 17, 2006 Section D pages 1 and 6 reported that precocious puberty might be connected to the transference of testosterone or estrogen from an adult male or female who comes in physical contact with a child or unintended ingestion of hormones through food consumption or coming into physical contact with creams and shampoos containing hormones and perhaps even general industrial pollution.

⁸ There is some indication that emotional or psychological stress triggers early puberty while physical stress delays it in individual girls. See Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Julia A. Garber, "Puberty as Biological and Social Event: Implications for Research on Pharmacology" in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* Vol. 15 no 8 (Dec. 1994): 663-671 and Mary E. Mascari, et. al. "Little Women: Early Menarche in Rural Girls" in *Pediatric Nursing* vol. 24 no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1998), 11-15. This small study involved seven girls in rural Pennsylvania. Four of the seven experienced early menarche and four were under severe emotional distress at the time. See also Rosenberg, "Menarcheal Age," 215-216. These studies, however, are not evidence of a general or long term trend.

⁹ In the Rabbinic tradition, boys are expected to fulfill religious responsibilities at the age of 13. The age of thirteen was also connected to puberty though not with the thought that 13 is a typical age for puberty. Hoenig writes "...most of the rabbinic discussions appertaining to *thirteen* years and signs of puberty conclude with the notion of *full maturity at twenty*." Sidney B. Hoenig, "The Age of Twenty in Rabbinic Tradition and 1 Q Sa" in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Ser. Vol. 49 No. 3 (Jan.1959) pp209-214, page 211. In Islam, boys are expected to fulfill religious obligations from the age of seven. Therefore there is no connection between puberty and religious responsibility. Charles J. Adams, "Maturity" *Encyclopaedia of The Qur'an* vol. 3 J-O, Leiden: Brill, 2003, p. 331.

now holding steady. Further study needs to be done on this issue. Other questions also need to be addressed such as: whether the change in the age of menarche over the past century and a half is the result of a larger cyclical pattern of raising and falling ages of menarche, either, in a particular population or worldwide, or is it a phenomenon of the modern world. For a biblical scholar, the trend raises questions such as, what was the age of menarche for the women of ancient Israel, and how might that information shed light on biblical stories that focus on marriage and particularly, “barren women”?

The Age of Menarche in Ancient Israel

Statistical evidence is lacking for the age of menarche during the Iron Age in ancient Canaan, the age of Israelite state formation. Moreover, numerical ages of women appear only rarely in biblical texts making it difficult to determine how old any particular woman was thought to be.¹⁰ Women usually appear in general age categories rather than specific ones. They are girls, old women, or women of the age of procreation. Statements in the writings of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as, the Bible itself may provide an approximate age at which menarche began. Plato (c. 427-437 B.C.E.) in the *Republic* conceptualized an ideal society where women would begin to bear children for the state at age twenty.¹¹ Eyben reports that Aristotle assumed that procreation was possible beginning at age 18, but, more typically, 21.¹² Referring to the women of ancient Greece, Demand writes, “Traditionally menarche was reckoned as occurring at the age of fourteen, a number that probably had more to do with the concept of seven-year

¹⁰ Sarah is the only female in the narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible, who is given a specific age. She is ninety years old when she is told that she will bear a child the next year (Gen 17:17). Gen 18:11 adds that Sarah is old and “it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women” (NRSV). Clearly, the text has menopause in mind. This sharply contrasts with men whose ages are frequently noted in the Pentateuch, Deuteronomistic and Chronicler’s historiographies.

¹¹ Justin D. Kaplan, ed. *Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1951), 321.

¹² Emiel Eyben, “Antiquity’s View of Puberty,” in *Latomus*, vol. 31(1972), 683, 696-697.

Menarche and Prepubescent Marriage

cycles of development than with actual physical maturation.”¹³ The notion of seven year cycles of development was articulated by the Greek philosopher Solon circa 640 B.C.E. Solon divided the ages of males into ten sets of seven years. The third set, 15-21 is adolescence. He wrote, “In the third period, while his limbs are still growing, the down of the beard appears, and his complexion loses its bloom....”¹⁴ If one assumes that females and males matured at the same time and accepts the lowest given age as normative for menarche, then one adopts the age of 15 as the age of menarche. Likely, however, neither of these assumptions are what the author had in mind. Boys tend to physically mature later than girls. Solon may have had the upper limit of this age grouping in mind, rather than the lower. Girls begin to show signs of puberty: breast development and pubic hair growth, a couple of years before menarche. If signs of puberty are visible at fifteen, menarche may not occur for another two years. Another of the ancient Greeks, Hesiod (7th century B.C.E.) suggests that the ideal age for a man to marry is 30. He adds that the man’s wife should be four or five years younger, hence, 25-26 years old. He wrote “Your wife should have matured four years before, and marry in the fifth year.”¹⁵ There is no explicit reference to the age of menarche in Hesiod or Solon for women unless the term “matured” is a reference to menarche. Augustus Caesar was known to have promoted child bearing and ovulation though not necessarily menarche must precede child bearing.¹⁶ Eva Canterella reports that in his *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 B.C.E.) and the *lex Papia Poppaea* (9 B.C.E.),

¹³ Nancy Demand, *Birth, Death and Motherhood in Classical Greece* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), 10. Darrel W. Amundsen and Carol Jean Diers collaborated on an article titled “The Age of menarche in classical Greece and Rome” that appeared in *Human Biology* vol. 41 no. 1(1969), 125-132. They conclude that menses most often began at age 14. They admit, however, that their sources are often not specific.

¹⁴ Whitney Jennings Oates and Charles Theophilus Murphy, editors, *Greek Literature in Translation* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1944), 979.

¹⁵ Hesiod, “Work and Days,” in *Theogony, Work and Days*, translated by Dorothea Wender (Baltimore: Penguin Press, 1973), 81.

¹⁶ See J. A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome, 90 B.C.-A.D. 212* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), 112. Also, Ludwig Friedlander, *Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire* (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 232. J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1962), 76.

Menarche and Prepubescent Marriage

Augustus established that men between the ages of twenty-five and sixty and women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty were obliged to marry or remarry persons appropriate age group.... The marriages, moreover, had to be fertile. This was, of course, impossible to enforce by law but rewards were given those who produced many progeny and sanctions (limitations on rights of succession and inheritance) were applied to those who had no children.¹⁷

Because Augustus wanted to promote childbearing, it is unlikely that he would have delayed marriage beyond the age when young women were able to conceive and bear children. From these examples, we may infer that menarche may have occurred at a later age during earlier time periods. Anthropologist Karen Ericksen Paige, who studies modern day traditional societies, notes in a 1993 article that ovulation is often irregular or delayed after the first menstrual period for as long as a year, a condition known today as adolescent sterility.¹⁸ If this pattern was also true in the past, it suggests a typical age of 18-21 for normal menarche.

The Bible, while not speaking directly to the question of the age of menarche, does imply an age of nineteen or twenty. In Leviticus 27:4, the valuation for males and females are listed according to their ages. The “equivalent”¹⁹ for a woman is at its highest, 30 shekels, beginning at age twenty. Prior to twenty, the equivalent is 10 shekels. After age sixty when a woman is unlikely to bear a child,²⁰ the equivalent drops back to

¹⁷ Eva Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), 122. See also John K. Evans, *War, Women and children in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1991), 13.

¹⁸ Karen Paige Ericksen, “A Bargaining Theory of Menarcheal Responses in Preindustrial Cultures,” in *Girls at Puberty*, edited by Brooks-Gunn and Ann C. Petersen (New York: Plenum Press, 1983), 305.

¹⁹ The reference is to making vows “equivalent for a human being” according to *TANAKH: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 201.

²⁰ The sixty upper age limit for women is likely a reflection of the age at which menopause would be completed. There are very few references to menopause in ancient literature, partly, because so few women lived long enough to experience it, and partly because it was a private matter. Physical anthropologist, J. Lawrence Angel concluded that 35 was the most common age at death for women in ancient Greece (650-350 B.C.E.) based on examinations of skeletons of the period. Those women would not have

10 shekels. Baruch A. Levine is most likely correct when he notes in his commentary on Leviticus “the age factor reflects productive capacity.”²¹ In the ancient world, for women, being productive meant bearing children.²² Leviticus assumes that 20-59 are the child bearing years.

The Practice of Prepubescent Marriage

A late age for menarche may have direct bearing on some of the so-called “barren women” stories of the Hebrew Bible. *ʿAqarah*, a word that is too often translated “barren” in English Bibles, indicates a variety of conditions including sterility, infertility or the state of being childless.²³ Women who are identified as *ʿaqarah* in biblical narratives usually bear children at some point; and all of the children except (usually) the first one are born without special divine intervention. The childless state may be the result of sterility, infertility, of being post menopausal, or being prepubescent or a lack of sexual activity. Some of the women in the “barren women” stories may, in fact, represent girls, who were married

lived long enough to experience menopause. Nancy Demand, however, thinks that Angel underestimated the age of death of the skeletons by ten years, yielding an approximate age of forty five years. This age begins to brush against menopause. See Nancy Demand, *Birth, Death and Motherhood in Classical Greece* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994:17, 20. As late as 1789, the life expectancy at birth for a female was 36.5 years. Also see Ruth Formanek, “Continuity and Change and ‘Change of Life:’ Pre-Modern Views of Menopause,” in *The Meaning of Menopause*, edited by Ruth Formanek (Hillsdale: New Jersey, 1990), 4.

²¹ Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus in the JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 193. Other biblical texts such as Num 14:28 and Ezra 3:8 indicate that twenty was the age of productivity, responsibility and accountability in ancient Israel for men. This age is likely linked to the age when puberty is coming to completion.

²² See Mary Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 13-16.

²³ Ludwig Keohler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 874 and Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 785.

prior to menarche, prior to having the physical ability to conceive and bear children. Whereas Sarah is clearly presented as a woman who is post-menopausal,²⁴ this is not the case for Rebekah, Rachel or Samuel's mother. Although the narrator uses the word *'aqarah* in Gen 25:21 as Isaac's description of Rebekah's state, as Jeansonne observes, Rebekah's infertility is only briefly referred to in the text. In the case of Rachel and Sarah, however, it is the focus of a longer narrative.²⁵ Rachel (Gen 35:16-17) and Samuel's mother (1 Sam 2:21) both bear additional children after the birth of the first child, an indication that something other than barrenness may have been the barrier. Teubal presents the intriguing thesis that Sarah, Rachel and Rebekah were priestesses who, according to the customs of their cult, refused to bear children. She writes, "Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, in identification with a goddess, chose to remain childless for decades."²⁶ But are some of these stories, in fact, reflecting prepubescent marriage of girls in ancient Israel? If so, what kind of society marries off such young girls and for what reason?

In a contemporary study, Paige found that in 82% of her sample of pre-industrial societies, betrothal of prepubescent females was practiced. The usual reason for the practice is that there is some economic (or political) advantage to the family. The bride's family benefits when there are up front payments toward the bride price; the cost of rearing the girl is shifted to the husband's family, and a suitable husband is found where one may not be available later.²⁷ She writes "the payment of gifts or portions of the brideprice...may later be counted as *installments of marriage compensation*."²⁸ The anthropologist, Edward Westermarck, cites studies of two Amazonian cultural groups where the marriage of prepubescent females has the stated advantage of allowing the girl to grow up in her husband's family so that she will relate to them as her family and be

²⁴ Savina Teubal questions this common assumption. See Savina Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1984), 106.

²⁵ Sharon Pace Jeansonne, "Images of Rebekah: From Modern Interpretations to Biblical Portrayal" in *Biblical Research XXXIV* (1989), 41. See also Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 30.

²⁶ Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, 140.

²⁷ Paige, "A Bargaining Theory of Menarcheal Responses," 306-309.

²⁸ Paige, "A Bargaining Theory of Menarcheal Responses," 307.

comfortable with their ways of doing things.²⁹ Westermarck lists the following reasons as stated by local consultants as to why prepubescent betrothal and marriage is practiced in these societies: The men experience difficulty in acquiring wives. It is less expensive for a man to get a child. The virginity of the girl is preserved. A child is likely to be more docile and less likely to assert her own desires. The benefit to the girl is that she can receive her gifts earlier. Both families benefit in that the relationship between the two is cemented.³⁰

Wolf and Huang's study titled *Marriage and Adoption in China, 1845-1945*, found that it was not uncommon in certain areas of China for infant girls to be given away or sold for a small amount of money to the family of her prospective husband. Poverty or death of the girl's parents appears to have been the impetus for the custom. The girls were then raised by the husband's family, even suckling at the breast of their mothers-in-law.³¹ The consummation of these marriages occurred after puberty without the usual ceremony that accompanied the marriage of adults because the couple was considered to be married already. The sole thing that changed was that the husband and wife began engaging in sexual intercourse.³² A stated advantage of this type of marriage was that the proverbial mother-in-law-daughter-in-law tension did not exist. The girl was treated like a daughter rather than a daughter-in-law in the family.³³ Another significant fact is that these marriages as a whole

²⁹ Whiffen 162 in Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage*, vol. 1 (London: MacMillan and Co., 1971, reprint of the 1921 edition), 349.

³⁰ Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage*, 370-371, 381. Westermarck links child-marriage to the growth of patriarchy and the desire to control women. He notes that marrying off prepubescent females is not a "primitive" custom in India. The Vedic texts assume adult marriages to be the norm. This article lists three reasons provided by a female informant for the marriage of girls 8-14 years of age: [It] "protects them from immorality, strengthens clan relationships and honors Islam." Journalist, John F. Burns, adds that in India, young girls are married to provide free labor for the family of the husband. See John F. Burns, "Though Illegal, Child Marriage Is Popular in Part of India," in *The New York Times* (May 11, 1998), A1, A8.

³¹ Arthur P. Wolf and Chieh-shan Huang, *Marriage and Adoption in China, 1845-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 1-11, 82-83, 332.

³² Wolf and Huang, *Marriage and Adoption in China*, 83.

³³ Wolf and Huang, *Marriage and Adoption in China*, 88.

exhibited a lower rate of fertility though the reason for this is not clear.³⁴ Studies show a 25-30% drop in the fertility rate of women who were married as children. Wolf suggests an aversion factor may be the cause of this. He posits that the couple, having been raised together as brother and sister, found changing the relationship to include intercourse to be too close to incest. Huang, however, suggests that other factors, such as the premature death of the woman may factor into the equation.³⁵

Judith Tucker's study of Nablus marriage contracts entered into from 1720-1856 reveals that 19 out of 107 marriages involved minor girls. In contrast to the Chinese examples, these marriages were more frequent among upper class families than lower class families. She concludes that marriages of this type were arranged when they "suited the political, material or social needs of the family."³⁶ She further remarks that a distinctive of these marriages (though not dominant) is "the marriage of brother's children or of brother's children to a brother's grandchildren."³⁷ (The later is the same type of relationship that Isaac had to Rebekah. Rebekah is the granddaughter of Isaac's father's brother, Nahor.) Drawbacks to prepubescent betrothal and marriage of females were recognized by societies that practiced this custom. Death of the young woman before and during child-bearing was a risk factor.³⁸ Paul Roscoe, further comments, that a study of the Mountain Arapesh of New Guinea revealed that many prepubescent betrothals were "interrupted." They did not result in a permanent union.³⁹

To summarize, anthropological and historical studies document the presence of the betrothal and marriage of prepubescent females. The same societal and cultural groups that permit the marriage of prepubescent females also permit the marriage of pubescent females. It is to be

³⁴ Wolf and Huang, *Marriage and Adoption in China*, 89-91

³⁵ Wolf and Huang, *Marriage and Adoption in China*, 166, 165-177.

³⁶ Judith A. Tucker, "Marriage and Family in Nablus, 1720-1858: Toward a History of Arab Marriage," in *Journal of Family History* vol. 13 no.2 (1988):173.

³⁷ Tucker, "Marriage and Family in Nablus," 174.

³⁸ Tucker, "Marriage and Family in Nablus," 173. See also, Mary E. Richmond, *Child Marriages* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1925), 24-26 and Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage* vol. 1, 356.

³⁹ Paul R. Roscoe, "Familiar Partners? The Mountain Arapesh and the Westermarck Effect," in *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 51 (Winter 1995), 351.

expected that the biblical world knew of and practiced prepubescent marriage of females to some extent because it is a widespread practice in traditional societies.

The Rebekah Narrative

The Rebekah narrative exhibits some of the characteristics present in prepubescent marriages as listed by Paige and may reflect the betrothal and indeed marriage of a prepubescent girl in order to gain an economic advantage for the family and because a suitable husband was found. The depressed fertility in prepubescent marriages as found in the China study, may reflect a reality in ancient Israelite society as well.

Alter classifies the first Rebekah narrative (Gen 24) as a “betrothal type scene.” His description of the genre itself is largely based on her story. He lists the characteristics of this type scene in the Genesis and Exodus stories as follows:

The betrothal type-scene, then, must take place with the future bridegroom, or his surrogate, having journeyed to a foreign land. There he encounters a girl – the term “na`arah” invariably occurs unless the maiden is identified as so and so’s daughter – or girls at the well. Someone, either the man or the girl, then draws water from the well; afterward the girl or girls rush to bring home the news of the stranger’s arrival (the verbs “hurry” and “run” are given recurrent emphasis at this juncture of the type-scene); finally a betrothal is concluded between the stranger and the girl, in the majority of instances, only after he has been invited to a meal.⁴⁰

Williams in a discussion of type-scenes notes that while historical information may not be extracted from a type-scene,

The historian will sometimes make general inferences concerning background and context (e.g. social conditions and roles) and

⁴⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 52.

variations and innovations in the use of conventions may reflect the life-setting and religious ideas of specific story-tellers....⁴¹

The first Rebekah narrative likely reflects the historical-sociological reality of prepubescent marriage in ancient Israel, particularly at a time in its history and in a community (the priestly community) when endogamous marriage and purity, both ritual and sexual was prized.⁴² Fuchs observes that Rebekah, for all her feistiness, is still depicted as properly subordinate to the males.⁴³ It could be argued that this is to be expected because Rebekah is not only a female but also a child.

In Genesis 24, where Rebekah first encounters Abraham's servant at the well, she is presented as a young child. Although she is identified as a *na'ara*⁴⁴ (Gen 24:16, 28, 55, 57), and a *betulah*⁴⁵ and an *'almah* (Gen 24:43),⁴⁶ all words that connote youth, her behavior and actions are those of a young child. Rebekah, for example, carries her *kad*, water jar, on her shoulder rather than her head (Gen 24:15).⁴⁷ She runs when walking will

⁴¹ James G. Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type-Scenes," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 17(1980), 111.

⁴² Alexander Rofe defends a late date for the Rebekah narrative based on the language and syntax of the text, theology and the concern for not abandoning the land in an article titled, "An Enquiry into the Betrothal of Rebekah," found in *Die Hebraische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte*, edited by Erhard Blum, Christian Macholz and Ekkehard W. Stegemann (Hamburg: Klaus Detien, 1990), 27-39.

⁴³ Esther Fuchs, "Structure, Ideology and Politics in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scenes," in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 274-276.

⁴⁴ The word *na'ra* appears in this chapter. Without the final h as a vowel indicator, the consonantal text reads *na'ar*. The word *na'ar* is masculine and refers to a young man. Gen 24 reflects a not usual use of the masculine for a feminine subject.

⁴⁵ *Betulah* is often translated "virgin." Sarna, however, writes that the word more properly refers to "a sexually mature young girl of marriageable age." See Nahum Sarna in *Genesis in the JPS Torah Commentary Series* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 165.

⁴⁶ An *'almah* is a girl of marriageable age.

⁴⁷ In 24:15, Rebekah is carrying *kadah 'al skemah*, "her jar on her shoulder." Four of these jars were used to flood the altar in the contest on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:34), suggesting a large jar. Hagar, the Egyptian maid-servant of Abraham's wife, Sarah, also carries something on her shoulder but it is not a *kad*, a water jar. In Gen 21:14, Abraham

do (Gen 24:28). She converses with a total stranger (Gen 24:18-25), who at no point in the narrative identifies himself to her. She calls a man described as an *'ebed*, a servant or slave, by the honorific, *'adonai*, my lord.⁴⁸ Rebekah is the only individual in the Hebrew Scriptures to address a person identified as an *'ebed*, by the honorific, “*'adonai*.” She invites a stranger to her house after informing him of its contents (Gen 24:25). She accepts expensive gifts from a stranger (Gen 24:22). (She does not seem to recognize the value of these gifts but Laban does.) She immediately volunteers for the Herculean task of watering ten camels that have just crossed a wilderness (Gen 24:19). She does not know when it is appropriate to wear a veil (Gen 24:65). She is unveiled in the presence of strangers but veils herself for her prospective husband.⁴⁹ Rebekah is accompanied by a *meneket*, a wet nurse (Gen 24:59),⁵⁰ rather than maid-servants.⁵¹ Even her willingness to walk off with a stranger, which is often interpreted as a reflection of her adventuresome spirit and independence may be no more than the typical behavior of a child. Later the text reads that Rebekah is married for twenty years before she bears children (Gen 25:20, 26). None of the above, alone, definitively argues for a young age for Rebekah. The social mores of ancient Israel may have permitted

places a skin of water on skemah, her shoulder. Hagar is clearly a fully grown woman in this narrative. She has a nearly grown child according to one tradition.

⁴⁸ See Gen 24:2, 9, 10, 17, 34, 53, 59, 61, 66.

⁴⁹ While this act is often assumed to be a wedding ritual, it is not attested elsewhere as such. It seems rather that Rebekah is confused about the practice. The Middle Assyrian law code (dating to the 12th-15th centuries B.C.E.) contains a section about veiling women. It affirms that the wives and daughters of “seigniors” must be veiled when going out into the street (but not in the house). It prohibits the veiling of prostitutes and slaves. See “The Middle Assyrian Laws, Tablet A #40-41” translated by Theophile J. Meeks in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the Old Testament*, edited by James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 183. The veiling of women in societies where it is practiced usually begins at puberty.

⁵⁰ In traditional societies, it is not unusual for a child to nurse until age three. Fildes, in her book on the history of wet nursing notes that the period of nursing ranged from six months to three years with two being the most common. She also notes that the Talmud suggests that children be nursed for not less than 24 months. A favorite wet nurse may stay with the female child into adulthood. See Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 7, 10, 13-15 and 23.

⁵¹ See Gen 29:24 and 29. Later in the text, Rebekah has young women with her. See Gen 24:61. The young women are not identified as maid-servants.

behavior that today would be considered child-like such as accepting expensive gifts from strangers.⁵² However, the fact that Rebekah carries her water jar on her shoulder, the use of the term *`adonai* as an address to a servant, being accompanied by a *meneket* instead of maid-servants, and inappropriate use of the veil suggest that in the cultural context of ancient Israel, Rebekah would have been understood to be a child. When combined, the evidence strongly suggests that the author intends her to be a little child.

Two similar stories parallel this one in the Hebrew Bible and are of the same genre, the betrothal type-scene. Rachel and the daughters of Reuel also encounter strangers at a well. Neither of these stories fits the genre as described by Alter as neatly as the Rebekah narrative, but characteristic elements are there. The Rachel narrative is much shorter. It begins with Jacob meeting Rachel at the well. Shockingly, she allows him to kiss her before he identifies himself as kin! Then she runs to tell her family (Gen 29:11-12). The seven year wait before the consummation of the marriage also suggests that Rachel is a young child. In sharp contrast, when Reuel's daughters meet a stranger, who assists them at a well, their behavior is quite different (Exod 2). They neither engage the man in conversation, nor do they rush home to report what happened. They do not even mention the man until questioned by their father. When they do speak of him, it is clear that they are ignorant of the man's identity. They are only able to identify him as an Egyptian. They do not invite him home or offer him hospitality. They express no real interest in him. Although, Reuel's daughters return home early, it is clearly not due to haste (running). They plainly say that they finished their task early because they received the help of a stranger. Moreover, the text shortly reports that there are no fertility problems in the Moses-Zipporah marriage (Exod 2:16-20). These women appear to be older. They behave in a manner that is appropriate for adult women in that society. Both Rachel and Zipporah are identified only as "daughters" and no word by which we may infer an age is used. In the case of Rachel, the seven year wait before a consummation of the marriage is considered suggests that the author is

⁵² We should note, however, that Abraham is wary of accepting gifts from strangers (Gen 14:22-24 and Gen 23). The offer of the land in the latter text is not to be taken seriously as this is a ploy in the bargaining process.

Menarche and Prepubescent Marriage

depicting her as a young child at the time when Jacob first saw her.⁵³ It is unlikely that a man would be asked to wait seven years to consummate a marriage with a pubescent female in traditional society. The danger that the woman would be impregnated by another man during that period would be too great. The seven year period is rather to be understood as the time needed for Rachel to reach menarche and childbearing capacity.

The story of Rebekah is consistent with the findings of Paige. Clearly, there is an economic advantage for the family of Laban. There are many references in the text to the wealth of the Abrahamic family (Gen 24:10, 22, 30, 35, 53). The servant has already given expensive jewelry to Rebekah (Gen 24:22).⁵⁴ The servant specifically mentions wealth to the Laban family (Gen 24:35). As he is negotiating for the bride, he presents gifts of silver, gold and garments that are given to the family. Because the groom is a distance away, it may have been necessary for the entire bride price or wedding gift to be given at once. Since Rebekah will go to live with her husband immediately, his family will also bear the expense of rearing her. The advantage of this prepubescent betrothal and marriage to the Abrahamic family is that they have secured a bride from their family of choice where one may not be available later. Since they are physically removed from their relatives in Canaan, they cannot be sure that they will be informed when a suitable female from their family of choice evinces her fertility (and therefore readiness for marriage) in menarche.⁵⁵ The story surely reflects a later concern for endogamous marriage. The family goes to great lengths to obtain a female that is

⁵³ The story line suggests the following sequence: Leah bears six sons and a daughter with two periods of infertility before Rachel gives birth for the first time. This would imply that a period of at least sixteen years has passed. The narrator's reference to Leah's oldest son, Reuben, the mandrakes and the two maids who give birth may suggest that a shorter period of time has elapsed between Rachel's marriage and the birth of her first child (Gen 29:35; 30:9).

⁵⁴ Roth understands this action to be not related to a brideprice, but a response to her help. See Wolfgang M. W. Roth, "The Wooing of Rebekah: A Tradition-Critical Study of Genesis 24" in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* XXXIV:2 (April 1972), 182.

⁵⁵ Menarche is not true evidence of fertility but it is usually accepted as such until proven otherwise. In many traditional societies, the onset of menses is the occasion for a public feast to let the community know that the woman is ready for marriage.

biologically related to them even though they will have to wait for years before she is ready to bear children.

If it is the intent of the author to depict a small child in Genesis 24, why are the terms *na`ara*, *betulah* and *`almah* used? The answer is that these words do not exclude the possibility of a young child. The word, *betulah*, which is often translated, young woman or virgin appears about fifty times in the Hebrew Bible. It describes either a young woman or more specifically, a young woman, who has not engaged in sexual intercourse (though the qualifying phrase “who has not known a man” usually accompanies the word to make explicit the concept of virgin).⁵⁶ Wenham suggests that the word, *betulah*, is best understood as a “girl of marriageable age, who may or may not be a virgin...”⁵⁷ Wadsworth, however, defends the translation “virgin” though his own carefully worded definition is “a distinctive person (or group) who, because of her innate condition or qualities, receives special attention or fulfills a particular role.”⁵⁸ Day defines a *betulah* as “a female who had reached puberty and was therefore potentially fertile, but who had not yet given birth to her first child.”⁵⁹ Day does not indicate why she assumes that the *betulah* has reached puberty. While these scholars present sound arguments for their case, each *tries* too hard to force a single translation for a word that like other words, in fact, may have meant different things in different contexts or at different historical time periods.⁶⁰ The Joel 1:8 and Esther 2 usages of the term mitigate against the translation “virgin” but more often than

⁵⁶ See John J. Schmitt, “virgin” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 853.

⁵⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, “Betulah, ‘A Girl of Marriageable Age,’” in *Vetus Testamentum*, 22 (1972), 326.

⁵⁸ Tom Wadsworth, “Is there a Hebrew Word for Virgin? *Bethulah* in the Old Testament,” in *Restoration Quarterly* vol. 23. 3(1980), 162.

⁵⁹ Peggy L. Day, “From the Child is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah’s Daughter” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, edited by Peggy L. Day, Fortress Press, 1989, 59.

⁶⁰ In the modern context, the English word, “youth” used to refer solely to males. Now it is used to refer to males and females. There is no reason to assume that across ancient Israel and throughout the time period during which the word *betulah* was used, it meant exactly the same thing.

not, the word fits.⁶¹ Rebekah as a young child is likely meant to be understood to be a virgin, not because *betulah* means “virgin” but because she is a prepubescent child. She is of marriageable age in a society where prepubescent females married. The most unexpected word used to describe Rebekah is *na‘ar* because it usually means “young man.” The feminine equivalent is *na‘arah*. *Na‘ar* is used of females in three places. The first is in the Rebekah narrative of Genesis 24 in verses 14, 16, 28, 55 and 57. The second is in the Dinah narrative of Gen34: 3, 12. The third is in a series of laws governing sexual activity in Deuteronomy 15. The word *‘almah* translated “marriageable young girl” appears seven times in the Bible. In Exod 2:8, it describes Miriam, the sister of the infant Moses. In the Song of Songs 1:3, 6:8 and Proverbs 30:19, the word is used to describe girls in general. In Psalm 68:26 [English 68:25], girls play tambourines. In Isaiah 7:14, the same word describes a pregnant young woman. In Gen 24:43, it is the servant’s description of Rebekah. A term that does not appear in the story but may have been used is *yaldah*, girl. *Yaldah* is found only three times in the Hebrew Bible. The first occurrence is in Genesis 34:4 where it is used in reference to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah. Dinah appears to be an adult woman in this narrative. In an oracle in the book of Joel (4:3, 3:3 English) there is a reference to girls that are sold in order to buy wine. The final mention of the word is in another oracle, Zechariah 8:5, where a time is envisioned when boys and girls will once again play in the street. This last text usually is understood to be describing young children playing rather than adolescents. The word, *yaldah*, in Biblical Hebrew may refer to a child but it is as likely to refer to a young woman. Although the expressions: *na‘arah*, *betulah*, *‘almah* and *yaldah* connote youth, none are specific enough to indicate whether a child, adolescent or young adult is envisioned.

⁶¹ Joel 1:8 refers to a *betulah* dressed in sackcloth who is lamenting the husband of her youth. Esther 2:17 continues to use the term *betulah* even after the individual is no longer a virgin.

Prepubescent Marriage in Ancient Israel

Students of the Rebekah story have noted that she appears to be young. David Fass, referring to a number of traditional rabbis, for example, writes,

It was good though, that Rebekah was young and Isaac was, according to the text, forty years old when he married her (25:20). The disparity in their ages, combined with the wisdom of his years, enabled Isaac to train Rebekah properly in order to overcome the natural tendencies toward evil that she inherited from her parents.⁶²

While one object to Fass's description of the family of Nahor as evil, he is correct in suggesting that there was a fundamental problem with Rebekah's family in the eyes of the early Jewish community. According to one tradition (Josh 24), they were not worshippers of YHWH, the god of Israel. Fass refers to legends and interpolations in traditional Jewish circles that understood Rebekah to be three years old when she left with the servant to meet her husband-to-be. The appeal of the young age is that it distances her from the pagan beliefs and worship practices of her family of origin. These interpretations allow Rebekah to grow up in a household that worships the god of Abraham. This was extremely important to the post exilic Jewish community which recognized the role of women in passing on the religious traditions to the next generation. Her "barrenness," however, in these interpretations is not attributed to age but to an imputed curse placed on her by Laban, her "questionable background", the lack of an ovary or even to eating non-kosher food.⁶³ It has also been suggested in traditional circles that the fertility problem was not Rebekah's but Isaac's.⁶⁴ According to this interpretation, Isaac was impotent.

⁶² David E. Fass, "Unbinding Mother Rebekah" in *Judaism* vol. 41 (Fall, 1992),363.

⁶³ Fass, "Unbinding Mother Rebekah," 184, 194.

⁶⁴ Fass, "Unbinding Mother Rebekah, 368-369.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the author of the first Rebekah narrative envisions her to be a child, who is betrothed and then married to Abraham's forty-year old son, Isaac. She is depicted as a child-bride, a social custom practiced in the time of the author and probably throughout the history of the ancient Near East. Child marriages occurred when there were economic, political, religious or social advantages to the families involved. The priestly community of the post-exilic period was particularly sensitive to the issue of endogamous marriage and sexual purity. The Abrahamic family goes to great lengths to find a female who is biologically linked. This is to suggest to the Jewish community of the exilic and post-exilic period that it should do the same and not make their marriages choices among the nearby, non-YHWH worshipping families. A problem for the author or redactor of the story is that according to an Israelite tradition, the family of Nahor did not worship the God of Abraham. Rebekah is therefore depicted as a child so that she can be distanced from the pagan beliefs of her family of origin. Her young age permits her to be formed and shaped in the community of Israel.

Readers of the Rebekah narratives are again reminded of the gap between the ancient world and contemporary biological and social norms and the need to take account of those when reading biblical stories or any narrative from the ancient world that are extant. Contemporary readers of ancient texts correctly assume that girls were married at puberty in ancient times, but they fail to realize that puberty did not begin at the same age as it does today. Therefore, they read into those ancient texts the kind of adolescent problems that face girls when they marry too young or give birth too young. However, a later age for menarche usually permitted a girl to develop a healthy sense of identity, to form peer relationships and to learn the skills that she will need as an adult without the distraction of puberty and the hormonal drives that accompany it. (Pre-pubescent marriage, of course, interferes with that development.) A later age for the onset of menarche meant that girls were better prepared for marriage and the demands of motherhood, biologically, physically, psychologically, socially and vocationally.

Menarche and Prepubescent Marriage

Students of cultures that are different from their own and particularly those who study texts that emerged in a different time period need to attend to biological and physiological changes that may have occurred over time or that are present in particular populations due to environmental factors or perhaps genetic variation. Such changes are reflected in social institutions including religious institutions and indeed help shape them.

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