

Rebekah and Isaac

Of course I would like to be able to say that I became pregnant soon after becoming the wife of Isaac, but that was not how it was. We were very happy together, and I was delighted to be able to travel with Isaac as he moved the flocks of sheep and goats, and the herds of donkeys and camels around the lands between the Great Sea and the River Jordan. We would travel as



far north and south as the lakes at either end of the River Jordan. In the north to the sweet lake of Chinnereth, sometimes called Gennesaret, in the countryside of Galilee. At the southern end is the bitter Sea of Salt. Isaac would not go anywhere near there, unless he really had to use the small streams feeding the sea. The Wilderness of Jordan bounding the Salt Sea is barren, and it is difficult to move animals down the sheer cliffs which bound it on both sides. You have to know where the accessible paths are.

I can't say that our life was an easy life, for despite the promises of Yahweh to Isaac's father Abraham we had no land to call our own. We were constantly having to negotiate with other herdsmen to share the supplies of water, and to race to the best areas of grass. We had plenty of servants to help us defend our flocks, but occasionally, particularly if we had had a long spell of heat, where the grass would dry up and wither away, and the water in the wells, and waterholes would get dangerously low, then there would be pitched battles between the herdsmen. Occasionally one or two would loose their lives.

I enjoyed living in a tent. Once the servants had pitched the tent, preferably under a tree and near a supply of water, I would unpack our household goods and make our tent a home. The basic structure of the tent was a series of tree trunks about a hand span across, which would be joined together with rope made from lengths of hide. Across the arrangement of trunks a sheet of animal hides, that I had stitched together using a bone needle and more thin strips of hide, would be thrown over the wooden frame and large wooden pegs would be driven through holes made along the edges of the hide, where it just touched the ground. This kept the hide sheets from blowing away when the desert storms hit us. One side of the tent would be left open, with the side panel balanced on poles to making a wall-less roof area where we could sit protected from the sun in front of the tent. Isaac's mother had woven some dyed

panels of linen, which she hung from the roof at the front of the tent where the side panels had been raised to make the overhanging roof. These panels create a door, and give us some privacy. Over the years I wove more in my own designs, as hers succumbed to time and the weather. For inside the tent I wove and bartered for brightly coloured woollen rugs, which I laid on the ground to provide us with a bit of luxury. We would sleep on the rugs, with cushions made from bits of wool I collected and stuffed into some small bits of woven linen sewn together with linen thread with a fine bone needle. Wrapped in our cloaks if the weather was cold, or with the door open and a cool breeze blowing through, we would sleep soundly to the noises of the wildlife being kept at bay by the fires of our encampment. Our servants and herdsmen would have tents nearby, gathered together for our mutual protection. Unless the weather was really cold, our fire would be outside the tent, and I would cook in the shelter of the overhang, and hope that the wind would blow the smoke away from the tent and not back into it.

I loved those days, rising early and sitting outside of my tent watching the sun rise over the landscape, making the sun, which during the day would appear white in the shimmering mid-day heat, appear now at the edge of the morning as shades of pink and grey. Then as the body of the sun began to peep over the horizon, the flaming white ball would transform the hills into a feast of bright orange, heralding another day of sunshine; apart from those few days in the year when the clouds would obscure everything, and then we knew that the rainy season was upon us. Although we were always grateful for the filling of the wells and waterholes, and the revival of the grass, life in a tent on those days could be very wet and uncomfortable.

Probably the most difficult time for us as nomads was when our sons were near grown up. That year the first rains did not come, neither did the main rains nor really did the spring rains. The summer heat came with a vengeance, drying up what little water there was in the wells and waterholes. It quickly withered the grass shoots, which had started to grow with the little rain we had had leaving the land bare and dusty. There was a famine over all of the lands that we travelled. Isaac talked for many nights with our herdsmen, who were very skilled at finding water and pasture. They would have liked us to take our flocks down to Egypt, where passing travellers told us that there had been rain. Isaac went out alone to pray. When he came back, he announced that Yahweh had reminded him of his covenant with his father Abraham, that this land was ours, and in it we would grow and prosper. So we were going to take our flocks to the land of the Philistines, on the coast, which had not been so badly affected as us, and ask for help from Abimelech, King of Philistia, who was staying in his city of Gerar.

There was just one thing he asked of me before we went. I am somewhat younger than Isaac, and he was worried that if the Philistines thought that he was my husband, they might kill him to get such a young and beautiful wife as I. What wife would not be flattered by such praises? So I agreed, that if I was asked, I would say that Isaac was not my husband but my brother. Abimelech was generous, and allowed us to

remain in his lands. People seemed to accept that I was Isaac's sister, at least until Abimelech caught us kissing, then it was obvious we were not brother and sister. When challenged, a very shame faced Isaac explained why we had chosen to deceive the King. There was a long silence before Abimelech threw back his head and roared with laughter. He was generous enough with us to send out an order forbidding any of his people from harming either of us.

We stayed in Philistia for several years, and learnt from them how to plant crops. What we sowed, we reaped a hundredfold, as Yahweh had promised Isaac. Our flocks prospered as well, to such an extent that the Philistines became jealous of us. To try and stop us from prospering some of them went out, and filled in the wells which Isaac's father Abraham had dug when he first came to the land, and had been used by him, and now us to water our flocks. Eventually things became so bad between us and the Philistines that Abimelech asked us to leave, so with great regret, for Abimelech had been so good to us, we moved our flocks to the Valley of Gerar and re-dug Abraham's wells again. But our herdsmen quarrelled with the local men, who said that the water was on their land, so we moved on and re-opened another well, and they claimed that was theirs as well, so we moved a third time and dug a new well which Isaac named Rehoboth. No one disturbed us there until one day Abimelech arrived with a large number of his guards. I could see that Isaac was worried, but he went out to greet Abimilech, and asked why he had come now with armed men. Abimelech told him that everyone could see from the way we were flourishing that our God Yahweh was with us, and that we had now become so rich and powerful that he wanted to make a treaty with us. Isaac was so delighted, and relieved, that he called me, and asked that we prepare a feast to celebrate the friendship between us and the philistines. Just as we were sitting down to eat some of our men arrived to tell us that they had dug a new well, which Isaac called Shibah. Yahweh was indeed blessing us that day.

But, back to the beginning of my life with Isaac again. Not becoming pregnant did not worry me at first. Everything was far to new and exciting, and I don't think Isaac was too worried either. He just seemed happy that I was happy, and did not regret my decision to leave my home and family to marry him. As the seasons passed, and years past, I noticed that he did become more worried, and things became a bit strained between us. Isaac had talked to me many times about Yahweh and his promises to his father Abraham. Isaac's mother Sarai had died just before we married. Abraham had married again, and had become the father of more sons. Isaac had always thought that Yahweh's promises would be fulfilled through him, especially after Yahweh had saved him from being sacrificed by Abraham. Yet here we were with no sons to follow Yahweh. Isaac took to going out into the desert to pray. Eventually it became obvious to me that I was at last pregnant. Isaac was delighted. I was not so. I was so dreadfully sick for the first few months, then as the months progressed I became so large that I could hardly move. In the hot summer heat my ankles swelled up, and all I could do was sit in the shade and wait. Whenever I tried to rest, the baby within me would move and I could see bumps rising on my belly as elbows and knees collided

with me as it moved around. It seemed to have an awful lot of knees and elbows. All the other women in our camp said that it was, a very large baby.

I should not have been surprised then, when my time came to give birth, after many hours of labour, a very large, very red faced, very red-haired baby boy popped out. Isaac was absolutely delighted, and named him Esau, on account of all his red hair. I was not interested in his name at all at that point, for the labour pains which should have subsided a bit, got worse again, and before Isaac's astonished eyes a second baby, another son shot out. This baby was smaller and dark haired and looked much like my brother Laban. I named him Jacob, as he had arrived on the heels of his brother. Isaac took the babies out to meet everyone, and left the women and I to finish the birthing process and to clear up.

It was hard work looking after two babies. Esau was so greedy that he would have sucked me dry. Luckily the wife of one of our herdsmen had recently given birth to a baby who died, so I gratefully handed Esau over to her to suckle. Jacob was such a calm baby. He fed well, but he always looked so frail compared to his brother. As the boys grew up, if there was ever any mischief then it was Esau who instigated it. The number of times Jacob had to come and tell me about something Esau was about to do, which was really dangerous, was beyond number. But Esau didn't fear me, or my scolds, in fact he is the bravest person I know. This bravery helped him to become a very skilled hunter from a young age. He would spend hours with our best tracker, and had endless patience when it came to sitting and waiting for just the right beast that they wanted. They would hunt not only for food, but to protect our flocks from the wild animals, many of whom fear no man. He and Jacob would spend hours practising with their bows and arrows, until both were able to fire with complete accuracy. I was so proud of them both. I should not have had a favourite really, but Isaac favoured Esau, because he loved the flavours of the wild meat that he would hunt, which was a welcome change from our usual diet of milk and meat from our own flocks of sheep, with fruit, nuts, seeds, wild plants and grains. Jacob was a lot quieter, and spent a lot of his time helping look after the animals, which we have in abundance. He is particularly called on at the birthing time, and he is so gentle with the females giving birth. He has become skilled at assisting them, and rearing their young by hand if they are rejected by their mothers.

Over these last few years our flocks and crops have grown and prospered in the care of our sons, and Isaac and I spend more time settled in one place so that we can grow the crops we grew when we were in Philistia. Yahweh has indeed been very good to us.