Paired Perspectives on the Parashah

View PDF



Hayyim Angel

Hayyei Sarah:

Abraham's Servant and the Art of Biblical Retelling

One of the most striking features of Genesis 24 is its extensive repetition. The Torah first narrates Abraham's servant's mission to find a wife for Isaac, and then recounts much of the same story through the servant's own words to Rebecca's family. Although the two accounts are substantially similar, they contain numerous differences in wording, emphasis, and sequence. Why does the Torah devote so much space to repeating the story, and what should we make of the variations?

This question reflects a broader methodological debate among biblical commentators. Ibn Ezra and Radak maintain that many differences between repeated accounts are ordinary literary variations. The Torah need not repeat an event in precisely the same words each time. One account may clarify the other without requiring us to assign independent significance to every variation.

Other commentators, including Rashi, Ramban, Abarbanel, and Malbim, often adopt an approach that emphasizes the significance of every detail in the biblical text. From this perspective, differences between parallel accounts invite interpretation rather than being dismissed as stylistic alternatives.

Genesis 24 provides a particularly rich opportunity to consider these approaches. Is Abraham's servant faithfully recounting his experience, with the Torah employing natural literary variation? Or does he deliberately modify his

account to persuade Rebecca's family to approve the marriage?

Perspective One:

A Carefully Crafted Persuasive Narrative

Rabbi Elhanan Samet, in the third series of his studies on the weekly Torah portion, identifies approximately twenty differences between the original narrative and the servant's retelling. He argues that these changes serve a coherent purpose: the servant wishes to convince Rebecca's family that her marriage to Isaac is both appropriate and divinely ordained.

Consider Abraham's original instructions: "Go to my land and to my birthplace (*moladti*) and take a wife for my son Isaac" (Genesis 24:4). In the straightforward reading of the original narrative, Abraham instructs his servant to travel to his homeland, rather than explicitly requiring him to marry Isaac into Abraham's extended family. Indeed, when the servant arrives at the well, he prays for a sign that will identify a suitable wife. He asks that the young woman who offers water not only to him but also to his camels be the one whom God has designated for Isaac (24:12–14).

The narrative describes the young women as "the daughters of the people of the city" (*benot anshei ha-ir*, 24:13). Nothing in the servant's prayer explicitly requires the chosen woman to be Abraham's relative. Moreover, after Rebecca fulfills the sign by generously watering the camels, the servant gives her jewelry and only afterward asks about her family: "Whose daughter are you? Tell me, please. Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?" (24:23). This sequence suggests that the servant initially identifies Rebecca as a suitable candidate because of her extraordinary kindness, without yet knowing her ancestry.

When the servant recounts these events to Rebecca's family, however, he presents the mission somewhat differently. He reports that Abraham instructed him: "You shall go to my father's house, to my family, and take a wife for my son" (24:38).

The distinction is significant. Rather than describing a search for a woman from Abraham's homeland, the servant presents his mission as a search

specifically within Abraham’s family. Ramban, Abarbanel, and Malbim recognize the importance of this variation.

The servant also changes the sequence of his encounter with Rebecca. In his retelling, he first asks about her family, receives confirmation that she is Abraham’s relative, and only then places the jewelry upon her (24:47).

This revised sequence strengthens his argument considerably. In the original narrative, the jewelry appears to reward Rebecca’s generosity before the servant knows her identity. In the retelling, the jewelry follows his discovery that she belongs to precisely the family Abraham supposedly designated.

The servant carefully recounts his prayer, Rebecca’s fulfillment of the sign, and his subsequent recognition of divine providence (24:42–48). By presenting the entire sequence as the fulfillment of Abraham’s specific instructions, he makes the marriage appear to be the unmistakable will of God.

His presentation achieves its intended effect. Laban and Bethuel respond: “The matter has come from the Lord; we cannot speak to you either bad or good. Here is Rebecca before you; take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master’s son, as the Lord has spoken” (24:50–51).

Their conclusion is understandable even from the original narrative. Rebecca’s appearance at precisely the right moment, her remarkable generosity, and her relationship to Abraham all point toward divine providence. Nevertheless, the servant’s retelling makes the providential nature of the encounter even more compelling.

On this reading, the servant is not merely repeating his experience. He is a skilled advocate who adapts his presentation to his audience. His objective is to secure Rebecca’s marriage to Isaac, and he arranges the details to emphasize family connection, divine guidance, and the compelling nature of Abraham’s request.

Perspective Two:

A Faithful Retelling That Clarifies the Original Narrative

Although the differences between the accounts are undeniable, an alternative reading challenges the assumption that the servant substantially altered the facts. The central issue concerns Abraham's original instructions. Did he merely require a wife from his homeland, or did he specifically intend that Isaac marry a member of his extended family?

Rashbam understands the Hebrew word *moledet* in Genesis 24:4 as referring to family rather than birthplace. This usage is supported by Genesis 43:7, where the brothers explain that Joseph had questioned them about their family. On Rashbam's reading, Abraham instructed the servant from the outset to seek a wife among his relatives. The servant's later reference to Abraham's family therefore does not represent a change in the mission but an accurate clarification of its original purpose.

The possibility remains that Abraham specifically hoped to find Rebecca. Genesis 22:20–24, immediately preceding the account of Sarah's death, reports the birth of several members of Abraham's extended family, culminating in Rebecca. Abraham therefore may already have known of her existence and regarded her as a prospective wife for Isaac.

More importantly, the original narrative itself suggests that the servant was concerned with Rebecca's family identity before he regarded his mission as successfully completed. After Rebecca waters the camels, the Torah states: "The man stood gazing at her silently, to know whether the Lord had made his journey successful or not" (24:21). At this point, Rebecca has already fulfilled the sign. Why, then, is the servant still uncertain whether God has granted him success?

The answer becomes apparent from what follows. After presenting Rebecca with jewelry, the servant asks about her family. She identifies herself as the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah and Nahor (24:22–24). Only after learning this information does the servant bow and thank God: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His kindness and faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the Lord has guided me on the way to the house of my master's brothers" (24:27).

This sequence is crucial. The servant does not declare his mission successful immediately after Rebecca fulfills the sign. His expression of gratitude comes only after he learns that she belongs to Abraham's family.

Furthermore, his thanksgiving specifically identifies the family connection as part of God's providential guidance. The servant celebrates having been led to

“the house of my master’s brothers.” This language suggests that reaching Abraham’s family was an intended objective, rather than an incidental benefit that the servant subsequently exploited in his presentation. Consequently, the original narrative itself supports the possibility that the servant was seeking a woman from Abraham’s family all along.

This observation significantly weakens the argument that the servant transformed a general search for a suitable woman into a family-specific mission only when speaking to Rebecca’s relatives.

Ibn Ezra and Radak, consistent with their broader approach to biblical repetition, understand the servant’s retelling as substantially faithful to the original events. Ibn Ezra maintains that the servant had indeed asked Rebecca about her family before giving her the jewelry, as he later reports. The initial narrative does not necessarily provide every detail in strict chronological order. The two accounts therefore may be read together to reconstruct the complete sequence.

Similarly, the servant’s more explicit account of Abraham’s instructions may clarify what the original narrative expressed more briefly. Rather than assuming that the servant modified Abraham’s words, we may understand the two formulations as complementary descriptions of the same mission.

The servant’s retelling, therefore, need not be understood as a calculated revision of the facts. It may instead be a natural and faithful restatement of the story, emphasizing details already implicit in the original account.

Nevertheless, this interpretation does not eliminate every possibility of deliberate rhetorical emphasis. Even if Abraham genuinely instructed the servant to find a wife from his family, and even if the servant faithfully conveyed that instruction, he may have rearranged the sequence concerning the jewelry to strengthen his appeal. By presenting the gifts as following his discovery of Rebecca’s ancestry, he reinforces the connection between Abraham’s instructions and their providential fulfillment.

Thus, acknowledging the general reliability of the servant’s account does not require denying that he shaped his presentation for persuasive effect.

Two Approaches to Biblical Narrative

The two perspectives illuminate both the character of Abraham's servant and the literary character of the Torah.

According to the first approach, the servant demonstrates remarkable intelligence and diplomatic skill. He recognizes the importance of securing Rebecca's family's consent and deliberately highlights the elements most likely to persuade them. The differences between the original narrative and his retelling reveal his strategy and invite readers to appreciate the artistry of biblical characterization.

According to the second approach, the servant's retelling primarily clarifies the original narrative. Abraham's intention to find a wife from his family, the servant's concern with Rebecca's ancestry, and his recognition of divine providence form a coherent account. The variations need not all reflect deliberate changes to the underlying events.

The distinction also reflects the broader interpretive debate over repetition in Tanakh. Must every difference between parallel accounts communicate a separate message, or may the Torah employ the ordinary variations characteristic of human storytelling?

Genesis 24 suggests that the question cannot always be resolved by adopting one methodological principle to the exclusion of the other. The servant's account may be substantially faithful while still reflecting the rhetorical needs of the moment. Conversely, recognizing persuasive elements in his speech does not establish that every variation represents a conscious alteration.

Perhaps the most important insight emerges from the original narrative itself. The servant's prayer identifies generosity as the sign of a worthy wife for Isaac, but his thanksgiving follows the discovery that Rebecca belongs to Abraham's family. Her character and her ancestry together confirm the success of his mission.

Whether the servant carefully reshaped his story or faithfully clarified its details, both accounts ultimately point toward the same conclusion: Rebecca's marriage to Isaac brings together human initiative, moral excellence, family continuity, and divine providence.