“I am a peacemaker in Israel.” (Cf. 2 Samuel 20.19): Women Peacemakers in the Bible

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Violence and unpeace are pervasive and affect all in the world. Peace and life have become the keywords of the time. Christians turn to the Bible hoping to find answers. The Bible does not give us solutions to all our queries but it can allude to some. This essay aims at introducing some women peacemakers in the Bible. Through them, we hope to find clues for alternatives and for peace in the world of conflicts and crises.

The Bible contains many stories in which women are both victims of violence and active peacemakers. Women as peace-builders work at every level: to name a few, among individuals (Abigail, 1 Sam 25), in the royal family (a woman from Tekoa, 2 Sam 14), among conflicting groups (a woman at Abel, 2 Sam 20). Or, women are agents of resolving crises that fell upon their community (Esther and Judith). Sometimes, the saving acts of their community do not necessarily bring peace to everyone: the persecutors of the Jews in the book of Esther suffer from violence by revenge and the enemy of Judith’s community experienced the same fate.

This essay deals with three biblical cases where women are agents of finding alternatives in conflicts and crises. In these cases, the conflicts occur between different ethnic groups (Exod 1.15-22), between different groups within a nation (2 Sam 20.14-22), and between members in a family (Genesis 27). Through these stories we will witness to active peacemakers, Puah and Shiprah, Ms. Abel, and Rebekah.

I. Puah and Shiprah: Midwives Bringing Life amid a Death Decree (Exodus1.15-22)

The book of Exodus opens with a story of conflict. The Israelites find themselves living as a minority in the empire of Egypt. A new Pharaoh arises and is not favorable to them. The nameless Pharaoh is afraid that the Israelites are many in number and will take sides with the national enemy in the case of a war (1.9-10). So he puts the Israelites into forced labor. But the more they are oppressed, the more they multiply. So the Egyptians come to dread the Israelites and are ruthless. We need to note that this book is about the birth of the nation of Israel and is written from their viewpoint. So in

this light we consider the ironies and the absurd ways the Pharaoh is described in the story.

Chapter one lists Pharaoh's three plans to oppress the Israelites: forced labor, killing Hebrew male babies through midwives' activities, and then genocide of all male infants. Our story (Exod 1.15-22) is sandwiched between the other two plans and serves as the plan B in which the midwives' cooperation is essential. Their refusal to follow the Pharaoh's command will cause a national policy of genocide, the plan C, but it too will be blocked by women (Exod 2.1-10).

When the Pharaoh finds out that the forced labor policy does not work he commands two Hebrew midwives, Shiprah ("beautiful") and Puah ("girl"),[1] to kill Hebrew boys upon birth. But the women fear God and do not follow the order. When scolded by the Pharaoh they say that unlike Egyptian women, Hebrew women are strong and thus give birth before the midwives' arrival. This response contains a sarcastic twist of Pharaoh's words and is a careful attack on his prejudice. Because of the words and behavior of the women, God is pleased with them and blesses them.

This short story is rich in irony, humor, and absurdity in the following ways. The king of a great empire stoops to communicate with ordinary midwives, in order to move his intentions forward. Why he should pick midwives, life-carriers, in handling death? There are only two midwives for the entire nation. The midwives get away with a simple explanation. The Pharaoh is foolish and ignorant of childbirth and he in the end commands killing of all boys, including the Egyptians ones unwittingly. These are to be understood as literary devices to enrich the story. Dichotomies such as girls/boys, life/death, Hebrews/Egyptians, the weak/the strong, and men/women are also at work in the process of reading.

It is worth making a few points from the story which are related to our discussion on peace building and life choosing.

1. Fear of God as the Principle

The reader is invited to ponder on who to be afraid of—human beings or God—especially in times like this. The Pharaoh's fear of the Israelites is epidemic and causes fear and thus racism among the Egyptians. It leads to violence and death. It makes the

[1] The two midwives are given names whereas all other characters, even the Pharaoh, are not. For the meanings of the names, see notes 11 and 12 of Chery J. Exum, "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live: A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 70-82.

Pharaoh even resort to the indecent strategy of turning Hebrews against themselves (cf. 5.10-21).

By contrast, the Bible does not say that the midwives are ever afraid of the Pharaoh, a clear and present danger. Instead, they fear God. The fear of God is total reverence and trust in God and is an important theme in the Israelite wisdom tradition (cf. Prov 2.5-15). On the other hand, a practical wisdom for survival says, "Keep the king's command . . . for he does whatever he pleases. The word of the king is powerful and who can say to him, 'What are you doing?' Whoever obeys a command will meet no harm and the wise mind will know the time and way" (Eccl 8.2-5, NRSV). Like other biblical acts of defiance, the midwives' heroism involves an element of the sneaky. The powerless women would not openly disobey the Pharaoh, but deceive him instead, by saying that Hebrew women are strong and give birth before their arrival.[2] Fearing God, however, means going against the will of the king, the highest human power on the earth and risking their lives. They function as genuine wise women who put their faith in the Creator into action.

2. Life and only Life

This is a story of the victory of life over the seemingly stronger death. Life here implies more than increase of the population. The Pharaoh represents death and violence. Midwives, women giving birth, and babies being born are those whom we imagine represent life and peace. Life is the keyword in the story. The root appears in almost every verse (vv. 16, 17, 18, 19, 22). In verses 15 ("and she may live [*wachaya*]") and 19 ("vigorous [*chayot*]") anomalous derivatives of the root are used. The two occurrences of *hapax legomena* (unattested elsewhere in the Bible) may not be coincidental:[3] they draw the readers' attention to the meaning of the root, "life (*chai*)."

God's reward of the midwives is also life. In verses 20 and 21 where the word "life" does not appear, the concept of life is repeated: "God dealt well with the midwives and multiplied the people and made them very strong. Because the midwives feared God, God made to them houses" (vv. 20-21). The idiom, "make a house" means "give families" and in Akkadian and in Hebrew refers to founding a lineage.[4] Because of the women both their nation and their own families are blessed with life in abundance. The

[2] The Bible tells many stories in which a weak party tricks a stronger, or in which characters engage in reciprocal, even competitive, trickery. Cf. Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).
[3] William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 140.
[4] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 140.

midwives themselves yield life and become mothers of many.

3. Resisting Together

Why *two* midwives and not one? Since the two speak and act at the same time, two characters for the same role would not have been necessary. We wonder if they worked together as a team at birth. One can be weak, but two are powerful enough to dupe the emperor.

Midwives did not belong to the high sector of society. If they were experienced midwives, they might be old. Midwives and old age do not have a lot to do with power and wealth. But they have each other in the act of defying the emperor. Midwives can be ordinary, but working together brings forth an extraordinary result.

The narrator does not describe any active role of pregnant women or women giving birth. But the reader enjoys the freedom to fill in the gap. We can imagine the cooperation and conspiracy of those women giving birth. The solidarity among women to save a baby, Moses, is more elaborated in the following story of Exodus (Exod 2.1-10).

4. God's Blessings only after the Event

Despite the Pharaoh's deadly threat, God does not step into the scene to intervene. God does so only after the action of the midwives. Even then God does not take action against the Pharaoh. God appears only to bless midwives. There is no clue that they knew there would be God's blessing afterwards. By defiance, they are not only risking their lives, but also losing any possible reward from the Pharaoh, as other stories in the Bible attest (cf. Gen 12.10-20).

The midwives' courage and wisdom and God's concern leave the reader with some optimism. But there is no word in the text that even suggests that the future will be shaped only by what God will do. As Terence E. Fretheim puts, God too awaits a future where human activity, both negative and positive, will have an effect on God's own possibilities.[5]

The Pharaoh's plan C is a national policy of killing all newborn boys: "Every boy that is born[6] you shall throw into the Nile,[7] but you shall let every girl live" (1.22). Why

[5] Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 36.
[6] The Masoretic text does not have "Hebrew" and thus indicates all male babies including

killing males only? The Israelites themselves treated prisoners of war in the same was as it is implied that Pharaoh did; killing all the men and confiscating the women (Num 31.1-18; Deut 20.14; 21.10-14; Judg 21.11-14; 1 Kgs 11.15; cf. Judg 5.30). This has remained a common practice worldwide.[8] The ideology is based on the patriarchal idea that life is continued through the male lineage. It is another irony in the story that males are saved by females. In Exodus 2, both Egyptian and Hebrew women will work together beyond ethnic differences to save a baby, Moses.[9]

The readers who are oppressors would wonder why the Pharaoh did not carry out his plan in a more systematic and empirical way. The oppressed readers would wonder why midwives did not consult with their union and go on a strike. The narrator just presents us as calmly as possible the defenseless defiance of powerless women in the backdrop of forced labor and a national genocide policy. In a way the narrator invites us to ponder on what we would have done in that situation and what they would do in situations like that in this age.

The story points at what the most important thing is. The emperor has a wrong object to be afraid of, an ethnic minority in his empire. The story shows that if there is one to be afraid of at all in the world, it is God. If the Pharaoh knew it, he would not have had to make his people slave drivers and soldiers. If so, an ethnic group would not have to appeal to their God for revenge and curse out of their defenseless resistance. A vivid scene on TV about an Iraqi mother who lost her child leaves a lasting memory. She said, "O Allah, please watch this and remember this," crying and beating her bosom as gesture of lament.

II. A Wise Woman of Abel Beth-maacah (2 Samuel 20.14-22): A Peace-Talker

Our second story is about a situation of conflict between different groups within a nation. It is another biblical example of taking an alternative to violence and death. The story is the last episode in a series of stories called the Succession Narrative in which David consolidates his power and kingdom. The backdrop relates that David has several problems in having everything under his control: his kingdom is far from one unified

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Egyptians. But the Greek, Samaritan Pentateuch, and Targum add "Hebrew."

[7] It is an irony in its reference to the Nile. The image of throwing babies into the Nile prepares for one of the ten plagues, turning the Nile into blood. At the end Pharaoh's successor and his armies will meet their end by drowning (14.26-28).

[8] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 141.

[9] Exum rightly observes that the story of the midwives is part of a marked focus on women at the beginning of Exodus. "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live: A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10."

one because of the uncooperative northern tribes; his sons have fights over the royal throne; he wants to take diplomatic steps in consolidating the kingdom but a general of his, Joab, is so powerful that he does things on his own terms and thus undermines the king.

Now a man named Sheba stirs up the northerners: "We have no portion in David, no share in the son of Jesse! … Everyone to your tents, O Israel!" (2 Sam 20.1b). The Bible states that all the people of Israel withdrew from David and followed Sheba (2 Sam 20.2). It is hard to call his move a revolt since he did not organize soldiers. But still, Sheba's upheaval threatens the kingdom itself, whereas the prince Absalom's threatened David (2 Sam 15-18).

Joab appears on the scene pursuing Sheba, a symbolic figure of the obstructive northern tribes. In fact, Abishai is the general who is just ordered by David to follow Sheba. This is seen as David's attempt to curb Joab.[10] On the way, however, Joab kills Amasa, another general and his rival, and gets all the power in his hand even over Abishai. Sheba is accepted by his supporters and finds shelter at a northern city, Abel Beth-maach (20:14), one of the northernmost towns of Israel, situated a few miles to the west of Dan.

Now Joab and his soldiers arrive there. He and his soldiers throw up a siege-ramp against the city of Abel. It is a standard method of attacking a besieged city.[11] The mound was intended to act as a ramp enabling the besieging to undermine another part of the wall. Their forces are now battering the wall to break it down. The reader can imagine that this process takes some time and the northerners inside the wall are having an urgent meeting. They do not come up with a solution until the attack starts, but a nameless "wise woman" jumps into the situation at the last minute.[12] We would like to call her Ms. Abel following an old Korean tradition which called an adult woman according to her place of origin. Ms. Abel shouts from the city wall, expressing her desire to converse with Joab. She says to him,

"They used to say in the old days, 'Let them inquire at Abel';
and so they would settle a matter.
I am one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel;

[10] Fritz Stolz, *Das erste und zweite Buch Samuel* (*Samuel Sang and Ha*, Korea Theological Study Institute, 1991), 462.
[11] Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 295.
[12] Scholars find a number of verbal parallels in the stories of wise women of Abel and of Tekoa (2 Sam 14). See P. Kyle McCarther, Jr. *II Samuel*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 431; Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 295.

you seek to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel;
why will you swallow up the heritage of the Lord?" (20.18, NRSV)

She speaks "in poetry, in a style that is elevated, ceremonially repetitive, and hieratic . . ."[13] Her persuasive speech moves from the city to "I" to the city again and finally to "you"; from the description of Abel's venerated wisdom tradition to herself as a faithful and wise woman and to a careful but powerful rebuke of Joab for his violence. Through the self-introduction in the middle of her speech, "I am one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel," she almost claims "I am a peacemaker," or "I want peace." She put the peacemaker, herself, and the one bringing violence, Joab, in subtle contrast. By her case she emphasizes there are plenty of peaceable people inside the wall. She calls her city the mother city and puts the city in parallel to "the heritage (portion, land) of the Lord." Her conclusion and last blow, "Why will you swallow up the heritage of the Lord?" almost puts in Joab's mouth a negative answer, "Far be it from me, far be it, that I should swallow up or destroy!" (20.20). Joab is now open to a peaceful resolution.

Joab explains why they are assaulting the city. He is the one who suggests a deal first: "Give him [Sheba] up alone and I will withdraw from the city." Even before consulting with her people, the woman specifies the way to deliver Sheba to him: "His head shall be thrown over the wall to you." When she goes back to her people with "her wise plan" (20:22) they follow it right away.

A few points about building life and peace in the story can be made as follows:

1. Ms. Abel, the Leader, Risks her Life for Many.

Although the story relates the courage and victory of a wise woman, it is filled with danger, fear, and tension. She is here dealing with the most violent figure in the Succession Narrative. Joab is a master of murder: he has killed King Saul's general Abner (3:27), the popular prince Absalom (18.14-15), and his rival general Amasa. He is also an expert of siege and destroying cities (11.1; 12.26-31). He is cunning and ambitious. It is always possible that he would refuse the peace-talk and kill the person who brings up the idea, Ms. Abel. It is rare to be equipped with both wisdom and courage. Maybe that is why Ms. Abel could appear only at the last moment when the attack has already started – after mustering some courage.

[13] Robert Altar, *The David Story* (New York: Norton, 1999), 325.

It is not hard to imagine that there are people inside the wall who take sides with Sheba and want to fight against Joab and his army to the end. We remember a scene in the Bible where a woman was thrown out from a building by people around her at the request of her enemy on the ground (Jezebel and Jehu in 2 Kings 9.30-37). It is also possible that people at Abel consider Ms. Abel as a betrayer and would harm her. Peacemakers are often caught between two opposing parties and risk their reputation and even lives. Ms. Abel is lucky because after all, Joab is the one who believes in the power of women's wisdom as described in the story where he sought for a wise woman to persuade King David to bring reconciliation between David and Absalom (a woman from Tekoa, 2 Sam14).

As King David was seeking consolidation of his kingdom, power was becoming centralized, inherited, and hierarchical and males took positions of public power. Still, the narrator portrays the wise woman as the representative of the people of Abel and as one who can make an important decision in matters of war and politics.[14] This leader who is a quick thinker and good talker, risks her life and saves the peaceable city and citizens and also David's honor and dignity from Joab's blind loyalty. She serves as an alternative to thoughtless violence and also to the power-greedy politics of David and Joab. True leaders are not afraid of personal risks in making peace for many lives.

2. Keeping the Principle of Peace

Just like Puah and Shiprah, Ms. Abel had a principle in mind to follow even in the most critical situation. If that principle was life for the midwives in Exodus 1, it is peace for Ms. Abel. In the beginning of her speech she quotes a saying, "Let them inquire at Abel." The city is known as a place where people with problems come to find solutions and alternatives. The city has many people with wisdom and creative ideas in solving problems. Ms. Abel, a wise woman, claims that she is "one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel." Thus finding a peaceful way to a problem is her tradition and principle. As Walter Bruggemann puts it, "The wise are those not trapped in conventional perceptions. They are those who can think of an

[14] Jo Ann Hackett believes that the place may not have been much affected by the institutional structure of the monarchy and that older patterns of authority persisted. "1 & 2 Samuel," *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 95. Some scholars see this woman at Abel as the respected community leader. See Claudia V. Camp, "The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, 1 (1981): 14-29; Marcia L. Geyer, "Stopping the Juggernaut: A Close Reading of 2 Samuel 20:13-22," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 41, 1 (1986): 33-42.

alternative way around the present set of circumstances."[15]

The phrase, "a mother city,"[16] invokes images of peace in the midst of a male warrior culture. In Bruggemann's expression, her mothering voice speaks for this mothering city.[17] The city is figured as a mother and its destruction would be a kind of matricide. So he is engaged in a deal initiated by a woman. She is able!

3. Even the Most Violent Can Sit at a Peace-Talk Table.

The story suggests that even the most dangerous and ambitious person or group can be involved in rational negotiation and learn a way to avoid widespread bloodshed. But both parties need to be willing to communicate with one another. For that, invitation to be in communication is necessary. In our story a ruthless killer and a woman make an uneven match on the peace-talk table. Several times Ms. Abel had to invite the other party. She said, "Listen, listen" . . . Listen" (20.16, 16, 17) before Joab finally responded, "I'm listening" (20:17).

The invitation is radical because it sounds impossible to work together with the untrustworthy enemy. But the invitation surprisingly makes Joab, with his own mouth, the first to come up with an alternative. Ms. Abel shows that even the most brutal party can be invited to peacemaking. In Tony Cartledge's words, conflict is inevitable; violence is not.[18] Whether it is in Palestine or Northeast Asia, peaceable negotiation is always preferable to physical aggression.

4. Giving up One Life for Many?

The alternative to Joab's massacre is to give up one life, Sheba. A person who has a different idea about David's reign is sacrificed. It is not his voluntary surrender. Sensitive readers are bothered by this solution.[19] The narrator presents that the sacrifice

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[15] Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 331.

[16] The literal Hebrew is "town and mother," a hendiadys which is a stylistic device indicating one concept using two words. Cf. Altar, *The David Story*, 325.

[17] Bruggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 332. The mother is used here in the sense of "mother-city" (cf. 'metropolis'), just as the 'daughters' of a city are its satellite villages (e.g. Judg 1.27). Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 295. The phrase, "a mother in Israel," was used to refer to Deborah (Judg 5.7). She earns this accolade for her good and effective counsel.

[18] Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2001), 634.

[19] Gordon argues that "a wisdom which counsels the beheading of an individual in order to save a city is no mere ethereal, humanistic abstraction; it is more like the cunning 'wisdom' of Jonadab (13.3)." *I & II Samuel*, 296.

of one for the sake of the many is the best course of wisdom in this situation. But the readers hear the silent cry of the northerners who had to give up their kinsman and leader. The readers also feel the pain and sorrow of the mother of the city, Ms. Abel. The city and the mother lose one of their children. She would know that taking alternatives does not always guarantee the best of her interest. The modern readers are keenly aware of the fact that the sacrifice of one life is too many. In fact, the story urges the readers to work harder not to lose even one life.

III. Rebekah: The Mother Who Prevented Fratricide (Genesis 27)

Our third paradigm of women making peace in the Bible comes from Rebekah in Genesis 27. This time the conflict is located within a family. Rebekah the mother helps Jacob her younger son of the twins to get a blessing from Isaac the father who originally wished to bless Esau the elder. She overhears Isaac's speech (27.5) to Esau which reveals his will to bless him upon the latter's return from hunting. She cooks Isaac's favorite dish and disguises her homebody son Jacob as Esau. Isaac takes Jacob for Esau and blesses him.

Scholars and preachers have often blamed Rebekah for the family feud: the conflict was caused by her preference to one of her sons and by her trickery.[20] The charge is not valid since it does not consider the literary role she is to play in the entire Rebekah narratives.[21] During her pregnancy, she, not the patriarch Isaac, received a divine oracle about the future of her descendants, which appointed Jacob the younger son as the heir (25.23). The narratives revolve around the oracle. Ever since the incident, Rebekah must have waited and prepared for the opportune time to fulfill the oracle. The so-called trick story in Genesis 27 narrates that she spontaneously responds to the given situation. As Mary D. Turner puts it, perhaps Rebekah's only alternatives were to

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[20] John Calvin said, "Her lie darkens the celestial oracle and abolishes . . . the grace promised to her son." *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (trans. J. King; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 84. Martin Luther lingers between two irreconcilable opinions regarding her behavior: "she accomplished the divine oracle wholly in faith and it was 'a serious and horrible sin against the husband.'" *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30* (ed. J. Pelikan and W. A. Hansen; Saint Louis: Concordia, 1968), 110-21; Samuel R. Driver says her action is "utterly discreditable and indefensible." *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1913), 255; Arthur S. Herbert says "nothing can excuse the deceit practiced on the aged and blind Isaac." (*Genesis 12-50*, London: Bloomsbury, 1962), 76.

[21] The Rebekah narratives are a unified literary unit with theological purposes. They are Genesis 22.20-24; 24; 25.19-34; 26.1-11, 34-35; 27.1-17, 42-46; 28.8-9; 29.12; 35.8; 49.31. See Yani Yoo, *A Rhetorical Reading of the Rebekah Narratives In the Book of Genesis* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest Information and Learning, 2001).

deceive Isaac or do nothing at all.[22] If she is the only one who knows the secret of the heir, who else would be responsible for fulfilling the mission?

Esau returns from hunting and realizes his brother took his blessing. Esau makes his mind up to kill Jacob (27:41). Now Rebekah's task is to prevent fratricide, the potential tragedy of the family. She urgently calls Jacob and speaks to him. "Look! Esau your brother is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now, my son, listen to my voice; rise and flee to my brother Laban in Haran and dwell with him some days until your brother's anger turns away, until your brother's fury turns away from you and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you from there. Why will I lose both of you in a day?" (27.42-45).

In her lengthy speech she employs her most commanding matriarchal tone and the same phraseology that she used to move Jacob twice before: "Now, my son, listen to my voice" (27.8, 13). She commands him with three imperative verbs (listen, rise, flee) and a verb (dwell) with the imperative sense.[23] She quickly lays out her plan that he should take refuge at her brother's house in Mesopotamia. In an attempt to persuade him to flee, she deliberately contrasts "your brother" (Esau) as a source of danger and "my brother" (Laban) as a place of safety.

Right after her speech to Jacob, Rebekah appeals to Isaac (27.46). This is her last speech in the Rebekah narratives. While she frankly shared her plan with Jacob her co-trickster about his shelter, with her husband she uses a different reason for sending Jacob away. She presents the best reason to persuade him: "I loathe my life because of the daughters of the Hittite. If Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of the Hittite like these from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?" (27:46). She does not mention Esau at all. But the two references to the Hittite women bring to both Isaac and Rebekah a common memory: the Hittite daughters-in-law as Esau's wives brought bitterness to them (26.34-35). With the triple repetition of the word, "daughters," Rebekah intentionally conjures the memory. Isaac right away follows her advice and sends Jacob to Haran.

Contrary to old blames, Rebekah can be called a peacemaker:

1. The Mother Caring for Both Sons

[22] Mary D. Turner, "Rebekah: Ancestor of Faith," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 20 (1985): 46.
[23] In Hebrew grammar, a verb in perfect tense with *waw* consecutive has imperative sense.

Rebekah's fulfilling of the divine will leads to excluding another son of hers, Esau. If there was fratricide, she might lose both sons: one as a murderer who has to flee on account of the fratricide and the other as the murdered like the case of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). Her concern about the well-being of both sons is eloquently demonstrated at the end of her speech, "Why should I lose both of you in one day?" (27:45). While most scholars see Rebekah as the mother who loves Jacob only,[24] Benno Jacob's observation is an exception: Rebekah's words skillfully appeal to Jacob's love for his mother, but also show that she cares for Esau.[25]

Rebekah says Jacob's dwelling in Haran will last only *some days*. With *some days*, she may be intentionally presenting the time as very short to ease his parting.[26] But "some days" will turn out to be many years. In fact, the mother and the son never get to see each other again.[27] Paronomasia (a word play on sound) with the verbs "to dwell" (*yashab*), "to turn" (*shub*), and "to forget" (*shakach*) demonstrates her strategy: Jacob's "dwelling" at Laban's house will help Esau "turn away" his anger and eventually "forget" Jacob's deception. The repetition, "until your brother's anger turns away, until your brother's fury turns away from you," stresses that her two sons should not see each other until it is certain that they can be peace at each other.

2. Life Matters.

In her speech to Jacob she does her best to persuade him to leave home. She wants to separate her two sons to avoid fratricide, even if it will take a long time. She is determined to save two lives: Esau from being a murderer and Jacob from being murdered.

In her speech to Isaac the word *life* encircles her statement. Surely, it is a matter of life and death. It is interesting to see Rebekah use the word *life* twice in relation to herself, while she brings this issue to Isaac concerning Jacob's *life*. In fact, as the one who is responsible for transmitting the divine promise to the right heir, the loss of the life of the heir would be like losing her life's work and her life itself. The readers can

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[24] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, Translated by J. J. Scullion. S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 443-44; Norman Cohen believes that Rebekah obviously has no great affection for Esau. "The Two that Are One: Sibling Rivalry in Genesis," *Judaism* 32/127 (1983): 337.

[25] Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 185.

[26] Herman Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1997), 307, trans. M. E. Biddle. *Genesis*. 3rd ed. (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1977).

[27] Westermann argues, "She [Rebekah] knows now that her plan has achieved nothing – perhaps it has lost all. She is unable to announce a safe way out. . . Mother and son never see each other again. . . an implicit judgment on the deception." *Genesis 12-36*, 444.

imagine that the mother must have suffered from Esau's exclusion from the inheritance and the blessing. There is a Korean saying, "Bite your fingers. Each hurts," that is, parents love their children equally.

3. Wisdom and Power of the Mother and the Wife

To fulfill her tasks of realizing the divine oracle and preventing fratricide Rebekah uses deceptive wisdom. Deception is an indirect means for the weak to achieve goals. She not only avoids potential conflict with Isaac over the deception but also prompts Isaac to give Jacob an additional blessing (28.3-4). She wisely and skillfully deploys her arguments to persuade Isaac to do what she wants. Although Isaac was aware of the conflict between his sons caused by the misplaced blessings, he does not take any initiative to resolve it. Instead, he passively follows the advice of his wife. He calls Jacob and asks him to "go to the house of Bethuel, *your mother's father*, and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, *your mother's brother"* (28.2). It is interesting to see the way Isaac describes Bethuel and Laban: he depicts them in relation to Rebekah, when they are also his own cousins.

Although Rebekah moved men like chess pieces in the story, she was a woman in a patriarchal culture, who had to resort to a sneaky wisdom. It involved listening behind the scenes (27.5), employing her home making skills of cooking and clothing (27.9-17), and giving different rationales to persuade men (27.42-46). It is also women's power in a man's world that achieves success for oneself through the success of male children.[28] It involves as well a willingness to sacrifice oneself if necessary for the sake of the son: "Let your curse be on me, my son" (27:13).

Through her wisdom, Rebekah successfully resolved the family crises. No one was murdered; no one was marked with Cain's mark, either. No one lost two sons in a day. No one doubts that without Rebekah's efforts her two sons' reconciliation later (Genesis 33) would not have been possible.

We have encountered some biblical women who built peace and life whenever crises occurred between ethnic groups, regions, and family members. The Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1 refused the Egyptian Pharaoh's command to kill Hebrew male

[28] Susan Niditch, "Genesis" in *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 23. According to her, Rebekah is "so clever, so strong and sure, so completely superior in wisdom to the men around her" that she seems to be the creation of a woman storyteller. . . Women would have taken special pleasure in hearing the particular version of Rebekah and Jacob's story."

babies. Their courage to defy the command and, instead, to respect human life came out of the principle of the fear of God. Their work was possible because they worked together. The wise and audacious woman at Abel in 2 Samuel 20 managed a brutal general to engage him in a peace-talk and prevent a massacre. Her case shows that our doing the best for making peace does not necessarily save every life but we are to do our best anyway. Rebekah the mother in Genesis 27 prevented fratricide, protected both sons, and eventually prepared for their future reconciliation.

In all three cases a common point is that the women had motherly roles; not just Rebekah who was a real mother, but also the midwives and Ms. Abel functioned as mothers, who bring and work for life. Another point in common was that all used communication as their primary means; they knew how to present their cases and conflict situations and what to say in given situations. Here, peace resides first on lips. In all three cases the women worked for alternatives to murder, battle, and fratricide. They in their own capacities used wisdom and power to bring peace and life, that is, achieving peace by means of peace.

There is no reward from God promised to the 21st century peacemakers. But the midwives, the wise woman at Abel, and Rebekah invite us to find alternatives in crises and choose peace in our mundane responsibilities. The women took actions, too: peace does not only reside on lips, but also in hands. When the rule of empire with its principle of power, ruling, domination and subjugation threatens our peaceable community, the biblical women urge us to join them in action.