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**Esau's Wives and the Question of Cross-Ethnic
Marriage in Genesis**

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Abstract

Esau's marriage to Hittite women has been explained by many as a wrongful act that placed him outside the chosen family. By this interpretation, commentators over the years have overtly and covertly endorsed ethnocentrism. As African readers, what are we to make of such interpretations, in the complex context of multiple ethnicities in Africa? In this paper, I interrogated the issue of cross-ethnic marriages in the Old Testament, using the case of Esau and his wives. Isolating three texts that focus on Esau's marriage (Gen 26:45, 27:46, and 28: 1-9), and using literary analysis, I read the texts in a way that suppresses the ethnocentric overtones of the narrative. This was achieved mainly through exploring the gaps within the narratives. My reading revealed that there was no explicit condemnation by the narrator of Esau's marriage to Hittite women. It was also revealed that the behaviour of Esau's wives towards their in-laws, not their ethnic background, was the source of strife. Since a poor management of the high ethnic and cultural diversities in African countries can lead to conflicts, African biblical scholars need to interrogate ethnocentric narratives through a constructive engagement with the Bible.

Keywords

Esau, ethnic, ethnocentrism, Hittite, Isaac, marriage, Rebecca, wives

Introduction

Genesis 27:46 reports Rebecca's request to Isaac concerning Hittite women. She expresses her discontent for these women and seeks to prevent her son, Jacob, from taking a wife of such background. However, her other son, Esau, has two wives of Hittite background, with whom Rebecca, for some reason, is displeased (cf. Gen 26:35). She points to the ethnic background of her daughters-in-law and insists that her son, Jacob, desist from getting a wife from the same ethnic background. In this, Rebecca appears to be ethnocentric in her reasoning.¹ As African readers, what are we to make of Rebecca's comment? Writing on the topic "Addressing Ethnicity via Biblical Studies: A Task for African Biblical Scholars", Peter Nyende, a Bible scholar from Kenya, strongly argues for African biblical scholars to pay more attention to how the Bible can address problems of ethnicity on the continent.² Nyende is very much aware of the scars ethnic clashes have left on the African continent, including his home country.³ However, discourses on ethnocentrism in Africa mostly dwell on ethnic clashes between groups and ethnic politics. For instance, in buttressing his point on ethnic crises on the African continent, Nyende gives the example of the Rwanda genocide which involved clashes between the *Abatutsi* and the *Abahutu*.⁴ Ethnic problems on the African continent, however, manifest in other subtle ways apart from the dominant and overt clashes between different ethnic

¹In this paper, ethnicity "refers to the social ideology of human division sorted according to common culture." See J. A. Manickam, "Race, Racism and Ethnicity," in William Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, eds. *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove (Illinois): InterVarsity Press, 2008), 718. Ethnocentrism, on the other hand, is "The sentiment of cohesion, internal comradeship, and devotion to the in-group, which carries with it a sense of superiority to any out-group and readiness to defend the interests of the in-group against the out-group ...", W. G. Sumner, *War and Other Essays* (Freeport: Yale University Press, 1911), p. 11.

²Peter Nyende, "Addressing Ethnicity via Biblical Studies: A Task of African Biblical Scholarship," *Neotestamentica*, 44, no. 1 (2010): 122.

³Adam Ashforth, "Democracy in the Aftermath of the 2007 Kenyan Elections," *Public Culture* 2, no. 1 (2009): 9-19; Brigitte Rohwerder, *Conflict Analysis of Kenya* (University of Birmingham, Birmingham: GSDRC, 2015).

⁴Nyende, "Addressing Ethnicity via Biblical Studies," 129.

groups. Boris Bizumić, for instance, explains that ethnocentrism “could contribute to direct (i.e., overt, brief, episodic, sporadic) kinds of violence among ethnic groups, such as ethnic wars ...” and “to structural (i.e., slow, covert, societally arranged) kinds of violence ...”.⁵ Indeed, ideas of ethnic superiority may first be displayed in the everyday traditions of a people, such as marriage and friendship. These perceptions of ethnic differences, when ignored, cement concrete ideas of ethnic uniqueness and progress into myths of ethnic superiority. In addressing ethnic problems, therefore, there is the need to pay attention to the covert and latent ethnocentric traditions to openly confront them and prevent the possibility of these traditions simmering. One such tradition is the aversion some people have toward cross-ethnic marriages.

In this study, I seek to interrogate the issue of cross-ethnic marriages in the Old Testament, using the case of Esau and his wives. I place the texts that dwell on this subject (Gen. 26:45; Gen 27:46, and Gen 28:86-8) under what Nyende calls “problem texts”. By “problem texts”, Nyende refers to portions of the Bible “which can be seen to teach ethnocentrism directly, and whose teaching then, rather than addressing corrosive ethnic issues actually appears to foster them.”⁶ I see the chosen texts as having this potential, thus, necessitating an interpretation that takes their meaning away from ethnocentric sentiments. I focus on the texts by exploring through literary analyses how ethnocentric sentiments can be relegated. Because I intend to read the texts purposefully to suppress ethnocentric ideas, I pay close attention to the gaps in the texts, which I see as opportunities that the texts give readers to shape their construction of meaning.⁷ I argue that the resentment Isaac and Rebecca had for Esau’s wives has little to do with their ethnic background as Hittite women. Rather, it is the lived experiences between the in-laws which is the source of the tension and resentment. Also, Jacob’s marriage into the household of Laban, his uncle, is a consequential fallout of Rebecca’s attempt to

⁵Boris Bizumić, “Theories of Ethnocentrism and their Implications for Peace building,” *Peace Psychology in the Balkans: Dealing with a Violent Past while Building Peace*. Olivera Simić, Zala Volčič, and Catherine R. Philpot (New York: Springer, 2012), 36.

⁶Nyende, “Addressing Ethnicity via Bible Studies,” 129.

⁷Gaps are important features of biblical narratives. According to Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana Literary Biblical Series; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), 235, a gap is a “lack of information about the world – an event, motive, causal link, character trait, plot structure, law of probability.” Gaps allow readers to use their imagination to enter the story world and participate in the creation of meaning.

prevent bloodshed between brothers. My reading pays less attention to the history behind the texts.

Esau and His Wives

Esau is the elder son of Isaac and Rebecca. He is the twin of Jacob and the grandson of Abraham. The first time we learn of Esau's marriage is in Gen 26:34, where we are told that he married Judith, daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite. Upon learning of Isaac's requesting of Jacob to go to their kinsmen for a wife in Paddan Aram, Esau also took to himself as a wife Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael and sister of Nebaioth (Gen 28:9). Esau, thus, ends up with three wives: Judith, Basemath, and Mahalath. However, in Gen 36:2-3, we find a different list of names for Esau's wives. Here, we read Adah, daughter of Elon the Hittite; Oholibamah, daughter of Anah, daughter of Zibeon the Hivite; and Basemath, daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth. Not only do we have different names, but also an overlap of the names concerning their origins. Thus, Basemath in Gen 26:34 is said to be a Hittite, while in 36:3, she is the daughter of Ishmael.

Scholars have tried to explain the inconsistencies in the accounts.⁸ Several proposals have been put forward, including the approach which explains that the differences imply that Esau may have had five or six wives. This means that the lists are reporting all the women that Esau married. Others explain by proposing two ways of name variation—first, that each wife had two names and, second, that each wife was renamed.⁹ A more popular explanation is that the different names result from different lists and traditions and that the wives were only three.¹⁰

Moving away from the difficulty of the names and number of Esau's wives, what is of major concern here is the nature of the marriage between Esau and the women and how the marriage was perceived by Esau's family. Traditional readings tend to point out that Esau broke the family tradition of how marriage was

⁸ Jed H. Abraham, "A Literary Solution to the Name Variations of Esau's Wives," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 7 (1997):1-14; Abraham, "Esau's Wives," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 25:4 (1997):251-259. See Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 174-181, where Gen 36 is specifically shown to be an example of genealogical fluidity, including Esau's wives.

⁹ For more details see Reuven Chaim Klein, "The Wives of Esau" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 42, 4 (2014): 211-220.

¹⁰ R. J. D. Knauth, "Esau, Edomites," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 223.

contracted and, as a result, ostracised himself from the family.¹¹ Abraham, Esau's grandfather, played a central role in contracting a wife for his son, Isaac. Abraham was insistent on finding a wife from his family in Mesopotamia (Gen 24). Two things are essential here: the first is that Abraham as a father played a role in getting a wife for his son. This may be construed as a parentally-arranged marriage. Interestingly, Hagar appears to be the first to have carried out this parentally-arranged marriage when she sought a wife for Ishmael in Egypt (Gen 21:21). We later see Isaac also playing a role in helping Jacob get a wife (Gen 28:1-5). Second, all wives in these parentally-arranged marriages have a common background with their in-laws. So, in the case of Ishmael, the wife was from Egypt, Hagar's hometown. Rebecca is Abraham's "grand-daughter"¹² (daughter of Bethuel who is Abraham's nephew). Thus, Jacob was directed to go to his uncle who was to help him get a wife. So far, in Esau's marriage, we see what appears to be a deviation from the two principles: he marries women of different ethnic descent and contracts the marriages himself. Nahum M. Sarna argues that Esau "commits a threefold offense: breaking with social convention by contracting the marriage himself rather than leaving the initiative to his parents; abandoning the established practice of endogamy by marrying outside the kinship group; and violating the honour of his clan by intermarrying with the native women."¹³ How true are these assertions by Sarna? Below, I interrogate three texts that talk about Esau and his wives.

¹¹ Among the early modern scholars to express negativity about Esau's marriage is John Skinner. He writes, "But the unedifying stories of Jacob's treachery, which were the essential link of connexion between them, are here omitted; and a new motive is introduced, viz., the inadmissibility of intermarriage with the inhabitants of Canaan. By transgressing this unwritten law, Esau forfeits his title to the 'blessing of Abraham,' which is thus transferred to Jacob"; *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Scribner, 1910): 374. John Calvin earlier had this to say of Esau's marriage, "Inasmuch as he mingled himself with the inhabitants of the land, from whom the holy race of Abraham was separated, and contracted affinities by which he became entangled; this was a kind of prelude of his rejection," *Calvin's Commentaries: Genesis*. electronic ed. (Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries), S. Ge 26:34.

¹² Among most Akan ethnic groups, of which I am part, one's nephew's daughter is one's granddaughter.

¹³ Nahum M Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 189.

a. Gen 26: 34-35

Sarna's evaluative conclusion on Esau's marriage is highly contestable when we pay close attention to the three texts that relate to Esau and his wives. The first is Gen 26:34-35, which reads:

wayhî 'ēsāw ben'arbā'im sānāh wayyiqah 'iššāh
'etyəhūdīt bat-bə'rī haḥitī wə'et-bāšmat bat'ēlon
haḥitī

*When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith
daughter of Beerī the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of
Elon the Hittite¹⁴*

Esau emerges here as the main protagonist of his marriage. It is he who takes for himself wives, and like his father, he marries at the age of forty. In his father's case, however, he was passive in the entire arrangement, as it was Abraham's servant who facilitated the marriage arrangements upon the behest of his master (Gen 24). Father and son are similar in terms of the age at which they marry, but both assume different roles in their marriage arrangements. Esau's sole initiative in his marriage becomes difficult to comprehend when compared, for example, to the marriages of Isaac and Jacob, respectively. So why did Esau decide to initiate marriage on his own? Could this be one of the reasons why the marriage was displeasing to his parents (Gen 26:35)? Scholars such as Sarna who see Esau as making a mistake in arranging marriage on his own need also to answer the question: where were the parents? After all, marriage customs are scarcely an individual affair. Rebecca's indifference can be excused on the basis that she was less attached to Esau (see Gen 25:28) and so might have been less concerned with what her son does. On the contrary, there seems to be no excuse for Isaac and it is an indictment on his role as a father not to have been involved in his son's marriage. As a father, he has a greater responsibility in directing his household to follow family traditions. Can the failure on his part be construed as the absence of any such tradition?

Indeed, R. C. Heard takes the position of the absence of tradition when he argues that some scholars err in making the

¹⁴ All translations are from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, except otherwise stated.

hasty conclusion that Abraham's instructions to his servant to take a wife for Isaac constitute a tradition of parental marriage arrangements.¹⁵ If tradition is understood here as a long-established pattern of behaviour in a group that is passed down from generation to generation, then, Heard has a good point in questioning the line of argument that sees Esau as breaking tradition in initiating his marriage. In the first place, we do not know whether Terah arranged Abraham's marriage for him. Again, if the so-called tradition began with Abraham, then, the pattern put forth is that a servant goes to the kindred family and contracts a wife for the master's son (the case of the background of the wife will be considered later). We do not see this pattern play out in Jacob's case. Jacob himself goes to Laban's house upon his father's instruction (Gen 28:1-3). Although the father plays the role of directing him where to go, it is also evident that this process deviates from what Abraham did in Isaac's case. What is important to note is that there is no direct selection of wives by fathers/parents in both Isaac's and Jacob's marriages.

What about the background of the women Esau chooses? The text is clear about the fact that the women are Hittite. Should this information affect our understanding of v. 35? The background of the women has been seen as the greatest mistake of Esau.¹⁶ In other words, the problem with Esau's marriage is not so much his initiation, but the kinds of women he chooses. Sarna indicates that the phrase "Canaanite women"¹⁷ is derogatory; therefore, it is unworthy for Esau, Abraham's grandson, to have a conjugal association with these women. Robert L. Cohn further explains that Esau's marriage to the Canaanites is significant in his role as the unchosen descendant of Abraham.¹⁸ On the premise of tradition, scholars of this persuasion point to the firm instructions Abraham gives to his servant to ensure that the wife taken for his son, Isaac,

¹⁵R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Dissection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (SBLDS 39; Atlanta: SBL, 2001).

¹⁶Gordon J Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 205, argues that Esau's indifference to his grandfather's law merits his denial of the inheritance. See also Victor P Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 210 who sides with Sarna in his evaluation of Esau's marriage.

¹⁷The terms "Hittite women" and "Canaanite women" are used in this paper synonymously. Old Testament references to Hittite give us two groups. First is a group located in Palestine near Hebron (Gen 15:20,23); second is a group located in the North Syrian (Josh 1:4, Judg 1:26, 2Kgs 7:6). It is the former that the narrative world of our selected texts operates with.

¹⁸Robert L. Cohn, "Negotiating (with) the Natives: Ancestors and Identity in Genesis," *HTR* 96:2 (2003):153.

is not a Canaanite. Abraham instructed his servant on his deathbed, and not only that, but he also made the servant swear.¹⁹ These signs point to the patriarch's strong position against taking wives among the indigenes. So Sarna writes, "Esau's marriages violated the conventions of his family and flouted their values ...".²⁰

However, just as the issue of Esau's initiative to marry appears not to breach any tradition, here also, it is difficult to determine how Esau's Canaanite wives are a breach of tradition or convention. And what are the family values that Sarna alludes to? Sarna does not make clear what he means by "values". He seems to be using values synonymously with the term "conventions". In that case, Abraham's instructions to his servant on how to contract a wife for Isaac become the reference point. The earlier criticism of the supposed tradition of parental arrangements applies here also. However, some issues deserve expatiation. First, did Isaac know of the convention that wives in the family are sought within the kinship group and that Canaanite women are to be avoided? Abraham, Isaac's father, had several wives and concubines (Gen. 25:6). Apart from Sarah, Isaac's mother, whom Abraham married in his homeland in Mesopotamia, the rest may have been taken in Canaan. Hagar, a servant, is from Egypt, and for Keturah, we are not told of her origins. The concubines may have come from the East (see Gen. 25:6). As part of Abraham's household, Isaac would be knowledgeable of these different women - who did not share the same ethnic background as his mother - but with whom his father had conjugal relationships. Isaac's lived experiences within the household of Abraham, therefore, included interacting with 'stepmothers' who were likely to be from the land of Canaan and beyond.

Equally important to ask is whether Isaac was at any point in time informed of this supposed tradition or convention of not marrying Canaanite women. The text does not suggest any such instruction. Rather, what comes close to such an idea is the portion of the narrative about the servant reporting to Isaac how he contracted Rebecca for him as a wife. Gen 24: 66 reads:

wayəsapēr hā'eber ləyiṣḥāq 'ēt kol-hadəbārīm 'āšer 'āsāh
And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.

¹⁹ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 183.

²⁰Sarna, *Genesis*, 247.

There could be the possibility that the servant might have narrated the whole incident of Abraham's instruction to him and how he went about securing Rebecca. In this case, Isaac will get to know of Abraham's aversion towards Canaanite women. However, is it not also plausible to read the same text as pointing to the servant's exploits in securing Rebecca's hand than to narrate to Isaac the instructions of Abraham? If the latter is true, then, Isaac did not know of the family tradition of not marrying Canaanite women. Also, his experience with his father's wives and concubines does not support any such tradition ever existing.

The concluding clause of Gen 26:35 has been used as evidence of the unworthiness of the Canaanite wives Esau took. It reads,

Watihyênā morat rūah ləyiṣḥāq ūləribəqāh

*And they were a provocation for Isaac and Rebekah*²¹

Opening the verse is the phrase *watihyênā* which identifies the subjects. The third person feminine plural form of the verb, *hāyāh*, points to Esau's wives. The phrase, *morat rūah* (literally *bitterness of spirit*), is an hapax (only found here in the Hebrew Bible). Many commentators presume the word *morat* comes from the adjective, *mār*, which is commonly translated *as bitter*. Robert Alter, however, comes with an alternative meaning, suggesting that the root of the verb, *morat*, is *morah*, meaning to *rebel* or *defy*. Alter, then, goes on to translate *morat* as *provocation*.²² He writes,

Some commentators construe the first component of the compound noun *morat-ruah* as a derivative of the root *m-r-r*, "bitter"—hence the term "bitterness" favoured by many translations. But the morphology of the word points to a more likely derivation from *m-r-h*, "to rebel" or "to defy," and thus an equivalent such as "provocation" is more precise.²³

Significantly, Alter's proposal shifts the attention of readers away from who the in-laws are (i.e., their background) to what they did. Nonetheless, the verse is clear on the fact that Isaac and Rebecca

²¹ This translation is taken from Alter, *Genesis*, 136.

²² Alter, *Genesis*, 136.

²³ Alter, *Genesis*, 136

are not pleased. What exactly are they not pleased with? One possibility is Esau's sole initiative to marry. However, this seems unlikely since going by the syntax of v.35, the wives of Esau are the subjects of the verb *hāyāh* – they are provoking Isaac and Rebecca. However, we need to know why Isaac and Rebecca are displeased and what their displeasure meant.

There is no explicit reason given in the text to help the reader understand why Isaac and Rebecca are displeased. However, scholars, such as Mignon R. Jacobs, are quick to cite the background of Esau's wives as the reason.²⁴ Though Jacobs's reading is a possibility²⁵, it does not alone suffice. In a persuasive analysis, Il-Seung Chung argues that the displeasure felt by Isaac and Rebecca towards Esau's wives was personal. He explains that Rebecca's comment in Gen 27:46 reveals the personal dislike she felt for her in-laws.²⁶ In addition to Chung's argument, I posit that the displeasure may have developed out of the provocative attitude of Esau's wives. This is why Alter's proposal is viable: Esau's wives behaved in a manner that infuriated Isaac and Rebecca. A careful consideration of v.35 shows that the displeasure felt by the in-laws is not instantaneous.²⁷ Rather, the displeasure seems to come out of their continuous encounter with the women. In this case, the discontent of the parents arises from their lived experiences with their in-laws. Wenham concurs with this reading when he writes, "What their Hittite daughters-in-law did to make life so miserable for Isaac and Rebekah is left unclarified, ...".²⁸ It is important we separate displeasure based on what Esau's wives did from displeasure based on their ethnic background. If such a separation is done, the behaviour and not the ethnic background becomes the more likely explanation of the text.

²⁴ For more details see Mignon R. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 118-121.

²⁵ This may be a possibility because of the disagreement Isaac had with the Canaanites, which included the Hittites; cf. 26:12-22.

²⁶ For more details see Il-Seung Chung, "Liberating Esau: A Corrective Reading of the Esau-Jacob Narrative in Genesis 25-36," (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Sheffield, 2008), 96-127.

²⁷ Even if the displeasure is instantaneous, it could be a reference to what Esau did – that is his sole initiative to marry – or when the in-laws realised the women were Hittites.

²⁸ Emphasis is from me; Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 205.

b. Gen. 27:46

The next time we hear something of Esau's wives is from their mother-in-law, Rebecca. Already, we know of her dissatisfaction with them, although the exact reason is unclear. The verse reads:

wato'merribqāh 'elyiṣḥāq qaṣṭī bəḥayyay mipnē
bənôt hēt 'im-loqēah ya'āqob 'iššāh mibənôt-hēt
kā'ëlleh mibənôt hā'āreṣ lāmmāh lī ḥayyîm

Then Rebecca said to Isaac, "I am disgusted with my life because of the daughters of Heth. If Jacob marries one of the daughters of Heth, like these, daughters of the land, why do I live?"

In our first encounter with Esau's wives, we learn about them through a direct report from the narrator. This time, it is Rebecca who says something about them, though indirectly. What is important to note is the source of this information on Esau's wives. But first, what is the background to the comment Rebecca makes? Rebecca's comment should be understood within the context of a desperate mother trying to prevent her two sons from having a fatal encounter. As a schemer, Rebecca hears of the plot of her not-so-beloved son, Esau, planning to kill her beloved son, Jacob. She quickly puts into motion a plan to prevent such tragedy. The plan involves separating the two brothers to allow for time to, perhaps, soften hearts and allow for reconciliation. Since Esau is married and settled, Rebecca sees an opportunity to use marriage as a pretence to send Jacob away.

Rebecca, however, knows that Isaac is not pleased with Esau's wives because of their behaviour. She cleverly begins her manipulation of Isaac by picking on the Hittite women as they (Rebecca and Isaac) share some level of displeasure towards the women (cf. Gen 26:35). She then connects her will to live or die to the presence of the Hittite women. The phrase, *qaṣṭî* (*I am disgusted*), is Rebecca's way of focusing on herself as the bargaining chip. Her entire speech to Isaac dwells on the value of her life. Constructions such as *bəḥayyay* (*with my life*) and *lāmmāh lī ḥayyîm* (*why do I live*) heighten her perceived danger which she labours to direct Isaac's attention to. The source of Rebecca's perceived danger is *bənôt hēt* (*daughters of Heth*) and *bənôt hā'āreṣ* (*daughters of the land*). No overt objective reason is given for her resentment of Hittite women, except what we already know in 26:35.

We also need to be mindful of the state of Isaac in the scheme of Rebecca's manipulation. Isaac is very old and has a low vision (Gen 27: 1-4). He even sees himself as close to death. Esau acknowledges his father's weakness and nearness to death when he postpones his plan to kill Jacob (Gen 27:41), since such an act will only make Isaac's condition worse. Isaac's old age and ill health place him in a state where he is likely to be susceptible to what his wife tells him. Thus, when Rebecca tells him of how her life is under threat because of the Canaanite women, and that she will die if Jacob should marry one of them, Isaac is not in a state where he can challenge or dispute his wife's claims.

Several commentators, including Walter Brueggemann, see Rebecca's comment as a clear indication that the narrator is teaching against the prospect of mixed marriages. Brueggemann writes, "In 27:46, the account begins in a complaint by Rebekah ... But as an introduction to a teaching, it is clear enough. To a passionate, faithful member of the family, assimilation through mixed marriage is a horrendous prospect."²⁹ Such commentators take a cue from Gen 26:35, where Rebecca and Isaac are displeased with Esau's wives. But as indicated earlier, it is not the ethnic background of the women that brings the tension, but rather, the behaviour of the women. Rebecca's experience of Esau's wives seemed to have influenced the way she perceived Hittite women. If this is right, then Rebecca's hatred can be described as a stereotype.³⁰ The two women cannot be the basis for condemning an entire group of people.

On the other hand, even when we understand Rebecca's comment literally, the comment can be read as part of Rebecca's grand scheme, which in this case makes the perceived danger the Hittite women pose a hoax she uses to achieve her main goal, which is to send Jacob away from Esau. The point is that Rebecca's real interest in her encounter with Isaac should lead us to what her comments mean. And as indicated, her interest is to protect her sons, especially Jacob, by sending him away. Her interest is not in the disdain she has for the Hittite wives of Esau. On this basis, we can push further that Jacob's marriage to non-Canaanite women is more of a coincidence than a family tradition of marrying from

²⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 237.

³⁰This is a fallacy that assigns certain qualities to all group members based on some members of the group exhibiting such qualities – see Husein Inusah et al, *Understanding and Applying Critical Thinking* (Accra; Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2019), 231-232. And this may be the case here; Rebecca may be assigning the provocative tendencies of her Hittite in-laws to all Hittite women.

one's clan or kinship group.³¹ Indeed, the narrative is filled with many gaps, which makes it difficult to take a definitive position as representative of the view of the narrator. The text, so far, in no way places any explicit ban on cross-ethnic marriages (the case of Gen 28:6 is explained below).

c. Gen 28:1-9

Of the three texts, this passage perhaps gives the most convincing arguments against cross-ethnic marriages. V. 8 reads:

wayyarə' 'ēsāw kî rā'ôt bənôt kənā'an bə'ênê
yîṣḥāq 'ābîw

*So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not
please his father Isaac ...*

This is a telling passage that reveals that Esau seems oblivious to the disdain his parents had for his wives. But before we accept Esau's rationalisation of what he saw and heard from Isaac's instruction to Jacob, once again, we need to connect this incident to what had earlier transpired. We already know that there is some level of discomfort and uneasiness on the part of Isaac and Rebecca towards Esau's wives. We have also established that the displeasure is more a result of the behaviour of the women. We again know that Rebecca uses the estrangement between the in-laws as a strategy to get Isaac to accept the proposition to allow Jacob to go to Paddan-Aram for a wife. The main reason for Jacob's departure, therefore, is to flee the wrath of his brother (cf. Gen 27: 42-25). I have, thus, postulated that Jacob's marriage to the kinsmen of Rebecca is a fallout from Rebecca's scheme to save her children.

With this background information, I posit further that Isaac's instruction to Jacob cannot be taken as strong evidence against cross-ethnic marriage in the text. The question we need to pose is: why did Isaac instruct Jacob not to marry the Canaanite women? Two reasons come up. First, Isaac has not been pleased with the

³¹Jacob's descent into Paddan Aram to Laban to get married is a result of Esau's fury. Marriage in Jacob's life is a consequential fallout of the blessing incident. Even in the encounter between Rebecca and Jacob, after Rebecca heard of Esau's plot, she did not have marriage in mind for her son. Her main agenda was to send Jacob away from the household to a safe place. It was in her attempt to convince Isaac to allow Jacob to leave, then she introduced the idea of marriage. I see this as smart spontaneous reasoning from Rebecca, which only goes to prove her as a good schemer.

Hittite wives of Esau.³² More importantly, in Isaac's instruction to Jacob, he never uses Esau's marriage as the basis for sending Jacob away to his kinsmen to marry from there. If Isaac is not pleased with the background of Esau's wives, why did he fail to use that as the basis to prevent Jacob from marrying women of similar backgrounds?

Second, Isaac may have issued the instruction because of what Rebecca had told him earlier. This reason is more plausible. Isaac's instruction to Jacob follows immediately from Rebecca's manipulation. His response, therefore, appears to have been under duress than a self-reflection of the issues at stake. Therefore, Isaac's instructions to Jacob not to marry Canaanite women was not made out of prejudice, since he was only ensuring that his wife's life was safeguarded. After all, Rebecca made her request revolve around her safety. Again, the fact that Isaac gives Jacob no reason for his preclusion of Canaanite women as suitable wives strengthens the proposition that Isaac may have nothing against the Canaanite women, except the two wives of Esau.

However, Esau's rationalisation of Isaac's instruction to Jacob may support the position that the text bars cross-ethnic marriages. The narrator tells us that Esau hears the instruction to Jacob not to marry Canaanite women. More importantly, Esau rationalises what he hears to mean Isaac hates Canaanite women and proceeds to marry Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael (Gen 28:9). But Esau's rationalisation and actions flow from how Isaac responded to Rebecca's scheme. Significantly, Esau knows nothing of Rebecca's encounter with Isaac. He does not know that Isaac's instruction to Jacob is based on Rebecca's supposed threat to her life due to the daughters of the land. He again does not know that his two Hittite wives are a source of displeasure to his parents. He only gets to know about it when he eavesdrops on Isaac and Jacob's conversation. In this vein, Heard writes, "Nothing in the text indicates that either of his parents ever told him (in forty years of life!) that they preferred he not marry local women."

Is this absence not an indication that no such convention existed within the family? If the family saga is extended to Jacob and his twelve sons, it will be difficult to see any consistent family tradition which barred taking Canaanite women as wives. Only Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob seemed to fit this tradition. Even this is

³²But this reason is not a strong point. Yes, the two Hittite wives of Esau are a source of worry to Isaac and Rebecca, but the nature of the worry emanates from their behaviour and not their background (see the exposition on Gen. 27:46).

uncertain, since Abraham married before settling in Canaan, and we know that when he got to Canaan, he was involved with local women. Jacob's marriage is also more of a coincidence than a planned thing. Finally, Jacob's sons married women from their surroundings.³³

Conclusion

Implications for Cross-Ethnic Marriages in Africa

Old Testament writers were particular about the distinctiveness of ancient Israel. As a result, they laboured to present her as a unique group in the land of Canaan. The Israelites, therefore, emerge as people who came from outside Palestine, with a faith and a land that was a divine gift. Readers of the Old Testament do not struggle much to see that Old Testament writers were, in many cases, not sympathetic to other groups; indeed, the ideologies of the writers unified in demonstrating Israel's unique status on earth due to her special relationship with God. This enthusiasm on the part of the writers in preserving Israelite identity, sometimes, strayed into the area of ethnic superiority, a perceived ideology that had to be safeguarded. Marriage was, therefore, one of the traditions that served as a means of preserving this perceived ideology of ethnic superiority, although ironically marriage was also one institution that contributed to the multi-ethnicity of the Israelite people. Scholarship over the years has rationalised Israelite perceived ethnic superiority as a necessary theological caveat needed to establish and maintain her special relationship with God. Sarna, for instance, is of the view that through his marriages, Esau, the eponymous ancestor of the Edomites, made himself the unchosen brother, while Jacob, the eponymous ancestor of the Israelites, walked on the chosen path. Although these identity preservation maneuverings on the part of the writers serve a theological purpose, they, at the same time, have the potency of promoting negative sentiments, especially among readers from nations with ethnic polarities. Intrinsic to ethnicity is the idea of uniqueness which sometimes spills into the idea of superiority, a tendency likely to develop among people from nations with multiple ethnic groups.

³³ Judah married the daughter of Shua, a Canaanite (Gen 38:2). His son Joseph married Asenath, an Egyptian (Gen 41:45).

Almost all sub-Saharan African nations have multiple ethnic groups, and Ghana is no exception. Some of the dominant groups are the Akan, the Ewe, the Ga-Dangme, the Mole-Dagbani, the Guan, etc. The Akan group can further be divided into the sub-groups of Fante, Asante, Akuapim, Kwahu, Bono, etc. Once independent states, these groups are part of the state of Ghana, where their identities are now subsumed under the single fate of Ghana as a unitary state. Despite the push for nationhood and its attendant national identity, ethnic identities continue to thrive alongside national identities in Africa. Arguably, unlike European nations that have been able to create nation-states, African countries have been accused of failing to replicate European types of nationality. Without venturing into the debate of African nationalism versus ethnic diversity, suffice it to note that ethnic diversity is not in itself inimical to nationalism. As argued by Amanda Lea Robinson, in Africa, the two are intricately linked and mutually supportive.³⁴

As an important socio-cultural institution, marriage has the potential to foster cross-ethnic interactions. As observed by scholars, cross-ethnic marriages are on the increase in Africa.³⁵ Across 23 African countries (including Ghana) cross-ethnic marriages stand at over 20% and the number is increasing.³⁶ In Ghana, cross-cultural/ethnic marriages are common among the political elite. The first president, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, married an Egyptian, Fathia Nkrumah. In the fourth Republic, His Excellency John Jerry Rawlings, an Ewe, married Nana Konadu Agyemang, an Asante. Also, John Dramani Mahama, a Gonja, married Lordina Mahama, an Akan. Arguably, the presence of cross-ethnic marriages among the political elite is a testimony to the acceptance and tolerance of cross-ethnic marriages among the general populace. Increased urbanisation and other economic factors are changing the landscape of Ghana's ethnic demography, with many people from different ethnic backgrounds coming into frequent contact with each other. Meeting couples from different ethnic backgrounds is, therefore, a common occurrence in Ghana.

Despite the increase in cross-ethnic marriages in Ghana, a mixed feeling persists among some sections of Ghanaians, leading

³⁴ Amanda Lea Robinson, "National vs Ethnic Identity in Africa: State, Group, and Individual Correlates of National Identification," *Afrobarometer* (September 2009), 23-24.

³⁵Boniface Dulani et al., "Intermarriage, Ethnic Mixing, and Ethnic Voting in Africa," *Midwestern Political Science Paper* (2018), 2.

³⁶Dulani et al., "Intermarriage, Ethnic Mixing, and Ethnic Voting in Africa," 2.

to a reluctance and/or rejection of such marriage arrangements. Indeed, the ethnic factor in marriage is still one of the important considerations would-be-couples and their families reflect on. Predominant among people steeped in their traditions, ethnic considerations in marriage stem from fears of the loss of one's customs, on one hand, and loyalty and attachment to one's native town, on the other hand.³⁷ Many are of the view that marrying from the same ethnic group is easier because the couples are compatible to culture, language, and traditions. Also, differences in cultural traditions such as succession and inheritance customs are important factors. According to A. K. Awedoba, cultural differences among ethnic groups lead to stereotyping. And in a study by Victoria W. Lawson, Charity S. Akotia, and Maxwell Asumeng, they found that ethnic stereotyping is prevalent in Ghana.³⁸

As an important social institution, marriage is promoted and encouraged within African communities. Among many cultures in Africa, marriage is a measure of one's maturity. Since urbanisation and other economic factors are constantly changing African societies and their demography, Africans need to accept that cross-ethnic marriages may now be the norm. Cross-ethnic marriage has the potential to unify African societies, blur the lines of ethnicity, and promote social stability. In promoting cross-ethnic marriages in Africa, therefore, the Bible has an important role to play. Although, as John Goldingay intimates, the Israelite faith as played out in the Old Testament is ethnic,³⁹ there are important incidents in the Old Testament that open up the identity of God's people to include people from different ethnic backgrounds. Cross-ethnic marriage, for instance, was a significant medium through which the people of God became multi-ethnic. Mention can be made of Judah who married Shu'a the Canaanite (Gen 38:2), Joseph who married Asenath, daughter of the Egyptian priest (Gen 41:45), Moses who married Zipporah, the Midianite (Ex 2:21), and Ruth, the Moabite, who married Boaz (Ruth 4:13). Africans need to understand that all people are from God and all are worthy to form relationships

³⁷ A. L. Crane, "Race differences in inhibition: A psychological study of comparative characteristics of Negro and the White man as measured by certain tests, with special reference to the problem of violation," *Archives of Psychology* 63, (1923): 9-84.

³⁸ Victoria W. Lawson, Charity S. Akotia, and Maxwell Asumeng, "Exploring Ethnic Stereotypes and Prejudice among some Major Ethnic Groups in Ghana," *Journal of Social Science Studies* 2, (1) 2015: 17-35.

³⁹ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove (IL): Inter Varsity Press, 2007).

across ethnic boundaries – boundaries which have been culturally created and enforced through social ideologies. The Bible can, therefore, be engaged in ways that promote our common humanity and emphasise our common faith in God. This applies especially to problem texts which upon first encounter may breed divisions and suspicions among the people of God, but upon a closer look, reveal a deeper truth about our common humanity and God's love for all humanity.