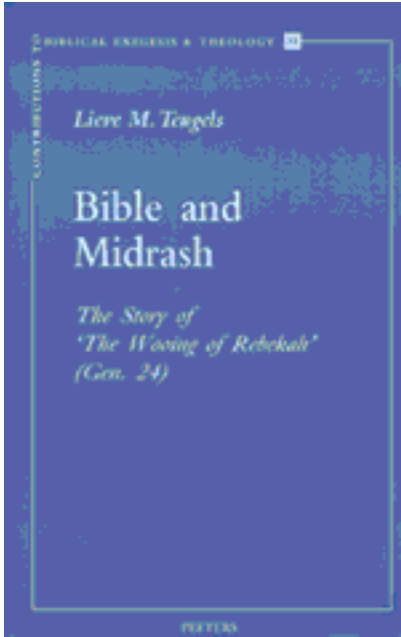


RBL 09/2006



Teugels, Lieve M.

Bible and Midrash: The Story of 'The Wooing of Rebekah' (Gen. 24)

Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 35

Leuven: Peeters, 2004. Pp. 246. Paper. €32.00. ISBN 9042914262.

Deborah Green
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon

Bible and Midrash: The Story of 'The Wooing of Rebekah' (Gen. 24) is, in part, based on Lieve Teugels's dissertation, which was written in Dutch and defended in 1994. From the title this reviewer expected a thoroughgoing treatment of the Rebekah cycle in the Hebrew Bible and midrash but found instead that the major focus of this work is the methods one might employ to analyze biblical and midrashic texts. Thus, the Rebekah cycle serves sometimes as a paradigm, at other times as a frame, for the larger methodological discussions and issues. Although the book is closely related to her dissertation, Teugels clarifies in her preface that the book is more of a compilation and revision of several essays connected to the dissertation that were written "prior to and after" (7) its completion.

The book is divided into two parts: one on the Bible and one on midrash. In the preliminaries to part 1, Teugels provides what she refers to as a "Colometric Translation of Genesis 24." The author states that she is presenting the translation according to "Delimitation Criticism"; that is, she is following the traditional Masoretic accents for her translation. The rationale for this choice is that "the medieval Tiberian masoretes ... did not invent this system but based themselves on much older traditions and refined them"

(13). Part 1 includes six chapters of varying lengths and subjects. The first two chapters, “Methodological Orientation and Introduction” and “Events, Plot and Type-Scene in Genesis 24,” detail Teugels’s methodology for reading biblical texts. In the first chapter she defines the narratological approach and each of its constituent parts. For example, Teugels discusses such aspects as the difference between story-time and text-time and characters and characterization, citing along the way various scholars who have employed similar literary methods. Among these, Teugels relies heavily on Shlomit Rimmon-Kenan. For those who enjoy discussions of literary method, Teugels is a gifted explicator. Her points are focused and highly nuanced.

Chapter 2 reviews aspects of the plot and events of the Rebekah narrative and provides thorough discussion of the betrothal “type scene.” As in her first chapter, Teugels begins theoretically but soon narrows her lens on the Rebekah narrative and its discrete particulars. Here Teugels turns primarily to Robert Alter and his use of Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s conception of *Leitwortstil* to investigate and compare the key words of Rebekah’s betrothal scene with those of the other matriarchs and patriarchs. Teugels ends this chapter by intimating that, although divine election (as Westermann argues) is observable throughout the Rebekah cycle, her overall impression of Gen 24 is closer to Ellen Van Wolde’s position that the cycle emphasizes both human initiative and divine election.

The next chapter entails a brief review of the preceding Genesis chapters (Gen 22–23) in order to provide the literary context for Gen 24. Discussion of these chapters is necessary for the associations Teugels draws later among Rebekah’s betrothal, her birth narrative, and Sarah’s death. The placement of this chapter, its brevity, and the fact that it is missing similar contextual discussion for Gen 25–30 somewhat disrupts the flow of the book and appears rather forced. However, the discussion itself and the connections that Teugels later makes among these events (in chs. 4–6) will be of great interest to students of the Hebrew Bible, as these provide some of Teugels’s most interesting insights and opinions.

The heart of the analysis is found in the next three chapters of part 1. In succession, the author presents meticulous analyses of the key words repeated throughout the narrative, other significant repetitions (e.g., of actions and accounts of events), the individual characters and their characterization, the consideration of Rebekah’s narrative as part of the matriarchal cycle, and several conclusions. These chapters find Teugels in her element. She provides a careful contextual reading in each of these areas, and her conclusions are prudent, lucid, and persuasive. In particular, her assessment of Abraham’s servant as a manipulative “salesman” who selectively chooses his words and which information to impart to Rebekah’s family in order to achieve the best result (i.e., Rebekah as wife for Isaac) is convincing and intriguing. The reader will find each of these

chapters full of new information presented in a simple and digestible format. Most important, one finishes the biblical section of the book with a fuller picture of the Rebekah narrative rather than the overwrought deconstruction so prevalent today in biblical scholarship. The only point with which some may quibble is Teugels's character analysis of Laban. She insists that Laban's negative portrayal derives from rabbinic commentary on Deut 26:5 which, through a pun on the root *'bd*, interprets Laban as the Aramaean who tries to kill Jacob. However, one need only read Gen 25–30 to see that Laban is portrayed as at best a trickster and at worst a mean-spirited father and father-in-law in the biblical text itself. In this light, the language and events of Gen 24 foreshadow the Laban narratives yet to come. But this is a minor point in an otherwise comprehensive and intelligent study.

The second part of the book focuses on the scholarly methods of midrash analysis and relates these to rabbinic interpretations of the Rebekah cycle. Six chapters constitute this section of the book; the first two are theoretical in nature, and the next four explore rabbinic texts. Chapter 7, entitled, "Midrash and the Academic Study of the Bible," seeks to assess how midrash has been used as opposed to how it should be used in Bible criticism. In the course of her analysis, Teugels examines the scholarship of René Bloch and Geza Vermes, who argued that midrash should be considered a literary genre unto itself that could be compared to the literature of the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, rewritten biblical texts, and other early Jewish texts in order to determine the historical development of aggadic traditions and motifs.

In chapter 8, "The Formal Study of Midrash," Teugels seeks to answer the question "What is midrash?" and to develop a definition for the term. The scholarship of Addison Wright, R. Le Déaut, Arnold Goldberg, and Philip Alexander are featured along with nodding references to Daniel Boyarin, Michael Fishbane, Jacob Neusner, and Gary Porton. Although Teugels is quite taken with Arnold Goldberg's form-analysis approach, she admits that this method leaves out too much. It is difficult to know whether Teugels, following Goldberg, would also omit the *mashal*, *ma'ase*, legends, and stories that lack reference to biblical verses. One suspects so, since her formal definition is articulated as "rabbinic interpretation of Scripture that bears the lemmatic form" (168). While some might find this definition too narrow, Teugels deserves praise for her efforts to tame this wild beast in definitive terms. This chapter will serve as a good basis for classroom discussion for those students who are just beginning study of midrashic literature—particularly if the argument is compared to one or more of the other methodological constructions.

In the rest of the book Teugels "reads" the rabbinic texts. In chapter 9 three midrashim are analyzed employing Goldberg's form-analysis approach. This technique is

problematic in part because it does not address the portion of the lemma left out of the manuscript. As a result, in one case Teugels must reanalyze the midrash to include the second half of the unprinted verse in order to explain correctly the “moves” of the text. This leads one to wonder why she employs Goldberg’s method at all, since her own approach in all three cases is superior.

Chapter 10 presents a well-conceived discussion on the connections the rabbis formulate among Rebekah’s birth narrative, Isaac’s binding, Sarah’s death, and the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. As such, this chapter ties back to the third chapter in which Teugels addressed Gen 22–23. Here Teugels clearly explains the structure of the midrash, explicates the actual text, and then ties this explanation to the overall meaning of the midrash.

Chapters 11 and 12 are two parts of a single topic: “The Virginitly of Rebekah in Halakhah and Aggadah.” In chapter 11 Teugels first describes the connection of Rebekah to the rabbinic legal category of the *mukat ets* (this is a reference to a virgin whose hymen is considered intact although she has been deflowered by mistake, e.g., by a piece of wood). Again, one may not agree completely with the specifics of Teugels’s analysis, but, overall, her descriptions are comprehensible, precise, and useful. The reader not only learns about Rebekah and halakah but also gains perspective on how the rabbis frame their discussions.

In chapter 12 Teugels first addresses the legend of Rebekah’s betrothal to Isaac when the matriarch was three years old and then investigates the connection of this story to related matters of halakah. Unfortunately, in this brief chapter the author forgoes the close reading and explication she so generously shared in the previous chapters and instead focuses on the “reception of these issues in feminist interpretation” (220). However, many of the well-known names connected with feminist work on the Talmud and other rabbinic literature are missing. For example, Tal Ilan, Judith Baskin, and Charlotte Fonrobert—to name just a few—are absent. A few other minor disappointments with the book include the many typos and grammatical errors (particularly in the first half of the book), the evident “seams,” and some redundancy. Overall, the book leaves the reader wishing to read more of Teugels’s own analysis rather than the well-explained methods and analyses of others. These are, however, minor flaws in what is otherwise a most worthwhile addition to the field of literary study of the Bible and rabbinic literature.