

Note: This was a question on a hermeneutics exam that Bret took at Reformed Theological Seminary. The response is brief, but helps to deal with the question of whether Genesis 24 provides a biblical model for dating and choosing a spouse. The same ideas would also apply to other texts supposedly giving a Biblical model (though texts such as Ruth 3 are advanced much less often due to obvious difficulties!)

Jim, a Christian friend, is visiting with you. He describes an inspiring sermon he heard last week giving the biblical method of choosing a wife, based on what Abraham did for Isaac (Genesis 24). He tells you that he has asked his father to do this for him in this same manner. How would you respond to him? (Limit the essay to 2 pages).

First, explain to your friend the steps that must be gone through in order to do grammatical historical exegesis, and briefly apply them to this passage.

Second, explain to your friend a redemptive historical hermeneutic, proving it from the Bible, and then how this affects application of this passage.

I would begin by explaining the four major parts of grammatical-historical exegesis. First, we must consider the syntax. What do the words actually mean in this context? Second, we must consider distanciation. This refers to the cultural and historical distance between us and the text. Third, we must consider the context, especially the larger context of the purpose of the passage in the larger text of Genesis and of the Bible as a whole. Finally, we must consider the genre we are reading, recognizing that each genre communicates truth differently and must therefore be handled differently.

In the case of Genesis 24, the issue of syntax is probably not much of a problem. The actual words and their meanings in Genesis 24 are not in dispute, so I would spend little time on this issue.

However, the other three issues are critical. There is a massive cultural distance between us and Abraham. Before assuming that we must follow this method of finding a wife, we must ask several questions. Was this a common method for finding a wife back in Abram's day? (I don't know!) Were there cultural issues, such as pagan beliefs of the women around Abram, which caused him to send his servant back to his family? (Probably). Did people usually try and marry near or distant relatives back then? (They did much more often than we would today). All of these questions must be answered before we attempt to find out if this is a pattern for us to follow.

Context is also a huge issue here. Why is this story included in the book of Genesis? Is its purpose to teach us how to find a wife, or is it related to the preservation of the seed of Abram? What does the larger context of the Scripture as a whole say regarding how to find a wife? Do later texts follow this same method, or do Scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 7 give a different picture? It appears they do, and this must be taken into account. No other person uses this method, and 1 Corinthians 7, which speaks a lot about marriage, makes no mention of such a practice, but states that the believer may marry anyone they choose, as long as they are a believer (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Finally, the genre of Genesis, historical narrative, is important. We must remember that we can not assume the actions we find in historical narrative are normative. For example, Abram

married his half-sister. Should we do the same? Also, Abram had several concubines. Does this mean we can do this? If not, then how do we know that concubines are not normative, but this method of finding a wife is normative? If this is really God’s command for how to find a wife, we should see evidence of this in the didactic teaching portions of Scripture, such as the law or the epistles.

I would also ask Jim why he is only choosing certain parts of the story to emulate. For example, Abram sent a slave to find the wife. Did he ask his father to send a slave? Why did he ask his father to choose, since Abram does not make the choice, but the representative of Abram? Furthermore, will he follow the same sign, that of the girl who waters the camels without being asked? Do these have to be literal camels, or will willingly serving others water when they are thirsty do? Will Jim pick out an engagement ring, or will the slave give her a gold nose ring instead?

The point of all these questions is to show that the text is being mishandled. Certain portions are being pressed beyond measure, and others are being conveniently ignored or transformed. This produces a distorted image of the text that is not in line with the actual purpose and meaning of the text.

I would then show Jim a much better method of interpreting Scripture. I would take him through a brief primer in a redemptive historical hermeneutical method, showing him that the purpose of Scripture is related to salvation, that the focus is Christ, and that the application is for the church. I would demonstrate this using the following chart:

Concept	Old Testament Scripture	Christ the fulfillment	Application to us – we inherit
Rock	Exodus 17:6	1 Corinthians 10:4	1 Corinthians 10:6
Seed	Genesis 12:7	Galatians 3:16	Galatians 3:29
Son	Genesis 22:1-2	Mark 1:11	1 John 3:1-3; 2 Corinthians 6:18
Prophet	Deuteronomy 18:15	Acts 3:17-22 Hebrews 1:1-2	Acts 2:16-21
Priest	Exodus 28 Exodus 19:5-6	Hebrews 5:4-10 Hebrews 1:3	Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; 1 Peter 2:9
King	Psalm 2:7-9	Revelation 12:5 Hebrews 1:3	Revelation 2:26-27 1 Peter 2:9 (royal)
Israel	Exodus 4:23 Hosea 11:1	Matthew 2:15 Matthew 3:16-17	Galatians 6:16 Philippians 3:3 Romans 2:29
Temple	Exodus 25:8 1 Kings 8:11	Matthew 1:23 John 1:14 John 2:19-22	Ephesians 2:19-22 1 Corinthians 3:16 1 Corinthians 6:19

This chart could be expanded with other items as well. The point is that the purpose of Scripture is soteriological, the focus is Christological and the application is ecclesiological. Thus, when we read the Old Testament, we should see how it applies to us through Christ. Since Christ is the focus of all Scripture (Luke 24:25-27; 44-47; John 5:38-39), to read Old Testament texts and try to apply them to us without going through Christ will land us in error!

Applying this redemptive historical method with grammatical historical exegesis will give us a better understanding of the passage in Genesis 24. The larger context of Genesis is about how God is preserving his seed miraculously. No matter what the danger, God had a provision. The same is true here. Although pagan wives might lead Isaac astray, God had a faithful wife for Isaac so that the seed would be preserved. The point of the text is not how to find a wife today, but how God acted to preserve Abram's seed from danger at every turn. Recognizing the distance between us and Abram, we see that his methods followed customs of his day, and were peculiar to his circumstance, and are thus not normative for us today.

Additionally, the text has a Christological focus and applies to us. Christ is the ultimate seed who is preserved. Thus, if anyone is represented by Abram and Isaac, it is not me and my earthly father, but Christ and God the Father, and the servant would be the Spirit who finds and prepares a Bride for Christ! If Abram is a type, he is a type of the Father – not my dad! (I am not arguing that these types are true, but if the passage had typology, this would be better than relating it to my search for a wife.)

However, the main focus is on how God is faithful to keep His promises and provide for and protect the seed of promise. Because He did this, we are saved today, and we can also have confidence that God will provide and care for us. No matter how many obstacles, and there were many in Genesis 24, God will faithfully and sovereignly work and provide. Yet, like Abram, this is no excuse for us. We follow God's lead and work to fulfill His plans for us.

Having done all of this, I would urge Jim to reconsider his idea. He does not have to follow some supposed model in Genesis 24 for selecting a wife. Instead, he can see that God has faithfully kept His promises against every obstacle. He can know that as he is in Christ, God will provide for him as well. He will lead and guide and sovereignly work to ensure His work in Jim is preserved – even as Jim looks for a wife!