Toldot

Rebecca

Why is Rebecca beautiful? She is like Mami Watta: barren, yet brings wealth. Dangerous to be in love with: she could have been responsible for Isaac being killed by Abimelech and his men. “The men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful” (XXVI:7) Beautiful, dangerous, without children, yet bringing much wealth: Isaac stays in Gerar, despite the famine in the land, and XXVI (12): “Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. The Lord blessed him, and the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy.”

After her children grew up she passed on her special powers to her son. The powers of the trickster, the manipulator.

In Yorubaland the mother of twins has special, mystical powers. Also with the Mande people of Guinea. In Toldot she has the power to reverse the normal order of patrilineage and primogeniture, to deceive the patriarch, to assume the risk of his curse, to impose her preference for her son over that of her husband, to save her preferred son over the one who is not preferred. He, the latter, weeps, as does his father, when the trick is discovered, but they are helpless to do anything about it.XXVII: 32-40.

She is both an allegorical, mythical figure (Mother of two nations: “Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body), and a human in pain: XXV:22: “But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, ‘If so, why do I exist”: and, Esau’s wives were “a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebeccah” (XXVI: 34), and “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me” (XXVII: 46); and when her sons are in dispute she says, “Let me not lose you both in one way” (XXVI: 44). All this is the human mother speaking, not the allegorical mother of nations. So, as the mother, she maneuvers Isaac to send Jacob away to Laban for a wife, out of danger—we don’t know whether she means it, or is maneuvering, when she asks “What good will life be to me” if Jacob marries yet another Hittite woman like his inept brother, the unfavored one. And when Jacob is endangered by his brother, she tells him, “Now, my son, listen to me.” And he does. She tells him he will go away, but only for a while, till Esau cools down and forgets what Isaac had done to him. “Then I will fetch you from there.” (XXVII: 45). She is in charge of the entire affair, from the beginning, when they are born and she gets god to speak to her about her children, to the end when she places her favorite on top.

It is to her lineage, to her brother’s house, that Jacob goes for a wife, whereas Esau, the maladroit hairy son goes to the lineage of his father, to his father’s uncle Ishmael, after Esau learned that his choice of Hittite wives was upsetting to his parents. But he gets no praise for this when he does so. Jacob goes to the matrilineal relative, and in Africa it is the maternal uncle who is the head of the clan. There, in Paddan-aram, he serves his mother’s brother to get the two wives who will enable him to father the bnai Israel. Laban comes from the same stock as Rebecca, and so he tricks Jacob to get him to serve for twice as long for Rachel, just as Rebecca had fooled Isaac to get Jacob the blessing and to get Jacob sent out of harm’s way to her brother. Jacob lies directly to Isaac who asks if he is Esau, but is not punished. Rather he is rewarded for prevailing. He is blessed, and like Joseph is larger than all life’s challenges because he is blessed. Joseph is handsome, the son of the favorite wife, the beautiful one, not the one with the funny eyes, the jealous, unhappy one.

The children of the beautiful wives, the wives whose beauty endangers their husbands, are the ones who are blessed, who receive the blessing, are supposed to receive the blessing. The listing is clear: Sarah gives preference to Isaac; Rebecca to Jacob; Rachel to Joseph, and Joseph’s children, in turn, and in the proper order of younger over older, receive the blessing from his trickster father as well, Ephraim coming first over his older brother Manassah. And despite the father’s preference, Jacob tells Joseph that he knows what he is doing when he reverses his hands. The son who is passed over, the Ishmael, Esau, and the other 11 sons of Jacob, cease to be charged with the power of the blessing, and fade out of the narrative. We are concerned with the favored sons, that is, those favored by god. But which god? The powerful male centered lord, adonai eloheinu, or the one whose name derives, possibly, from the word breasts: el shaddai. When Isaac sends Jacob to choose a wife from the daughters of Laban, the one he calls “Your mother’s brother,” he blesses him: “May el shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous” (XXVII: 3).

In contrast to the magic powers of the mother-son blessed pair, Isaac and Esau turn human, weep with their loss, and are helpless to change it.(XXVII:32-40) We feel for their sorrow—they are sacrificed in order that the blessing be passed on as god would have wished it. But god can pass it on only through the special woman who is beautiful, who cannot bear children until god helps her to do so, and then, having given birth finally to the one to receive the blessing, ceases to bear—except for Bejamin, his father’s favorite after Joseph. Sarah, Rebekka, Rachel bear one and then two children only; in contrast, their rival wives bear many children, but they fade to insignificance, as with the other children of Abraham’s old age, born after Sarah dies, and whose names we cannot recall. The same is the case with Esau whose unfortunate marriages and many children are lost to the community of bnai Israel, and finally the iniquitous or maladroit other children of Jacob who need to be rescued by the one whom they attempted to kill. The blessing goes to the son of the beautiful woman, not her rival.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob prosper, and we learn that they have received god’s blessing. But they are the husbands of mami watta, she who confers prosperity to her adherents. She is not a goddess of many children, but of wealth; the sons of her husband’s union succeed, but at great risk: the sacrifice of Isaac, the mortal fight between Jacob and Esau; the brothers’ attempt to kill Joseph, all are the risks the sons bear, as if in payment for the wealth their mothers bring to their fathers, just as Abimelech threatens the fathers because of the beautiful mami wattas, yet must yield his wells, and the power to become wealthy, to mami watta’s husbands.

Mami watta is a goddess, and the closest a male god can come to her is to have a name that suggests breasts, a name that mami watta’s husband evokes when he finally gives that blessing to his son, at his wife’s behest: “May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples, a kihel ammim” (XXVIII: 3), a Kehillat Israel.