

Leah

- I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
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I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

According to the Jacob story, Leah is Jacob's first wife. As Laban's oldest daughter, she becomes the victim of her father's intrigue against Jacob, who is the son of Laban's sister Rebekah. Laban promises to give Jacob his younger daughter Rachel as a wife if Jacob works for him as a shepherd for seven years. Yet, instead of Rachel, Laban uses a ruse to marry Jacob with Leah, who suffers from an eye condition that apparently detracts from her beauty as compared to Rachel (Gen 29:17). Jacob then has to work seven more years, even though Laban gives him Rachel only a week after his marriage to Leah (29:14–30). Nevertheless, Jacob consummates his marriage to Leah, who proves to be quite fertile, providing Jacob with seven children. Yet, Jacob only

loves Rachel, even though she is been unable for a long time to bear him children (Gen 29:32–34; 30:20). Leah expresses her hope of gaining Jacob's affection by way of the names she gives her sons. Only at the birth of her last child, Dinah, Jacob's only daughter, does Leah offer no explanation for the name (30:21). After the birth of her fourth son Judah, whose name expresses thanksgiving to JHWH (29:35), Leah cannot give birth anymore. This most likely indicates that Jacob no longer came to sleep with her. However, she buys herself another opportunity to have sex with Jacob by selling mandrakes to Rachel, which were used as an aphrodisiac in the ancient Near East (Gen 30:14–17).

As a dowry, Laban gives the two daughters female slaves (Gen 29:24, 29). Rachel, still childless, resorts to an ancient Near Eastern custom by giving her slave Bilhah to Jacob in the hope that she might give birth in Rachel's place. In this type of surrogate birth, the child born to the slave and the husband belongs to the wife, not the slave. This was a valid practice according to ancient Near Eastern laws, though it is not found in any of the written law codes in the Bible. Narrative texts, however, mention this practice, for example in the cases of Sarai and Hagar (Gen 16). Leah uses the same strategy as Rachel, giving Jacob her slave Zilpah after Bilhah had born him two children (Gen 30:3–8). Zilpah's surrogacy provides Jacob and Leah with two additional sons (30:9–13).

The competition exhibited between the two sisters with their slaves should not be misinterpreted as reducing women to baby makers. Rather, this "competition" creates Jacob's family, that is, Israel. When national history is portrayed as family history, it projects contemporary political conditions onto the genealogy. If a people consisting of twelve tribes want to tell its story in this kind of narrative form, then the story needs to recount how twelve sons are born in one generation to one father, who then becomes the tribes' patriarch. Moreover, the sons are not only born to one father, but they are also born in an endogamous marriage to two sisters. In fact, in the post-exilic period, endogamous marriage was considered the ideal, although Lev 18:18 forbids a man from marrying two sisters.

The two sisters only unite when they turn together against their father, who had indeed put them in competition with one another for the time being (Gen 31). After Jacob has served Laban for three seven-year periods – during which, he has established a large family and accumulated great herds as a result of God's blessing – he enters into a conflict with Laban and his sons (31:1–2, 9). Jacob begins to think about returning to his country, and in fact a messenger of God commands him to do so (31:10–13). He calls Rachel and Leah to the field where his herds are grazing (31:4), and the two wives both agree that their father has treated them

as foreigners, since he essentially sold them off and had even spent the entire bride price (31:15). Thus, the women decide that the wealth earned by the young family at the expense of their father as a result of Jacob's successful breeding of livestock belong to "us and our children" (31:16). The family leaves during Laban's absence in secret (31:19–21). When Laban discovers that Jacob's clan has left and even taken his household idols, he chases after them and catches them in the hill country of Gilead. However, he does not find the *te'arapim* that Rachel had stolen (31:19, 22–35). Since this is the point at which the daughters take leave of their birth family, the men finally decide to draw up a marriage contract which is designed to protect both Leah and Rachel (31:50) and to determine the borders between Israel and Aram (31:51–32:1). Jacob's assessment of the hierarchy between his two wives becomes clear in the encounter with Esau. Jacob places the two slaves and their sons at the very front of the group, followed by Leah and her children, and finally Rachel with Joseph in the most protected position (32:1–2, 6–7). Thus, even as Jacob's first wife and the mother of his first born, Leah fails to reach the highest position.

Further mention of Leah occurs in the introduction of Dinah as her daughter (34:1) and twice in the list of those in Jacob's clan who go to Egypt, where both sisters appear twice: once in the identification of Leah's sons with Jacob and once in the list of Leah's slave Zilpah's sons (46:15, 18). According to the brief statement in 49:31, Jacob buries Leah in the family grave in Machpelah where Sarah was buried (cf. Gen 23), though the narrative does not offer a full account of this event. Beyond the book of Genesis, Leah's name appears in the Hebrew Bible only in the marriage blessing in Ruth, where she is listed after her sister; she is most likely named there since the story takes place in Bethlehem. Rachel's name, however, occurs more frequently in other biblical books and in reference to her grave (Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam 10:2; Jer 31:15). If one interprets Hos 12:13b as a synonymous parallel – "there Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he guarded sheep" – and not such that Jacob had to serve one wife and tend sheep for the (other) wife, then the verse refers very likely to Rachel, since Jacob negotiated in each case his service to Rachel, and not to Leah.

How is the figure of Leah embedded in the *history* of Israel? What situation or setting is explained by the narratives of the two sisters? For over a century it has been a common approach of biblical research to recognize important points of connection between historical Israel and the male figures in the narratives. However, the female figures have received much less attention. Mowinckel attempted relatively early an explanation by distinguishing between the tribes of Rachel and the tribes of Leah;

however, he considered the two groups to have already merged before the establishment of the nation of Israel. Such an early date is no longer tenable. If family narratives with their genealogical constellations reveal anything about history (*Völkergeschichte*), it is only the relationships among the family members which provide the interpretive key. Jacob serves as the patriarch of the Northern Kingdom; it is not by accident that he receives the honorific name Israel (Gen 32:29). The narratives tie him most closely to Rachel, who he loves (Gen 29:18, 30), and whose children, Joseph (37:4) and Benjamin (42:36–38; Gen 44–45), he favors. “Joseph” (Ps 80:2; Amos 5:15) or “House of Joseph” (Judg 1:22–23, 35; Amos 5:6; Obad 1:18) can even be a synonym for the Northern Kingdom. The territory of Benjamin also belonged to the Northern Kingdom during the early monarchy.

By contrast, Leah represents the Southern Kingdom, named for her son, Judah. In fact, the Southern Kingdom only becomes historically important after the collapse of the Northern Kingdom. In the patriarchal narratives, Israel is only the third generation of the genealogy, which in a hierarchical, patriarchal society indicates lesser importance. Thus, it is no accident that the narratives that were developed after 722 BCE portray Leah, the mother of Judah, as the older sister. But, the fact that Jacob/Israel marries two sisters means that the resulting nation is ethnically and religiously unified since sibling relationships indicate equality. There is also no significant hierarchy even among the sons, i.e., apart from the primacy of the firstborn. Hence, from a historical perspective, Leah stands for the ancestry of the Southern Kingdom, the House of Judah, and Rachel for that of the Northern Kingdom, the House of Joseph.

Finally, Jacob represents the entire people, whose political center moves to the Southern Kingdom after the collapse of the Northern Kingdom. The inclusion of precisely twelve sons in the birth narratives dates most likely to a later period, probably during the post-exilic period (cf. Levin), which is also when the entire people of God take on the name “Israel”. Notably, Leah and her maidservant take on the pole position in the long genealogical list of those of Jacob’s tribe who move to Egypt. This list has a pivotal function in the Joseph story between the patriarchal narratives and the Exodus traditions. In this part of the Joseph story, which brings the list of Jacob’s family members to a close, Rachel’s strong position is also finally diminished by the fact that in Gen 48:5 Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh are adopted by Jacob, who is almost exclusively called Israel in this chapter.

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