

**Karolina Olszewska**

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń

karols@doktorant.umk.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-2192-896X

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## **The Biblical Narrative about Leah, Jacob's Wife (Genesis 29:16–30:21; 31:4–16; 33:1–3)**

### **Biblijna narracja o Lei, żonie Jakuba (Rdz 29,16–30,21; 31,4; 33,1–3)**

**Abstract.** The research problem of this article is the question of how Leah is presented in the biblical narrative. The narrator of the Book of Genesis presents Leah in five social roles as a woman, daughter, wife, sister and mother. Each of them expresses Leah's drama when she is compared to her younger sister Rachel. The culmination of the tension between the sisters is Leah's desire to be a beloved wife and Rachel's wish to become a mother as, in reality, Leah is a mother, and Rachel a beloved wife. God interferes in the story of the two sisters and His action allows the reader to properly interpret the presented narrative.

**Streszczenie.** Problemem badawczym niniejszego artykułu jest pytanie o to, w jaki sposób Lea została przedstawiona w narracji biblijnej. Narrator Księgi Rodzaju prezentuje Leę w pięciu rolach społecznych: kobiety, córki, żony, siostry i matki. W każdej z nich wybrzmiewa dramat Lei, która jest porównywana ze swoją młodszą siostrą Rachelą. Punktem kulminacyjnym napięcia pomiędzy siostrami jest pragnienie Lei, aby być kochaną żoną oraz pragnienie Racheli, aby zostać matką. Lea bowiem jest matką, a Rachelą kochaną żoną. W historię dwóch sióstr ingeruje Bóg, którego działanie pozwala czytelnikowi na właściwą interpretację przedstawionej narracji.

**Keywords:** Leah; Rachel; Jacob; woman; daughter; wife; sister; mother.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Lea; Rachela; Jakub; kobieta; córka; żona; siostra; matka.

Leah, Jacob's wife, is presented to the reader through the perspective of her sister Rachel and the deceit of her father Laban. He makes Jacob marry Leah first and then allows him to marry Rachel, whom Jacob loved. For this reason readers are divided into two groups. The first group does not show compassion

for Leah because she was an obstacle on the way to happiness for Jacob who was God's chosen one. The second group sympathizes with her misery because she was unloved. However, how does the biblical narrator actually present her?

The subject of Leah and her role in the history of salvation has not been thoroughly researched yet. Therefore, this article may serve as an impulse for a deeper analysis of Leah's fate. This text will show how Leah was portrayed in the social roles which she played, first as a woman in general, then as a daughter, wife, sister and finally as a mother.

### Leah as a woman

On the pages of the Holy Bible, Leah is mentioned for the first time in Gen 29:16. The reader finds out that Leah was the older daughter of Laban and Rachel's sister. Next, the narrator compares a look of Leah's eyes with Rachel's appearance. The Hebrew word *rakkōt* used to describe Leah's eyes conveys a multifaceted meaning, which is both negative and positive.<sup>1</sup> It can mean: "weak", "dull", "lovely" and "tender". Therefore, the question arises which meaning of this word should be assumed in Gen 29:17.

The following arguments speak for the negative understanding of the word *rakkōt*:

- 1) the version of "weak" eyes is confirmed by LXX and the Vulgate. Gradwohl analyzes the significance of the description of Leah's eyes as weak.<sup>2</sup> For Jacob, it could mean that Leah had a problem with eyes, like his father, Isaac. And from his own experience Jacob knew that this creates problems. Midrash to Gen 29:17, says that Leah's eyes were not so much "weak organically" as "weak from crying". According to Jewish tradition, the older daughter (in this case Leah), was intended for the older brother (Esau), and the younger (Rachel) for the younger (Jacob). Therefore, Leah's eyes are weak, because she has been cursed with the rejection of Esau. Then this weakness deserves rather to be praised than reprimanded.<sup>3</sup>
- 2) Gunkel thinks that among the old Hebrews only the shining eyes of a woman were of great value. Their dullness was considered as a big

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<sup>1</sup> See: D. Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, pp. 83–84; S.A. Brayford, *Genesis*, p. 357; J. Lemański, *Księga Rodzaju*, pp. 740–741; K.A. Mathews, *Genesis*, pp. 467–468.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Gradwohl, *Waren Leas Augen hässlich?*, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Midrash Rabbah*, 70:16.

flaw.<sup>4</sup> Von Rad, on the other hand, adds that at that time Jews, not only in Egypt, used a black line round their eyes to emphasize their charm.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of whether Leah's eyes were "weak" or "dull" we are dealing with a lost, undeserved quality which negatively affects the image of a woman.

A positive understanding of the word *rakkôt* can result from:

- 1) the sentence structure contained in Gen 29:17: "Leah had lovely eyes (*rakkôt*), but Rachel was shapely and beautiful". It shows that the narrator was inclined to indicate two positive traits than to contrast the negative feature of Leah with the positive feature of Rachel.<sup>6</sup>
- 2) the fact that the mother of half the generations of Israel cannot be ugly.<sup>7</sup>

Although both negative and positive arguments seem to be just as strong, we should opt for a positive consideration of the meaning of the word *rakkôt*. It seems more likely that the narrator wishes to emphasize the value of Leah visible in her eyes, rather than her defect. Thus, in this biblical story both heroines are beautiful women.

## Leah as a daughter

At first glance, it seems that Laban wants to ensure the best future for his older daughter and to avoid her being disgraced by the local community, he gives her in marriage before Rachel. So far in the story it is Laban who directs the action. He makes an agreement with Jacob and then he breaks it. His daughters become a commodity for him. Under the terms of the contract, the payment for this commodity is the work that Jacob undertakes on Laban's farm. Obviously, Rachel's work can be seen as working out a dowry that Jacob did not bring. However, the reader, when observing the events of the wedding night, may easily recognize Laban's clever plan of keeping Jacob on his farm as long as possible. Breaking and re-entering into a deal between Laban and Jacob contains a clause, which Laban makes: "Finish this marriage week and I shall give you the other one too in return for your working for me for another seven years" (Gen 29:27). It is worth noting that Laban did not use the name of any of his daughters in this promise.<sup>8</sup> This can strengthen the reader in the belief

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 328.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose*, p. 252.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. R. Gradwohl, *Waren Leas Augen hässlich?*, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. Ross-Burstall, *Leah and Rachel*, p. 165.

that Laban did not love his daughters at all, but he used them to get a cheap workforce on his farm for fourteen years.

After the narrator informs readers that Laban brought Leah to Jacob's tent and they slept together, the narrator also notes: "Laban gave his slave-girl Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her slave" (Gen 29:24). Likewise, when Rachel became Jacob's wife, the narrator added that she had a slave Billhah to serve her (see Gen 29:29). Can such a "wedding gift" that father gave to his daughters be considered as a form of compensation for harm caused by Laban when negotiating a marriage contract between him and Jacob? Or perhaps it served as a form of bribery or appeasement of his daughters. It does not imply a change in Laban's attitude towards Jacob and his wives, but a desire based on the wish to improve the results of the son-in-law's work and to avoid disputes that could affect Jacob's work efficiency.

The fact that Laban did not treat his daughters with due love, strengthens the words which Leah and Rachel utter when Jacob announces that according to the will of God he decided to return to his homeland. They both say:

Are we still likely to inherit anything from our father's estate? Does he not think of us as outsiders now? For not only has he sold us, but he has completely swallowed up the money he got for us. All the wealth that God has reclaimed from our father belonged to us and our children in any case. So do whatever God has told you (Gen 31:14-16).

This statement of Laban's daughters strengthens the reader's conviction that Laban cared for his own interest only and he used all possible means to make himself rich neglecting his daughters.

Laban's attitude towards Leah shows the reader one more aspect. Laban avoids the error of Isaac who put his younger son before the elder. The choice of Isaac led to Jacob's escape and the conflict with Esau. In the story of Leah and Rachel it is Leah, who in accordance with accepted standards, enjoys privileges of priority. This means that the blessing of the older daughter is indeed hers. Contrary to expectations, it does not become as serious as the conflict that erupted between Esau and Jacob because of the fault of Isaac.

## **Leah as a wife**

Isaac's blessing given to Jacob is closely related to marrying one of Laban's daughters (Gen 28:2). When it happens: "May El Shaddai bless you; may he make you fruitful and make you multiply so that you become a group of na-

tions" (Gen 28:3). This blessing could only come true thanks to Leah because Rachel was barren.<sup>9</sup> Laban's trick, therefore, opens the gate to God's plan and fulfills God's promise.

The events of the wedding night are an analogy to Isaac's blindness. Just as Isaac's eyes were blinded by illness, Jacob's eyes were blinded by the night.<sup>10</sup> The situations of Isaac and Jacob are similar. Rebecca disguises her younger son and makes him look like an older brother. Laban, however, under the cover of the night, introduces the older daughter to Jacob's tent, so that Jacob cannot distinguish her from Rachel. Both Rebecca and Laban, sister and brother, become fraudsters who unwittingly contribute to the activation of God's plan. When in the morning Jacob realizes that he has been cheated, he bears a grudge against Laban and at the same time pushes Leah away from him. After seven days, Jacob marries his beloved Rachel. Perhaps this story led to the introduction of the record in the Law that two sisters cannot have the same husband if both of them are alive (Lev 18:18: "You will not take a woman and her sister into your harem at the same time, to have intercourse with the latter while the former is still alive").

Jacob's attachment to Rachel is directly proportional to his rejection of Leah. The narrator, however, shows that not only Jacob is the perpetrator of Leah's rejection, leaving the reader only a laconic note: "When Yahweh saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb" (Gen 29:31). It is not known exactly who rejected Leah. It seems, however, that the narrator had in mind the rejection of Leah by everyone, her husband father, and her sister.<sup>11</sup>

God, who until now was "absent" in the relations of Laban and Jacob, gets into the situation of such a rejection. Thanks to divine interference into this family drama, the reader can begin to see the contrast between Jacob's treatment of Leah and God's behavior towards Leah (Gen 29:30-31). In the biblical text, the name of Jacob is linked with the name of Rachel and the name of God with the name of Leah. Moreover, God does for Leah things he does not do for Rachel. Therefore it can be said that the narrator here shows God and Leah as spouses in an intimate relationship. Leah is the one who has the privilege of being in the heart of God's care. It is God who initiates the change that takes place towards the "hated-innocent".<sup>12</sup> Above all, God opens the womb of Leah with his blessing. He becomes like her husband, thanks to whom she bears offspring.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. D.J. Zucker, M. Reiss, *The Matriarchs of Genesis*, p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, p. 129.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J.E. Cook, *Genesis*, s. 33; cf. D.J. Zucker, M. Reiss, *The Matriarchs of Genesis*, p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Ross-Burstall, *Leah and Rachel*, pp.166-167.

The choice made by Jacob and the action of God introduce tension between the promise (God's plan) and its implementation (human's plan). Leah, however, becomes a catalyst for this tension: "Leah is the first and primary wife by whom the blessing of Isaac and the promise of God will be fulfilled."<sup>13</sup>

God's intervention leads to the situation that Leah, who until now was an agent between Laban and Jacob, becomes the foreground figure. Thanks to God's concern and initiative towards Leah the reader perceives her no longer as a silent object of trade and rejection, but as a woman who creates a relationship and takes the floor.<sup>14</sup>

It should also be noted that through Leah God does not let Jacob forget about his guilt towards Esau. God's interference becomes a turning point in the history of Jacob and Esau, as well as in the story of Rachel and Leah. It appears that Rachel as a beloved woman of God's chosen one should inherit a blessing with Him. Leah, like Esau, should be removed from the blessing. However, it is not the case. Once again, God's action shows Jacob very clearly that the history of his life is guided by the plan of God. The blessing intended for Esau is given to Jacob, and the one designed for Rachel is given to Leah. Thus it becomes a source of conflict between the sisters.

### **Leah as a sister**

The reader does not know what the relationship between Leah and Rachel was like before the marriage of Jacob and Leah. The natural question posed by the reader seems to be: Did Rachel know that her father was preparing Leah instead of her to marry Jacob? If so, how did she feel and why she did not do anything? Therefore, it seems that Laban's trick was so sophisticated that Rachel did not know what was happening until the last moment, which is why the biblical text is silent about the role of Rachel during Jacob's first wedding. However, this event leads the reader to experience the feeling of tension between the sisters.

The possible beginnings of the conflict between Leah and Rachel are described in Midrash Tanhuma. According to the text, Leah and Rachel were born from the same womb, so it can be assumed that Leah and Rachel were twins. Midrash presents this situation as follows:

You may know this also from Rachel and Leah. At first Leah was not considered worthy of marrying anyone but Esau, while Rachel was destined to wed Jacob.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 167.

Leah would sit at the crossroads inquiring about Esau's actions, and they would tell her: 'Oh, he is a wicked man; he sheds blood and waylays passers-by, he is covered with red hair as a garment and commits every kind of abomination against God'. Upon hearing all of this, she would cry bitterly: 'My sister Rachel and I were born of the same womb, yet Rachel is to marry the righteous man and I the wicked Esau'. She wept and fasted until her sight became weak. Hence it is written: *And Leah's eyes were weak* (Gen 29:17). *And the Lord saw that Leah was hated* (ibid., v. 31). This verse indicates that Esau's actions were hateful to her. However, when Rachel learned that she was to marry Jacob she was elated and became arrogant. Once they both were married to Jacob, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: She cried, and fasted, and despised Esau's behavior, and prayed to me. It would be unjust to keep her from the righteous one. Indeed I will let her bear sons first. Thus it is said: *And the Lord saw that Leah was hated*.<sup>15</sup>

This quote is an illustration how unhappy Leah was. It also emphasizes Rachel's arrogance towards her sister, which may indeed be the reason of a conflict.

The narrator shows the conflict between the sisters, especially in the mandrakes dispute scene (Gen 30:14-21). In the scene it is even clearer that the main characters of the whole section devoted to Jacob and his wife are Leah, Rachel and God. Jacob does not play such a significant role at all. The triad of God, Leah and Rachel is the prism of dynamic actions in this family.<sup>16</sup>

When Ruben brings mandrakes to his mother Leah, Rachel asks her sister to give it to her. She thinks that in this way she will provide herself with fertility (mandrakes were considered to be a fertility-promoting measure) and will fulfill her dream of motherhood. Rachel's desire of motherhood and Leah's longing for husband's love resonate in a question addressed by Leah to her younger sister: "Is it not enough to have taken my husband, without your taking my son's mandrakes as well?" (Gen 30:15). They are the axis of the conflict between the sisters.<sup>17</sup> This tension between Rachel and Leah can be found already in Eve. Akeydat Yitzchak says:

Originally, Adam had called Eve "*ishah*", emphasizing her parity with man, i.e. *ish*. After the episode with the tree of knowledge, he called her *chavah*, emphasizing the female element within her, and the fact that she was the mother of all subse-

<sup>15</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma*, part 4.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. Ross-Burstall, *Leah and Rachel*, p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. S.H. Dresner, *Rachela and Lea*, p. 152.

quent human beings. Between these two names, the two functions of woman are defined.<sup>18</sup>

On the one hand, a woman wants a man who would love her, guarantee her safety and satisfy her needs, also in the sexual sphere. On the other hand, a woman wishes to be the giver of life and fulfill her role as a mother. In each woman's life comes a moment in which the conflict between the desire for man's love and the desire for motherhood grow. In fear of this conflict, women look for various forms of replacement, usually concentrating on one of these roles. It happens that they realize themselves sexually, take on male roles without thinking about the consequences, which makes them ignore their maternal instinct. Or, they overly care for their children, neglecting their husband, without being able to help him (see Gen 3:18–25).

This tension is already present in the names of the first woman, so you can call it "Eve's conflict". "Eve's conflict" is also visible in the dispute between Leah and Rachel. Leah wants her husband's love whereas Rachel dreams of motherhood. Their desires become so strong that the sisters begin the rivalry for Jacob's attention. It is similar to the rivalry for the birthright between Esau and Jacob. Esau lost his birthright for a bowl of lentils whereas Jacob in the conflict between the sisters gained himself the rank of the subject of the fight. He was traded for mandrakes. And it would seem that both sisters won in this game. However, it is not like this. Rachel not only lost her husband's love (for one night, but how important one!), but also the mandrakes did not provide her with fertility. It seems that Leah is the only, at least momentary, winner of the game. She won her husband's love for one night and she conceived another, fifth son. For Rachel, this exchange does not bring any tangible benefits because it is God who deals the cards in the game.

### **Leah as a mother**

Although Leah, unlike Rachel, is not loved by her husband, she receives the gift of motherhood from God. She is also the first woman who gives names to her children on the pages of the Holy Bible. In the first generation of patriarchs, Abraham names his sons (Gen 16:15; 21:3). In the second generation, Isaac and Rebecca do this together (Gen 25:25–26). In the third generation, names are given by both Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:32–35; 30:6.8. etc.). Only in the case

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<sup>18</sup> *Akeydat Yitzchak*: 9:1.



of Benjamin Jacob interferes about his name.<sup>19</sup> This shows that the role of the Israeli matriarchs in this respect is very important. They, as mothers of twelve generations (biological or adoptive), give names to all their children. The history of Israel is therefore a reflection of the desires of mothers included in the names of their children. At this point, we will analyze the names of six biological sons of Leah.

Ross-Burstall claims that each of the names given by Lea is her personal prayer and lamentation that she elevates to God.<sup>20</sup> The same author also notes: "The narrator of 29:31-35 has a role comparable to a midwife who reports what is brought into being by the action of God and the response of Leah."<sup>21</sup> What is the significance of the names Leah gives to her sons?

### *Reuben*

Gen 29:32: "'Yahweh has seen my misery'; and she said, 'Now my husband will love me.'"

Perhaps, at first glance, it is about the humiliation of Leah experienced by her husband's rejection. Although Leah directs her first words to God in this prayer, she counts on Reuben being her bargaining chip in her husband's bid.

### *Simeon*

Gen 29:33: "Yahweh heard that I was unloved, and so he has given me this one too."

Leah is still considering her retirement from her husband. He states that Simeon is a satisfaction from God for the suffering she has experienced being unloved by her husband.

### *Levi*

Gen 29:34: "This time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons."

In the case of Levi, Leah does not even mention God. She directs all her desires and dreams towards Jacob. She forgets the One who opened her womb and gave her the gift of motherhood.

The names of these three sons are an illustration of the suffering that Leah experiences because of Jacob's rejection. Her attention is so focused on what she is experiencing that she laments because of her retreat from her husband and when giving the name to her third son, she ceases to remember God's in-

<sup>19</sup> Cf. D.J. Zucker, M. Reiss, *The Matriarchs of Genesis*, p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Ross-Burstall, *Leah and Rachel*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 167.

tervention in her life. However, even though Levi was supposed to be a son thanks to whom Jacob would attach to his first wife, God would tie Levi to him, making from him a progenitor of generation of priests and helpers in the Tent of Meeting, and later in the Temple of Jerusalem.

### *Judah*

Gen 29:35: "Now I shall praise Yahweh!"

Only in the case of this son, Leah is able to focus on giving glory to God. Perhaps for this reason, it is Judah, the one in whom the mother praises the Creator who becomes the progenitor of the Messianic family. It is interesting to note that Judah is neither the first, nor the last nor the third son. Why is the fourth child so special?

The number four in the biblical sense is the cosmic number (e.g. the four sides of the world) and denotes everything that is conceivable.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps God chose Judah to inscribe what is humanly understood into God's logic. The most appropriate and logical act of Leah was to give glory to God. Her husband did not love her and he removed her from him. Only God's intervention made Leah become the guarantor of God's promises despite Jacob's behavior. Perhaps, her act to glorify God opens the door for God's election of Judah.

### *Issachar*

Gen 30,18: "God has given me my reward for giving my slave-girl to my husband".

Issachar is a son conceived when Rachel offers Leah the night with Jacob in return for the mandrakes. His name, however, refers to Leah's decision of handing over her slave-girl to give birth to more children of Jacob. Although in the case of Judah Leah praised God, in Issachar she returns to her desire for husband's love. This shows the condition of human nature that leads from worshipping God in spite of everyday worries, back to earthly life and an attempt to reverse the bad fate.

### *Zebulun*

Gen 30:20: "God has given me a fine gift; now my husband will bring me presents, for I have borne him six sons".

Leah still wants to be recognized by her husband. Five sons (everyone except Judah) are to become for her the possibility of being loved by her husband. Motherhood is for her not so much a gift and a task but a way to realize the desire to have a loving husband by her side. It seems, therefore, that in these short

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. F. Reirterer, *Liczby*, pp. 428–429.

monologues in which Leah gives names to her five sons she is selfish, referring more to her own unsatisfied desire than to the joy of having children.

## Conclusion

Leah is presented by the biblical narrator in five social roles as a woman, daughter, wife, sister and mother. Leah is a beautiful woman who can function in society as an object of lust for men. As a daughter, she is treated by her father as a commodity and given to Jacob as his wife although he does not want her. As a wife, Leah is unhappy because Jacob does not love her. Because of it, she comes into conflict with her sister. The tension between the sisters is a reflection of the "Eve's conflict" taking place between the desire for man's love and motherhood. Rachel is loved by Jacob whereas Leah, thanks to God's intervention, becomes the mother of six sons and a daughter. In the names given to all biological sons except for Judah, her personal drama of rejection by her husband and the lack of his love resounds. The exception is Judah, in which Leah praises God for everything He has done to her.

The history of this matriarch shows that despite human adversities, God does not remain deaf to the cry of the oppressed. From the most rejected and unloved by her father, husband and sister, she becomes the mother of the largest number of generations of Israel.

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