



Leah and Rachel: A Tale of Two Sisters

JOAN ROSS-B URSTALL

Johnsonville, Wellington, New Zealand

It is said that we learn by asking questions of our teachers. I wish to begin by acknowledging the teachers whose foundational scholarship in critical methodology has profoundly influenced our present approach to the Bible. I speak of Claus Westermann and George W. Coats, among others. In the process of my research in the Genesis tale of Leah and Rachel, however, I have found myself questioning, albeit apprehensively, a number of their conclusions.

My initial questioning was triggered by Westermann's proposal that our text (Gen 29:31-30:24) could be understood as "an account of the 12 children of Jacob in the form of a genealogy with the giving of names."¹ He suggests that:

an older layer provides an account of the rivalry between Leah and Rachel, and that a later writer using the system of 12 has expanded it to a secondary genealogy...in which the reviser's main concern was to set in relief God's action in the birth of Jacob's children.²

Our text does stand within the toledoth of Isaac that begins the story of Jacob. The final form of this passage does include the genealogical elements of birth and naming. However, the narrator reports the birth of 11 sons and 1 daughter to their respective mothers. Leah or Rachel name the sons, in terms that express their particular female concerns. The separate report of the twelfth son has the function of announcing Rachel's final lament and death.

Moreover, it is not the identity of the father that needs to be stated. What is

¹C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 472.

²Ibid.

essential to the tale is the identity of the mother. Indeed, Jacob is barely there. In the wider context of the Jacob-Esau and Jacob-Laban novellas, this central tale represents his nadir. The sequence of Jacob's stolen birthright and blessing, and his subsequent flight and marriages leave this primary figure in a tight, silent corner. To be of the same bone and flesh constitutes no barrier to deceptive acts or life-threatening plans. This generation of the Abraham/Sarah dynasty is characterized by partiality and strife, be it between brothers, uncle and nephew, or sisters. Hostility and maneuvering are likewise integral to the tale of Leah and Rachel's rivalry in the motherhood stakes.

However, the family dynamic between Jacob, Leah, and Rachel provides only one

dimension of our text. The triangle that functions as prism for this family dynamic is comprised by the narrative's three primary characters: God, Leah, and Rachel (Gen 29:31, 32; 30:22-24).

"When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved..."

She responds, "The LORD has seen my affliction..."

"Then God remembered Rachel..."

She responds, "God has taken away my reproach..."

In developing these relationships, the tale of Leah and Rachel continues the ancestral narrative's theme of God's promise of posterity to Abraham. In spite of all the obstacles created by misdeed or circumstance, by human strife or barrenness, the divine response will sustain life into the next generation.

The narrative interaction among God, Leah, and Rachel crystallizes a second question: Why do the naming speeches of Leah and Rachel include language from the Psalms?

This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed, but the significance of psalmic language for the genre of the Genesis tale has remained undeveloped. Thus, for example, Walter Brueggemann comments upon Gen 29:32-35:

The narrative focuses upon Rachel. But there is an interlude for Leah. Of four sons given to her, three are named with reference to Yahweh....The seemingly incidental assertion of Leah in 29:32 is the claim of the entire narrative. God looks upon the affliction of his children.³

Brueggemann proposes that Leah's first naming speech expresses the heart of the narrative's intention; the primary character, however, is Rachel. In my view, this is an unwarranted shift of emphasis that detracts from the setting that Leah's naming speeches give to the shape and purpose of the entire passage of the two sisters.

Westermann recognizes that the later revision of the Yahwist narrative has included psalmic language: "When a child is named it gives as the reason for the name an action of God in language reminiscent of the Psalms."⁴ Commenting on the naming of Leah's second son, Simeon, he says, "The sentence: 'Yahweh has heard that I am unloved,' exhibits the clumsy combination of the Psalms and the

³Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 254-255.

⁴Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 477.

situation."⁵ Westermann does not develop the genre of psalmic language within the final narrative. His concern is the life setting of the reviser:

In a later era, when the reviser was at work, it had become necessary to set with increasing emphasis what was happening on the human level in its relationship to God. This could well be the situation into which the prophets spoke....The reviser links the story of the patriarchs immediately with the worship of his day when he gives as the reason for Judah's name his mother's exclamation 'Now I will praise Yahweh.'⁶

George W. Coats in his form-critical work on Genesis makes no reference to psalmic language. The Leah-Rachel narrative is understood in terms of birth reports where the mothers' sayings carry forward the motif of strife in the family.⁷

I. LEAH'S LAMENT OF ALONENESS

I propose that where the language of the Psalms begins a specific narrative then what follows will stand within the intention of the psalmic genres that are indicated. My analysis suggests that the genre of lament is present in Leah's and Rachel's naming speeches, and that the genre of lament becomes influential for the interpretation of the entire tale. I will illustrate this proposal by an analysis of the opening scene that I call "Leah's Lament of Aloneness." The analysis will consider the context for Leah's lament, the role of the narrator in representing God's partnership with Leah, and the essential elements of lament that are present in Leah's naming speeches.

1. The Context for Leah's Lament

The context for Leah's lament is the marriage report that transfers her from father to husband. The marriage report has the form of a work contract that her father both makes and breaks; Jacob serves Laban for seven years in exchange for a wife. Rachel is the wife that Jacob chooses; Leah is the wife that Laban gives to him. Leah's lament is the outcome of her father's deceitful action and her husband's angry response. Both men betray her.

Leah is the instrument that Laban uses to ensnare Jacob into another seven years' service for Rachel. "The trickster himself is tricked," comments Fokkelman, "for in Genesis 27 two brothers were exchanged by means of a trick before a blind man; in Genesis 29 two sisters are exchanged by a trick in the darkness of night and behind a veil, which eliminates Jacob's sight."⁸ Well feasted, Jacob takes his wife, Rachel's image in his mind. In the morning, Jacob's image is shattered and Leah's lament begins. "And in the morning, behold (*wehinneh*), it was Leah" (29:25a).

The term *wehinneh* functions in Hebrew narrative to mark the perception of a

⁵Ibid.; 473.

⁶Ibid., 477.

⁷G. W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983)215.

⁸J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975) 129.

character as distinct from that of narrator. In this instance the word conveys what Jacob sees upon waking—Hebrew: "she Leah"—with the immediate force of his horror. Jacob speaks no word to Leah. He expresses his anger to Laban in three terse questions to which the name of Rachel is central: "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve you for Rachel? Why have you deceived me?" (29:25b).

In the wider context of the Jacob-Esau novella, the younger son has remained true to his character by desiring the younger daughter. Laban, however, insists upon the precedence of the elder sibling. He uses the term "firstborn," emphasizing the privilege of being born first. It is the very term that Jacob used when he lied to Isaac in saying he was "Esau your firstborn." This time

the younger son has not had his way. Leah is Jacob's "comeuppance" in addition to being his snare.

To this point Laban is the character in charge of the action in the plot. He turns the tables upon Jacob and commands Jacob's work and domestic conditions. Laban disposes of his daughters without naming them. He commands Jacob to finish the bridal week of "this one," and then he will give him "the other one." The ensuing report of Rachel's marriage in 29:28-30 emphasizes Jacob's subservience to Laban's terms. The narrator repeats Laban's terms in the act of Jacob's fulfilment of them. Jacob is allowed no further speech on the matter. Laban's control over his household is consummated.

At this very place, however, the narrator introduces a new thought as he recalls the dynamic of Jacob's single-minded desire for Rachel: "So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah" (29:30a).

The dynamic of Jacob's partiality to Rachel has as its counterpart his willful neglect of Leah. Leah's is the face of Laban's mastery and deception; her image is the broken image of the promised Rachel. The elder and younger sister are unequally yoked in competition for their jointly owned husband. This is the setting for Leah's lament.

2. *God's Partnership with Leah*

Consider the role of the narrator in this scene. The narrator shares in God's omniscience. "The reader's perception is formed by what the narrator reveals of his omniscience, and the way it is revealed," writes Adele Berlin.⁹

What the narrator reveals is God's discriminatory perspective towards Leah: "When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren" (29:31). God as active participant in the narrative has been absent from the dealings of Laban and Jacob that have disposed of Leah and Rachel. Now the narrator emphasizes that nothing can be hidden from the all-seeing knowledge of God, by moving swiftly from the wider family scene of 29:28-30 to the specific focus of God's perspective in 29:31. In the structure of 29:30-31 the narrator juxtaposes the action and attitude of Jacob towards Rachel with those of God towards Leah.

⁹Adele Berlin, *The Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983) 52 (emphasis mine).

Jacob's name is linked to his partiality to Rachel and his distance from Leah. God's name is linked to his partiality to Leah. What God does for Leah, God does not do for Rachel. In this way the narrator brings God and Leah into partnership. The character who has the privilege of being at the heart of God's concern is the unloved (literally, the hated) wife.

I suggest that the way the narrator's omniscience is revealed may be termed "an annunciation to the unloved matriarch." It is two-fold:

(a) The narrator represents God's discriminatory concern for Leah and reports God's actions towards her in the conception of sons.

(b) The narrator represents Leah's distress by the development of a prayer of lament that she expresses at the birth and naming of the sons.

In this way the narrator represents a partnership in which God is the initiator of change for an innocent character who is unjustly used. This has correspondence to the setting of certain

individual psalms of lament, for example, Ps 10:12-14:

Rise up, O LORD; O God lift up your hand;
do not forget the oppressed.
Why do the wicked renounce God,
and say in their hearts
“You will not call us to account”?
But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief
that you may take it into your hands;
the helpless commit themselves to you;
you have been the helper of the orphan.

It is the hope of the Psalmist and the belief of the Genesis narrator that God will not only see trouble and grief, but will respond with action to alleviate it. God’s action towards Leah’s isolation is to grant her the blessing of fertility. The annunciation of God’s blessing to the unloved matriarch has significance in the wider context of the divine promise of posterity to Abraham. Jacob’s single-minded desire for Rachel represents a threat to the matriarch Leah; this constitutes an integral part of the tension between promise and fulfilment throughout the ancestral narratives.

Jacob cannot apportion God’s promise of progeny to his preferred wife, Rachel. The outcome of husband-wife union lies in the action of God to give or withhold blessing. It is the prior wife’s position of being unloved that must first be overcome by God’s omniscience and involvement. Leah is the first and primary wife by whom the blessing of Isaac and the promise of God will be fulfilled.

God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. (Gen 28:2)

I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you, and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth. (Gen 28:13-14)

Jürgen Moltmann, in his consideration of a theology of hope, writes: “A divine promise indicates that the expected future does not have to develop within the framework of the possibilities inherent in the present, but arises from that

which is possible to the God of the promise.”¹⁰ God is the initiator of change for Leah. The first act of conception places her within the line of promise that comes to fruition through the generations of Sarah and Rebekah. The four birth reports that follow are circumstances of change that indicate Leah’s recognition within the household. Jacob, however, remains unnamed within the birth reports. 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.

3. Leah's Lament as Longing for "My Husband"

God's discriminatory blessing brings Leah to the fore as a character in the novella. Prior to this she has functioned as a named agent between the characters of Laban and Jacob, whom they have acted upon and against. When Leah becomes the object of God's concern and initiative, she develops as a character with relationship and speech. At the birth of her sons Leah responds to each circumstance of change created by God by giving voice to a prayer.

Leah bears four sons to Jacob without speaking his name or directing one word of discourse to him. Leah's sister, Rachel, is not present by name, nor, I suggest, by allusion. In this sense I disagree with Westermann that the meanings of the names of the sons "are to be explained solely by the rivalry between the sisters."¹¹

Coats likewise identifies the intention of 29:31-35 as depicting the hate that Rachel bears towards Leah: "The point of v. 31, then, is not that Jacob hates Leah....The point is rather that Rachel hates Leah. The barren-fertile opposition highlights the tension posed by the hate. Jacob's failure to love Leah is then a minor reflection of Rachel's hate."¹²

I propose that Jacob's neglect of Leah cannot be subsumed to Rachel's hatred in this way. Coats's conclusion regarding 29:31-35 is drawn from a reading of the ensuing narrative in 30:1-24. At this point in the narrative the position of Leah as "hated" stands in the prior context of the two wedding reports: her own (29:21-25), in which Jacob was deceived, and her sister's (29:28-30), in which she is put aside for Jacob's desire for Rachel. Rachel has all of Jacob's love. Leah is hated in Jacob's estrangement from her. It is in this sense that God sees that Leah is hated *before* she conceives a son by God's action of blessing. The barren-fertile opposition of the tale develops in response to the blessing of God to the matriarch Leah. The pericope of 29:31-35 is not Leah's protest at her *sister's* hatred.¹³ It is rather her lament of longing for a *husband* who does not love her although she is his prior wife.

All of Leah's speech is uttered to God in the elements of a prayer of lament in which the "other" is her estranged husband. Leah confesses her trust that God has seen her misery; her petition is that her husband will love her (29:32). Her second

¹⁰Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 103.

¹¹Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 472.

¹²G. W. Coats, *Genesis*, 214.

¹³Contra Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, who writes: "29:31-35 Leah alone. She is alone, despised by Jacob, hated by Rachel" (134).

prayer embodies the continued complaint of being hated within the confession of trust that God has heard of this (29:33). Leah's third prayer expresses her assurance of being heard; now at last her husband will be joined to her, since she has borne him three sons (29:34). Her final prayer is a vow of praise to God (29:35).

At the hopeful conclusion of her lament, the circumstances of change cease. Leah no longer carries a child within her. Her expression of lament to God, who partners her sorrow, has permitted movement from aloneness. Leah is no longer isolated within the family of Jacob. Divine intervention on behalf of the elder daughter and unloved wife has overcome the initial threat that God's promise of descendants to Jacob would go unfulfilled.

4. Wordplays and Structure

The final form of 29:31-35 fuses the genealogical elements of birth reports and namings with short prayers that develop in the form of a lament. The fusion of genres and viewpoints is linguistically achieved by the use of wordplays that associate Leah's prayers and the son's names. Both the birth reports and lament prayers stand with the annunciation of God's blessing to the unloved matriarch, Leah, that is introduced by the formula: "When the LORD saw...the LORD opened her womb" (29:31). From this basis of God's action towards Leah, the narrator's viewpoint in every way coheres with the perspective of Leah. There is no dissonance between report and prayer.

Fokkelman concludes that the name-givings are the means of revealing the inner meanings of the births. In noting Jacob's absence from the naming of his sons, Fokkelman proposes that, "All eleven names are mentioned and interpreted in the framework of the bitter struggle, the poisoning envy between Rachel and Leah."¹⁴

But Fokkelman's generalization as to the function of the names obscures them as expressions of prayer from two distinct characters. It is too easy to create Leah in Rachel's image, or to assume Leah is secondary in the narrative because she is secondary to Jacob at the outset of their marriage. In the same way that Jacob's neglect of Leah cannot be subsumed as a minor reflection of Rachel's hate, neither can Leah's name-giving be interpreted as the voice of Rachel's jealousy. This attributes too much to Rachel, a female character who is innocent of speech or action until she utters her life-or-death prayer to Jacob in the ensuing scene.

The issues for the two female characters are distinct. Leah's lack is the love of her husband. Rachel's subsequent lack is sons to her husband. There is rivalry between Leah and Rachel, but not for identical reasons. Commentators who focus upon "two females locked in struggle for one male" overlook the contribution of the name-givings to the development of two distinct characters within the narrative. Leah and Rachel each develop by way of their unique lament and praise. The wordplays fuse each birth report with its corresponding prayer of lament or praise.

¹⁴Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 133.

The scene in 29:31-35 may be structured thus:

29:31 Annunciation to the unloved matriarch, Leah.

The following four verses each comprise a birth report, a naming report, and a component of lament prayer, that are related by a wordplay.

29:35d Annunciation of rest: Leah stops bearing sons.

5. Leah's Prayers

I shall turn now to consider Leah's four prayers in response to the birth of her four sons.

a. Reuben: *Because the LORD has looked on my affliction* (29:32)

The narrator reports that Leah conceives and gives birth to a son, following God's intervention in her prospectless situation. He reports further that Leah alone names the boy with the proud exclamation of parents at the arrival of the firstborn male in the marriage. Reuben means literally, "see a son" (31). The reason for the naming, however, points not to joint

celebration, but to Leah's singular humiliation: "the LORD looked on my affliction."

Leah's speech has associations of meaning and of sound with Rachel's naming of her second and last son, Ben-Oni (35:18). As Rachel dies, she names the boy "son of my sorrow." It is significant that the same term used to describe Leah's affliction, 'ny, is also used in Hannah's lament, "O LORD of Hosts, if you will only look upon the misery ('ny) of your servant" (1 Sam 1:11). The source of Hannah's complaint is clearly indicated as barrenness. She speaks of that barrenness as "affliction"; this is typical terminology for describing the plight of lamenters (Pss 9:12; 25:18; 31:7; among others).

From this basis we may understand Leah's reason for Reuben's name as a *confession of trust* that incorporates a *complaint* and concludes with a *petition*. The confession of trust is expressed in the reflection that God has seen what is happening to her; what is happening is the complaint. The petition expresses her cry for the husband-wife relationship to be consummated with love, since it has been fruitful in producing their first-born. These elements are signified by the Hebrew word order: the sentence begins with God's sight, centers on Leah's affliction, and concludes with her cry for her husband. The narrator, however, gives no indication of the longed-for husband's response to the wife who has given his firstborn son. He is assumed in the conception of a second son at whose birth Leah again voices her lament.

b. Simeon: Because the LORD has heard that I am hated (29:33)

Hard on the heels of Leah's first petition comes the express detailing of her *complaint*. The second occasion for "hated" is in Leah's prayer. Her speech agrees with the narrator's report of what God sees (29:31). This time God *hears* the cry of the one who laments. For God to hear is the repeated plea of the psalms of lament and praise. In reviewing the crisis from which God has rescued him, the speaker of

Psalms 30 petitions: "Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper!" (v.11).

The complaint of Leah reaches the ear of her partner, the Lord. Leah regards her second son as given by God and belonging to her. The child is her *assurance* that her complaint has reached the One who can bring comfort and effect change. Leah's complaint, therefore, has the setting of a responsive *confession of trust*. This is my alternative and positive proposal to Westermann's description of a "clumsy combination of the language of the Psalms and the situation." The name Simeon is associated with the term *šm'*, literally, "he who hears." The Hebrew word order underscores their connection: "The LORD has heard that I am hated" begins Leah's prayer-speech. The phrase "She called his name Simeon" provides the narrator's agreement and conclusion to this episode.

c. Levi: Now this time my husband will be joined to me (29:34)

"Now this time" corresponds to the turning point in the Psalms of lament when the speaker moves from plea to praise. The birth of Leah's third son provides the context for her assurance that God has heard her complaint and petition. Jacob's turning to recognize Leah as his wife is the hopeful content of her assurance. Leah's speech includes her first reference to her husband in the role of father: "I have borne three sons to him." Her confidence is expressed in the naming of the son Levi, which has association of sound with the term *yillaweh*, literally, "he will

be joined.”

d. Judah: This time I will praise the LORD (29:35)

In typical form, the Psalm of lament concludes with the speaker’s vow of praise to God. Leah names her fourth son Judah, which has association of sound with the term *’ôdeh*, literally, “I will praise.” She concludes her lament of aloneness by a vow of praise to God who has brought into being a family for Leah: four sons and her once-hating husband.

II. CONCLUSION

I conclude with two proposals. First, the three essential components of Leah’s lament are:

- (a) *God*, who actively sees her position as the unloved wife
- (b) *Leah*, whose speech has an I-Thou context
- (c) “*My Husband*,” the unnamed “other,” the source of Leah’s sorrow

Second, when the narrative is understood in this way, the intention of the birth reports is seen to serve:

- (a) the wider Genesis context of God’s intervention to resolve the obstacles that threaten the fulfilment of the divine promise of descendants
- (b) as the setting for the prayers of the unloved, and therefore threatened, matriarch Leah
- (c) the inclusion of Leah within the blessing of fertility, well-being, and prosperity that stands as counterpoint to the motif of strife in the story of Jacob’s family.

JOAN ROSS-BURSTALL presented this paper at the International Congress for the Study of Religion in Melbourne, Australia, July 1992.