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WOMEN IN THE BIBLE III
RACHEL
The woman who had much but did not see

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We first encounter Rachel by the well. Her impressive starting points reveal professional independence and leadership charisma; despite being the younger daughter, she shepherded her father's flock and represented him among the local shepherds. She is exceptionally beautiful and effortlessly wins the ultimate love of Jacob -a love that did not erode through seven, or even fourteen, years of labor for her sake. This is an unprecedented relationship in biblical narrative; of Jacob alone is it said that his years of labor for Rachel "seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her" (Genesis 29:20). Despite these exceptional starting points, Rachel becomes trapped within the dictates of a patriarchal culture that sanctifies fertility as everything. Her total obsession with realizing motherhood, while neglecting her existing strengths, led to her collapse and untimely death, thereby leaving the modern reader with a tragic and existential warning sign.

In the Book of Genesis, Rachel is depicted as one of the most fascinating and complex figures in the gallery of the Matriarchs. As the younger daughter of Laban the Aramean, Rachel grew up in a home saturated with manipulation, lies, and deceit. This household, dominated by powerful male figures (Laban) alongside an older sister (Leah), may have forced the young Rachel to develop delicate survival and maneuvering skills from early childhood.

Rachel's story serves as a mirror image of Jacob's. Her work as a shepherd shaped her character. Both represent a younger generation forced to contend with older, more powerful forces within the family sphere:

- Jacob contends with his elder brother Esau, his father Isaac, and later his father-in-law Laban the Aramean, who represents the pinnacle of familial cunning.
- Rachel is required to maneuver her personal desires and aspirations between a manipulative father (Laban) -who does not hesitate to use his daughters as mere commodities- and an elder sister (Leah) who holds traditional birthright status.

The meeting of Jacob and Rachel by the well (Genesis 29:1-12) is not coincidental. While the well in biblical narrative is a conventional site for betrothals, here it also symbolizes the meeting of two kindred spirits -two young people trying to carve out their path in an adult world.

Contrary to the passive image often attributed to women in the Bible, Rachel is first introduced as a working, active woman: "And, behold, Rachel his daughter cometh with the sheep" (Genesis 29:6), and later: "for she shepherded them" (Genesis 29:9).

Laban's choice to entrust the flock to his younger daughter, Rachel, rather than to Leah carries deep interpretive significance. The text notes: "And Leah's eyes were weak; but Rachel was beautiful and well-favoured" (Genesis 29:17). Leah's "weak eyes" refer not merely to an aesthetic flaw, but to a metaphorical blindness or an inability to see far ahead and navigate space. Conversely, Rachel, possessing sharp vision and an impressive presence, is well-suited for the demanding role of shepherding.

Shepherding was by no means a given profession for a woman in the Ancient Near East. It demanded of Rachel:

1. Responsibility and vigilance: Protecting the flock from predators, weather hazards, and thieves in an open and dangerous territory.
2. Leadership and charisma: Navigating the flock and engaging in direct contact with other shepherds (men) at the well.

3. Independence: A constant presence outside the home, in the public sphere, which granted her self-confidence and unique life experience.
4. Projecting confidence and inner strength to keep the other shepherds at a distance despite her rare beauty.

Rachel is not merely "beautiful and well-favoured" (an ultimate aesthetic description she would later bequeath only to her son, Joseph); she is a woman experienced in dealing with the world, charismatic, and possessing an undeniable presence.

Despite these impressive starting points and Jacob's immense love for her -a love for which he worked seven years that seemed to him "but a few days, for the love he had to her" (Genesis 29:20)- Rachel falls into an unbearable existential trap due to her barrenness. Yet, despite her barrenness, she remains the beloved and preferred wife in whose tent Jacob routinely resides.

Jealousy of her fertile sister drives her to a desperate outburst at Jacob: "Give me children, or else I die" (Genesis 30:1). Jacob's response exposes the complexity and cruelty of relationships within the patriarchal space: "And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said: 'Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?'" (Genesis 30:2). Jacob abdicates responsibility, using hurtful words that frame her barrenness as a divine decree directed personally against her due to some mysterious sin.

Yet Rachel does not yield. She does not sink into passivity; instead, she takes active initiative and offers her handmaid, Bilhah, as a legal surrogate: "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; that she may bear upon my knees, and I also may be builded up through her" (Genesis 30:3). Unlike Sarah, who gave Hagar to Abraham as a passive act of despair, Rachel dictates clear legal terms ("she may bear upon my knees") to secure the maternal claim for herself.

The transaction over the mandrakes (Genesis 30:14-16) reveals the hidden power dynamics within Jacob's household. When Rachel asks Leah for the mandrakes found by Reuben, Leah lashes out: "Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? And wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also?". Rachel's reply -"Therefore he shall lie with thee to-night for thy son's mandrakes"- reveals a major family secret: Jacob's permanent place was in Rachel's tent. Rachel holds complete control over the household's emotional and sexual resources. Leah is forced to "hire" Jacob in exchange for the mandrakes. Rachel manages this transaction with a firm hand, proving once again that she knows how to use her power and status to get what she wants (the mandrakes, which were considered a remedy for fertility).

Her central status in the family is also evident when Jacob decides the time has come to flee Laban's house. He does not act alone; he summons his wives, Rachel and Leah, to the field -Rachel's natural and safe domain (Genesis 31:4). There, he conducts a careful consultation with them, explaining the economic and spiritual situation.

Rachel and Leah's joint response -"Is there yet any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house?" (Genesis 31:14)- presents a unified female front against an exploitative father. Rachel, having grown up in Laban's house and knowing his methods, is a full partner in the decision to leave. Her loyalty is now pledged to Jacob and the new family they have built together. Jacob, for his part, recognizes Rachel's special status; even when preparing to confront Esau, he places the handmaids and their children first, Leah and her children second, and Rachel and Joseph at the very rear of the camp -the safest and most protected position (Genesis 33:2).

Despite her immense advantages -her legendary beauty, Jacob's uncompromising love, her managerial competence, her independence, and her charisma- Rachel ultimately emerges as a tragic figure. Her existential struggle for fertility, which began with sophisticated initiative, ended in unavoidable tragedy.

Rachel's tragedy stems from her choice to define her self-worth solely through the prism of fertility. She refused to come to terms with the limitations of her life and failed to appreciate and cultivate the many tangible assets she did possess (love, freedom, influence in the tent). Her relentless struggle to bear fruit became an existential obsession that led directly to her tragic death while giving birth to Benjamin: "And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing -for she died..." (Genesis 35:18).

The height of the tragedy lays in the fact that Jacob himself killed the love of his life by his own vow in front of Laban, that the one who stole Laban Idoles - will die. He did not know that Rachel is hiding them while sitting on the camel.

Why didn't she tell him?

Did she tell him later? Did he understand finally that his vow killed her?

Did she feel doomed?

The ultimate beauty and the greatest love in the Bible collapsed into an untimely death and a lonely burial by the wayside, far from the Cave of Machpelah where her sister Leah was buried years later. Rachel lost her life, her burial in the family tomb alongside Jacob, and the memory of the generations who would ascend to the tomb of the patriarchs.

SOMMARIO

La figura biblica Rachele lascia al lettore moderno, e in particolare alle donne di oggi, un messaggio complesso e duplice: Una fonte di ispirazione e indipendenza: Rachele rappresenta la donna proattiva, attiva e lavoratrice: Un segnale d'avvertimento esistenziale: Rachele è un invito netto e doloroso a ricordare l'importanza di accettare la realtà e fare i conti con ciò che ci manca. In definitiva, la storia di Rachele è quella di un enorme potenziale rimasto inespresso a causa della sua resa ai dettami della società. Il suo personaggio ci invita a espandere la nostra definizione di identità oltre le ristrette aspettative sociali e a realizzare l'intero spettro di forze che abbiamo dentro di noi.

ABSTRACT

The biblical Rachel leaves the modern reader, and particularly women today, a complex, twofold message: A source of inspiration and independence: Rachel represents proactive, active, and working womanhood. An existential warning sign: Rachel serves as a sharp and painful reminder of the importance of accepting reality and coming to terms with what we lack. Ultimately, Rachel's story is one of immense potential left unfulfilled due to her surrender to societal dictates. Her character calls on us to expand our definition of identity beyond narrow social expectations and to realize the full spectrum of strengths within us.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Rachele
Genesi
Labano
Reuben
Giacobbe

KEYWORDS

Rachel
Genesis
Laban
Reuben
Jacob

Contributo, come da regolamento, non sottoposto a referaggio "double blind".