RACHEL, DAUGHTER OF LABAN (לָרָח, rachel; meaning “ewe”). Younger daughter of Laban. Favored and second wife of Jacob. Mother of Joseph and Benjamin. One of the two matriarchs of Israel, along with her older sister Leah. The name Rachel occurs 47 times in the entire Bible—primarily in the book of Genesis.

Etymology and Biblical Appearances

Rachel in the Old Testament

Rachel first appears while watering her father’s flocks in Gen 29:6. She encounters Jacob at a well after he has fled the murderous anger of his brother, Esau. Jacob is instantly enamored by Rachel’s beauty, which seemingly imbues him with the strength necessary to remove a large stone covering the well by himself (Gen 29:9–12). Rachel accompanies Jacob back to her father’s—Laban’s—house, where Jacob agrees to work for his uncle for seven years, asking for Rachel’s hand in marriage as his payment (29:18–20). At the conclusion of seven years, which seemed only a short duration, given Jacob’s deep love for Rachel (Gen 29:20), Laban deceives Jacob on the wedding night by giving him Leah—the elder, less attractive daughter—instead. Laban responds to Jacob’s accusation of fraud by declaring “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn” (Gen 29:26 NRSV), an obvious echo of Jacob’s earlier successful deception of his father Isaac and brother Esau that saw Jacob procure both the right of the firstborn (Gen 25:27–34) and the paternal blessing (Gen 27:1–45). Jacob agrees to work an additional seven years in exchange for Rachel’s hand in marriage.

Though now married to both sisters, Jacob’s love and devotion remains primarily with Rachel (Gen 29:30). However, while Rachel is barren, Leah gives birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah (Gen 29:31–35), leading Rachel to take recourse by giving her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob. Bilhah gives birth to Dan and Naphtali. These children functioned as Rachel’s own, evidenced in the fact that she is the one who names them (Gen 30:1–8). But Leah bears more children to Jacob—Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah (Gen 30:17–21)—and it is only after this that God turns His attention to Rachel, opening her womb and allowing her to conceive Joseph, who would become Jacob’s favorite son (Gen 30:22–24; see Anderson, Jacob and the Divine Trickster, 102–05).

Rachel next appears in the narrative alongside her sister Leah, with whom she seems to have made peace, giving their mutual consent to Jacob’s plan to move his family back to his homeland (Gen 31:1–16). Prior to leaving, however, Rachel steals her father’s teraphim (Gen 31:19). It appears that these are household gods that would have served as a blessing for the home in which they reside, and may have functioned in divinatory practices (Gunkel, Genesis, 334;
Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 493; Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 273). Parallels also exist in the Nuzi texts, where possessing the *teraphim* could give one a legal right to the estate (Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 85; Speiser, *Genesis*, 245). Rachel hides the *teraphim* under her saddle, and when Laban catches up to them and accuses Jacob of the theft, Jacob allows Laban to search his camp and unwittingly pronounces a death sentence on whomever Laban discovers hiding them. Rachel proves that she is equally adept at deception as her husband and father, apologizing to Laban that she is not able to dismount her saddle because “the way of women is upon me” (*Gen 31:35* NRSV). By fleeing with Jacob, stealing the *teraphim*, and lying to her father, Rachel has pledged her loyalty to Jacob. It also seems that God functions as a trickster along with Rachel; He is able to “demonstrate his superiority by protecting his people and discrediting the images and power of rival deities” (Matthews and Mims, “Jacob the Trickster,” 189; see also Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster*, 124–26). Failing to find his stolen goods, Laban resigns himself to bidding his family farewell and establishing a covenant and boundary between Jacob and himself.

As Jacob and his family continue their journey homeward, Rachel begins to recede from the narrative. She is next mentioned in *Gen 33*, where Jacob’s favoritism for her and their son Joseph is evident in the arrangement of the processional toward Esau. Rachel and Joseph are placed at the back of the line—where they would be most protected if Esau and the 400 men accompanying him decided to attack—behind Leah and her children, who are behind the maids and their children (*Gen 33:1–3*).

Rachel dies between Bethel and Ephrath while giving birth to her second child, Benjamin (*Gen 35:16–21*). Women’s deaths are seldom recounted in the Old Testament and so it is significant that Rachel’s receives mention (Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 87). She initially names the child ben-oni, meaning “son of my sorrow,” but Jacob calls him Benjamin, meaning “son of the right hand.” Rachel is buried on the way to Ephrath, part of the later tribal territory of Benjamin; Jacob marks her grave with a pillar.

Outside of Genesis, Rachel’s name appears three times in the Old Testament. In *Ruth 4:11*, Rachel is mentioned with Leah at the wedding of Boaz and Ruth as the matriarchs of the people Israel. They are described as those “who together built up the house of Israel” (NRSV). This reference appreciates the fact that it is only with the children of Jacob—who is renamed Israel—that the promise of a “great nation” comes to fruition (*Gen 12:1–3; Gen 32:28–29; 35:10*). In *1 Sam 10:2*, Samuel anoints Saul and instructs him to find two men near Rachel’s tomb with whom he is to speak. The third and final mention of Rachel in the Old Testament occurs in *Jer 31:15*, where she is prophesied as weeping over the fate of her children, specifically her lost descendants of Ephraim, son Joseph—who represent the 10 northern tribes decimated by the Assyrians.

*Rachel in the New Testament*
Rachel is mentioned a single time in the New Testament. Matthew 2:18 picks up the image of Rachel weeping for her children from Jer. 31:15, appropriating this image to reference Herod’s massacre of the innocents.

In Comparison with Leah

The sisters Rachel and Leah appear quite different. Rachel is described as especially beautiful, and while Leah’s eyes are described as being “lovely” (Gen 29:17 NRSV), the Hebrew term employed here may also mean “weak.” Given that a contrast between the sisters is implied, the less flattering “weak” appears the more likely translation (Turner, Genesis, 128). The incongruity in appearance seems balanced by an incongruity in status: Leah is the firstborn daughter, while Rachel is the younger and thus labeled “insignificant.” However, Jacob’s heart clearly belongs to Rachel.

Rachel and Leah differ most markedly their capacity for childbearing. Leah is fertile, while Rachel is infertile. Rachel’s jealousy and anger over this is directed at Leah. It is only after Rachel gives birth to Joseph that the animosity between the two appears to decrease. They appear unified in agreement with Jacob’s assessment of their father’s devious treatment, and they both agree to join Jacob in flight (Schneider, Mothers of Promise, 93).

Israelite Marriage Customs in the Story of Rachel

It was preferred and encouraged for an Israelite to marry within the extended family. Abraham says in Gen 20:12 that Sarah is his half-sister—the daughter of Terah, Abraham’s father. However, they do not share the same mother. Isaac and Jacob both marry within the lineage of Terah. Such a contract maintained land claims during the period of the early tribal confederation and would have become especially vital during and after the period of the Babylonian exile (597 BC–539 BC), when a claim to land was ambiguous. It has been suggested that this model also served an important function—presenting its key characters as marrying within a tightly defined family line, while pruning off other members from the elect family tree (Lot, Ishmael, Esau). The Genesis narratives supported the program of endogamy advocated in Ezra—Nehemiah, and thus upheld their unique claim to the possession of the promised land as an inheritance (Heard, Dynamics of Diselection, 20–21, 178). The primary concern in this type of marriage focuses on the importance of the perpetuation of the family line over time in order to protect property (Petersen, “Genesis and Family Values,” 16–17).

Rachel’s marriage to Jacob is unique for another reason: she shares her spouse with her sister. While the Genesis narratives portray the marriages as the result of deception perpetrated by Laban against Jacob, within anthropology this paradigm of marriage is quite well known. It is called sororal polygyny—when man marries sisters (Petersen, “Genesis and Family Values,” 17). Gunkel notes: “Marriage to two sisters was prohibited by later law (Lev 18:18), but must have been considered entirely unobjectionable in the ancient period, otherwise one would not have recounted
such of Jacob” (Gunkel, *Genesis*, 320). It is in fact possible that the law in Leviticus actually arises out of the problems that become evident in the lives of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel (Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 89).

**Rachel and History**

Martin Noth suggests that Rachel represents an original tribe or clan. The 12 children born to Jacob by Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah are the eponymous ancestors of the Israelite tribal league, most in evidence in the book of Judges. Joseph and Benjamin, the two sons born to Rachel, are requisite members of this confederation, and the place of birth for each of these two children may shed some light on the cultural memory lying behind their respective places of origin (Noth, *Das System*).

**Bibliography**


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