

THE WOMAN WRESTLING WITH FATE – ON RACHEL IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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Rachel is the wife of Jacob, the immediate ancestor of the Israelites. Her life story which is scattered in the Book of Genesis seems to show that her life was a tragedy and she was almost a loser, though she was especially beloved by her husband. But a more in-depth reading suggests that the narrative about Rachel is actually so subtle as to imply that there is another possible interpretation of Rachel as a literary character: a life of dignity and passion. Rachel's confrontation and even wrestle with hardships presents to readers a brave and active woman image, along with her happiness, sorrow, despair and hope. Meanwhile, her life is also a symbol of tragic, but unyielding historical experience that is shared by all the early matriarchs as well as the Israelites.

Key words: Rachel, Genesis, narrative, wrestling

There are many women characters who never really have the opportunity of stepping onto the center stage of the Biblical narrative before they disappear. However, their stories are fragmentally recorded in this or that way in Biblical history and if we piece those fragments together, we may see images of surprisingly vivid individuals in historical scroll of ancient Israelites. Among them, Rachel, the second wife of Jacob, stands out in a unique stance: a wrestler. Jacob wrestled with God at Jabbok and was renamed by God as Israel, meaning "wrestled with God",¹ while his most beloved spouse Rachel has been wrestling all her life, for a different purpose.

1. Give me children, or else I die

Like Jacob, Rachel was not born the first child and wanted the rights of first-born, but unlike him, Rachel is not so lucky in her struggling for birthright. Jacob bought the birthright from his brother Esau with a bowl of red pottage and bread (25: 29-34), and got his father's blessing with the help of his mother

¹ All the quotations in this article from the Bible, unless specially marked, are taken from KJV.

(27: 1-35). While in Rachel's case, it was her whom Jacob fell in love with and was willing to work for seven years, but on the wedding night, Rachel's place was taken by her sister Leah. Her father denied her right of being marrying first, saying, "It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn." (29: 26). Thus in the first round of struggle for right, Rachel was defeated by custom, which is as if stressing that birthright is an unchangeable law that the second-born should by no means overtake the first-born, and has to wait patiently for her own natural turn.

Rachel became Jacob's second wife in the end and Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah", but soon after that, she had to face the second round of wrestling: to become a mother. The life after marriage imposes an even bigger problem for Rachel: God opened Leah's womb but not hers. As a wife, giving birth to a son is the uppermost concern of Rachel, as well as all the other women in the Bible. It is actually the very first task and instruction that God gave to human: "Be fruitful, and multiply..." (1: 28). Rachel, though loved by her husband, was not favoured by God and lagged far behind her sister Leah in terms of fruitfulness, while the latter gave birth to one son after another until she had four sons in a row, and named them Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah respectively. But Rachel was kept barren. It is in this situation that Rachel opened her mouth and uttered the first ever sentence since her appearance in the Scripture: "Give me children, or else I die." (30: 1b)

The first speech of a character is usually considered essential for characterisation and often implies essential features of a character.² It has been more than 10 years since Rachel first appeared in the Bible in Genesis 29. In fact, women have very little chance of voicing themselves throughout the Bible, especially by direct speech – one of the basic means of characterisation. Sadly to see, this first direct speech by Rachel was uttered in such a shocking tone, which almost set a basic keynote for her life – desperate.

Giving birth or death! What follows is the odyssey that Rachel takes to reach the destination of having a son in her name. Her first try is to give her maid to Jacob and hoped to be called a mother by adopting her maid's child. She satisfactorily got two sons from her maid Bilhah named them like what her sister Leah did. She was so overwhelmed by this success that she declared herself to have prevailed over her sister. But what readers see is another picture: her so-called "prevail" is no more than a self-comfort – after all, her own womb is still closed. And what happens next makes the so-called "prevail" even ironic: Leah did the same thing as Rachel – giving her maid to Jacob and got two more sons – and she named them Gad (meaning "a troop cometh") and Asher (meaning "call me blessed") (30: 10-13). Leah's proud declaration of being blessed and her sons coming in troops contrasts sharply against Rachel's failure.

In fact, the sister rivalry between Rachel and Leah in Genesis runs somewhat like a hidden line behind the brother rivalry of Jacob and Esau. However, the

² ALTER, R. Genesis: Translation and Commentary, p. 157.

two lines don't meet not just because they are different as male and female, but also in terms of the ending of the younger ones. The second born Jacob is, he was declared by God as "the elder shall serve the younger" (25: 23) before his birth, which already endows Jacob a theological right. Rachel tried as hard as Jacob if not more, though in vain. Without God's approval and help, she is like the *ficelle* in Henry James novels, serve only as a foil for the success of the hero – Jacob. She is eager to keep pace with Jacob, but never actually seems to have achieved anything.³

At last, "God remembered Rachel... hearkened to her, and opened her womb" (30: 22). Rachel gave birth to her first son: "God hath taken away my reproach" (23), as she was assuring herself. She named her son "Joseph", hoping that "the Lord shall add to me another son" (24). The birth of the new-born baby apparently had been not just a big relief, but also kindled a bigger hope for her. It might indicate a turning point for a better life. Hopefully, she was pregnant again as she had been wishing. Is she going to see her days to come?

Her days did come, but ended abruptly at where it began: she enjoyed only a short period of being a happy mother before she died unexpectedly during the birth of her second son. Death concludes her lifelong tragedy at a "climax": she died on the way when Jacob brings the whole family back to where his father and grandfather had covenant with God. Rachel was buried at the roadside while her "foe" Leah was buried with her beloved husband Jacob, along with other ancestors and ancestress (49: 29-31). Once again, for the third round, Rachel failed, even after her death.

For her whole life, Rachel seems to be a loser, who could compete neither against life, nor her sister, alive or dead. At her deathbed, Rachel named her newly added son *Benoni*, meaning "son of my sorrow", which is a tragic footnote of her sorrowful life, though it was changed by Jacob to *Benjamin*, leaving Rachel's sorrow behind.

2. The way of women is upon me

Rachel is criticised by scholars for stealing her father's family figurine and lying to her father, which is regarded as her biggest contamination and partly the reason of her death. But there are two questions needed to be answered before we settle on this conclusion about Rachel: why does she steal the figurine? And how did she lie to her father?

This stealing and lying episode happens when Jacob was to leave Haran, his father-in-law Laban's place, and go back to Canaan, where his father and grandfather had covenant with God. As the story goes, in order to marry Rachel, Jacob had been working for Laban for fourteen years. After that, he was employed by Laban and worked as a shepherd for him for another six years, like what Jacob himself complained, "in the day the drought consumed me, and the

³ PARDES, I. Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach, pp. 64 – 65.

frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes” (31: 40). According to Jacob, he had been devoting to Laban for 20 years, but Laban changed Jacob’s wages ten times to exploit him ruthlessly. Jacob is very good at shepherding, and with the blessing of God, he owned a big herd and became very rich. Fearing that Laban and his sons might be jealous of his fortune and hurt him, Jacob decided to leave with his wives and children and property. He and his family left secretly. Laban didn’t discover this until the third day and seven days later, he and his sons overtook Jacob and his family.

Laban questioned Jacob: “And now, though thou wouldest needs be gone, because thou sore longedst after thy father's house, yet wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?” (31:30) To prove his innocence, Jacob suggested that Laban search all the tents of his family. When Laban reached Rachel’s tent, Rachel hid the figurine in the camel’s furniture and sat on it, saying to her father: “Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up before thee; for the custom of women is upon me.” (31:35) Laban searched all the other places, and “found them not”. (31: 34)

If this the lie that Rachel told, what does it mean then when she said that “the custom of women is upon me”? Traditionally, it is understood that what Rachel means suggests that she is in the period of menstruation, and she takes advantage of this special women’s physiological feature to cheat her father and “scare” him away, since menstruation was regarded unclean. Feminist critics argued that the patriarchal narrator is here criticising Rachel for being a cheater, and even criticising all women as a whole, since Rachel is a woman and menstruation is a special women thing that Rachel’s cheating is another proof that women are inferior to men.⁴

However, does “the custom” really refer to menstruation? Literally may be. But in the translation of NRSV, which is closer to original Hebrew meaning, what Rachel said is translated into “the way of women is upon me”. Does “the way of woman” mean menstruation? Jacqueline Lapsley’s research shows that there is no usage of “the way of women” or “women’s way” as menstruation in the Bible.⁵ However, “the way of women” is mentioned in Proverbs and goes like this:

“The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid. Such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness.” (Proverbs 30: 18-20)

“The way of woman” here has nothing to do with menstruation, but “the way of adulteress”, the way that has “done no wrong”, the way (of women) that is challenging the way of men!

⁴ FUCHS, E. Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative, pp. 79 – 80.

⁵ LAPSLEY, J.E. Whispering the Word: Hearing Women’s Stories in the Old Testament, p. 27.

Comparing with this “way”, we may make a guess that Rachel’s “way” also suggests that she has “done no wrong” even when she steals the figurine of family gods. But why not? And why did she steal the figurine anyway? Is it really proof that she, as the representative of women, is weak and false? For a better understanding of all these, we may have to trace back to the relationship of Rachel and her father as well as her rivalry with Leah.

Firstly, the marriage which should have belonged to Rachel was offered to Leah disregarding Rachel’s feeling; secondly, both she and Leah were traded for Jacob’s labour, which totals 14 years. Therefore, when Jacob decided to leave for Canaan, Rachel, as well as Leah, criticised their father: “Are we not counted of him strangers? for he hath sold us, and hath also quite devoured our money.” (31: 15) The word “sold” clearly shows their hatred towards their father.⁶ But as Esther Fuchs points out, the cheating of women dues to men’s mistreating women as inferior, thus they couldn’t take action against men face to face.⁷ Rachel cannot express her dissatisfaction like what Jacob did against Laban, nor can she settle the dispute via an agreement or a covenant, which is typically men’s way. As a woman and a daughter, there may be only one way left for Rachel to let out her feeling or to make up what she believes her father owes her: by the way of women.

On the other hand, if the figurine does symbolise family god, which could bring its bearer holy blessings, Rachel’s taking of the figurine may be out of a long-term consideration for her or even her son’s future, since in The Book of Deuteronomy, it says:

“If a man have two wives... he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn: But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.” (21: 15-17)

When Rachel’s eldest Joseph was born, there are already eight elder brothers ahead of him. As the ninth son of his father, Joseph undoubtedly will have to face the disadvantageous birth order. He may have to pay a lot of effort and pain as his parents did in order to gain more rights, and maybe even in vain like what his mother has already experienced. However, a family god figurine may possibly change the situation and secure him more blessings than hardships. Considering this, Rachel may have hoped that with the figurine in her hand, her own painful life may have chance of turning to the better, of getting more family rights and higher status. Meanwhile the figurine may also ensure a better future for her sons with the power of family gods.⁸ We know later that Joseph

⁶ NEWSOM, C.A., RINGE, S.H. The Women’s Bible Commentary, p. 24.

⁷ FUCHS, E. Ibid., p. 72.

⁸ DRAFFKORN, A.E. “Ilani-Elohim”, pp. 216 – 24.

was the most beloved son and heir of Jacob and he saved the Hebrew from starvation, but what kind of role the figurine played in Joseph's advancement remains a mystique.

Therefore, to Rachel, stealing/taking the figurine could have at least two layers of implications: it could just be an expression of her dissatisfaction towards her father, an outlet of her hatred, an indirect punishment of her father; or it may be a hidden wish for her and her sons' future, and a hope for divine power to reverse her fate.⁹

Interestingly, this episode happens in Rachel's tent, which is absolutely a woman's space. In this space which is dominated by women, Rachel ironically owned her father's figurine via "the way of women". To some extent, Rachel beat her father because of the special physiological feature of women and voiced her own "way".

I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed

Though a sad mother, the image of Rachel as a wife and a woman is neither weak nor pathetic – nothing negative in fact – but a powerful and active character who deserves to be comparable with other matriarchs in early Hebrew history. The scattered episodes of Rachel have already depicted a woman who has strong love and passion for life. She is in fact so passionately striving for a better life that she once named the second son of her maid *Naftulim*, meaning wrestling and struggle,¹⁰ which to some extent implying that she is a "wrestler" like her husband Jacob who once wrestled with God.

In the first place, her wrestling with her sister Leah runs throughout her story. Compared with Leah, the narrator gives Rachel more initiatives in action. Though the second daughter, Rachel was the first to meet Jacob: while Jacob was speaking to the local people, "Rachel came with her father's sheep: for she kept them." (29: 9) Keeping sheep is obviously an important task for nomadic tribes, Rachel's role of shepherding suggests that she carries important responsibility at home, or at least that she has the ability of shepherding outdoor, which is traditionally regarded as where women should not stay.¹¹ Then knowing who Jacob was, Rachel "ran and told her father". (29: 12) Meir Sternberg analyses Genesis 18 and points out that the narrator used action verbs like "run" and "haste" to suggest Abraham's hospitality and his fear of God.¹² Accordingly, Rachel herein "ran" and "told" her father the news about Jacob may also indicates her being active. Her activeness also reminds readers the

⁹ PARDES, I. *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, p. 79.

¹⁰ ALTER, R. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, p. 159.

¹¹ Jacob's daughter Dinah's going out leads to her being raped and violent revenge of her brothers on the local people, which proves that a women's place should be kept indoor. See Gen. 34.

¹² STERNBERG, M. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, pp. 91 – 93.

episode where Rebekah appears, who “ran” back home to inform her father the coming of Abraham’s emissary, coincidentally also at a well in Haran (Gen. 24: 28). This natural association of Rachel with Rebekah suggests a resemblance of Rachel and Rebekah, the second matriarch of the Hebrew.

Secondly, Rachel wrestles with the situation of being barren. She and Jacob met at a well, which is believed to be the symbol of women’s womb and their productivity.¹³ But the very well which symbolises Rachel’s womb was blocked by a huge stone. Robert Alter’s interpretation is that this huge stone implies Jacob’s hardship that he has to go through before he could get his beloved women.¹⁴ But apart from that, it also should be noted that the well blocked with a huge stone may also suggest Rachel’s hardships before she could become a mother. In fact, if Jacob has to pay physical labour to get his beloved woman, what Rachel pays for being a mother is courage and spiritual labour. However, the hardships that Rachel experienced doesn’t frustrate the readers that she is a loser. On the contrary, what readers feel for Rachel can be a respect for her endless struggle to achieve the goal. After all, having difficulty in giving birth is another type-scene that almost all matriarchs may have to experience.¹⁵ Rachel’s resort to her maid and her hope to establish herself via a surrogate is exactly like what Sarah did according to local tradition.¹⁶

Moreover, Rachel’s similarity with the first two matriarchs, Sarah and Rebekah, is not just in terms of behaviour, but also appearance – beautiful and well favoured, while Leah was introduced to readers as “tender eyed” (29: 17) long after the introduction of Rachel’s prettiness. Jacob served without complaint for Laban for seven years because he loved Rachel and the seven years “seemed unto him but a few days” (29: 20). When he found that he was cheated and married Leah instead of Rachel, he worked for another seven years in order to marry Rachel immediately. Fourteen years of hard work of Jacob reinforced the charm and importance of Rachel – she deserves this. The narrator not only depicted Rachel’s beautifulness directly, but also indirectly, to present a round and rich-implied image to the readers.

Also, similar to Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel seems to have a high status at home. Sarah asked her husband Abraham to lie with her maid for a son, and later expelled the maid and her son (Gen. 16, 21); Rebekah maneuvered her husband’s deathbed wish and helped Jacob to get the family right (Gen. 27). As for Rachel, she not only enjoys a biased love from her husband, but also declared that “I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed” (30: 8). In what aspect does she prevail? It may have something to do with Leah’s situation. The

¹³ ALTER, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 62.

¹⁴ ALTER, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Robert Alter mentioned another type-scene in his *The Art of Biblical Narrative*: Annunciation type-scene, in which the mothers are usually barren at first and after a lot of effort, their wombs are opened by God and successfully give birth to an heir.

¹⁶ SPEISER, E.A. *Genesis. The Anchor Bible*, p. 120.

narrator says that Leah “saw that she had left bearing ... she gave her maid to Jacob, too”. Has Leah become unproductive? Apparently no. She still has productivity because she later bore two more sons for Jacob. The only reason that she stopped bearing may be that Jacob might have stopped sleeping with her because of Rachel’s power. Therefore, in this sense, Rachel’s prevail may not refer to the number of sons in her name, since she doesn’t prevail in this, but her success of enjoying her husband’s love exclusively.

As to her own barrenness, Rachel never gives up. When she saw Leah’s son found mandrakes, she asked Leah for the magic plant, and as a trade Leah was allowed to sleep with Jacob (30: 14-16). This episode proves again Rachel’s authoritative status at least inside the house, which is the women’s space – even Jacob has no word for this trade.

Mandrake was believed to have the magic power of curing the barrenness of women since it grows in the shape of a human. This plant is mentioned in The Book of Song of Solomon as having magic power: “The mandrakes give a smell, and at our gates are all manner of pleasant fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.” (7: 13) But its magic function of curing infertility is doubted. Seventeenth century English poet John Donne listed several impossible things in his “Song”, suggesting that “Get with child a mandrake root” would be as impossible as “catch a falling star”. But no matter what function mandrake may have, Rachel’s desire for the mandrakes is a vivid depiction of her desperate longing for being pregnant: in order to get a child, she is willing to try any possible method, no matter how impossible it may be, and no matter what sacrifice she has to make, including giving up her husband to her “enemy”. This last strive shows her respectable dignity and indomitable courage in the face of all the hardships of life and fate, which is truly moving and sympathy-provoking.

Summary

“Rachel” in Hebrew has two meanings: “ewe” and “a good traveler”, which is a best summary of the image of Rachel: on the one hand, she is like a ewe, striving to mother an offspring; on the other hand, she is like a traveler, travelling endlessly to reach her destination, even with little hope. Her story offers readers a great experience of sharing her happiness, her sorrow, her despair, her hope, her fight in “women’s way” and her wrestling with fate. In fact, beyond the aesthetic value of Rachel as a literary character, there is more in-depth narrative power behind her personal courage: the sorrow of Rachel to a large extent may be the symbol of what the Israelite as a whole have experienced, and her story is symbolically referring to the common memory of the sorrowful Israelite past. Later prophets commemorate her as the sad mother of the Israelite, like what God said in the Book of Jeremiah, “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children

refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.” (31: 15, cf. Matthew 2:18)

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