

Rachel and Leah

Like brother stories, a sister story is a narrative paradigm that construes the family primarily upon its horizontal axis. In a sister story, identity is determined and the narrative is defined by the sibling bond, as opposed to the more hierarchical parent-child relationship. As I note in my introduction, brother stories dominate the Bible. By the time we meet sisters Rachel and Leah in Genesis 29, Cain has killed Abel, Isaac has usurped Ishmael, and Jacob has deceived Esau. At the conclusion of Rachel and Leah's sister story, brothers return to the spotlight as Joseph and his brothers become the focus of the narrative. The Bible's prevailing trope of fraternal rivalry is essentially about patrilineal descent in which paired brothers fight for their father's and for God's blessing. Pairing the brothers helps focus the rivalry and makes clear who is the elder and who is the younger and who, therefore, should have the legitimate claim to their father's property.¹ There can be only one winner, one blessed heir in the patrilineal narratives.

Naturally, a good story defies cultural expectations, and younger brothers, more often than not, claim their father's and God's blessings. Examining this motif in separate works, both Frederick E. Greenspahn and Jon D. Levenson observe how the status of the Bible's younger sons reflects Israel's status, and how their stories reflect Israel's national story.² Like Israel, younger sons have no inherent right to the status they acquire in the course of their narratives.³ And like Israel, younger sons must experience exile and humiliation to acquire their blessings.⁴ Isaac faces his father's knife. Jacob is sent to Paddan-aram to serve and fall victim to his uncle Laban. Joseph is sold into servitude in Egypt. For Greenspahn and Levenson, brothers are not only essential figures in Israel's story; they are Israel's story.

Without the right to inheritance, it is logical that biblical sisters play little part in the patrilineal narratives. Their stories, therefore, cannot reflect, and arguably are even inessential to, Israel's national story. For Levenson, sisters Rachel and Leah are part of the humiliation Jacob must suffer to assume his

position as designated heir.⁵ Unlike for brothers, it does not formally matter which sister was born first. Not granted the rights of primogeniture, sisters are essentially interchangeable within their families. Although Rachel and Leah's father Laban insists that custom prevents a younger sister from marrying before the elder (Jacob is not bothered by this custom),⁶ he blithely exchanges this one for that [ונתנה לך גם-את-זאת], one sister for another.⁷ Similarly, Saul promises first one daughter, then the other to David, and indicates that either daughter could serve as an effective trap for David. Even when the sister narrative is about inheritance, as in the story of Zelophehad's daughters, birth order is not significant or even mentioned. In this remarkable story, five sisters appear before Moses as equal claimants to their father's property after their father died without leaving sons or heirs.⁸ The sisters' names appear in a different order in Num 27:1 and Num 36:11, which makes it impossible even to speculate on their birth order.

Like brothers, sisters appear in pairs throughout the Bible. Lot's two daughters,⁹ Rachel and Leah, Michal and Merav, and Rebel Israel and Faithless Judah are paired sisters. The appearance of paired sisters suggests that they share a narrative function similar to paired brothers. For Greenspahn, sibling pairs become "the locus of competition."¹⁰ He understands the pairing of siblings, along with other paired biblical characters like wives, to be a literary convention that highlights differences and emphasizes the hero's virtue. Isaac and Jacob appear calm and thoughtful next to their wild and impetuous brothers Ishmael and Esau. According to Greenspahn, God values these highlighted qualities.¹¹ As with brothers, the pairing of sisters pits one sister against another and focuses their rivalry, though without implications for inheritance and blessing.¹²

My reading reveals a more complex picture in which the convention of pairing sisters at times highlights distinct characteristics of each sister and induces conflict, while at other times, it brings the sisters in relation to each other and enables them to cooperate. The relationships between paired sisters are depicted with a greater emotional range than those of paired brothers, who are invariably defined by rivalry. Their stories serve as excellent resources for understanding the ways in which the Bible depicts interpersonal relationships among women and the anxieties these relationships evoke. Not competing for blessing and property, paired sisters are free to relate to each other either as peers or as rivals. Although both sororal competition and solidarity advance the biblical narrative, the Bible is as suspicious of sororal solidarity as it is of sororal agency and desire, which are also evident in these narratives. When sisters conspire and when they assert agency to fulfill their desires, they threaten patriarchal authority and destabilize their homes. In these moments, they

become dangerous sisters who, as I show, play a significant role in the patrilineal narratives.

My analysis of the Bible's paired sisters begins with Rachel and Leah. In the course of their narrative, each functions as a wife and mother, as well, and are most often seen by scholars in these roles.¹³ When viewed as wives and mothers, their story focuses primarily on Jacob and Rachel and Leah's relationship to him. Seeing them as sisters provides a different focus to their narrative. As sisters, their story focuses upon the interpersonal relationship between them, as well as on their relationship with Laban, their father. Rachel and Leah are first shown to us in their roles as sisters. Even though they also are daughters, wives, and mothers in the course of their narrative, I contend that they function primarily as sisters. Their story concerns the welfare of their natal household, and their relationship to one another determines the course of its narrative. These features, I argue, support reading their story as a sister story.

As mentioned above, Rachel and Leah's relationship reflects the emotional range available to paired sisters. In the course of their narrative, they compete against and conspire with one another. Sororal competition builds the house of Jacob, while sororal solidarity destroys the house of Laban. Although Rachel and Leah are instrumental in establishing Jacob's house, in effect, they never leave their father's house. Once they establish Jacob and his household at their father's expense, their narrative ends. Rachel and Leah are never portrayed as wives and mothers in Jacob's house. Instead, they function in their narratives as dangerous sisters who betray their father and weaken his home, while enabling Jacob to acquire his status as a designated patriarch.

With Jacob on the run from his brother after he deceived Esau, Rachel and Leah provide a fresh focus to, if not a detour in, the biblical narrative. Extending across several chapters in Genesis, their narrative is arguably the Bible's most developed sister story. Yet Rachel's story does not begin as a paradigmatic sister story. In Gen 29:6, Jacob speaks with the shepherds beside a well in Paddan-aram and inquires after the well-being of his uncle Laban. The shepherds respond: "He is well and there is his daughter Rachel coming with the flock." As Robert Alter demonstrates, a biblical narrative about a young woman at a well is really a story about a bride.¹⁴

Rachel's relationship with her future husband, like Rebecca's before her and Zipporah's after her, begins while drawing water. As the scene unfolds, it becomes clear that Jacob is, in fact, an appropriate suitor for Rachel. Genesis 29:10 mentions three times that Laban is **אחי אמו**, his mother's brother. Genesis 29:12 refers to Jacob as Rebecca's son, and Gen 29:13 calls him **בן-אחתי**, the son of his [Laban's] sister. So far, the only sister that matters in this story is Rebecca,

Jacob's mother. Again and again, the text makes clear that Rachel is Jacob's first cousin through his mother's line. Cross-cousin marriage, particularly through the maternal line, was the preferred type of marriage in the biblical world because it enabled a family to expand appropriately while protecting its property by keeping it as close as possible within the family.¹⁵ Thus, Genesis 29 shows that Rebecca still functions as an ideal sister to Laban.¹⁶ As she did in Genesis 24, she continues to protect Laban's patriline, now into the next generation. At this point in the narrative, Rachel behaves like an ideal *daughter* to Laban, who should become an ideal *wife* to Jacob.

Yet with the introduction of Leah in Gen 29:16–18, the Bible shifts focus from Rachel the daughter to Rachel the sister, and the narrative takes on a more complicated dimension:

Laban had two daughters. The name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak while Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. Jacob loved Rachel and said: "Let me work seven years for you for Rachel, your youngest daughter."

From this passage it is clear that the sisters are distinct from one another and that their distinctions are accentuated by the convention of pairing them. Leah is older [גְּדוּלָה], while Rachel is younger¹⁷ [קטנה]. Leah has weak eyes, while Rachel is beautiful. However one understands the meaning of רְכוּת, weak eyes, it indicates a physical contrast between the sisters.¹⁸ Unlike Esau and Jacob who are marked by both physical, as well as temperamental differences,¹⁹ physical qualities alone differentiate the sisters, who appear otherwise aligned with one another at the start of their story.

Until Jacob's arrival, the sisters are without narrative strife or, for that matter, narrative at all. In contrast to brothers Jacob and Esau who wage a prenatal battle, there is no sororal race from the womb to the well. By loving Rachel, Jacob introduces tension within the sisters' relationship and the narrative. Certainly love is a divisive factor in the brothers' story as well. Yet it is parental love and not a potential spouse's love that impacts the brothers' relationship. Isaac loves Esau, while Rebecca loves Jacob.²⁰ Also, parental favoritism exacerbates, but does not create the strife among the brothers. Jacob and Esau's battle begins in utero even before their parents could pick favorites. Unlike sisters, brothers are born to settle the patrimony.

The intervention of a suitor's love as opposed to parental love is one of the features that marks Rachel and Leah's story as a sister story. Since a brother story

is about inheritance, parental love is a crucial factor. Genesis 22:2 designates Isaac, and by implication not his brother Ishmael, as Abraham's beloved son. Isaac's parental love compels him to bless Esau, while Rebecca's love compels her to secure Isaac's blessing for Jacob. In the next generation, Jacob's love for Joseph initiates its own devastating cycle of sibling rivalry among Joseph's brothers.²¹ Yet a sister story is about the security of the natal household. Naturally, a suitor's love is a crucial factor in a sister story because a sister must find an appropriate husband who does not threaten, but supports, her home.

Whereas brothers fight for property, sisters fight for husbands. Yet, whereas there can be only one designated *bekhor*, one firstborn male heir, sisters are essentially interchangeable.²² One sister is not, by law, more entitled to a husband than the other. And to make matters more complicated, they can share a husband and share the status of being his wife. In ancient Israel, a husband could marry more than one primary wife—women of equal status—as well as take secondary wives that have a lower status than the primary wife.²³ Although a man can marry two women in the Bible, there is debate whether a man can marry two sisters because Lev 18:18 states: “Do not marry a woman as a rival to her sister [אשה אל-אחותה] and uncover her nakedness during her lifetime.” Scholars continue to consider the meaning of “sister” in this prohibition and the relationship of the prohibition to the family narratives. Angelo Tosato argues that Lev 18:18 does not prohibit sororal polygyny specifically. Rather, he understands “sister” to refer to a “female fellow-citizen.”²⁴ Tosato contends that Lev. 18:18 prohibits general polygyny and reflects a later stage in Israel's history than is reflected in the family narratives.²⁵ Indeed, sororal polygyny appears to be an accepted form of marriage in the family narratives. Both Jacob and, as we will see, God marry two sisters. Naomi Steinberg argues that sororal polygyny is a desirable marriage construct when the objective is to produce multiple heirs. According to Steinberg, the Rachel-Leah cycle shifts the focus from “lineal/vertical heirship” to a “horizontal/segmented genealogy.” Being sisters, Rachel and Leah have equal status as wives. Either sister could produce a viable heir.²⁶ Noticeably, it takes a sister story, not a brother story, to construe the narrative along this horizontal axis.

Once married, Rachel and Leah's sororal competition and their story should be over. They should now become wives and mothers in narratives that are concerned mainly with husbands and producing sons. Yet, by keeping the narrative focused on the relationship between Rachel and Leah, the Bible extends the sister story. Jacob's love for Rachel remains a complicating factor in the sisters' story since, as Gen 29:30 notes, Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah. In response to Jacob's favoritism, God intervenes and introduces another

factor that differentiates the sisters as Gen 29:31 relates: “YHWH saw that Leah was unloved and opened her womb while Rachel was barren.” Rachel may be beautiful and loved, but Leah is now fertile. Beauty and fertility, two desired qualities, are split between the paired sisters as if to pit one quality and the sister who possesses it against the other.²⁷ In the Bible, there is no contest between beauty and fertility. Beauty often creates problems. Characters marked as beautiful, like Sarah in Gen 12:11, Joseph in Gen 39:6, Tamar in 2 Sam 13:1, and Esther in Est 2:7 are vulnerable because of their beauty.²⁸ Fertility, on the other hand, ensures patrilineal descent and secures the inheritance.²⁹ Unless Rachel (or God) reverses the situation, fertile Leah should win the sororal competition over beautiful Rachel hands down.³⁰

By opening Leah’s womb, God creates further discord among the sisters and tips the scale in favor of Leah, yet God’s motivation remains unclear. Either God supports the underdog as he does throughout the Bible and effectively chooses weak-eyed, unloved Leah over beautiful, beloved Rachel, or God wants increased sororal strife. In the case of these sisters, the second explanation seems more likely since God has no independent plan for Leah such that he would choose her over her sister. In fact, Leah does not exist narratively except when paired with her sister. This is not true of Rachel who acts alone when she steals her father’s idols in Genesis 31. Unlike the favored brothers Isaac, Jacob, and even Joseph, Leah does not experience a private moment of revelation and has no specific mission to fulfill. It seems, then, that God wants to increase sororal strife more than he wants to vindicate Leah. By opening Leah’s womb and keeping Rachel’s closed, God intentionally sows discord and pits sister against sister.

Of course, God has opened wombs before. In Gen 21:1, God remembers barren Sarah and enables her to conceive. In Gen 25:21, God enables barren Rebecca to conceive. In each of these stories, God’s will determines when a woman conceives, which enables the birth of the next generation’s designated patriarch. With Rachel and Leah, God employs a different strategy and relies on sororal strife to spur fertility. As Esther Fuchs observes, Genesis 30 illustrates that sororal rivalry serves the Bible’s central concern of having sons to secure the patrilineal inheritance. Each sister wants what the other one has, and their jealousy results in a good-for-patriarchy battle for babies. Fuchs describes the sisters’ competition to be “the necessary instrumental mechanism that presents Jacob with 12 sons who will constitute the foundation of the Israelite nation.”³¹

Although God starts the fight, self-interest motivates both sisters, who whole-heartedly engage in the battle. Fertile Leah desires Jacob’s love and hopes that each child born will help her get it. The names she gives her children, such

as Reuben—“YHWH has seen my degradation, and now my husband will love me,” Levi—“Now my husband will be joined to me for I have born him three sons,” and Zebulun—“Now my husband will exalt me for I have given him six sons,” make clear that Leah wants Jacob—or at least his love.³²

Infertile Rachel wants to become pregnant but in contrast to her sister, her desire to be pregnant seems to have nothing to do with Jacob. Rachel exhibits a selfish desire that seeks to secure her own status, particularly in relation to her sister.³³ In fact Rachel views Jacob as an impediment to her fertility, perhaps because he refuses to beseech God on her behalf as her confrontation with Jacob in Gen 30:1–2 indicates:

When Rachel saw that she had not conceived for Jacob, she grew jealous of her sister and said to Jacob, “Give me sons. If not, I will die.” Jacob was angry at Rachel and said: “Do I stand in the place of God who has prevented you from conceiving?”

This angry exchange reveals that God is directly responsible for Rachel’s barrenness and not just for Leah’s fertility. It also reveals that it is Rachel’s jealousy of Leah, and not her love of Jacob, that fuels her desire to have children.³⁴ One imagines that if Rachel could have a son at this point, she would use the name she gives later to her maidservant Bilhah’s second son in Gen 30:8: “Rachel said: ‘I have struggled mightily with my sister and have succeeded.’ [נפתולי אלהים נפתלתי עם-אחתי גם-רכלתי] She named him Naphtali.”

Because this is not a brother story in which God identifies, protects, and rewards the chosen brother, the sister Rachel must become the mistress of her own fate.³⁵ She offers Bilhah to Jacob as a secondary wife who would bear children for Rachel. The introduction of a secondary wife links Rachel’s story to Sarah’s in Genesis 16. Like Rachel, infertile Sarah offers her maidservant Hagar to Abraham in order to be built up through her [אבנה ממנה]. Echoing Sarah, Rachel says in Gen 30:3: “Indeed, I will be built up through her [ראבנה גם-אנכי ממנה].” Yet whereas Sarah and Hagar function as rival wives in their narratives, Rachel does not compete with Bilhah who gives birth to two sons. Instead, the focus remains on the relationship between the sisters. Seemingly no longer fertile and still longing for her husband’s love, Leah offers her maidservant Zilpah to Jacob as another secondary wife. Like Bilhah, Zilpah gives birth to two sons. Neither Bilhah nor Zilpah introduce tension within the narrative. Instead, they seem to create symmetry by further pairing the sisters as well as their children. Each sister has a maidservant who bears two children.

Without conflict between the primary and secondary wives, the narrative remains a sister story in which *sisters* provide the narrative's tension and determine its progress. Rachel continues to compete with Leah as the name Naphtali indicates. Rachel's struggle with her sister inscribed in Naphtali's name, and her expressed triumph over her, evokes the famous episode in Genesis 32 in which Jacob wrestles a mysterious man and, like Rachel, prevails [וְהוֹכֵל]. Yet whereas it is unclear whether the man Jacob wrestles is divine or human, Rachel clearly wrestles with her sister. As Fuchs notes, female rivals like Rachel and Leah do not formally reconcile in the Bible.³⁶ In contrast, the Bible does enable rival brothers to reconcile and provides closure to their narratives. Jacob wrestles with the stranger in Genesis 32, perhaps the specter of his brother, on the eve of reconciling with Esau. Their struggle could be seen as a healing moment in which fraternal rivalry is finally laid to rest. Having wrestled in the night, Jacob is able to embrace his estranged brother in the morning.³⁷

Having wrestled with one another, sisters Rachel and Leah are not allowed to embrace and reconcile like Jacob and Esau in Gen 33:1-11 or like Joseph and his brothers in Gen 45:14-15. They do not bury their father in solidarity like Isaac and Ishmael in Gen 25:9, like Jacob and Esau in Gen 35:29, or like Joseph and his brothers in Gen 50:13. In a gesture that simultaneously demonstrates fraternal harmony and sororal strife, Jacob separates the sisters into distinct camps when he reconciles with Esau. Although brothers unite, sisters remain separate even in death. Rachel dies on the road to Ephrat and is buried alone and not in the family tomb. Strikingly, Leah receives that honor, which is recorded in Gen 49:31.

Leah's burial in the cave of Mahpelah appears to settle the sisters' competition that pitted beauty against fertility in favor of fertile Leah. Fertile Leah wins her spot in the family tomb. For Rachel who dies in childbirth,³⁸ fertility—or rather her selfish desire for it—proves to be lethal. After enduring her sister's seven pregnancies, Rachel finally gives birth and names her son Joseph [יֹסֵף], saying "May God add [יִסְרָף] another son for me." Not satisfied with only one son, perhaps when compared with her sister's six, Rachel prays for another. She dies when her prayer is answered. Her death can be seen as harsh judgment for her selfish desire and the agency she exercises to secure it. Rachel's solitary burial between her father's and her husband's homes suggests that she, like Miriam in Numbers 12, is aborted from the family and ends her life in disgrace, marked as dangerous.³⁹

As I outline in my introduction, dangerous sisters assert an independent agency that challenges patriarchal authority and threatens the stability of the

natal household. In their battle for babies, both Rachel and Leah display independent desire that marks them as dangerous. Leah desires Jacob, and Rachel wants to get pregnant. Yet their desires and their struggles to fulfill them at first seem to serve and not challenge the patriarchal interests of their natal family. As I note above, sororal strife secures the patriline. In the beginning of their story, while they live in Laban's home, it is unclear whose patriline is being supported—Laban's or Jacob's. In Laban's mind, the sisters' rivalry builds his house, and their children are his. Laban informs Jacob of this when he overtakes him in Gen 31:43:

Laban responded and said to Jacob: “The daughters are my daughters, the sons, my sons, and the flocks are my flocks. All that you see belongs to me. What can I do now about my daughters or the children they have born?”⁴⁰

As long as Rachel and Leah remain in and help build the house of Laban, they seem to function according to my paradigm as ideal sisters whose desire to have children strengthens their natal household. Yet, with the birth of Rachel's first son Joseph, Jacob decides to leave Laban's house, initiating a transformation from the sisters' supportive role within their natal household to a destructive one.

Leaving Laban's house marks a shift in the narrative and draws the sister story to a natural close. Once sisters leave their natal households, like Rebecca in Genesis 24, they primarily function as wives and mothers within their narratives. Yet neither Rachel nor Leah survives narratively as a wife or mother in Jacob's house. As I mentioned above, Rachel dies en route and Leah narratively dies with her. The only subsequent mention of Leah is the incidental mention of her burial. Rachel and Leah's story does not progress outside of the framework of their natal household and therefore remains a sister story. Yet their relationship develops a new dimension.

Before Jacob departs from Laban's home, he summons Rachel and Leah to the field to ask if they are willing to leave their father's house. Together the sisters respond in Gen 31:14-16:

Rachel and Leah respond and say to him: “Do we still have a share in the inheritance of our father's house? Are we not considered outsiders to him? Indeed, he has sold us and consumed our money. Truly, all the wealth that God stripped from our father belongs to us and our sons. Now then, all that God says, do.”

In solidarity, Rachel and Leah agree to leave Laban's house.⁴¹ Their mutual consent appears to be financially motivated since they have no claim to their father's property and, therefore, no place in his house. Feeling like outsiders in their natal home, they formally renounce their membership in it. Like Rebecca in Genesis 24, sisters Rachel and Leah agree to leave their father's house. Yet where ideal sister Rebecca's departure enriches her natal household, Rachel and Leah's departure depletes their natal household. Their consent to leave is an overt act of aggression against their father. At this moment, when they align against their father, Rachel and Leah function like dangerous sisters.

This is not the first time the sisters cooperate, defy patriarchal authority, and are marked as dangerous. Earlier in the narrative, Rachel and Leah conspire to subvert patriarchal authority. In Gen 30:14, Leah's eldest Reuben brings his mother mandrakes, a fruit believed to be an aphrodisiac that promotes fertility. The mandrakes represent the quality each sister has and the other wants and brings them together. As an aphrodisiac, the mandrakes represent love—the quality possessed by Rachel and desired by Leah. As a fruit that promotes fertility, it represents Leah and the quality desired by Rachel. In this way, the mandrakes function as a symbol of, and as an impetus for, sororal solidarity. Seeing the mandrakes, Rachel directly addresses her sister for the first time, and they strike a deal.⁴² Leah purchases Jacob with her mandrakes. In a moment of sororal solidarity, the sisters compromise and cooperate to get what they want. They do so at the expense of Jacob's patriarchal authority. As Ilana Pardes observes, the mandrake episode manifests a “reversal of hierarchies.”⁴³

Although Rachel and Leah subvert their husband's and not their father's authority, they do so as *sisters*, using the object, the mandrakes, that symbolizes their solidarity. This links their action to Dinah's, the paradigmatic dangerous sister. Like Dinah who independently goes forth [וּרְחֵצָא דִּינָה] from her father's house, Leah goes forth [וּרְחֵצָא לְאֵה] to greet Jacob and to inform him that she has acquired him with Reuben's mandrakes.⁴⁴ While Dinah's independence leads to an improper sexual union, Leah's results in a legitimate sexual union but one that defies the norms of a patriarchal society. At this moment, Leah behaves like a destabilizing figure. In the biblical world, a woman is not expected to initiate a sexual encounter with a man. As I mention in my introduction, a woman's honor depended on being submissive to men and sexually pure. A man's honor, as Gale Yee notes, depended on controlling a woman's sexuality.⁴⁵ Rarely in the Bible do women initiate sexual encounters and those that do are either desperate to serve patriarchal interests, like Tamar in Genesis 38 or Ruth, or are dangerous seductresses, like the strange woman in Proverbs 7 or Delilah in Judges 16.⁴⁶ With four sons, Leah is not desperate to

provide an heir to Jacob. Instead she behaves like her sister Rachel. Leah asserts agency, seeks to satisfy her own desires, and controls her husband's sexuality.

Despite their efforts, sisters cannot determine their fates, and magical substances cannot induce love or fertility. Only God can. Rachel remains desired but infertile (she must suffer through three more of Leah's births),⁴⁷ and Leah remains fertile yet unloved.⁴⁸ In other words, the competition between the sisters remains unresolved, and their agency did not yield the results they desired. At last, God remembers Rachel and opens her womb in Gen 30:22. It is Joseph's birth that inspires Jacob to leave Laban's home.⁴⁹ At this moment, Jacob and Laban formally become rival patriarchs. Over the years, Laban's household has benefited greatly by Jacob's presence. Now it stands to lose a great deal, as Jacob informs Laban in Gen 30:30: "For the little you had before me has grown into much. YHWH has blessed you wherever I turned. And now, when will I provide for my own household?"

Jacob is clearly ready to build his own house apart from, and even at the expense of, Laban's. The two households and their patriarchs stand in obvious tension. Both work to secure their property. In Gen 30:35, Laban surreptitiously protects his property by removing the speckled and spotted goats promised to Jacob: "That day he removed the speckled and spotted he-goats and the speckled and spotted she-goats, all that had white on them and all the black sheep, and gave them into the care of his sons." Interestingly, this is the first time in the narrative that we hear of Laban's sons, the brothers of Rachel and Leah, who actively work to protect their father's house. Unwilling to be outdone by Laban, Jacob practices an effective form of animal husbandry or divination and is able to produce and claim new speckled and spotted flocks. By the end of this chapter, the house of Jacob stands separate from the house of Laban and is both stronger and richer, as Gen 30:42-43 describes: "The feeble flock he did not place. The feeble ones went to Laban and the strong ones to Jacob. The man grew wealthier and wealthier. He had large flocks, female servants, male servants, camels, and asses."

Clearly threatened, Laban's sons inform their father that Jacob is taking and profiting from Laban's property. With tension growing between Laban and Jacob, the time finally has come for Jacob to leave. When Laban is off shearing sheep, Jacob takes his wives, children, and property and leaves Laban's house. Yet Jacob is not the only one to take things from Laban's house. Rachel steals the teraphim, the household gods, from her father's house. The form and function of the teraphim remain unknown. In this narrative, they appear easily transportable, fitting into a camel saddle. Yet, as we see in the next chapter, they appear to be larger. Michal places teraphim in her bed to imitate her sleeping

husband and to fool her father. William G. Dever derives several qualities of the teraphim from these narratives; for example, they are transportable and seem to be in the custodianship of women. In terms of my analysis, the most significant quality he derives is their value. Because they represent ancestral deities required to ensure the on-going welfare of the family, Dever considers the teraphim to be “among the most valuable of the family’s possessions.”⁵⁰

Although the narrative does not explain her action, it implies that Rachel’s theft, like her consent to leave, is an act of significant betrayal against Laban. Rachel steals the valuable idols [וּתְהַגֵּב רַחֵל] just as Jacob steals the heart of Laban [וַיִּגְנֹב יַעֲקֹב אֶת-לֵב לָבָן]. Rachel’s theft of the teraphim may be an attempt to secure the legal title to her father’s estate for Jacob and for her sons,⁵¹ or it may be an attempt to secure the protection and power of his household gods for herself and not for her husband or for her sister.⁵² Pardes suggests that Rachel’s theft is another manifestation of sororal rivalry. Rachel steals the idols to mark her own son, and not her sister’s, as the designated heir.⁵³

Whatever her motivation, her theft is a personal act of aggression against her father that seals her fate. Unaware of Rachel’s guilt, Jacob condemns the thief to death in Gen 31:32. Rachel’s aggression against her father is evident when Laban searches for the teraphim in Gen 31:33–35:

Laban entered Jacob’s tent, Leah’s tent, and the tent of the two maidservants, but found nothing. He went out of Leah’s tent and entered Rachel’s tent. Rachel had taken the teraphim and placed them in a camel saddle and sat upon them. Laban searched the tent but did not find them. She said to her father: “Do not be mad at me for I am unable to rise before you because the way of women is upon me.” He searched, but he did not find the teraphim.

Because no one but Rachel knows that she has stolen the teraphim, it seems that Rachel did not intend them for Jacob’s benefit. Even in trouble, she does not confess to Jacob and ask for help. Instead, she cunningly hides the teraphim and tells her father that she is menstruating and cannot get up. Rachel’s methods of self preservation are clever,⁵⁴ but they also have the added benefit of mocking Laban’s religious beliefs and his authority. By sitting on the teraphim, symbols of her father’s household and his religion, she asserts control over both. Dangerous sister Rachel has Laban and his gods pinned.

Although Rachel may be more dangerous than Leah, both sisters prove themselves to be so. Together, they build the house of Jacob at their father’s expense. As the Bible’s most developed sister story, their narrative shapes

subsequent sister stories like that of Michal and Merav. As we see in the next chapter, the sister story of Michal and Merav shares features with Rachel and Leah's story and includes episodes of wife-swapping and subterfuge that involve household gods. Most importantly, Rachel and Leah's detailed sister story helps illuminate the representation and narrative function of sisters in the Bible. Like other sister stories, their story is concerned with supporting the natal household and reveals the anxieties sisters induce by being marginal figures in those homes, particularly the anxiety of finding appropriate husbands that will enrich and not rival their father's house. At first glance, Jacob seems to be an appropriate suitor, and Rachel and Leah appear to function as ideal sisters who support and strengthen their natal home. Yet as the narrative unfolds, Jacob proves to be a rival patriarch to Laban, and Rachel and Leah function as dangerous sisters, who assert agency and desire and ally against their father. These dangerous sisters damage their father's household.

Their relationship to one another is a pivotal and defining force in their narrative. Although they are rivals, Rachel and Leah display an emotional range in their relationship that transcends their jealousy. Sororal strife and sororal solidarity play significant roles within their story, which demonstrates the benefits to their husband of their rivalry and the dangers to their husband and their father of cooperation. God initiates and sustains the rivalry that builds and fills the house of Jacob, while it weakens and drains the house of Laban. Yet, as the mandrakes episode shows, the sisters are able to capitalize on their jealousy and conspire when necessary to get what they want. When the sisters align, as they do over the mandrakes or when they consent to leave Laban's house, they threaten patriarchal authority. Sororal solidarity induces Jacob to sleep with Leah and Laban to lose his daughters and his property.

Although Rachel and Leah build the house of Jacob, as a sister story their story is essentially about the fall of the house of Laban. By consenting to leave, the sisters formally renounce Laban's house. By stealing his gods, Rachel depletes and denigrates her father's house. In the danger they pose, these sisters clearly serve a crucial purpose. In the greater context of Genesis, Laban is a rival patriarch who must be weakened so that Jacob's household can thrive. Rachel and Leah help weaken Laban's house and strengthen Jacob's. In this way, the sisters are not simply humiliations that Jacob must bear to become the designated patriarch as Levenson suggests. They are not payback for Jacob's deception of Esau as Greenspahn suggests. They are significant figures who advance the biblical narrative and ensure Jacob's success.

Despite their significance, dangerous sisters Rachel and Leah do not experience happy endings. They do not enjoy formal moments of

reconciliation, nor do they reap the rewards of being wives and mothers in Jacob's independent house—the house they help build. After they serve their purpose, they are effectively removed from the narrative. In this way, their story remains a sister story because it never advances fully to be a wife or mother story but functions as a cautionary tale that warns against sororal solidarity, agency, and desire. Sororal solidarity overturns patriarchal authority. Sororal agency and desire effectively kill Rachel. Her theft, an act of agency, condemns her to death when Jacob inadvertently promises to kill the thief.⁵⁵ Ultimately, it is Rachel's selfish desire for more children that actually kills her.⁵⁶ She dies in childbirth on the road to Ephrat, as Gen 35:16–19 recounts:

They traveled from Beth El. They were at a distance from Ephrat when Rachel went into labor. The labor was difficult. During her difficult labor, the midwife said to her: “Do not fear for this one will also be a son.” At the moment of her last breath, for she was dying, she called his name Ben-Oni [lit., son of my affliction], but his father called him Benjamin [lit., son of my strength]. Rachel died and was buried on the road to Ephrat, now Bethlehem.

Dangerous sister Rachel never lives in Jacob's house nor is she gathered to his kin. Buried in the family tomb, Leah appears to fare better. Perhaps she is granted this honor over Rachel because it was desire for Jacob that motivated her and not her own gain as it was for her sister. But once her sister dies, Leah's story essentially stops. Without Rachel, Leah has no place in the text. Her character and her story are defined by her sister.

The house of Jacob is built at the expense of the house of Laban. It is also built at the expense of the sisters Rachel and Leah who, having served their purpose, exit the narrative along with their father. In particular, Rachel suffers in the service of Jacob's house because she dies in childbirth. Before dying, she names her son Ben-Oni, son of my affliction. Yet, Rachel's affliction becomes a symbol of Jacob's strength when Jacob renames the baby. Ben-Oni, son of my (Rachel's) affliction becomes Benjamin, son of my (Jacob's) strength. Rachel and Leah name all their other children. Benjamin is the only baby that Jacob renames. As Fuchs comments, Rachel hopes to inscribe her suffering in her son's name but is overridden by Jacob. Jacob denies Rachel this legacy. Instead, Jacob chooses a name that conveys strength and optimism—a name that communicates his strength.⁵⁷ It may be that Rachel's death signals to Jacob the end of his time in Laban's house and his triumph over Laban. He is prepared to enter a new phase in his life and to become the patriarch of his own

home. Rachel will not be part of that home. By weakening the house of their father, sisters Rachel and Leah play a crucial role in Jacob's story. Together, the dangerous sisters build the house of Jacob. Their struggles with one another and their suffering ensure that Jacob prevails over Laban.

Notes

1. According to Deut 21:17, the eldest brother receives twice the inheritance of his younger brothers.
2. Greenspahn observes: "Drawing on a father's prerogative to choose whichever child he wishes, it reconciles Israel's doctrine of election with the reality of her political ineffectiveness. The prominence achieved by younger sons throughout the Bible thus asserts Israelite merit while tacitly conceding the weakness of her case." See Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 109.
3. Deut 7:7 and 9:5 make clear that Israel has no justifiable claim to its status.
4. In Levenson's reading, younger sons acquire the status of firstborn sons through exile and humiliation, and are, like Israel itself, essentially reborn as God's firstborn. See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 67.
5. *Ibid.*, 66.
6. In Gen 29:18, Jacob asks specifically to marry the younger sister Rachel, knowing that Leah remains unmarried. Block notes: "As a matter of custom parents expected their children to marry in the order of their births (Gen 29:26), but Israel had no laws prescribing this practice." See Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 57.
7. Gen 29:27.
8. Fighting to preserve their father's property and not to secure their own, the daughters of Zelophehad function as ideal sisters who serve the interests of their natal household.
9. Although paired, I include Lot's daughters in the second part of my study among the incest narratives.
10. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 136.
11. Greenspahn writes: "As with rival wives, the Bible's sibling pairs provide the narrator with an opportunity to emphasize certain features of those whom God had chosen by setting them alongside others." See *ibid.*, 137.
12. Athalya Brenner agrees with Greenspahn and considers the pairing of women to be a literary convention that presents the women as rivals and works to induce tension within the narratives. See Athalya Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns Within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm," in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 207.
13. Brenner identifies motherhood to be the basic motif of their story. See *ibid.*, 209. Leila Leah Bronner includes Rachel and Leah in her study of the Bible's mothers. See Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers: Maternal Power in the Hebrew Bible* (Dallas: University Press of America: 2004), 16–21. In contrast to these scholars, Esther Fuchs views Rachel and Leah primarily in their roles as wives. For Fuchs, Rachel and Leah's story conforms to the "contest type-scene," which "presents one husband and two co-wives, one of whom is barren. The fertile co-wife humiliates the barren wife intentionally until the latter is redeemed through divine intervention, becoming fertile and giving birth to one or more sons." Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 150–51.

14. Robert Alter outlines the features of the betrothal type-scene in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 47–62.

15. Joseph Blenkinsopp comments on the kinship relationship between Jacob and Rachel: “Cross-cousin marriage of this kind, the preferred type in many societies though forbidden in several states in the United States, seems to mark the optimum, the stage of social maturity at which the ancestral lineage could segment, and consequently, Israel as an ethnos came into existence.” See Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 73–74.

16. In my introduction, I argue that Rebecca functions as an ideal sister in Genesis 24.

17. The distinction made between the older and the younger sisters echoes the distinction made in Gen 27:15 between Esau, the older son [הַגֵּדִיל], and Jacob, the younger [הַדִּקְטָן]

18. The meaning of רַכּוֹת remains unclear. Jacob’s description of his children as רַכּוֹת in Gen 33:13, too weak to travel, suggests that the word indicates a physical condition.

19. Esau is red, hairy, and wild, while Jacob is smooth-skinned and docile. See Gen 25:25–28.

20. Gen 25:28.

21. Gen 37:3.

22. Even when the daughters of Zelophehad fight for property, they do so as a unit. One sister does not claim more than another.

23. Naomi Steinberg differentiates the primary from the secondary wife; she writes: “A primary wife is a woman whose continued status depends on whether there is a marital fund that was established when she was joined with her husband and that would be lost to him if the marriage were to be dissolved. . . . Typically a concubine is a secondary wife, a woman whose involvement with the husband represents a secondary union, both in terms of being an additional wife and of having a lower status than the legal wife.” See Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 16.

24. See Angelo Tosato, “The Law of Leviticus 18:18: A Reexamination,” *CBQ* 46 (1984): 201–2.

25. *Ibid.*, 208–14.

26. Steinberg writes: “In other words, the Rachel-Leah cycle provides us with a social model for resolving heirship in the situation of sororal polygyny. Cross-cultural kinship studies on sororal polygyny lead us to expect multiple heirship among the offspring of Rachel and Leah. Sororal polygyny, then, extends heirship to multiple individuals.” See Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 116.

27. Esther Fuchs observes that the splitting of these qualities justifies polygyny because no one wife can satisfy her husband. See Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 161.

28. For a discussion of the various ways beauty functions as a motif in the Bible, see Stuart Macwilliam, “Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible,” *BI* 17 (2009): 265–87.

29. Yee notes the significance of female fertility in ancient Israel. See Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 46.

30. Brenner outlines Leah’s advantages over Rachel: “Leah’s seniority is twofold and thus well established (like Sarah’s): she is the elder sister who married Jacob first. Rachel is doubly inferior socially: she is younger, a second wife. Unlike Sarah, Leah is not beloved by her husband but is the fertile one.” See Brenner, “Female Social Behaviour,” 210.

31. See Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 154.

32. Fuchs similarly comments on Leah’s motivation: “As the names of her first three sons indicate, Leah considers her reproductive capacity not as an end in itself, but as a means by which to win her husband’s love (Gen. 29.32–34).” *Ibid.*

33. In a patrilocal society, a wife’s status was particularly dependent on having children, providing her with status and security in her conjugal home. See Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve*, 38.

34. Ilana Pardes observes that this passage provides insight into Rachel's emotions and is remarkable in the context of the Bible, which does not usually record its characters' emotional responses. See Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 64.

35. Pardes notes the limited role God plays in Rachel's story. See *ibid.*, 65.

36. See Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 159.

37. Gen 33:4.

38. Gen 35:19.

39. As Benjamin Cox and Susan Ackerman observe, having died in childbirth, Rachel's corpse is considered dangerous: "(I)f even healthy childbirth is considered to be such a potent source of danger, how exacerbated must the threat become in the case of the mother's death. . . . Not only does a mother's death in childbirth, therefore, introduce another facet of liminality to an already liminal figure, but because that death interrupts the normal progress of delivery before the woman can be reintegrated into her community, it prevents the performance of whatever rites are needed to remove the liminal danger of childbirth. The body of the dead mother is thus left in a perpetual state of liminality." See Benjamin D. Cox and Susan Ackerman, "Rachel's Tomb," *JBL* 128, no. 1 (2009): 145.

40. Nancy Jay suggests that Laban operates within a system of matrilineal descent and assumes his inheritance would be transmitted through his daughters. See Jay, "Sacrifice, Descent and the Patriarchs," *VT* 38, no. 1 (1988): 64.

41. Pardes comments on the sisters' solidarity: "The two have learned to cooperate in times of distress. Enraged by Laban's usurpation of their inheritance and by their status as *nokhriyot* (foreigners) in his household, they do not hesitate to join forces with Jacob against their father." See Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 68.

42. Pardes observes how rarely women dialogue in the Bible. See *ibid.*, 66.

43. *Ibid.*, 67.

44. Gen 30:16.

45. See Yee, *Poor Banished Children*, 46.

46. Claudia V. Camp comments on the strange woman in Proverbs 7: "Far more dangerous is the woman who exists within the boundaries of male-controlled sexuality, but who decides for herself to opt out of them. Such is the wife 'dressed as a prostitute' in Proverbs 7." See Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 62.

47. Had Leah not met Jacob on his way home and informed him of the hire, presumably he would have gone to Rachel's home, which indicates his desire for Rachel.

48. Leah's choice of names for her sons continues to express her unrequited desire for Jacob.

49. The verse offers no explanation why Jacob decides to leave. It simply says in Gen 30:25: "When Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban: "Send me so that I can go to my place, my land."

50. William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 182.

51. Nancy Jay perceives Rachel's theft as an act that secures her inheritance through a system of matrilineal descent. See Jay, "Sacrifice, Descent and the Patriarchs," 65–66.

52. See Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 222–23.

53. Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 71.

54. Rachel may hope to deter Laban with the threat of contamination because according to Lev 15:19–24, impurity can be transmitted to objects touched or sat upon by a menstruating woman.

55. Pardes wonders if Jacob knows the consequence of his promise to Laban that the thief would die. Although she does not doubt Jacob's love for Rachel, Pardes also suggests that Jacob felt

threatened by her and may have subconsciously condemned her. See Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 72–73.

56. Rachel's desire to have more children is evident in the name she gives her first son Joseph, meaning "May God provide for me another son." Gen 30:24.

57. See Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 56.