

# Love changes faces: biblical and psychological view

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## Abstract

*Biblical woman is always in the service of relationships and is willing to change her face to this end. It is important to note that this step needs a hint and encouragement of a man. So Sara becomes fertile only upon the opening of her husband Abraham. Even Rebecca becomes fertile only upon Isaac's prayer. Jacob's wives change their faces in the love towards their husband and in unconditional love of their husband towards them. However, if the partnership or marital relationship is fraught with doubt, the wife is not able to change her face and must »die« like it is for example shown in the wife of Lot. This means that the prospect of life lies in the vision of unconditional love, which allows the changing of faces.*

Keywords: *love, relationship, face, wife, husband*

Changing faces is actually a process of integration, when we learn to accept and love ourselves and our family the way they are including their dark or sinful dimensions of life. God always rewards such a man and provides him with new beginnings (Kalimi 2009, 64). In the biblical cases religion and perseverance always play a key role in this regard.

Unlike modern humans, who struggle with faith and, especially in regard to long-lasting stable relationships, relatively quickly give up (Pryor 2014, 53–54), biblical person never gives up. His/her faith strengthens his/her perception that with God's help one can find a way out of any situation in life, no matter how difficult it is.

## Abraham's wife Sarah

Following the »honeymoon weeks or months« period, »hunger« sneaks up in the relationship between Abram and Sarai, leading them into mutual estrangement, which the Bible illustrates with their departure in the foreign country, Egypt (Gen...). This estrangement follows them even after they are expelled from Egypt and so they decide to cleanse their relationship and start building it on new foundations. During this estrangement period both of them commit infidelity – Sarai with pharaoh and Abram with maid Hagar. In this context, we can understand that Sarah was not fertile because she was not sufficiently loved.

The change of their faces finally happens when Abram stops thinking only of himself and becomes more open for fellow-man, which occurs under the famous oaks of Mamre, where he entertains three passers, and God blesses him (again) and promises him children. The change of their faces is thus so crucial that both of them accept new name: Abram becomes Abraham, and Sarai becomes Sarah (Gen 17,4–5). Only after Abraham alters his face and shakes of his selfishness and becomes more sincerely loving, only then is also possible for Sarah to change her face and start respecting her husband, which relaxes their relationship, thereby making it become fertile. Her famous laugh in the tent when Abraham promises changes to her, clearly demonstrates lack of respect (Gen 18,1–12). Abraham was probably pretending ignorance in his promises for so long that Sarah stopped believing and trusting him (Hartley 2000, 169). But when he actually changed, Sarah realized that he was actually capable of that, which she repaid both by showing respect as well as with fertility.

## Isaac's wife Rebekah

Unlike Abraham and Sarah, where we follow very dynamic relationship, full of changes, imbued with conflicts and signs of devotional love, we are able to detect less drama in the next generation. Even Isaac and Rebekah otherwise get in distress, but apparently not so dramatically as Abraham and Sarah. Therefore, they do not go to a foreign country, they also do not part, although this option is also very close. From their relationship we realize that they learned a lot from their parents and do not want to repeat their mistakes. It is true though that they are accompanied by similar challenges.

They indeed do not repeat the mistakes of their parents, but perhaps that is precisely why they fail to invest so much of their life force into their relationship and thus remain more or less estranged throughout their lives, and as a husband and wife live past each other. Isaac otherwise expresses a certain willingness to

change when he is praying for Rebekah's fertility, but is in his prayers probably too pragmatic and too short-sighted for more serious and in-depth changing of his face. As soon as two sons are born to them, each of them choose their own and build separate attitudes towards them, while their mutual relationship remains relatively neglected.

The consequences of their estrangement are reflected primarily in the estranged and with hatred permeated relationship between the brothers. In particular, Rebekah often shows how her beloved son Jacob means more to her than her husband. In caring for her son it is not too hard for her to cheat her husband, and thereby dragging her son Jacob into her ideas.

Rebekah is presented as a very crafty woman who achieves her goals regardless of the consequences. She does not change her face, although this is probably due to the fact that her husband Isaac is also not willing to do it. Both the first and the third generation show the husband needs to change his face first, only then the wife is able to change hers.

### Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel

The story of sisters Rachel and Leah is very interesting and suspenseful in a "movie-style" fashion, but at the same time incredibly close to real life. Their rivalry reminds us of the rivalry between brothers Esau and Jacob and even Cain and Abel. In one sentence, the Bible subtly sums up and lays out differences between the two sisters. Rachel, as a "second-born" represents youth and agility, as well as beautiful, sparkling, clear eyes; in other words, she is a girl with all aspects of esthetics. An opposite of Rachel's beauty is Leah, who is "old, ugly, and almost blind" – with dull eyes and a foggy, cloudy look (Gen 29,16–17).

As we know, Jacob falls in love with Rachel on his way to her father. Judging by Rachel's positive emotional reaction, who love-struck runs to her father and brings him the good news, Jacob can count on a good leverage in possible negotiations. He makes an agreement with the father to work for the lovely and young Rachel. Seven years of service is an acceptable offer to the father. Feeling good about the accepted offer and a set agreement or contract, Jacob freely looks to his future (Gen 29,18–20). He is completely dedicated to service and thus forgets about the time. Time passed quickly, just as watching a good movie, or reading an interesting book. Thus, after the time passes he asks the father for his "payment."

Rachel's father Laban does not protest; after all he agreed to his terms and does not intend to oppose their agreement. In accordance with the traditions of the time and his own plans – to give his old and ugly Leah in marriage first – Laban instead decides for cunningness and deception. He is a relative of

Jacob's mother Rebekah, whom we know as a practical and cunning woman. It is worth remembering that she won the father's blessing for her son Jacob through trickery. Cunningness therefore is not just a characteristic of individuals; it apparently runs in the whole family.

Laban does not show any signs of breaking his promise to Jacob. Just the opposite, he wishes to fulfill it ceremonially and with a celebration (Gen 29,22). Thus follows a wedding with all its customs and traditions and Jacob follows the flow of the day. In accordance with the wedding ceremony, following the reception he enters the bedroom, certain that he will receive the wife he knows from his time of "service." However, in the morning there is no sign of the beautiful, lovely, and young Rachel. In her place is the ugly and old Leah, the complete opposite of the bride that he knew and for whom he so dedicatedly served (Gen 29,23).

It is only in the morning that Jacob realizes the altered situation, when it is too late to change anything. Thus he lets his anger be known to Leah's and Rachel's father, so his father in law, who cheated him and did not give him the daughter for which he served, but another woman, with whom he cannot imagine spending his life (Gen 29,25). When Jacob tells his father in law everything he feels he deserves, he gets a surprisingly calm, but indisputable answer, "In our country the older daughter must get married first." (Gen 29,26) But why didn't he tell him that beforehand?

Jacob realizes he was tricked. But from his mother he learned to "fight" and never considers giving up. After his initial disappointment and "outrage" he quickly calms down. Here, along with disappointment, he probably remembers the good times and his own successful tricks, when he forced the right of the firstborn from his brother (Gen 25:29–33), and with his mother's help even tricked his father and forced him to give him the blessing (Gen 29,1–40). The trickster is finally tricked himself (Anderson 2011, 99), and thus forced to face his shadow "face-to-face" (Kille 1995, 48).

After talking to his father in law, he accepts the fact that we cannot take any steps back in life. Thus after his outburst of aggressiveness, anger, and disappointment, he listens to his cunning and wise father in law, who gives him fairly clear instructions for a happier future (Gen 29,27). If he wants to get the daughter Rachel, for whom he was actually serving, as his wife, he must first complete the bridal week with the wife he did not want, but received nonetheless, with the ugly and old Leah. Only then can he get the beautiful and young Rachel too, but has to serve another seven years for her. It is interesting that Jacob doesn't have to wait seven years for Rachel, but gets her – after he agrees to serve another seven years – immediately after the bridal week with Leah. Therefore Laban trusts him and "takes his word" for it. The meaning of the bridal week is a guarantee that the groom, having spent the time with his bride, definitively accepted her

as his wife (Sveto pismo 1997, 81). Jacob can therefore hope for Rachel only if he is willing to first completely and unconditionally accept Leah as his wife.

Laban was correct to assume that Jacob would not give up Rachel no matter what the cost, because he takes the challenge without a second thought. He spends his bridal week with Leah and then – changing his face and entering the new service – he receives Rachel as well (Gen 29,28–30). Thus he now has two wives: an ugly, old, and “blind” Leah, and a beautiful, young, agile, and lovely Rachel. Each of the wives also has a maidservant who also belongs to Jacob (Gen 29,21; 28–30). Thus he has four women at his side.

### Love Changes Faces

The Old Testament is intertwined with longings for spousal love and faithfulness between husbands and wives, and these longings can typically be recognized in a modern, “western” man (Pryor 2014, 51–52). Jewish culture stands by monogamy, a union of one man and one woman. Thus the tale of Jacob and his wives Rachel and Leah, as well as their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah, encourages us think further and find a deeper meaning, which makes it even more interesting and relevant to our time.

We know from experience that man has different faces, which he – sometimes like masks – changes and alters. Some psychologists even talk about different personalities within one person. In any case, we know how to use different faces in different circumstances. Positive and respectful communication usually creates a beautiful face on the recipient, while negative communication, full of contempt, creates an “ugly” one. When we are communicating respect and love, we will encounter beautiful faces, but if our words spread hatred and contempt, we will encounter “ugly” faces.

Based on the hypothesis that Rachel and Leah are not two different women, but are merely two faces of the same person, the above discussed story presents us with an interesting dynamics of forming permanent partnerships, or spousal relationships. In this case the strongest points are made by the faces of Rachel and Leah (Höfer 1993, 136–137), while a little less obvious, yet still significant are the faces of both maidservants.

The story clearly tells us that Jacob served for the beautiful and young Rachel. While he was serving for her, he undoubtedly served her as well, since she was not “his” yet. Without much effort we can imagine that she also used every opportunity to show him her affection and thus she served him as well. Jacob was not “hers” yet either. In this reciprocal service to one another, when they were “courting” each other but did not yet “belong” to one another, they were a beautiful, young,

and lovely “Rachel” to one another. A wedding follows; a beautiful, joyful event that often surprises people and strangely changes them. During their wedding night, Jacob’s wife turns from a beautiful and young Rachel, to an ugly and old Leah. The wedding feast, along with its beauty, brings also responsibility and challenges that Jacob only recognized after the wedding.

Up until the wedding night, Jacob knew his girlfriend as a beautiful, young, and lovely Rachel. When she lay down as a bride on their wedding night and woke up as a wife, together with her changing role from girlfriend to wife, her nature, body, and face changed as well. That night she lay with her husband as a beautiful and lovely Rachel, but in the morning she woke up as an ugly Leah.

Rachel turned into Leah on their wedding night, which – despite being angry with his wife and her father – nonetheless forces Jacob to think that he might share the responsibility for her transformation. Perhaps Rachel’s change is just an answer to Jacob’s different, less loving and more possessive communication. Up until the wedding he was serving her and knew her as Rachel, but with the marital “possessiveness” he stopped serving her and became possessive, which changed Rachel’s “body, face, and eyes.”

Of course Rachel and Leah are not only female faces, but male faces as well. A wife is just as capable of saying things that instantly change her husband from “Rachel to Leah.” Rachel and Leah’s roles are just as relevant to men as to women. In a sense any wedding is a wedding of two “shadows” not only two “suns” (Höfer 1993, 137) even though the sunny side is usually more exposed during the wedding.

When Jacob wakes up in the morning he cannot believe his eyes. He cannot comprehend that his wife can be “like that” too, since he always knew her as a beautiful Rachel. Disappointed he goes to his father in law and “lets him know” what his daughter is “really like.” The father in law does not make excuses for his daughter and does not take her side; he does not debate Jacob over his complaints. Instead he resolutely advises him to accept “Leah” if he wants to get “Rachel.” Therefore he tells him to, without complaints and “whining”, lovingly accept his wife as “Leah” i.e. for who she really is. Afterwards he should change his face first and start serving her again and after only one week he will start discovering the former beauty of Rachel in her again. If he wants to change his wife from an ugly Leah to a beautiful Rachel, he must first love her as Leah, then start “serving” her and only then will she start becoming beautiful and worthy of love again, no matter what her age.

Lasting relationships are therefore fundamentally connected with unconditional acceptance and service. It is only an unconditional love for Leah – in a female or male form – that enables a mature and responsible love of Rachel. When, after a honeymoon period of romantic love, “crises” in a marriage occur, and we

reveal our shadowy side and with it a different face that might have remained successfully concealed until then, a true necessity to move forward towards a responsible and mature love is unconditional acceptance of shadowy parts, which are in this story represented by Leah's image. It is interesting that modern research of spousal relationships recognizes prayer as the decisive factor that enables people to forgive and is a prerequisite for unconditional acceptance and a relevant means of altering faces (Fincham 2014, 345).

Seven, of course is a symbolic number which stands for fullness, forever. It refers to the story of creation and invites us to serve "until the deserved rest" or the end of earthly life. Still, relationships remain a mystery, which cannot be captured in any logic, or pragmatic programming, and thus keep surprising us – disappointing, but also bringing joy.

### The Dynamics of Fruitfulness

Rachel and Leah symbolize personal growth in lasting relationships which are full of beautiful and joyful, but also less pretty and even unpleasant and difficult events. According to this interpretation, Rachel represents beautiful and joyful moments, while Leah represents laborious and difficult periods of a partnership or spousal relationship. Seen as personal growth in a relationship, man needs both dimensions, Rachel and Leah's, as well as those of both maidservants.

As a symbol of difficult times, Leah always feels neglected, but keeps giving birth to children. With every son she gives birth to, she hopes to win Jacob's love, but seemingly never succeeds. Although truthfully, from the names he gives her children, we can deduce that her confidence is growing and that – with God's help – despite a still cold communication, with each child she feels more confident and worthy of love. Her growth in love goes from Reuben, through Simeon and Levi, to Judah (Gen 29,31–35), which leads her to the realization that the only prospect of love is positive communication. Leah thus builds her confidence from misery and feeling neglected, as well as nervousness or impatience, to the decision that self-pity and complaining, which is what the first three sons were born into (Reuben, Simeon, and Levi), will not bring her the desired outcome; thus she decides for positive communication, which is what the fourth son is born into, Judah – "I will praise the Lord!" (Gen 29,35) Thus Leah tries to win Jacob's favor through fruitfulness, but he – despite infertility – keeps looking for "Rachel," i.e. "beauty and enjoyment" in their relationship. Rachel, as a symbol of "beauty in the relationship" starts to question the purpose of her role without fertility only after the fourth Leah's son, Judah is born. Perhaps she is worried that because of her infertility Jacob might find even her beauty "boring." Thus she starts actively searching for fertility.

Her initial longing is filled with envy because Leah has four children already and she has none. Envy, of course, cannot bear fruit. Therefore she seeks help from her maidservant Bilhah, who gives birth to two sons – Dan and Naphtali (Gen 30,3–8). Leah immediately takes revenge and takes her maidservant Zilpah, who also gives birth to two sons – Gad, and Asher (Gen 30,9–13).

Rachel finally realizes that truth cannot be tricked, and fruitfulness cannot be achieved with extortion. Increasingly she suffers with painful knowledge that her love is “empty and fruitless.” Therefore she changes her strategy. She asks Leah, whom she despised and envied her fertility thus far, for help. Therefore, she had to humble herself and ask her competitor for help. As a matter of fact, she turns to her and her fruit, Reuben, who, as the firstborn, symbolically takes care of her mother’s fertility. In Rachel’s plea for mandrakes, a symbol of fertility (Hartley 2000, 266), which she addresses to the mother and the son (Gen 30,14–15), is hidden a deeper discovery of love, which is, for the price of fruitfulness, willing to also accept sacrifice and therefore another, painful dimension of love. If we want the happy, beautiful moments to bear fruit (the sunny side of relationships), we must first unconditionally accept, even love and ask for help the difficult and strenuous times (shadowy side of relationships). Jacob experienced fruitfulness of Rachel (beauty) only after she got help from Leah (difficulty and struggle). A relationship without pain remains fruitless and sooner or later even boring. If we want our relationships to be beautiful and fruitful, we must also accept pain and vulnerability.

Judging by such a different number of children between Leah and Rachel, one can assume that in permanent (marital) relationships difficult and strenuous times are more fruitful than pleasant and easy ones; for it was Leah who gave birth to seven children, but Rachel only had two.

Some periods are transitional in nature – they flow from difficult times to good times, and vice versa – and these are symbolized by the two maidservants and their children. A small number of their children, as well as their unimportant role symbolizes that transitional periods are not especially fruitful and do not offer much growth in the relationship.

Jacob loved Joseph most, that is the first child of Rachel, the wife he loved most. Even though he was born as the eleventh child, Jacob saw him as his “firstborn.” Thus he helped immensely in changing Jacob’s wife from an old and ugly Leah to a pure, beautiful, and finally fruitful Rachel. The dull eyes were cleared. After many trials and tribulations and after ten children, she is finally happy, lovely, and beautiful as before the wedding again. The trials helped Jacob and Rachel for the beauty to bear fruit. Joseph is therefore, according to Jacob’s opinion and feelings, the first child of a mature, tested, and purified spousal love, which is the most joyous kind; in this love the youngest son Benjamin is later born too.

Jacob's strong love for Rachel and Joseph is shown most intensely during one of his final spousal trials, when he is approaching his brother Esau in order to reconcile with him. Because he has not seen his brother in a long time and cannot know how he is going to react, Jacob arranges his family in a way to protect Rachel and Joseph, who symbolize the most precious events and moments of their family life (Gen 33,1–2). He puts the above mentioned "transitional periods" (maidservants and their children) in the most dangerous spot, from what we can assume that transitional periods are less important and are forgotten fastest. Trials and painful events stay in our memory longer and we protect them more. We can only speak of protecting difficult and painful experiences after we have embraced them, grown to love them, and learn from them. It is the protection of "Leah and her children" that really protects and keeps the beautiful and joyful experiences, which are symbolized by Rachel and Joseph, and were best protected by Jacob. In front of all of these Jacob bravely travels himself, which sheds a new light on the arrangement of the family and their dynamics, since the bar by which all other relationships are gauged is his relationship to himself (Gen 33,3).

Difficult and strenuous periods are an important element of spousal life, in the sense of permanent relationships, because they bear experiences, educate us, and give us strength. Learning forgiveness, we experience the greatest spiritual growth in these times (Parrot III and Parrot 1996, 127). In reality the permanent spousal relationship "hinges" on Rachel and Jacob. If we ever feel like separating in divorce because our partner became too unbearable and difficult, it is good to remember that for Rachel, Jacob was willing to cope with and even love the ugly Leah. The problem of failed permanent relationships is therefore not the "ugly Leah," but the "beautiful Rachel." As long as Rachel is beautiful enough, we are willing to cope with and accept even the most unbearable Leah. For love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (1 Cor 13,7–8). But if there is a lack of Rachel, sooner or later Leah's shadow alone will be a good enough reason to break a relationship.

Rachel died while giving birth to the youngest son Benjamin. Jacob sets up a pillar for her (Gen 35,17–20), but at the same time has to accept that fruitfulness swallowed his wife's beauty. The Bible primarily introduces Rachel as Jacob's wife, and Leah more as a mother. Rachel is thus first a beautiful wife and then a mother, and Leah is first a good mother and then a wife. In spite of this, after his death Jacob does not rest with "wife-mother" Rachel, but with "mother-wife" Leah. They are both – at his request – after their death joined to their ancestors Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 49,29–33). So while the permanence of a relationship depends on Rachel, in the end we end up with Leah. Rachel was Jacob's wife most of her life, while Leah longed for him and finally got him only

after his death. Does Jacob's family story then sensitively, yet mercilessly, tell us that the beauty of our relationships is indeed connected with fruitfulness? Ethics and esthetics are deeply interwoven and strengthen each other and makes sense of each other. This is confirmed with the long-term perspective of Jacob's family tree. His beloved children Joseph and Benjamin, as carriers of the blood line, are lost. In this context, Leah's children play a more important role; both in the sense of spiritual and religious, as well as political lives. Moses and Aaron come from Levi's and David from Judah's bloodlines, all of whom are therefore Leah's sons' descendants (Mirkin 2004, 93). Thus the Bible, through Jacob's family story, teaches us that the beauty and fruitfulness of relationships grow hand in hand. It is interesting that this finding has been discovered anew in the so-called most developed environments (Tanturri 2014, 138).

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