

Happy End for an Unloved Wife

by Dr. Raúl Esperante
Research Scientist, Geoscience Research Institute
Loma Linda University

Introduction

The Bible is full of startling love stories. Its first love story goes back to the Garden of Eden, when the first couple began life together in such idyllic circumstances that it seems like a dream. The beginnings of some Bible love stories were unexpected, at times traumatic and hair-raising—occurring in the middle of a war, during a long dusty trip through the desert, near a well. Unusual examples of couples’ experiences in marriage abound in Scripture. In one amazing love story, the unexpected pregnancy of Mary almost broke apart her relationship with Joseph even before they got married. . . .

Some love stories ended in extraordinary ways—Esther married the King of Persia, Ananias and Sapphira died one after the other on the same day as a result of their lies before God and their conspiracy in the early church. Most love story endings in Scripture, however, are just common and rather ordinary. For most of the kings and queens of Judah and Israel, no comment is made at all regarding their marriage stories. Unlike the fairytale marriages where the hero and heroine were “married and lived happily ever after,” in most Bible accounts of kings’ lives the stories end laconically just like those of ordinary people: “and they were buried and rested with their fathers.”

One might think that the way a couple begin their married life would somehow determine the kind of marriage they would have. That might be true in some cases, but in at least one story recorded in Scripture, the Bible has some surprises in store for us.

A Wife Not Chosen

Wrong decisions and serious mistakes involving marriage are likely to have long-range and often unpredictable consequences. The story of Jacob’s marriage (Gen. 29) is full of them. Being a poor migrant shepherd in Haran far from his Canaan home, his life was at the mercy of his greedy employer. This employer was none other than Laban, an uncle whom Jacob should have been able to trust. The self-serving Laban decided to pull a mean trick on Jacob. To the wedding ceremony he brought his eldest daughter, Leah, dressed in the full body-covering wedding garments of the ancient Middle East. Leah, however, was not Jacob’s choice. This big mistake led to unhappiness in the family for generations.

The Bible tells us that Jacob’s true love was Leah’s sister, Rachel. He waited and worked seven years to be able to marry her. After the ill-conceived wedding with Leah and a second wedding with Rachel, Jacob worked another seven years for Laban. In a surprising way, Leah’s father tragically deceived his son-in-law at the wedding. Laban imposed his own criteria—what he thought was best for him and his daughters. The ruse was conducted in such a manner that the bridegroom, Jacob, was unable to retract.

The conspiracy with her father to force a marriage that Jacob had not planned led Leah to an unhappy married life. Living with a marriage that he did not want led to quite a bitter experience in marriage for Jacob. However, there was no turning back. The story of that mismatched couple became more and more complex. On the wedding night Leah lay down hoping that her “smart” plan would succeed; she got up the next morning with a disturbing question: How can a wife share her life with a husband who does not love her? The biblical narrative presents the subsequent marital relationship of Jacob and Leah from quite a realistic perspective. Hers was the story of a woman who suffered much throughout her life trying to be loved by her reluctant husband.

Leah, the imposed wife, was fertile and soon gave Jacob several sons (Gen. 29:32-35). Four verses, four sons!! Rachel, Jacob’s true love, was barren and suffered intensely from infertility. She became depressed and wished she could die (Gen. 30:1). It is a dramatic paradox of pain produced by the side effects of a bigamous marriage: Rachel, the woman loved, agonizing and desperately trying to have children; Leah, bearing many children, struggling desperately to be loved. In line after line of the text, the story stresses the frustration of both women. Rachel finally conceived two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, to the surpassing happiness of Jacob and herself; Leah, though, almost reached the end of her life without gaining her husband’s love.

Most readers take sides in this plight with the beautiful and loved Rachel over Leah, the imposter. They do sympathize, though, with Leah’s anguish as the daughter of a greedy father who did not understand the ways of true love. They share in her pain as an unloved wife. As it happens, the Bible records an unpredictable happy ending for Leah.

Leah’s Journey

The way Leah went through her marriage plight can help us assess our own marital relationships realistically. Analysis of the narrative shows that Leah went through several phases in her married life that are common.

Phase 1: Disappointment (Genesis 29:16-30). The marriage between Jacob and Leah was marked by disappointment on both their parts. Not only was Leah disappointed in her husband’s response to her, but he, too, faced a cruel disappointment in being deceived by Laban and indentured for another seven years of labor to obtain the woman he truly loved.

Disappointment is often felt in many marriages, even for those who don’t necessarily go through Leah’s experience. If you are married, think back for a moment over all the years that have gone by since your wedding day. Have you ever felt frustration and disappointment? Why? How often? Do you feel that expectations have not been met, that you have not obtained what you worked really hard for? Unrealized expectations are common in marriage. Even those dearest to us can turn out to have short-comings, weaknesses we didn’t count on, traits that can be difficult to live with. In all cultures we tend to mask our unhappiness and disappointment. How have you faced your disappointments?

Phase 2: Longing (Genesis 29:31-34). One of the most dramatic moments in Leah’s tragic love story is revealed in vs. 31. The text says simply, “God saw that she was unloved.” Every time Leah gave birth to a son, she revealed what was on her mind in the name she chose for the baby. When the first, Reuben, was born, “She named him Reuben, for she said, ‘It is because the LORD has

seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now” (Gen. 29:32). But Jacob did not love her more because of Reuben. Then a second child was born, whom she named Simeon, which means *the one who hears* (Gen. 29:33). However, Jacob did not listen to her. When her third son was born, Leah exclaimed hopefully: “‘Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ So he was named Levi” (Gen. 29:34).

Maybe part of the problem came from the fact that Leah was not quite the striking “Miss Mesopotamia” that her sister Rachel was. We can imagine that, if Leah had been as beautiful as her sister, life might not have been so hard. But it was not so. Reality is as it is and we have to deal with it for the best or for the worst. God leads our lives, not by magically transforming our circumstances into a perfect situation, but by showing His love even in our imperfect reality. This, of course, includes marriage.

There is not a single hint in the text that would make us think that God considered Leah as a “second-rate” wife. In reality, God has no “second-rate” children. God saw the pain in her heart for being despised by her husband and, despite her mistakes, He blessed her with many children.

Phase 3: Finding purpose (Genesis 29:31-35). In the midst of difficult circumstances, it was the children that gave her life purpose. While Leah was not loved by her husband, she did have many children to love and by whom to be loved. After the birth of Levi, Leah decided to change her approach. It seems she stopped seeking Jacob’s love. She began instead to acknowledge the love of the One who had always loved her. Probably this is why she called her fourth son “Judah” and said, “This time I will praise the Lord.” (NIV marginal note: “*Judah* sounds like and may be derived from the Hebrew for *praise*.”) Here we may see a progression in Leah’s faith and emotional maturity. Her longing for the love of her husband was surmounted by finding a great purpose in being mother to her children.

There are many people who suffer in marriage—making great efforts to keep or recover the love of a non-responsive spouse. No matter what gestures of affection are shown, the response never seems to correspond with the spouse’s cry for love. All those who experience situations like these can sympathize with Leah. It is not by chance that her story is included in the Bible. It is hard to live within a marriage with a spouse who does not manifest the expected expressions of affection. For a fulfilling relationship to take place, we need mutual commitment, love, and a harmony, at least minimally, of the two minds, bodies, and hearts. Clearly, not everyone is always willing or able to provide what such harmony requires.

After this turning point in Leah’s life, it is interesting to note that she still gave birth to two more sons and one daughter. She gave to her sixth child the name Zebulun, which means *dwelling*. This baby boy arrived at a time in Leah’s life when she was definitely looking for her place in the family, if possible as a wife, but at least as a mother: “now my husband will dwell with me, because I have born him six sons” (Gen. 30:20 NKJV). Leah did not lose hope. The persistent shadow of her rival, the beautiful Rachel, gave to Leah a quite unsatisfactory married life, but she managed to survive.

Just like her, we live in a fallen world, where disappointment often thwarts our illusions and where frustration may coexist with having nice children and enjoying many other blessings. Married life seldom presents itself in a fully satisfactory manner; instead, we live with a certain degree of

dissatisfaction in our family relationships. Not enough commitment, not enough love, not enough intimacy, not enough good communication. Whatever it may be, we often come disappointingly short of what we really wanted. Like Leah at the beginning, we can choose to focus on the things we lack and thereby spoil our life through pain and desperation. Or, as Leah eventually did, we can choose to focus on the gifts we have received and praise God for them. She felt at least partially vindicated and fulfilled as a mother. In fact, the great majority of the people of Israel would descend from her offspring.

The Recognition of Leah

Leah's moving story has impressed the hearts of Bible readers throughout the centuries, especially the hearts of those who also feel rejected or unloved by their spouse. However, God knows every human heart and He is able to make the last to be first. Leah's story conceals one of those surprising "happy endings" that God likes so much to grant, even though this final recognition came late in her life. There is no romantic reconciliation in a beautiful garden under the full moon, nor a great resounding reconciliation banquet in front of a clapping group of friends. There is just the silent witness of a quite unexpected recognition ultimately manifested in the choosing of a tomb.

After Rachel's death, Leah finally became the only woman in the life of her husband. How long and how satisfying this period was in the life of this couple we do not know very well. What we do know is that when old Jacob began to understand that his days were coming to an end, he gave specific orders about the burial place for him and his family: "In the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought . . . as a possession for a burial place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife, there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife, *and there I buried Leah*" (Gen. 49:30, 31 NKJV, emphasis supplied). Leah was buried in the family pantheon, while Rachel's body was never placed there. She was buried on the way to Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19, 20 NIV).

Leah was number two in Jacob's heart for many years, but by circumstance she succeeded in becoming number one. In death she would rest forever with her husband in the couple's burial place. We do not know when in the waning years of their life together as a couple that the decision was made to bury her in Machpelah, but it was a telling decision on Jacob's part about his attitude toward her. It was indication that he recognized and accepted her fully as his wife.

God had even more surprising endings for Leah which she could not have guessed. It was through Judah, Leah's son, that King David was born. And, further down the stream of history, Jesus the Messiah would be born in this same line. Leah was His grandmother!

Conclusion

God can bring surprising endings into our lives. He loves us despite all our mistakes. We are his family, His dear children. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross. . . . You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household . . ." (Eph. 2:13-19).

May God bless our homes and make us more loving and affectionate toward each other. May God especially bless those who suffer for any reason in their family life. May we feel His eternal love for us. May we rest in His promises and be filled with joy and satisfaction in living.