

Leah's 'soft' eyes: Unveiling envy and the evil eye in Genesis 29:17

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The seemingly innocuous description of Leah as having 'soft' eyes in Genesis 29:17 has captivated scholars and readers for centuries. This article advances an ironic interpretation, suggesting that Leah's 'soft' eyes were not a sign of weakness but, rather, an indication of envy and malevolence, potentially contributing to fertility issues faced by her sister Rachel in terms of the ancient Near Eastern evil eye belief complex. In this context, the article delves into ancient belief systems that entwined beauty, fertility, and the malevolent gaze.

Contribution: Drawing from biblical texts, historical sources, and contemporary scholarship, this article reveals the intricate layers of meaning within this minor detail.

Keywords: Leah; Genesis 29:17; envy; evil eye belief; beauty; fertility; sibling rivalry; irony.

Introduction

The Hebrew Bible, a repository of religious, literary, and historical depth, brims with passages that beckon scholars and readers to explore their intricacies. Amid this vast tapestry of narratives, one passage that has intrigued interpreters for centuries is the seemingly unassuming description of Leah as having 'soft' eyes (עֵינַיִם רַחֵם) in Genesis 29:17. While this brief characterisation may, at first glance, appear peripheral in the grand mosaic of biblical tales, closer investigation reveals that it has a deceptively rich node of significance.

Leah's 'soft' eyes, like a riddle, hint at hidden layers of meaning. Rather than symbolising fragility, they seem to conceal paradoxical qualities of envy and malevolence that may have implications extending far beyond the individual. Within the broader context of the malevolent gaze belief complex, these 'soft' eyes evoke questions about their influence on the fertility and destiny of Leah's sister, Rachel.

This article embarks on a journey to unlock the latent treasures within this enigma. The goal of the article is to demonstrate that these 'soft' eyes are not mere adornments of a character but essential threads woven into the fabric of ancient belief systems that interlace concepts of beauty, fertility, and the malevolent gaze. In doing so, light is shed on the narrative, its characters, and the enigmatic interplay of ancient beliefs that continue to shape our understanding of this text.

A social-scientific approach

Together with Mendenhall's (1974) *The Tenth Generation* and Van Seters' *Abraham in History and Tradition* (1975), Thompson's (1974) *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* put a decisive end to earlier attempts to locate the ancestral figures in Genesis in a historical context. Before these works, scholars commonly assumed that the patriarchal narratives originated in the second millennium BCE and that they reflected social customs of that period rather than those of later Israel. Although none of the events as recounted in the traditions can be assumed to be historical, the narratives still make for interesting reading and lend themselves to interpretation as literature and folklore (Frazer 1919; Van Dyk 1994).

The social scientific approach to the study of the Hebrew Bible has proven invaluable for an understanding of biblical material and for avoiding anachronistic and ethnocentric misinterpretations (Sneed 2008). The aim of this interdisciplinary approach is to study biblical materials as a reflection of their cultural setting. Utilising methods and theories from sociology, anthropology and psychology, the meaning and socio-cultural background of the text are more fully illuminated.

Note: Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

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One significant aspect of the social scientific study of the Hebrew Bible involves examining the historical and cultural background of the text (Matthews & Benjamin 1993; Smith 2002). Scholars in this field often explore archaeological evidence, ancient Near Eastern texts, and comparative studies to reconstruct the social structures, religious practices, and political dynamics that shaped the world of the biblical writers. Another key focus of social scientific analysis is the examination of power dynamics, social inequalities, gender roles, and the representation of men and women in biblical narratives (Exum 1996).

Following in this tradition, this article seeks to contribute to an understanding of the complex sisterly relationship between Rachel and Leah by reading the text within its historical, cultural, and social context. Examining the gender dynamics, broader societal issues, and cultural belief systems at play contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of not only the relationship between the sisters but also more specifically, the enigmatic description of Leah's eyes as 'soft'.

Leah and Rachel: A complex sisterly relationship

The narrative surrounding Leah and Rachel is a fascinating depiction of complex sibling relationships and rivalry (Dresner 1989). The text presents Leah as the older sister, while Rachel is described as more beautiful (Gn 29:17). The rivalry between the two sisters goes beyond mere competition for Jacob's love; it extends to their longing for children, especially in a culture where fertility and offspring were highly valued. Leah's fertility is portrayed as a blessing from the Lord, and she conceives multiple times, while Rachel initially struggles to have children. In an ironic twist, the one described as 'soft-eyed' becomes the mother of several sons, while the 'beautiful of form and appearance' Rachel faces difficulties.

It is important to notice that within this narrative, Jacob, their husband, plays a central role, and his feelings towards each of his wives contribute to the complex dynamics. While Jacob loves Rachel more, Leah's fertility intensifies the rivalry, and Rachel's desire for mandrakes, believed to enhance fertility, exemplifies her desperation to overcome her barrenness. According to Olszewska (2018:353), the mention of mandrakes (*Mandragora officinarum*) in the narrative occurs in the context of fertility. In Genesis 30:14, Reuben, Leah's son, finds mandrakes in the field and brings them to his mother. Rachel, upon seeing them, asks Leah for some. Mandrakes were considered to be an aphrodisiac and were believed to enhance fertility and conception in ancient cultures. In this context, Rachel's interest in mandrakes reflects her desire to overcome her infertility.

As the biblical narrative progresses, it becomes evident that Leah and Rachel's relationship undergoes transformation. After Leah's initial fertility, Rachel also conceives. This leads

to a more equitable distribution of sons between the two sisters. The transformation in their relationship suggests that the tension and rivalry between Leah and Rachel may have been fuelled by the circumstances and cultural beliefs of the time. As their motherhood journeys unfold, the importance of bearing children becomes a common bond, gradually diminishing the initial rivalry. The role of Jacob as the husband and father of their children also influences their relationship. Jacob's love for Rachel initially intensifies the rivalry, but as they both bear his children, the focus shifts from the competition between sisters to the broader context of family and motherhood. The initial rivalry between Leah and Rachel provides the ideal background for an interpretation of Leah's 'soft' eyes as juxtaposed with Rachel's beauty in Genesis 29:17.

Leah's 'soft' eyes: A history of interpretation

Leah's description as having 'soft' eyes in Genesis 29:17 has led to various interpretations, some of which approach it from a medical perspective. Kotelmann (1910) discusses the symptoms of conjunctivitis simplex and suggests that Leah's eyes may have been affected by a chronic conjunctival inflammation, including symptoms such as swelling, mucus secretion, and reduced tolerance to light. Gordon (1941) presents a similar perspective, indicating that Leah's eyes might have been red, swollen, and possibly lacking eyelashes because of a condition such as blepharitis ciliaris. These interpretations, considering the physical state of Leah's eyes from a medical viewpoint, fail to shed light on the juxtaposition of Leah's eyes with the beauty, rather than the health, of Rachel.

The notion that Leah's 'soft' eyes could represent a positive trait is discussed in several interpretations. Some scholars suggest that 'soft' might imply tenderness and gentleness in Leah's nature, highlighting a positive aspect of her character (Einzig 2013). Jensen (2018) argues that 'soft eyes' should be understood as a reflection of Leah's overall appearance, emphasising her delicate and appealing nature, especially when compared to her sister Rachel (cf. Arnold 2009).

Leah's eyes have also been interpreted negatively. Some authors suggest that 'soft' may imply weakness, dullness, or unattractiveness (Fruchtenbaum 2009). According to Skinner (1910), Leah's eyes lacked the lustrous brilliancy associated with female beauty in the ancient Near East, which may have contributed to her being considered less desirable in comparison to her sister. In this view, Leah's eyes had a negative impact on her overall appearance and desirability as a wife. However, it remains unclear why her unattractive eyes, specifically, would be contrasted with Rachel's beauty in form and appearance.

An alternative perspective on Leah's 'soft' eyes is that they may serve a proleptic function, foreshadowing her later deception in marriage. In this approach, the 'soft' eyes description functions as a narrative device, anticipating her

role in a later episode where she is switched with her sister Rachel to avoid remaining unmarried because of her lack of beauty (Marcus 2021). While the suggestion of a connection between the initial description of Leah's eyes and the subsequent events in the biblical narrative may be valid, its possible connection with Rachel's fertility problems remains unexplored.

Leah's 'soft' eyes are often discussed in comparison to her sister Rachel's beauty. The literature underscores the importance of this contrast in highlighting the differences between the two sisters (Longman & Garland 2008). This interpretation, while not assigning a clear positive or negative value to Leah's eyes, emphasises the narrative role of the eyes in distinguishing the two sisters. It remains unclear, however, why the author would contrast Leah's eyes, specifically, with Rachel's beauty in form and appearance.

Role and character interpretations focus on how Leah's eye condition may have influenced her character, responsibilities, and emotional state. Some authors suggest that Leah's eyes were connected to her emotional state, possibly because of crying (Seelenfreund & Schneider 1997). Her eyes are seen as possibly related to her emotional distress, leading to a significant change in her life events, such as her marriage to Jacob. This imaginary approach, too, fails to elucidate the apposition of Leah's eyes with the beauty of Rachel. It may be that this enigmatic juxtaposition is best understood against the background of the evil eye belief system in the ancient Near East.

The beauty-fertility-evil eye nexus in ancient belief systems

The belief in the evil eye, one of the oldest and most widespread belief systems in human history, is shrouded in antiquity. Its origins remain a subject of debate, but references to the evil eye abound in various ancient cultures, including Sumerian and Akkadian texts. This belief revolves around the idea that individuals, often women, possess the power to inflict harm through malevolent glances (Seligmann 1910).

One particularly intriguing aspect of the evil eye belief is its connection to beauty. While beauty is universally celebrated, it paradoxically invites the attention of envious or malevolent gazes. To counteract this risk, protective measures such as amulets and gestures have been employed. The blue eye amulet, a well-known protective talisman in Mediterranean regions, is worn to ward off the evil eye. Exceptional beauty is believed to be particularly susceptible to malevolent gazes (Elworthy 1895). The consequences of the evil eye's influence on beauty can be significant, potentially affecting an individual's appearance and overall well-being. Vulnerability to the evil eye is often linked to the idea that exceptional beauty can provoke jealousy, thereby attracting malevolence.

Fertility, particularly concerning infants and mothers, emerges as a primary target of the malevolent influence of the evil eye. In ancient cultures, a strong belief persisted in

the power of the evil eye to harm newborns, exacerbated by the high infant mortality rates prevalent in antiquity (Elliott 2015). As a response to this perceived threat, protective rituals and practices were enacted in societies where belief in the evil eye held sway. Newborns were frequently shielded from the gaze of others for a specific period, and protective talismans were employed to avert harm. Mothers, too, were safeguarded from the potentially detrimental influence of the evil eye through a variety of protective gestures and items, with these measures sometimes extending for weeks or even months after childbirth.

The beauty-fertility-evil eye nexus, deeply embedded in human culture, presents an intricate and enduring aspect of ancient belief systems. The vulnerability of beauty and fertility to malevolent gazes consistently recurs across a spectrum of ancient cultures, necessitating protective measures to fend off the malevolent influence (Lykiardopoulos 1976). This historical backdrop sets the stage for an interpretation of the author's ironic description of Leah's eyes as 'soft'.

Leah's 'soft' eyes: An ironic interpretation

The Hebrew Bible is a treasure trove of literary complexity and depth, with irony serving as a powerful rhetorical tool (Häner & Miller 2023). Irony, characterised by a gap between appearance and reality, often reveals profound insights in biblical narratives (Good 1965). For example, it has been suggested that the author of Qohelet maintains an ironic tone throughout the book, reflecting on the human condition, the impact of God, and death. Qohelet's ironic stance towards traditional wisdom is evident, with the author engaging in Socratic-like reasoning (Spangenberg 1996).

Sharp (2008) also emphasises the pervasive use of ambiguity and irony in sacred texts, stressing the importance of authorial intention in understanding irony. She underscores the influence of reader assumptions and interpretive communities, acknowledging that irony blurs the lines between what is said and unsaid, challenging the reader's perception. The significance of context in identifying irony is also highlighted.

The irony implied by the 'soft' eyes of Leah, is best understood against the background of the extramission theory of vision in the ancient Near Eastern and circum-Mediterranean world. Contrary to the current scientific intramission theory, in which the eye is a passive organ and recipient of light and sensation, the extramission theory regarded the eye as an active organ. It was thought to project particles of energy or light (Elliott 2015). In ancient texts, the eyes of humans and gods are often described as 'fiery', 'gleaming', and 'flashing', projecting particles of energy similar to the rays of the sun or a source of light. Weakness and old age were associated with a dim light of the eyes, whereas health and strength were associated with a strong light of the eyes (cf. Gn 27:1; Pr 15:30).

In view of this cultural conceptualisation of vision, the irony of Leah's 'soft' eyes mentioned in the context of Rachel's beauty becomes clear. The adjective used to describe Leah's eyes, רך, related to the verb רכך, 'to be tender, weak, soft', is used to describe tenderness and imply weakness (Gn 18:7; 33:13; 2 Sm 3:39; Brown, Driver & Briggs 1996). Significantly, in Proverbs 15:1 it is contrasted with a harsh and painful (עצב) word: 'A soft (רך) answer turns away anger, but a harsh (עצב) word stirs up ire'. If the reference to Leah's eyes was indeed intended to be ironic, her eyes could therefore be interpreted as 'hard' and inflicting harm in the context of the ancient Near Eastern evil eye belief complex.

As illustrated here, beauty was believed to attract the evil eye. Therefore, rather than being 'soft' and 'weak', they were 'strong' and 'harsh', contributing to Rachel's fertility problems as described in the ensuing narrative. Marcus (2021) may have been right in surmising that the description of Leah's eyes as soft was proleptic, but in an ironic way, foreshadowing Rachel's initial inability to conceive as a consequence of Leah's envy. This interpretation extends beyond a mere physical description. Leah's 'soft' eyes, symbolising envious and malevolent intentions, align with the ironic nature of the Hebrew Bible's narratives. The use of irony within biblical texts underscores the capacity of these narratives to contain multilayered meanings and subtlety that provoke thought.

Leah's fertility stands in stark contrast to Rachel's initial barrenness. Rachel's desire for mandrakes also supports the interpretation that she may have believed her fertility to have been caused by the evil eye, as in some cultures it is regarded as an apotropaic against the evil eye (Seligmann 1910). Leah's envy, although merely implied, fits this narrative by contributing to the belief that Rachel's beauty attracted misfortune. Moreover, as illustrated earlier, the notion of an evil eye being connected to infertility was not exclusive to this biblical narrative. In various ancient cultures, from the Mediterranean to the Near East, the belief in the evil eye's harmful effects on fertility was widespread. This shared cultural context reinforces the interpretive perspective that Leah's envious eyes had a perceived impact on Rachel's initial fertility struggles in the context of the ancient Near Eastern evil eye belief complex.

Conclusion

The narrative of Leah and Rachel serves as a compelling illustration of complex sibling relationships, marital dynamics, and the significance of fertility in the ancient world. The desire for children, the use of mandrakes as a fertility drug and apotropaic against the evil eye, and the evolving relationship between Leah and Rachel provide a rich context for understanding the subtleties of this narrative and the description of Leah's eyes, in particular.

Leah's 'soft' eyes in Genesis 29:17, described in a seemingly casual manner, carry deeper layers of meaning that reflect the multifaceted nature of the Hebrew Bible. By applying

an ironic interpretation within the context of ancient belief systems surrounding beauty, fertility, and the evil eye, this article pointed to the perceived influence of Leah's envious eyes on Rachel's fertility.

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Author's contributions

Z.K. has declared sole authorship of this research article.

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