

Where Did Leah Die?

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Canaan and Egypt are likely locations for the death of Leah since there is no reference in Genesis to her demise, as with Rachel (Gen.35:16-20), while Israel was in transit to Egypt (Gen.46:1-28). Jacob reports he buried Leah in the cave of Machpelah before Mamre in the vicinity of Hebron (Gen.49:29-31). Did Leah then die in Canaan before Jacob moved Israel Enterprises into Egypt? After all, she was not counted among the seventy "souls of the house of Jacob, which came into Egypt" (Gen.46:27) though her daughter, Dinah, is so included (Gen.46:15). Like Er and Onan, who died in Canaan, none of Jacob's wives, whose names are given here, are reckoned among the seventy listed by Moses.

Nevertheless, Joseph's prophetic dream that "the sun, moon and eleven stars made obeisance to me" (Gen.37:9) points to the future presence of his stepmother Leah in Egypt. Jacob understood this (Gen.37:10), saying, "Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?" God's people, like Jacob initially, have been slow to accept Leah as the "mother" in the house of Jacob. Yet, biblical prophecy suggests that Leah had assumed her rightful position as first wife in Jacob's household.

Let us recall that "When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren" (Gen.29:31). Four children were born in succession as Leah sought in vain to gain the love of Jacob (Gen.29:32) in severe competition with her envious sister Rachel. Barren, Rachel provoked a rare burst of anger from Jacob when she demanded "give me children or I die" (Gen.30:1). Rachel continued wrestling with Leah (Gen.30:8) by giving Jacob her maidservant, Bilhah, as an unendowed wife (concubine) (Gen.30:3). Leah responded in kind giving her maidservant, Zilpah, to Jacob as a wife (Gen.30:9).

Later, barren Rachel sought to appropriate mandrakes Reuben found. Leah initially responded negatively, asking "Is it a small matter that thou hast taken away my husband? and wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes?" (Gen.30:14-15). But, the sisters struck a deal and that evening "Leah went out to meet him (Jacob), and said, Thou must come in unto me; for surely I have hired thee with my son's mandrakes" (Gen.30:16). "And God hearkened unto Leah, and she conceived and bare Jacob a fifth son . . . Issachar" (Gen.30:17-18).

Rachel was thereby reprov'd for her foolish superstition about a fertility placebo in the conception of children. In fact, it was God who had closed her womb (Gen.30:2) sanctioning Jacob for his hatred of Leah. Jacob finally reconciled with Leah and accorded his wife her due in love and respect under God's law (Exodus 21:10). "And God remembered Rachel . . . and opened her womb" (Gen.30:22). But, prior unjust treatment of Leah left a legacy of jealous hatred among her six sons which ultimately led to the selling of Joseph (Gen.37:11-33). When Joseph summoned Jacob to Egypt, Joseph's mother, Leah, also came and bowed to Joseph fulfilling prophecy and protocol. When Leah died, she was taken by Jacob to Canaan for dignified burial in the cave of Machpelah where Joseph later buried his father, Jacob (Gen.50:1-12).