

Rivalry, Fertility, and Favouritism among Jacob's Wives: An Akan Reading of Genesis 29–30

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Abstract

This article investigates the underlying causes of conflict among Jacob's wives and analyses these dynamics within the context of Akan socio-cultural experiences of polygyny. Although previous scholarship on the Jacob narrative has primarily addressed themes such as barrenness, fertility, and divine intervention, it has paid limited attention to interpreting the rivalry among Jacob's wives through an Akan inculturation perspective. Utilising narrative criticism and inculturation hermeneutics, this study situates the experiences of Jacob's household in conversation with Akan conceptions of marriage, fertility, favouritism, and co-wife relationships. The analysis contends that rivalry among Jacob's wives arose from three interconnected factors: the violation of the marriage arrangement that favoured Rachel over Leah, competition regarding fertility and childbearing, and unequal access to Jacob's affection. The findings suggest that these dynamics closely parallel tensions in Akan polygynous households, where fertility, marital preference, and competition among co-wives often shape family relationships. Furthermore, the Jacob narrative critiques practices that marginalise less-favoured wives and questions the assumption that childbearing necessarily secures a husband's affection. This article advances African biblical hermeneutics by demonstrating how an Akan inculturation approach yields new insights into the conflict dynamics present in the narrative of Jacob's family.

Keywords: Polygyny, Akan, Inculturation Hermeneutics, Favouritism, Family Conflict, Fertility Competition

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Introduction

The subject of conflict is a common phenomenon in most polygynous family relationships. The polygamous institution comes with certain practices that involve psycho-traumatic experiences, disrespect for the unloved wife and her children, deprivation, and depression that affect the behaviour of family members who experience such tendencies in that institution.¹ Those affected are known to behave in ways that run counter to social norms, thereby becoming the key architects of the

¹ Julius Arhin-Asamoah, "Breaking Boundaries: Exploring Polygamous Marriage from an African Woman's Perspective in Ama Ataa Adoo's *Changes: A Love Story*," *Asian J. Lang. Literary and Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2023): 368.

troubles, confusion, and chaos in the family and the broader society. Those who respond negatively to these daily experiences are seen as unfriendly, rude, and troublemakers toward anyone they perceive as a threat to their status in their families.

In the Hebrew Bible, it is easy to identify certain men who married or entered into an affair with more than one woman and ended up having issues with their wives (Gen. 21:8-21; 1 Sam. 1:2-6). Notable figures such as Abraham, David, and Solomon are recorded as having married several women at some point in their lives and experiencing familial troubles (Gen. 21; 2 Sam. 13 and 1 Kgs 11). Among these accounts, the conflict involving Jacob's wives offers a particularly useful case for the present study.

While previous studies on Genesis 29–30 have examined themes such as polygyny, barrenness, fertility, divine intervention, and family conflict, little attention has been given to the specific socio-cultural factors that generated rivalry between Jacob's wives and how these conflict dynamics may be interpreted within African cultural contexts. In particular, there is a scarcity of studies that place the narrative in dialogue with Akan socio-cultural understandings of polygyny, favouritism, fertility competition, and co-wife relations. This study addresses that gap by employing an Akan inculturation hermeneutic to examine how the conflict indicators in Jacob's household resonate with, critique, and illuminate similar experiences in Akan polygynous families.

The Akan, on the other hand, though have several distinct ethnic groups, share common familial, social and political institutions, including polygamy.² This makes studying the Akan together possible. In recent times, the institution of polygamy appears to be waning from public view since some non-Muslim men, especially, keep other concubines hidden from the first wife.³ However, there are a select few who make their polygamous relationship known. Mostly, behaviours the husband and some wives put up with, or key decisions they make, have generated a lot of conflict in such families, either while the man is alive or posthumously.

Comparing the two worldviews, the conflict indices identified in the Hebrew narrative of Jacob's family and the Akan context indicate that, although the contexts differ, they share much in common. The paper identifies the root cause of these conflicts as responses exhibited by Jacob's wives, shaped by their daily experiences with their husband and with one another as women married to the same man. An Akan re-reading of Jacob's narrative would easily recognise rich evidence for the

² Omar H. Ali, "Akan," in *Native Peoples of the World: An Encyclopedia of Groups, Cultures and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Steven Danver (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 12.

³ Miriam Koltvedgaard Zeitzén, *Polygamy: Across Cultural Analysis* (Bloomsbury: Berg Publishers, 2008), 161.

Akan context, where Rachel and Leah's responses to their situations share much with the conduct of rival wives who generate chaotic homes.

In juxtaposing their experiences with the Akan context, the study realises that although the two contexts differ, the responses the women exhibited due to the issues of the beloved wife monopolisation of the husband, instances of neglect, denial, sidelining, and stigmatisation that women in polygynous families occasionally faced are similar to what an Akan polygynous wife would equally exhibit when faced with similar circumstances. The research presents Jacob as a polygynous husband who was supposed to unify his wives but saw no need to do anything to bring about this unity, and ended up playing favouritism between them, thus creating disharmony. Rachel is also presented as the beloved wife in a polygynous home who has no affection for Leah, the first wife she met, and uses her privileged position to dominate her husband's affection.

In an effort to understand wives' and husbands' behaviours that create conflict, the paper investigates how people who feel their privileged positions are threatened or subverted behave in a polygynous family by exploring the experiences of Jacob and his wives. It then evaluates the variables that shape the behaviour of Jacob and his wives in the biblical narrative, in the context of Akan polygynous families, to understand how the Akan can equally appreciate the biblical narrative through inculturation hermeneutics.

The study offers a thorough assessment of how the Jacob narrative throws light on the conflicting scenes experienced in polygynous families in both contexts and thus attempts to understand the responses exhibited by the characters in both contexts. This reading will deepen understanding of Jacob's wives' behaviours and offer a richer appreciation of similar responses that wives may exhibit in Akan polygynous family set-ups. This will reveal how the various issues that emerged among his wives resonate with the Akan context. Isaac bidding Jacob to marry from his uncle, thus encouraging cross-cousin marriage (Gen. 28:1), the envy of Rachel towards Leah in the birth tussle, the fight against Jacob's sexual rotation, and the conflict over the mandrake that emerged in his family relate so perfectly to the Akan socio-cultural practices that prompt the need for a comparative discourse.

The work seeks to reread Jacob's polygynous family relationships by re-examining the issues that created conflict among his wives through an Akan socio-cultural lens. The goal is to show how an Akan polygynous wife would respond to the same conditions Jacob's wives experienced. This effort requires dialogue around key thematic issues in Jacob's narrative from Akan socio-cultural perspectives.

This article argues that rivalry between Jacob's wives emerged from three interrelated factors: the breach of the marriage arrangement that privileged Rachel over Leah,

competition over fertility and childbearing, and unequal access to Jacob's affection. Through an Akan inculturation reading, the article shows that these conflict dynamics closely resemble tensions in Akan polygynous households while also challenging cultural assumptions about fertility and marital affection.

Interpretive Framework: Narrative Criticism and Akan Inculturation Hermeneutics

The work employs a bipolar approach to read Jacob's family conflict in the Akan context. Taking a cue from Otto Eckart's advice that recent biblical scholarship ought to apply dual approaches to read the Bible diachronically and synchronically, the research uses a dual methodology to read the Bible.⁴ It adopted the narrative-critical lens that pays attention to characterisation, repetitive motifs, plot, type-scenes, among others, to analyse the key issues in Jacob's family narrative and expose certain dynamics of the conflict that would be much appreciated within the Akan context.⁵ In addition, it used inculturation hermeneutics, which allow the researcher to use the socio-cultural conditions of a specific people group to engage in a dialogue with issues discovered in the biblical narrative.⁶ This, in a way, made the narrative meaningful to the socio-cultural conditions of the Akan practising polygamy in the Ghanaian geopolitical world.

Exchange of betrothed wife (Gen. 28-30; 35:16-23)

The rudimentary cause of the rivalry between Jacob and his wives can be traced to a breach of the marital contract between Jacob and Laban. Jacob's father directed him to take a wife from one of the daughters of Laban (Gen. 28:1-2). The core of the instruction, according to the text, is Isaac's command (*tsavveh*) to Jacob to take a woman/wife (*ʾiššah*) from among the daughters of Laban. Thus, Jacob, when ready to choose a wife, clearly informed Laban of his interest in Rachel, and an agreement was reached that he would work for seven years to have his request granted according to the plot of the narrative. Per that agreement, Rachel would be Jacob's betrothed wife until the contract was formalised. Unless the seven years are up, Jacob has no right to have carnal knowledge of Rachel. He has to fully fulfil the marital processes. In ancient Israel, betrothal (*'araš*) is the promise of marriage of a maiden to a man made over a period of time before the main wedding. The supposed lady is promised to the groom-

⁴ Eckart Otto, *The Pentateuch in Synchronical and Diachronical Perspectives Protorabinic Scribal Erudition Mediation between Deuteronomy and Priestly Code* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2004), 472.

⁵ Menahem Perry and Meir Stenberg, "The King Through Ironic Eyes: The Narrator's Devices in the Biblical Story of David and Bathsheba and Two Excuses on the Theory of Narrative Text," *Hasifrut/Literature* 1, no. 2 (1968): 632; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 116-117; Jan Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 1.

⁶ Eric Anum, *Comparative Readings of the Bible in Africa: Some concerns* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), 468.; Justin S. Ukpong, "Development in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *Bible in Africa, Translations, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. by G.O. West and M.W. Dube (Brill: Leiden, 2001), 12.

to-be as his would-be wife.⁷ It appears that full payment of the bride wealth concretizes that arrangement.⁸ The expected amount that should have been paid to Laban was fifty shekels (Dt. 22:29). According to Driver and Miles, one's monthly wage is between one and one and a half shekels.⁹ Jacob offering to serve seven years to pay for Rachel's bride price was thus a substantial payment. His bid was far above the normal wage.¹⁰ The deal Jacob had with Laban is therefore an arranged marriage between cousins to fulfil his father's request.¹¹

Ancient Israel treated betrothed wives as actual wives (or daughter-in-law), and any unfaithfulness on their part before the wedding took place was equal to adultery, and the Mosaic Law prescribes the death penalty for such offences (Deut. 22:23-24; cf. Lev. 20:10). For a woman to be considered as a wife, bride wealth, *mōhar*, has to be paid to the family.¹² A man, however, could be made to pay *mōhar* not only in monetary form but through service requested by the father-in-law, as Jacob did (Gen.29:15-30). Laban, however, breached the contract and replaced Rachel with Leah. In this regard, neither Jacob nor Rachel was guilty of the infraction of the marital process.

On the other hand, Laban was. His excuse that it was not customary for the younger sister to marry before the elder sister was a discussion that Jacob needed to be privy to. Keeping this information secret from Jacob is a great form of mockery.¹³ Laban's deception created an unhealthy relationship between Jacob and Leah. Jacob's replacement of Rachel with Leah created family friction that later led to several conflicts. Laban thus outwitted Jacob, forcing him to serve for fourteen years to marry his two daughters.¹⁴

The Akan, on the other hand, would see the arrangement between Jacob and Laban as both a betrothal, a cousin marriage, or an arranged marriage. Traditionally, the Akan marital process begins with mate selection. Choosing a wife remains the preserve of the man.¹⁵ Just as no one knows of Rachel's affection for Jacob, it is unthinkable for a

⁷ Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1961), 29.

⁸ Victor H. Matthews, "Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 7.

⁹ Godfrey R. Driver and John C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 470-471.

¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary* vol 2, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1994), 451.

¹¹ Victor P. Hamilton, "Marriage", *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York/London: Dell Publishing Group, 1992), 5637.

¹² Tracy M. Lemos, *Marriage Gifts and Social Change in Ancient Palestine 1200 BCE to 200 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61.

¹³ Jo Ann Skousen, *Matriarchs of the Messiah: Valiant Women in the Lineage of Jesus Christ* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort Publishing, 2026), 28.

¹⁴ Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 439.

¹⁵ Dorothy Dee Vellenga, "The Widow Among the Matrilineal Akan of Southern Ghana," in *Widows in African Societies*, ed. Betty Potash (Stanford: Stanford University Press Library, 1986), 222.

woman to propose to a man she secretly admires, since she will be taken as an immoral woman and may lose her respect.¹⁶ This restriction on women is supported by the popular Akan adage “it is the dog that searches for bone and not the inverse.” This is just to say that a lady proposing to a man is an aberration. In the olden days, biological fathers played little role in their sons' mate selection because the Akan practised matrilineal inheritance. The maternal uncle usually helps with such a decision.¹⁷ He takes the initiative to secure a wife for his nephew if the latter is unmarried. Laban, as the lead figure in his daughter's proposed marriage to his nephew, would have been seen as appropriate by the Akan. In all these negotiations, the standard form of Akan marriage requires consent from both families, as well as from the individuals involved.¹⁸

When a young man's uncle wants to help choose a wife for his nephew, blood-related rules are observed. The blood link determines who gets married to whom, no matter the love. As a norm, the Akan consider it unacceptable for blood-related people to marry. Though one is not allowed to marry one's direct brother or sister, the Akan encourage cousin marriage, that is to say, a woman could marry her father's nephew.¹⁹ As a norm, most marriages in Akan communities are arranged between families, yet some aspects are based on friendship between the groom and bride.²⁰ For young people who seek to marry within the Akan community, marriage usually begins with a young man and a woman falling in love. Observing courtship among the Ashanti group of the Akan, Rattray noted that the two young people first become attracted to each other and begin a friendship.²¹

Usually, a young man who wanted to marry a lady would frequent her family's household and be ready to do a few odd jobs for her parents, just as Jacob did. At the first opportunity, he would propose in the popular formula: “I want you to be my wife.”²² This implies that young people take the initiative in choosing a partner, and for it to be valid, parents must consent and due process must be followed. The Akan believe that people who marry as good friends experience a lovely union. Aidoo notes: “if dating and courtship become a time to see each other as a friend, then the real

¹⁶ Read the same view from Baffour K. Takyi, “Tradition and Change in Family and Marital Processes: Selecting a Marital Partner in Ghana,” in *Mate Selection Across Cultures*, ed. Raenn R. Hamon and Brom B. Ingoldsby (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 85.

¹⁷ Confidence Gbolo Sanka, et al, “Ama Ata Aidoo and the Akan Culture: A Critique of the Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa”, in *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, 2, no 9 (September, 2013), 92.

¹⁸ Vellenga, “The Widow Among the Matrilineal Akan of Southern Ghana,” 222.

¹⁹ Martha Donkor, “Women, Gender, Sex and the Church,” in *Gender and Sexuality in Ghanaian Societies*, ed. Martha Donkor and Amoaba Gooden (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 1.

²⁰ Mark S. Aidoo, *Friendship in the Book of Job: Art, Context and Theology from an African Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2024), 168.

²¹ Robert Sutherland Rattray, *Ashanti and Constitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 76.

²² Rattray, *Ashanti and Constitution*, 76.

discoveries and virtues that grow in a relationship should not die off when the two become married".²³ In this regard, the Akan would have seen Jacob's close relationship and later love story with Rachel as normal. Their love union is closely linked to the earlier friendship (Gen. 29:6-12). This is different for Leah, who had little contact with Jacob, let alone a friendly relationship. Thus, Jacob's disinterest in Leah would not surprise the Akan. Alter's depiction of the 'type scene' in Hebrew Narratives, where a young maiden meets a young man at a well and falls in love, sheds light on the foundation of the Jacob-Rachel love saga.²⁴

Beyond the similarities in mate selection, the Akan would see the form of betrothal practised in ancient Israel differently. Usually, ancient Israel had betrothal as the first stage of marriage between two adults. This is then accompanied by (at least the promise of) *mohar* [a marriage gift]; later the marriage itself, signified by the wife's move from her father's house to that of her husband, consummation, and very often a feast."²⁵ The Akan, by contrast, understand betrothal marriage differently from what ensued between Jacob and Rachel. Betrothal is a popular ancient Akan marital practice.²⁶ This marriage is arranged when the woman is very young, and her elders or parents contract the marriage on her behalf until she becomes an adult.²⁷ In other forms, parents could even promise two unborn children in marriage if one was born male and the other female.²⁸ Mair also wrote that among the Akan, even two children can be betrothed to each other in infancy.²⁹

Several reasons are given to encourage the practice. The young lady might be pledged to an elderly man whom the family owes to offset family debt.³⁰ The young man's parents may see the woman as a potential wife and make early arrangements to marry her to their younger son when both reach marriageable age.³¹ The young boy's parents make such an arrangement to develop family ties with the young girl's family.³² Under such circumstances, the young man's family is free to give token gifts or money to their bride-to-be with the understanding that, in the future, their son would become

²³ Aidoo, *Friendship in the Book of Job*, 168.

²⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 83.

²⁵ Bernard Jackson, *Wisdom-Laws: A Study of the Mishpatim of Exodus 21: 1-22:16* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 372.

²⁶ Lucy Mair, *African Marriage and Social Change* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1969), 4.

²⁷ Kwame Arhin, "The Political and Military Roles of Akan Women, in *Female and Male in West Africa*, ed. Christine Oppong (New York: Routledge Revivals, 2023), 45.

²⁸ Vellenga, "The Widow among the Matrilineal Akan of Southern Ghana," 222.

²⁹ Mair, *African Marriage and Social Change*, 4.

³⁰ Mair, *African Marriage and Social Change*, 4.

³¹ Baffour K. Takyi, "Tradition and Change in Family and Marital Processes: Selecting a Marital Partner in Ghana," in *Mate Selection Across Cultures*, ed. Raenn R. Hamon and Brom B. Ingoldsby (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 83.

³² Takyi, "Tradition and Change in Family and Marital Processes: Selecting a Marital Partner in Ghana," 83.

the husband of the woman with whom the alliance was sought.³³ If the girl's father breached the contract and gave her to another man when she came of age, it could result in a court suit.³⁴ Jacob's choice of Rachel is driven by his love for her. This is confirmed by serving fourteen years to marry Rachel. They first met at the well and exchanged pleasantries (Gen. 29:6-12). Laban's decision to take Rachel, Jacob's betrothed wife, from him and replace her with his elder sister would be tantamount to a breach of contract. Among the Akan, Jacob would be embittered by the Laban household, and all of Jacob's family members would also dislike Laban and his family. The Akan would therefore have seen Jacob as justified in hating Leah and loving Rachel. This is because a breach of a betrothal contract is not taken lightly. The Akan would therefore see Jacob's behaviour in the narrative as satirising the challenges of imposing a woman on a man, creating detachment and resentment in that relationship when the man finally meets the woman he loves in a polygynous context.

Envy among co-wives due to barrenness (Gen. 29: 31-30:24; 35:16-23)

In the Jacob narrative, barrenness created envy among the two legal wives. The narrator presents God as actively involved in the birth process. Jacob married four women, two sisters and their slaves. According to the narrator, the legal wives both had God open (*pātāh*) their wombs before they could conceive and give birth (Gen. 29:31; 30:22). In the case of Leah, Yahweh saw (*rā'āh*) her condition and opened (*pātāh*) her womb. Rachel, on the other hand, is presented by the narrator as having Elohim (God) remember (*zākhar*) her, hear (*šāma*) her cry, and open (*pātāh*) her womb after a long period of battling barrenness before she could give birth (Gen. 30:22).

Many works address barren wives in the Hebrew Bible.³⁵ The ability to conceive is presented as an act of divine intervention.³⁶ This presents God as having absolute power over reproduction in the womb. Likewise, it takes God's intervention for Jacob's legal wives to conceive. A broader reading of the Hebrew Bible reveals other avenues for conception. Some adopted surrogates to intervene in giving birth, although such an approach gives temporary satisfaction. Three cases are Sarah (Gen. 16), Leah (Gen. 30:9-13), and Rachel (Gen. 30:3-8), who involved their maidservants to overcome their inability to give birth. It is difficult to disagree with scholars who see Rachel and Leah's intervention to conceive through their maidservants as the rape of

³³ Takyi, "Tradition and Change in Family and Marital Processes: Selecting a Marital Partner in Ghana," 83.

³⁴ Vallenga, "The Widow among Matrilineal Akan of Southern Ghana," 205-208.

³⁵ Mary Callaway, "Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash", *SBL Dissertation Series* 91 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 231; James G. Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type Scenes," *JSOT* 17 (1980), 107-119.

³⁶ Esther Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (Leiden/New York: Koln/Brill, 1997), 87.

enslaved women.³⁷ Such a perspective is unwarranted in the practices of the ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu.³⁸ However, viewed through a modern lens, such judgment may not be far from the truth.

From another perspective, birth is conceived when persistent prayer is offered, and God finally answers (Gen. 25:21; 1 Sam. 1:10-17). The husband's role in going into the wife for conception has never been neglected (Gen. 4:1; 38:2, 18). When the husband is not mentioned in the conception process, it does not rule out the fact that the couple had conjugal engagement. In Leah's sixth birth, it was explicitly mentioned that her husband went into her and Yahweh gave her conception (Gen. 30:16-17). In Rachel's case, God remembered her, opened her womb, and gave her conception (Gen. 30:22). Even though Jacob is not mentioned as going into Leah before she conceived, this does not rule out the fact that the couple might have had sexual intercourse with their husband for this to take place. What could be deduced is that, as husband and wife, they might be having such intimate sexual encounters, but at the point Rachel conceived, the omniscient narrator informed readers that it was the divine who intervened.

It has been recognised that, in pronatalist societies, a woman's happiness is complete only through childbirth.³⁹ In a polygynous household, a rival wife who has the advantage of giving birth could cause pain to the other wife who lacks it. In the birth tussle, Rachel's happiness was not complete at the early stage of her marriage when she kept struggling to give birth. Rachel was the beloved (*'āhabāh*) of her husband, but Leah, the fertile woman who bore the most children, was the unloved (*śenû'āh*). This left Leah unhappy with the turn of events, setting the stage for envy. Observing such daily disregard and sidelining by her husband caused her a lot of pain and frustration (Gen. 29:31-34).

To balance the scales of happiness, the narrator presents God as intervening to bless Leah with fruitfulness, giving her a reason to be content in her marriage. This gives Rachel her husband's love, while Leah, denied marital love, receives the love of her children as compensation. Rachel gains her self-worth through her husband, and Leah through her children.⁴⁰ In a patriarchal world, having sons mattered, so the two women initially competed with each other. This explains why Rachel, who was childless, expressed intense jealousy toward Leah (Gen. 30:1).

³⁷ Susanne Shulz, *The Bible as Political Artifact: On the Feminist Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), 83.

³⁸ Susan Niditch, "Genesis," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 20.

³⁹ Elyse Goldstein, *Revisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1998), 65.

⁴⁰ Goldstein, *Revisions*, 65.

Rachel realised that she had less power in the marriage and desperately needed assistance to achieve this; that is why she says to her husband: "Give me sons, and if not, I die."⁴¹ When Jacob sees himself as incapable of helping Rachel, she uses other means to conceive.⁴² That is, she adopts Bilhah to intervene and remedy her frustration. Nahman takes up on Rachel's statement that she will die without sons by emphasizing that "Rachel would have mortified herself because of grief and died of grief".⁴³ Von Rad sees Rachel's cry as a request for a child.⁴⁴ Rachel's next action was to give Bilhah to Jacob to give birth on her behalf since Jacob claimed to be incapable of helping her. Jacob's compliance in sleeping with Bilhah saves Rachel from her fear of dying from the grief of childlessness. Her statement: "I have asked my maidservant to give birth on my knees that I may build my children by her (Gen. 30:3)," affirms that Rachel owes both Bilhah and her child yet to be born. Rachel's statement made to Jacob: "give birth on my knees" and "I may build my children by her" indicate that she owes both Bilhah and her child to be born. However, Rachel sees them not as mere slaves, but as part of her own family.⁴⁵ Boom reiterates that the expression is a legal term, which means Rachel acknowledges the child as legally belonging to her.⁴⁶ Even though Rachel resolved to use Bilhah to solve her barrenness, Levinson thinks her problem was only temporarily resolved. It would only be permanently resolved after Rachel gave birth to her own son.⁴⁷ Later, Leah, demanding her husband's attention, adopted Rachel's strategy by using Zilpah to bear two children for her husband (Gen. 30:11, 13). In all, Leah raised seven children, and her maid raised two more children for Jacob; Rachel had two sons, and her maid had two more sons. After having two biological sons, Rachel had attained fullness.

Similarly, the Akan see barrenness as one key cause of friction and envy among co-wives. Arhin-Asamoah maintained that barrenness remains the greatest single conflict-generating issue in any form of marriage, both within the traditional and modern systems. He maintains that the vexed issue of a wife's barrenness affects the

⁴¹ Hanne L. Levinson, *The Death Wish in the Hebrew Bible: Rhetorical Strategies for Survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 31.

⁴² Sehrish Farooq, Farah Malik and Sabila Naseer, "Causes and Consequences of Polygamy: An understanding of Coping Strategies by Co-wives in Polygamous Marriage," in *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry* 22, no. 9 (2021): 31.

⁴³ Moses ben Nehman. *Commentary on the Torah Beraishis* (Brooklyn: Shilo Publishing House, 2018), 367

⁴⁴ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: Old Testament Library Series* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1973), 158.

⁴⁵ This would be more intriguing when, later in Genesis 33:2, Jacob would separate the slave children from those of the legal wives. Once each of the four women have their own children, the slaves' families were detached from the families of the legal wives. Jacob thus would recognize these women differently.

⁴⁶ Corie T. Boom, "Genesis," in *NKJV: The Woman's Study Bible: Receiving Truth for Balance, Hope, and Transformation*, ed. Dorothy Kelly Petterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 56.

⁴⁷ Hanne Loland Levinson, *The Death Wish in the Hebrew Bible: Rhetorical Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 21.

psychic peace of such women, as some people who have children look down on them.⁴⁸ From an Akan perspective, Rachel's jealousy of Leah because of her fruitfulness would have been seen as justified. Among the Akan, if a man does not love his barren wife, he may end up divorcing her.⁴⁹ An Akan man may take a second wife because his first wife is barren.⁵⁰ Barrenness is therefore seen as a major problem. They believe that marriage is not just a mere social institution that brings two people together, but that its main purpose is for childbearing. That is why Mbiti states that "marriage and procreation in African communities are united: without procreation, marriage is incomplete."⁵¹ This explains why, after just a year, the absence of babies in a marriage sparks worry among the couple, their family, and the entire community. Every Akan woman dreads being called barren and yearns to have her own children. She therefore tries all she can to find out whether it is her supposed barrenness that is the explanation for the absence of children in their marriage, or there is something else to it."⁵²

When pregnancy is delayed, family members will make several attempts to remedy the situation, including seeing a herbalist, just like Rachel sought the mandrakes for fertility (Gen. 30:15). The Akan see children as so important that when a woman is infertile, she ends up losing her peace due to sarcastic remarks people will rain on her. Barrenness is so serious that the Akan associate it with a curse. Wright quotes the Akan proverb, "The barren have no face in the other world," to express the customary consequences of childlessness.⁵³ It is therefore considered unfruitful to marry a barren woman among the Akan since children are considered the most valuable thing in marriage and in society.

That is why the barren wife goes to great lengths to also give birth for her husband. Competition for the fruit of the womb among polygamous wives is, therefore, a

⁴⁸ John Mbiti, *S. African religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 255; Rose, Acholonu, "Igbo Women and the Tradition of Peace: The Dynamics of Change and Continuity," in *Conflict Resolution and Peace Education in Africa* edited by Ernest E. Uwazie (New York: Lexington books, 2003), 96.

⁴⁹ Janice P. De-Whyte, "Wom(b)man: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narrative" in *Biblical Interpretation Series* vol 162, ed. Paul Anderson and Jennifer Koosed (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 67.

⁵⁰ Brigitte Khoury and Yasmine Fayad, "Defining Partner Relational Problems in the Arab Region," in *Family Problems and Family Violence: Reliable Assessment and the KD-11*, ed. Heather M. Foran, Steven R.H. Beach, Amy M. Smith and Richard E. Heyman (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2013), 89.

⁵¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 107.

⁵² Sanka et al, "Ama Ata Aidoo and the Akan Culture: A Critique of the Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa," in *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, 2, no. 9 (September 2013): 93.

⁵³ Derek Wright, "Ayi Kwei Armah's Africa: The Sources of His Fiction," in *New Perspectives on African Literature*, ed. Eldred Jones (Munich: Hans Del Publishers, 1989), 140.

common practice.⁵⁴ When the fertile wife gives birth to a son to succeed the man as heir apparent, the man's fondness for her is supposed to increase, not decrease, as we encounter in the treatment of Leah. Barren wives are the ones who are humiliated because of their condition.⁵⁵ Leah's ability to give birth to six sons and a daughter without obtaining the husband's fondness would seem very surprising to the Akan. If anyone is to suffer ridicule or dejection, it must be Rachel. The Akan would therefore understand Rachel when she confronted Jacob to give her a son, or she would die. The Akan would appreciate Rachel's statement very much. Having the husband's love is not enough to survive the social stigma, invectives, and sarcasm that barren wives face daily from mothers-in-law and co-wives who have children. Such a challenge could literally and emotionally kill her. The Hebrew narrative thus causes the Akan reader to rethink how the weaponisation of fertility and childbirth in polygynous marriages to win a man's love could sometimes fail in polygynous marriage. Childbirth is seen in the Hebrew narrative as not always winning the love of a polygynous man. The unquestioned acceptance of Bilhah and Zilpah in the birth tussle in the Hebrew narrative reflects how an Akan polygynous man sometimes has to dance to the rhythm of his wives, even when the request is negative, to ensure peace in the family.

Co-wives conflict due to monopolisation of the husband's love by one wife (Gen. 30: 15)

The quarrel between Rachel and Leah, a related scene involving the mandrakes, shows how rival wives often quarrel when one feels the other has taken all their husband's attention. Leah's response is replete with her feelings about Rachel: "Is it a little thing that you have taken my husband, that you want to take also my sons' mandrakes too?" (Gen. 30:15, trans. mine). By letting the women exchange words about their thoughts of each other, the narrator shows how heated the struggle has become. According to Boom, Leah's statement implies that Rachel had taken her place as firstborn, first wife, and has absolute possession of most of the sexual engagement with Jacob.⁵⁶ Rachel clearly dominates this love affair, and Leah's statement is a way to balance the scales. Leah's speech implicates Rachel in doing nothing about what her husband has been putting her through.

The issues that brought about the rivalry between Leah and Rachel have much to share with the Akan context. In the Akan context, a man who desires to take a second wife is obliged to discuss the subject with the first wife to get her consent before carrying

⁵⁴ Mwangi J. Macharia, "From Polygamy to Multiple Monogamies to *Mipango ya Kando!*" in *Polygamous Ways of Life Past and Present in Africa and Europe* (Zürich: Literatur Verlag, 2020), 379.

⁵⁵ Stan Chu Ilo, *The Face of Africa: Looking Beyond the Shadows* (Eugene, Oregon: Wpf & Stock, 2012), 257.

⁵⁶ Corrie T. Boom, "Genesis," in *NKJV: The Women's Study Bible; Receiving Truth for Balance, Hope and Transformation*, ed. Dorothy Petterson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 56.

on.⁵⁷ The goal is to ensure a peaceful relationship between the two women. A woman could even ask the husband to take an additional wife to help with the domestic chores.⁵⁸ Usually, after the contraction of a second marriage, first wives receive more respect and recognition than junior wives. Broude observes that “the senior wife is the manager of the household, overseeing the work and other activities of the remaining wives and the distribution of supplies. In another society, the senior wife arranges and consents to the husband’s next marriage.”⁵⁹ First wives who have such privileged opportunities, if proper checks and balances are not placed on their role, could use their privileged opportunity to abuse the other wives.

Like Jacob’s love for Rachel, strong love and care that husbands developed for younger wives have also been identified. The Akan have the adage that “a new marriage is like a new cocoa farm that has started bearing fruit and must be kept well.” This implies that if much attention is not given to the young wife, the marriage will not survive.⁶⁰ Second wives are usually married out of genuine love. A husband may sometimes blindly give all his attention to his second wife, who may usually be much younger. First wives who end up being neglected by their husbands experience mental health issues due to the husband’s favouritism among his numerous wives. These women develop hatred for the beloved wife, become dissatisfied with their marital conditions, see the rival wife as a competitor, and distrust the husband for bringing in another woman to share her position as a wife.⁶¹

Open quarrels, dislike, and hatred begin to surface between the two wives when the husband openly shows genuine love toward one wife and less affection for his elderly wife.⁶² The first wife realises her value is declining when she is treated with less respect and her husband stops paying attention to her pressing needs. Unloved women may instinctively fight for their husbands’ love. This is demonstrated in quarrelling, jealousy, and hatred among co-wives. Hillman states that these conditions can hinder peace in the house and may cause the unloved woman/women to look

⁵⁷ Mwangi J. Macharia. “From Polygamy to Multiple Monogamies to *Mipango ya Kando!*” in *Polygamous Ways of Life Past and Present in Africa and Europe* (Zurich: Literature Verlag, 2020), 379; Robert S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 95.

⁵⁸ Godwin K. Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2003), 56.

⁵⁹ Gwen J. Broude, *Marriage, Family and Relationships: A Cross-cultural Encyclopedia* (Denver: ABC-CLIO, 1994), 208-209.

⁶⁰ Kofi Agyekum, “Akan Proverbs and Aphorisms about Marriage,” in *Institute of African Studies Research* 27 (2012): 15.

⁶¹ Tsoaledi D. Thobajane and Flora Takayindisa, “An Exploration of Polygamous Marriages: A Worldview”, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Science* 27 (2014): 158.

⁶² Sehrish Farooq, Farah Malik and Sabila Naseer, “Causes and Consequences of Polygamy: An understanding of Coping Strategies by Co-wives in Polygamous Marriage”, In *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry* 22, 9 (2021): 5.

down on themselves.⁶³ First wives who experience such unfavourable conditions have low self-esteem and poor relationships with their husbands. In effect, they show signs of loneliness, somatisation, depression, fear, nervousness, hostility, distrustful ideation, and cause family friction.⁶⁴

Leah's request that Rachel release her husband in exchange for her sons' mandrakes would have been seen as usurping her place as first wife. Among the Akan, younger wives usually cannot control a man's sexual rota. However, it is expected of the husband to maintain a fair sexual rotation among his wives. Giving Rachel absolute control over whom to sleep with and when would have offended Leah, the first wife, deeply. In the Akan context, if a man gives such allowance to any of his wives, it could also generate conflict. A polygynous husband is expected to set timetables so each wife has her "cooking and sleeping schedule" with the husband.⁶⁵ Each woman would be given her visiting week during which she was expected to have sexual access to her husband. During her weeklong meeting time, the wife on duty was scheduled to meet her husband, cook for him, and sleep in his room, often using bedding she would take with her when her week ended. Such an arrangement did not exclude the man from interacting with his other wives; it simply meant that at any given time, a particular woman had the right to sleep in their respective natal home. It would, therefore, be difficult for the wife on duty to claim exclusive sexual rights even during the week of such rights.⁶⁶

Leah's open confrontation, in which she asked Rachel whether it was not enough to take her husband that she wanted to take her son's mandrakes (Gen. 30:15), indicates Rachel's breach of the rota in an unfair manner. Akansor reports on selected cases where polygamous wives openly engage in violent fights that ended in the Accra Circuit Court for settlement.⁶⁷ These mannerisms indicate a quest for change and the frustrations these women face in their households.⁶⁸

⁶³ Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 182.

⁶⁴ Alean Al-Krenawi, "Women of Polygamous Marriages in Primary Health Care Centres". *Contemporary Family Therapy* 21, 3 (1999), 423.

⁶⁵ Martha Donkor and Amoaba Gooden, *Gender and Sexuality in Ghanaian Societies*, ed. Martha Donkor and Amoaba Gooden (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), xix

⁶⁶ Donkor and Gooden, *Gender and Sexuality in Ghanaian Societies*, xix.

⁶⁷ Justina Akansor, "Polygamic Lifestyle in Twentieth Century Ghana", in *Polygamous Ways of Life Past and Present in Africa and Europe*, ed. Henry Kam Kah and Bea Lundt (Zürich: Literatur Verlag, 2020), 382-383.

⁶⁸ See Titus K. Nnabugwu, "Marriage in African Society and Culture: Challenges to Polygamy as a Juridical Matrimonial Model in Nigeria," *Journal of Customary and Religious Law* 1, no. 1 (2024): 83.

Conclusion

The issues that provoked tension between Jacob's co-wives are not new to Akan readers. When the Akan read the narrative with deeper consciousness and reflect on their own background, they gain a better understanding of why the breach of the marital contract made Jacob have problems with Leah and love Rachel more. In addition, the Akan would better understand the envy between Rachel and Leah and Jacob's monopolisation of them by examining how favouritism and special attention are given to the most loved woman over the others. Thus, the conflicts among Jacob's co-wives could be seen as a prototype of what an Akan polygynous family could easily experience if the husband does not handle his wives tactfully. The Hebrew narrative about Jacob, on the other hand, offers Akan readers a chance to reflect on polygynous practices that stratify wives into the loved and the marginalised, warning polygynous men in both contexts about the gravity of differential affection for their wives. It also defies the Akan fertile wives' weaponisation of childbirth to win their husbands' affection. In other words, procreation that the Akan husband cherishes so much is presented in the Hebrew narrative not as a guarantee to win a husband's love in an instance when two wives are competing for their husband's affection.

Jacob's passive behaviour in allowing his legal wives to push their maidservants on him depicts similar instances in which an Akan polygynous man yields to his wives' whims and caprices to ensure peace in polygynous households. This reduces the possible trauma the man could be subjected to if he fails to yield to their wives' schemes.

Finally, the study contributes to African biblical hermeneutics by demonstrating how Akan cultural experience provides a fruitful interpretive lens for understanding the conflict dynamics of Genesis 29–30. At the same time, the Jacob narrative functions as a critique of marital favouritism, fertility-based status competition, and the marginalisation of less-favoured wives in both ancient Israelite and Akan polygynous contexts.

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