

# Two Matriarchs, One Well: The Misinterpretation of Rebekah and Rachel 17th Century Neapolitan Painting. The Cases of Luca Giordano and Andrea Vaccaro \*

## Dos Matriarcas, un pozo: La confusión entre Rebeca y Raquel en la pintura napolitana del siglo XVII. Los casos de Luca Giordano y Andrea Vaccaro

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**Abstract:** The biblical text has been translated into images through specific visual codes throughout the history of art. This article examines this phenomenon in the case of two women from the Old Testament and their traditional representation: Rebekah and Rachel and their encounters at the well. The codification of their biblical story through shared iconographic motifs has led to confusion in their identification. The latter is demonstrated by a reinterpretation of two seventeenth-century Neapolitan paintings by Luca Giordano and Andrea Vaccaro, respectively.

**Keywords:** iconography; Old Testament; 17th century painting; neapolitan painting; Luca Giordano; Andrea Vaccaro.

**Resumen:** El texto bíblico ha sido traducido en imágenes a través de códigos visuales específicos a lo largo de la historia del arte. Este artículo examina dicho fenómeno en el caso de dos mujeres del Antiguo Testamento y su representación tradicional: Rebeca y Raquel en sus encuentros junto

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al pozo. La codificación de sus relatos bíblicos mediante motivos iconográficos compartidos ha dado lugar a confusiones en su identificación. Esto se demuestra a través de una reinterpretación de dos pinturas napolitanas del siglo XVII, realizadas respectivamente por Luca Giordano y Andrea Vaccaro.

**Palabras clave:** iconografía; Antiguo Testamento; pintura del siglo XVII; pintura napolitana; Luca Giordano; Andrea Vaccaro.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of history, direct access to the Bible was restricted by widespread illiteracy and the high cost of books, which were typically reserved for the elite or kept in institutions such as universities and monasteries. Consequently, the general public engaged with the Old Testament primarily through oral and visual channels, including art, liturgy, sermons, and catechesis.

Art played a pivotal role in conveying biblical narratives, shaping viewers' understanding through images that often became codified into fixed iconographic models. Yet not all biblical themes received equal attention: while certain stories, characters, and dramatic episodes dominated, others appeared only sporadically, increasing the likelihood of misidentification or misinterpretation.

This essay examines the pictorial representation of two Old Testament matriarchs—Rebekah and Rachel. Although both are prominent in the Book of Genesis, their depictions have often been problematical by iconographic similarities, especially given their shared roles as wives of patriarchs and mothers of miraculous children. Once codified, these visual parallels frequently led to confusion and misrecognition, particularly in seventeenth-century Neapolitan painting.

Thus, the primary aim of the present work is to analyze how these women were portrayed in early modern Naples, with special attention to the iconographic codes used to translate biblical narratives into visual form. In pursuing this, the research engages with Old Testament exegesis, exploring the narratives of Rebekah and Rachel, their artistic renderings, and the iconographic challenges arising from their misidentification. Ultimately, the project seeks to restore the individuality and nuanced significance of these figures in early modern visual culture, while revealing the processes through which the identities of biblical women were shaped, simplified, or conflated in the passage from the text to the image.

### 1. REBEKAH AND RACHEL: TWO MATRIARCHS AT THE WELL

When examining the depiction of strong women from the Old Testament in the early modern period, the most logical point of departure is the biblical text itself. Within these scriptures, we encounter numerous female figures—some

named, others anonymous—who occupy prominent roles or perform widely recognized deeds. Yet the anonymity of many of these women, identified solely in relation to male figures, presents a significant challenge: their individual identities are obscured, and their narratives are subsumed within those of husbands, sons, or brothers.

As a result, women in the Old Testament are typically cast as peripheral to the main narrative—sometimes as reproductive necessities, at times as troublesome or potentially dangerous, and occasionally as figures exercising authority, though almost always under male control. Frequently nameless and often without genealogies, the majority vanish once their narrative purpose has been fulfilled, leaving no trace beyond the written text.<sup>1</sup>

This erasure becomes even more pronounced in their visual representations, where the translation from text to image tends to codify and condense the narrative, further limiting individual characterization. Iconography, as a discipline, concerns itself with the description of images, grounded in their relationship to literary or graphic sources and, likewise, to their cultural tradition—manifested both as continuity over time and as variation in their iconic arrangement according to different historical circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, the study of biblical transmission through images, the visual exegesis,<sup>3</sup> must acknowledge that not all episodes and characters have received equal iconographic emphasis. Visual tradition has consistently privileged a select group—most often the most narrative or dramatic scenes, or individual figures of particular significance—while leaving many others without sustained representation.<sup>4</sup>

This imbalance has far-reaching implications: the pre-eminence of certain images over others, and thus of specific stories and characters, decisively shapes the way the biblical message is transmitted and conditions the effectiveness of its communication to the viewer. Episodes or figures depicted only sporadically risk passing unnoticed or being undervalued, simply because they are not immediately recognized within the established visual canon.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the representation of some strong biblical women—despite the fact that many held great importance within the biblical narrative and played a significant role in Marian iconography as foreshadowing that exalted the virtues of the Virgin, embodying qualities and values that Christian women were expected to emulate—has suffered from both neglect and deliberate silencing. Their individual identities have been blurred

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<sup>1</sup> Klein (2003): 2–7.

<sup>2</sup> García Mahiques (2015): vol. 7, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Exum / Nutu (2007): 1-2; Exum (2019): 3-8.

<sup>4</sup> Exum (2019): 8-9; Yebra Rovira (2022): 10.

<sup>5</sup> Exum (2019): 12.

within the stories of their male counterparts, who have traditionally been the focus of iconographic studies pursued with greater detail and depth.<sup>6</sup>

Among these strong Old Testament women, the matriarchs of Genesis—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah—stand out as a distinct group: the wives of Israel's patriarchs.<sup>7</sup> Alongside Hannah, mother of Samuel, they embody the Old Testament's miraculous maternities, prefiguring later figures such as St. Anne, St. Elizabeth, and the Virgin Mary. These women were revered as the “chosen among the chosen,” their virtue tied to endurance of shame—particularly barrenness—before divine intervention granted them motherhood. Their patience and resignation were framed as pious virtues, rewarded by God's favor.<sup>8</sup> However, the stories of almost all of these women have been codified into narrative scenes dominated by the patriarchs, thereby effacing their individuality and, on several occasions, leading to confusion in the iconographic reading of the images in which they appear.<sup>9</sup>

Within this group of matriarchs, Rebekah and Rachel, the protagonists of this study, are the ones who had greater presence, both in the Old Testament and in the art world, and whose image has been brought to canvas more often.<sup>10</sup> Yet they have not always been able to overcome this aforementioned confusion.

To begin with, following a chronological order, the protagonism of Rebekah in the Book of Genesis is enormous. She is the only woman mentioned in the Old Testament who has not only a name but also her date of birth reported (Gen. 22:23), whereas her kinship linkage with all the patriarchs (as grandniece of Abraham, wife of Isaac and mother of Jacob), redoubles the importance of her role in the development of the history of Israel. She is also a character described as having qualities such as enormous courage and great faith, since she readily accepts, after her encounter with Abraham's servant Eliezer, to travel from Mesopotamia to Canaan to marry Isaac, i.e., to set out towards an uncertain future (Gen. 12:1; 22:7 and 24:4, 38, 60). Also, and similarly to Sarah and Rachel, she faces many years of barrenness after leaving her homeland before God blesses her with motherhood.<sup>11</sup> Finally, and more important, Rebekah plays a more active and commanding role in the Old Testament than Isaac, her husband, does, since it is her and not him who will preserve the will of God and his promise to Abraham by making sure that Isaac grants the birthright to his youngest son, Jacob.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Yebra Rovira (2022): 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Yebra Rovira (2022): 15-25.

<sup>8</sup> Roiphe (2006): 153-268.

<sup>9</sup> Exum (2019): 10.

<sup>10</sup> Álvarez Seijo (2023): 155-157.

<sup>11</sup> Wray (2008): 29-30.

<sup>12</sup> For a complete analysis of Rebecca's story and an understanding of her character and its impact, please refer to Roiphe (2006): 105-71; Wray (2008): 27-43; González González (2009): 107-123.

In the story of Rebecca, a life of virtue is traced from beginning to end. This is why she is the one chosen to be Isaac's wife and therefore the mother of the chosen one, Jacob. Virgin and then barren, this Old Testament figure prefigures, to the Catholic Church during the early modern period, what will be the most perfect and virtuous conception of all, that of Christ. Hence, during that period, Rebecca will foreshadow the Virgin Mary as a model of virtue, of the preservation of her virginity and her renunciation to it in fulfillment of her duties and tasks, as she wanted to be veiled before her betrothal to Isaac.<sup>13</sup> The beauty of Rebecca, in comparison to other types described in the Old Testament, will be an inner one related to the purity of her spirit, which makes her outwardly suitable, first in the eyes of Eliecer, and later in the eyes of her husband.<sup>14</sup>

The only episode in Rebecca's story where she deviates from the path of justice and virtue that brings her so close to the Virgin is when she helps her son Jacob to deceive an old, blind and bedridden Isaac, so that the former can take away Esau's birthright by putting wool on her younger son's arm, thus imitating the hairy epidermis of his older brother (Genesis 27:22). This trick between mother and son is excused because Jacob was the chosen one: Rebecca acted according to her wisdom since Jacob was the chosen one by God.<sup>15</sup>

After Rebekah and Jacob have tricked Isaac into giving him the birthright instead of his older brother Esau, the young patriarch must flee from Canaan to Mesopotamia, taking the opposite route to that taken by his mother after her encounter with Eliezer (Gen. 27:6–46 and 28:1–5). Jacob arriving to Mesopotamia is how the chapter 29 of Genesis begins, where we are first introduced to the character of Rachel, through her encounter with Jacob at the well.

Therefore, Rachel's story also begins with a scene of an encounter, although, in her case, it is a direct meeting with her future husband. Beautiful, young, and virginal, like Rebekah was, Rachel is a shepherdess, Jacob's cousin, with whom he falls in love as soon as he sees her at the well. The patriarch, however, cannot marry her immediately. The young woman's father, his uncle Laban, her mother's brother, tricks Jacob into marrying his eldest daughter Leah first, and he is forced to serve in his household for two periods, of seven years each, before he can marry the woman he really desires (Gen 29:15–30). This matriarch, herself also the protagonist of a miraculous motherhood (that of her son Joseph) is thus another woman of great importance in the biblical text.<sup>16</sup> This time, however, contrary to

<sup>13</sup> Roiphe (2006): 153-154; Wray (2008): 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> Réau (1996): 171.

<sup>15</sup> As noted by Anne Roiphe, "Some of the Scholars who have poured over the texts have decided that Jacob had sinned in stealing the blessing that belonged to Esau, but in order to protect one of the founding fathers they deflected his sin onto his mother, saying that she forced him, she pulled him away from the virtue [...] but "Without Rebekah the nation would not have been born, the will of God hidden forever". Roiphe (2006): 156-158.

<sup>16</sup> González González (2009): 107; Álvarez Seijo (2023): 157-159.

Rebekah, Rachel will not end up being more important than her own husband, even if she carries out actions unknown to him, such as when, before fleeing Laban's house with Jacob, Leah and their children to Canaan, she decides to steal her father's idols (Gen 31:22–36).<sup>17</sup>

Although the stories of these matriarchs are interrelated, both because of their kinship relationship as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and because of the many parallels existing between their respective paths, they remain two completely distinct and independent characters within the book of Genesis. Moreover, if we look only at the biblical text, they are not given equal importance, as Rebekah plays a more active and decisive role in the development of the history of Israel than Rachel does, due to her active role in the conspiracy drawn with Jacob to deceive Isaac and thus deprive Esau of the blessing of his birthright.

In the history of painting, however, the relevance of these women is terms of their presence in the field of the image will be relatively even, especially if restrict our view to the study of early modern painting.

Focusing on the visual history of these biblical women, their typical representation as individual characters follows their description in the biblical text at the time of their first appearance. Hence, Rebekah is usually depicted as a young and beautiful woman, usually adorned with jewels and beautiful clothes, and carrying a pitcher, a symbol that refers to the moment when she gave water to Eliezer and his camels.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Rachel is also portrayed as a beautiful young woman, but holding a shepherd's staff in her hand and wearing the typical clothing of that profession, thus alluding to the moment when she meets her husband Jacob at the well.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, while Rebecca was adopted by the Catholic Church as a prefiguration of the Virgin Mary, Rachel will personify the Church, the New Law, the antithesis of the unfaithful, worldly and carnal Synagogue, represented in the slaves and in the unchosen sister, Leah.<sup>20</sup>

Their iconography, however, alludes in both cases to a common “type scene” in the Bible, (i.e., stories similar in structure and content), namely, the wooing episode next to the well, symbol of fertility: one with the servant of Abraham, Eliezer, and the other with her future husband, Jacob.<sup>21</sup> This is so because these iconographic attributes are codified and fixed from the narrative scene that is most generally associated to these characters. Hence, even if other moments in their respective histories have also been represented in the history of art, it is their

<sup>17</sup> Álvarez Seijo (2024): 84-95.

<sup>18</sup> Réau (1996): 170-171.

<sup>19</sup> For the importance ascribed to these women as foreshadowing the New Testament or the victory of the Catholic Church, cf. Réau (1996): 178-181.

<sup>20</sup> Álvarez Seijo (2023): 168.

<sup>21</sup> Evidence of this can be found in the title of Anne Roiphe's book itself, which is about the four matriarchs: *Water from the well: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah*. Also, see Wray (2008): 32.

respective encounters at the well which we will most often see translated from the text to image.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that artistic representations, by their very nature, select specific moments in the narrative or fix particular symbolic attributes to a character. This conciseness is significant because it facilitates interpretation, revealing which biblical passages were deemed most important at the time and which values were intended to be communicated through these scenes and figures.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, as we already have established, stories that are rarely depicted—despite their significance within the biblical narrative—have undergone a gradual process of silencing and exclusion, making it difficult to identify their images on the few occasions they do appear.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that whenever an artist depicts a biblical scene, they inevitably project their own vision—or that of their patron—onto it. This subjectivity directs attention to certain aspects while downplaying others. Consequently, variants of the same episode may emerge, or similar episodes may be combined, resulting in the creation of entirely new scenes.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in the case of these two Old Testament matriarchs, Rebekah and Rachel—each possessing distinct value and narrative significance within the Book of Genesis, and embodying different virtues for the Church during the early modern period—the history of their representation has nevertheless settled on analogous moments in their lives as the standard scenes for their depiction. This convergence has resulted in the conflation of their images in several concrete examples, with their individual identities being lost in the translation from literary history to the visual realm.

## 2. THE MISINTERPRETATION OF REBEKAH AND RACHEL IN EARLY MODERN ICONOGRAPHY: CASE STUDIES

This “loss in translation” between Rebekah and Rachel—from biblical text to artistic representation—is precisely the issue we aim to explore through the analysis of two seventeenth-century Neapolitan paintings where the subject may have been misattributed: a painting by Luca Giordano (1634-1705) from the Prado Museum and a canvas by Andrea Vaccaro (1604-70) from the Palazzo Reale di Napoli.

<sup>22</sup> Yebra Rovira (2022): 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> Exum (2019): 8-10.

<sup>24</sup> Yebra Rovira (2022): 9-11.

<sup>25</sup> Seijas (2022): 35-36.

## 2.1. Rachel is, in fact, Rebekah: ‘Jacob and Rachel at the well’ by Luca Giordano

Luca Giordano's painting, so-called *Jacob and Rachel at the Well* (fig. 1), is dated around 1653,<sup>26</sup> belongs to the Museo Nacional del Prado and is deposited in the Museo de Belas Artes of A Coruña. Together with its companion, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (fig. 2),<sup>27</sup> it is one of the few works from the Naopolitan painter's formative years.



Fig. 1. *Jacob and Rachel at the Well*. Luca Giordano. Ca. 1653. Museo de Belas Artes da Coruña. A Coruña. Property of the Museo Nacional del Prado (Madrid) and on a permanent loan to the museum in A Coruña. © Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

Whereas the former canvas has been loaned long-term to the Museum of A Coruña since 1914, its companion remains in storage at the Prado. This fact may explain why these paintings were not well known till recent studies.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, they are a particularly good case in point of the early Giordano's work and style. Also, regarding the painting deposited in A Coruña, it must be

<sup>26</sup> Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 61.

<sup>27</sup> Scavizzi / De Vito (2012): 24; Scavizzi (2017): p. 19; Causa (2019): 24.

<sup>28</sup> Scavizzi / De Vito (2012): 24; Scavizzi (2017): p. 19; Causa (2019): 24; Causa / Piscitello (2020): 161.

noted that its signature had not been revealed until a recent restoration. Before, it was completely invisible.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 2. *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Luca Giordano. Ca. 1653. Museo Nacional del Prado. Madrid  
© Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

In *Jacob and Rachel at the Well* Giordano depicts a young couple in the foreground, centering the composition. The two figures are shaking hands in affection, conveying to the viewer the sense of a loving relationship between these two young characters. A group of four human figures, two men and two women, and also a camel, located between the couple and the well, attentively observe this love scene. On the left margin of the composition, another group of characters chat among themselves, although paying no attention to the main action. The same applies to the characters located at the right of the couple, namely, a boy with a shepherd's staff and a young man crouched at the height of the infant. In addition, two horses are located behind them, one of them positioned

<sup>29</sup> The fact that both paintings continue to be referred to by scholars as works executed *alla maniera di* Salvator Rosa is another potential reason accounting for the scant attention they have received thus far. In fact, they had been attributed to this painter in the earliest known record of them, the inventory of the palace of La Granja from 1746. However, as Úbeda de los Cobos has pointed out, available knowledge of Giordano's imitations demonstrates that these paintings were not part of the group of works that are consciously and deliberately copies of another artist's style, in this case, Rosa's style. See Hermoso Cuesta (2008): 1057–1059 and Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 60.

in such a way that intends to show the viewer its saddle, as an insinuation that someone has just gotten off it. The rest of the scene is populated by animal figures –goats and dogs, mostly– that fill the rocky landscape in which the story unfolds.

This scene, painted by Giordano at the beginning of his career, has often been associated to another theme from the Old Testament, identified as the “Encounter of Rebecca and Eliezer”. Úbeda de los Cobos had pointed out that “a careful examination of the scene shows that it does not represent the encounter between Rebecca and Eliezer, as has traditionally been interpreted, but that of Jacob and Rachel at the Well –two themes commonly mistaken due to both involving a man and a woman beside a well.”<sup>30</sup> In this regard, Úbeda de los Cobos continues, “this identification of the scene as «Jacob and Rachel at the Well» is motivated both by the age of the young man –who is evidently not the servant Eliezer– and by the fact that the main figures appears to be a couple, rather than a messenger seeking a bride for his master’s son (Isaac, son of Abraham).”<sup>31</sup>

We concur with his assessment that the scene should not be identified with the encounter between Rebekah and Eliezer. Both the affectionate demeanor of the protagonists and the youthful appearance of the male figure provide strong grounds for dismissing the interpretation of the scene as a meeting between the matron and Abraham’s servant. Nevertheless, in view of the occasional confusion in the pictorial tradition regarding the Old Testament matriarchs, we propose a third possibility for the identification of this canvas.

Our interpretation situates itself between the two earlier proposals. We argue that the woman depicted is indeed the matriarch Rebekah, not in her encounter with Eliezer (Gen. 24:12–21), but rather in her first meeting with Isaac, her future husband. In this way, the painting presents Laban’s sister—and thus Rachel’s aunt—at a different, yet equally significant, moment in her narrative.<sup>32</sup>

This episode in the story of the matriarch (Gen. 24:61–67) follows immediately after her encounter with Abraham’s servant, a scene that was far more frequently represented in art, particularly during the Early Modern period. By contrast, depictions of the meeting between Isaac and Rebekah are comparatively rare, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This

<sup>30</sup> Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 60.

<sup>31</sup> Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 61.

<sup>32</sup> This identification was first proposed by Giuseppe Scavizzi and Giuseppe De Vito, and later supported by other scholars of Neapolitan art, such as Stefano Causa, who examined it from a stylistic perspective without engaging in the iconographic debate. Nevertheless, the work continues to be catalogued as *Jacob and Rachel at the Well* to this day, which underscores the need for the present analysis. Moreover, in the catalogue of one of the most recent exhibitions devoted to the artist, *Luca Giordano: dalla natura alla pittura*, curated by Stefano Causa and Patrizia Piscitello (2020) and held at the Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte between October 2020 and January 2021, the entry on this work, authored by Marco Liberato, once again identifies it as *The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel at the Well*. For further information see, Scavizzi / De Vito (2012): 24; Scavizzi (2017): 19; Causa (2019): 56–57; Causa / Piscitello (2020): 161.

scarcity, combined with the iconographic and narrative similarities among the stories of the Old Testament matriarchs, as previously noted, has often complicated their identification in visual representations.

In our view, several factors support the interpretation that this early work by the Neapolitan master represents the encounter between Isaac and Rebekah. First, certain iconographic motifs lend weight to this reading. While the affectionate gestures of the protagonists might also suggest the episode of Jacob and Rachel at the well, they equally sustain the identification of the figures as Isaac and Rebekah. The narrative of Rebekah begins in Genesis 24—the longest chapter of the book—with her meeting Eliezer (Gen. 24:12–21), and continues with her departure for Canaan, accompanied by Abraham’s servant, after receiving her family’s consent to marry Isaac (Gen. 24:57–58). Upon their arrival, Rebekah descends from her camel when she first sees her future husband. Isaac, for his part, is said to have fallen in love with her at that very moment: “Isaac took her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. She became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Gen. 24:67). In the context of arranged marriages, expressions of love were seldom emphasized, and physical displays of affection are particularly rare in biblical narrative. The detail of their touching, therefore, acquires special significance, underscoring the mutual affection between them and presenting the union of the patriarch and his wife as an exceptional instance of conjugal love.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the two main characters in Giordano’s painting holding hands could be a symbol of this love and of their future marriage.

Moreover, certain details—such as the pearl diadem worn by the female protagonist—are more characteristic of Rebekah, who journeys to Canaan adorned for her betrothal, than of the shepherdess Rachel. Similarly, the elderly man observing the couple, the camels to which another male figure offers water, and the additional attendants positioned on the right side of the canvas may be understood as Eliezer and the retinue accompanying the matriarch in her marriage journey: “Then Rebekah and her attendants got ready and mounted the camels and went back with the man” (Gen. 24:61).

Secondly, the accurate identification of a subject requires attentiveness not only to the elements depicted, but also to those conspicuously absent.<sup>34</sup> Questioning the identification of Giordano’s depiction as the encounter of Jacob ad Rachel at the well, the female figure does not carry a shepherding symbol, such as that usually carried by Rachel in most depictions. Nor does the male figure carry one. This is an element that the patriarch Jacob sometimes also carries in this scene. Likewise, the male figure standing over the well is drawing water from it, rather than removing the stone that covers it. It is common in depictions of Jacob and Rachel at the well to show the patriarch, or another figure,

<sup>33</sup> Wray (2008): 33.

<sup>34</sup> Álvarez Seijo (2024): 84-95.

removing the stone, since the need to wait for Rachel to water the flock motivates the encounter between the two.

Moreover, it is also unusual that the flock depicted is made up of goats, rather than sheep. Nor are the sheep near the female figure or drinking after having arrived. In other words, there is scarce evidence to suggest that this is a shepherding scene, except for the staff the boy in blue, who is in conversation with the squatting young man in the right-hand corner of the picture, is holding in his hand. Nevertheless, populating his landscape scenes with figures and animals is not uncommon in Giordano's work.<sup>35</sup> In his scenes of Old Testament landscapes, painted in the manner of Bassano or Castiglione, the painter resorts to the representation of animals and figures.<sup>36</sup> They are secondary to the main action, but complement the scene.

Thirdly, we should bear in mind the subject of the painting with which it is paired: *The Sacrifice of Isaac*.<sup>37</sup> The meeting of Abraham's son with his future wife is the moment coming immediately after the biblical story where we find Isaac's presence after his father's willingness to end his life (Genesis 22). Hence, as Giordano depicts Isaac and Rebekah on the second canvas, both scenes represent successive moments of the same story; two milestones in the life of the patriarch. The commission of pairs, or groups of four paintings, is very common in the work of the Neapolitan painter, especially in his compositions with subjects.<sup>38</sup> In this case, insofar as there are no other known paintings of the same dimensions, style and compositional structure in Giordano's catalog, we must assume the story to be complete with the pair.

In case the painting was actually a representation of the encounter between Jacob and Rachel, the compositional and stylistic relationship between the two paintings would still be clear, although it would be more difficult to justify iconographically. One painting would represent a sacrifice, with Abraham, Isaac and the angel as protagonists, and the other would represent a loving scene between a future married couple, when Jacob and the shepherdess Rachel meet for the first time. Therefore, thematically, it would be difficult to observe a

<sup>35</sup> Scavizzi / De Vito (2012): 56-57; Scavizzi (2017): 19.

<sup>36</sup> As Úbeda de los Cobos has pointed, for the first time in Giordano's work, in this pair of paintings "we find the details that indicate the young artist's considerable talent, such as the rocky vegetation, the folds of the drapes and, above all, the rendering animals; particularly noteworthy is the group of the two horses and four goats on the far right" in the scene so called 'Jacob and Rachel at the Well'. Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 61.

<sup>37</sup> Like its companion, it's a canvas that corresponds stylistically to the beginnings of the Neapolitan painter's career. However, it already reveals the enormous talent that he possesses and will continue to develop. Giordano has chosen a double-diagonal composition for this Old Testament scene. The figures are arranged in a frieze descending from the angel left of Abraham and the resigned Isaac, and finally to the torch in the lower right corner. The rocky landscape, the characters' features, the colors used, etc., along with the fact that they have the same dimensions, make it undeniable that these canvases are a couple. See Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 57-58.

<sup>38</sup> Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 24.

narrative or iconographic pattern justifying their joint conception, besides the fact that Abraham's sacrifice was made for his love and faith in God's will.

Finally, attention must be paid to existing records about this pair of paintings, informing us about their provenance prior to their arrival at the Prado Museum. The earliest known record of these paintings is that of the inventory of La Granja de San Ildefonso Palace, dated 1746: "599–600 Fleur de lis Two paintings, which seem to be by Salvator Rossa; one represents the Sacrifice of Isaac with the Angel who holds back Abraham's hand, the other signifies Rachel. They are one vara high, and four feet less to finger-widths wide- Frames like the previous one."<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, in this inventory, the painting's female figure is identified as Rachel, and the painting is also attributed to Rosa's brush, rather than to Giordano's. However, in the subsequent inventories of the same palace, dated 1766 and 1774, these paintings lack any recognized attribution, and its subjects are already identified as the encounter of Isaac and Rebekah: "599, 600 Another two pictures three feet high, and four wide, one represents Rebecca, and the other the sacrifice of Isaac, plain gilt frame, they are worth four hundred reales 400."<sup>40</sup>

Both were reported to be in the palace of Aranjuez twenty years later, in 1794. In this case, however, they seem to be attributed to a "Flemish Jordan", probably due to a misreading of the signature, whereas the stories are identified as the sacrifice of Isaac and Rebekah's encounter with Isaac, respectively. Surprisingly, the value of the latter is higher than that of the sacrifice: "404, 599 Four feet and five finger-widths long and three high. The Sacrifice of Abraham. Flemish Jordan... 1,500" and "406, 600 Another the same. Rebekah's encounter with Isaac. Idem...1,800."<sup>41</sup> Both paintings later reappeared in the royal inventories of Aranjuez in 1818. However, this inventory shows substantial changes in comparison to the previous ones: the canvas depicting the Sacrifice is the first to be correctly attributed to Giordano, while the one we are analyzing is recognized as depicted by Murillo and identified as the Marriage of Rebekah.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, in the inventory of the Real Museo of 1854, this painting appears identified with the theme of the encounter between Rebecca and Isaac: "Jordan (imitating Salvator Rosa) / 644. / Rebekah arriving at Abraham's house, is received by Isaac, who gives her the hand of a husband. Men and animals surround the scene. Background: broken country. Height 3 ft.; Width 4 ft. 4 in. 6 lin."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Aterido / Martínez Cuesta / Pérez Preciado (2004): vol. 2, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Aterido / Martínez Cuesta / Pérez Preciado (2004): vol. 2, 277.

<sup>41</sup> Fernández Miranda (1989): vol. 2, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Inventory of the Royal Palace of Aranjuez [1818], XII: 15–16.

<sup>43</sup> "Jordán (imitando á Salvator Rosa) / 644. Isaác y Rebeca. / Llegando Rebeca á la casa de Abraham, es recibida por Isaác, el cual le da la mano de esposo. Hombres y animales rodean la escena. Fondo: país quebrado. Alto 3 pies; Ancho 4 pies, 4 pulg, 6 lin." Archivo del Museo Nacional

At this point, having presented all these arguments supporting our identification as a representation of Isaac and Rebekah, several questions must be raised.

While not the dominant one, there is, in fact, an iconographic tradition that has chosen to represent the theme of the encounter between Jacob and Rachel at the well by means of placing a kiss, or a scene of affection, at the center of the composition. An example of this tradition is the painting by Jacopo Nigretti (1479–1528), known as Palma il Vecchio, dated around 1515–25, more than a century before Giordano's painting, now at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, and entitled *Jacob and Rachel* (fig. 3). Influenced by Giorgione and Titian, this artwork is considered a mature masterpiece by the Venetian painter.<sup>44</sup> With its warm colors and sensitive rendering, this pastoral depiction is very much painted in the Venetian style. In this canvas, the artist shows the affection between the two characters with great clarity and eloquence, materializing it in a passionate kiss at the center of the composition.<sup>45</sup>



Fig. 3. *Jacob and Rachel*. Jacopo Nigretti, known as Palma il Vecchio. 1515-25. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen. Dresden.

© Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.  
Photo: Hans-Peter Klut

del Prado (AMNP). *Catálogo de los cuadros del Real Museo de Pintura y Escultura de S.M. / redactado... por Pedro de Madrazo* (1854): 147, no. 644.

<sup>44</sup> Morelli (1883): 181–182; Villa (2015): 215.

<sup>45</sup> Marx / Hipp / Roth (2005): vol. 1, 398.

However, when compared with the canvas concerning us here, there are other iconographic elements that allow us to identify the subject with Jacob and Rachel with greater ease than in the case of Giordano's painting. The shepherd's staff in front of the couple in the foreground; the young man moving the stone slab blocking the access to the well; the landscape populated by sheep drinking after grazing... All these are elements that help us recognize Rachel and her future husband in the scene and which, in turn, are absent from the work preserved at the Prado Museum.



Fig. 4. *Jacob meeting Rachel*. Marco Antonio Franceschini. Ca. 1690. The State Hermitage Museum. St. Petersburg © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Pavel Demidov, Alexander Koksharov, Konstantin Sinyavsky

The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg has another example, *Jacob meeting Rachel* (fig. 4), dated around 1690 and painted by the Bolognese artist Marco Antonio Franceschini (1648–1729).<sup>46</sup> This canvas is clearly indebted to

<sup>46</sup> There is another version of this painting by Franceschini, in this case on copper. Dated circa 1710–1715 is probably a portable copy of the one at the Hermitage Museum, and it is preserved at the Museum of Fine Arts from Budapest. On this particular painting, see Wittkower (1999): 471.

Palma II Vecchio's work, despite both depictions being more than a century apart. As in the work of Palma, Franceschini's canvas shows, besides the two kissing figures in the foreground and the young man who has uncorked the well, a group of women collecting water with their pitchers from it, accompanied by a large flock of sheep and carrying, some of them, shepherdesses' staff in their hands. The women, the pitchers, and the multitude of drinking sheep again associate the scene with shepherding. These elements, however, are much less relevant in Giordano's work.



Fig. 5. *Jacob and Rachel at the Well*. Jacques Waben. Ca. 1624.

The State Hermitage Museum. St. Petersburg

© The State Hermitage Museum.

Photo by Pavel Demidov, Alexander Koksharov, Konstantin Sinyavsky

A show of affection, but only holding hands without kissing, can also be found in the canvases *Jacob and Rachel at the Well* (fig. 5), by the North Netherlandish painter Jacques Waben (1590–1634), dated ca. 1624, and preserved in the Hermitage Museum;<sup>47</sup> and in the work, similarly titled, of the Spanish painter Francisco Antolínez (1645–1700), *Jacob and Rachel* (fig. 6), preserved in the Detroit Institute of Fine Arts and dated ca. 1665–1700.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the bucolic and pastoral atmosphere is much more present in these

<sup>47</sup> <https://research.rkd.nl/nl/detail/https%3A%2f%2fdata.rkd.nl%2fimages%2f238198> (accessed on April 6, 2025)

<sup>48</sup> Angulo Iñiguez (1981): vol. 2, 351, no. 610; Burke / Holo (2005): 228-2299, cat. 67.

paintings, as well as in the paintings of Palma and Franceschini, than it is in the work held at the Prado.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, there is a long iconographic tradition of emphasizing the affection between Jacob and Rachel at the moment of their meeting at the well. It is precisely the absence of such elements—namely, those associated with shepherding and the well—together with the painting's pairing with the *Sacrifice of Isaac*, that most decisively argues against identifying the scene as Rachel and Jacob.



Fig. 6. *Jacob and Rachel*. Francisco Antolínez y Sarabia. 1665–1700. The Detroit Institute of Fine Arts. Detroit © The Detroit Institute of Fine Arts

Nevertheless, even in light of these precedents, the iconography employed here remains atypical for representations of this subject. Several examples about the meeting between Jacob and Rachel, and from a date close to Giordano's painting, can be found employing a more usual iconography. One of them can be found in the work of Giordano's contemporary Andrea di Leone (1610–85), who

<sup>49</sup> These examples, both that of Waben and that of Antolínez and the others, although removed from the Neapolitan iconographic tradition, allow us to observe and understand the continuity and variations of this iconographic type. They demonstrate that, despite its rarity, it was indeed a type of depiction of Rachel and the Patriarch that was produced and that permeated the iconography of various regions, thus accounting for the confusion regarding the scene in the Museo del Prado.

also followed the Old Testament landscapes of Giovanni Benedetto de Castiglione.<sup>50</sup> In *Jacob and Rachel at the Well* (fig. 7), now at the Hermitage Museum, Di Lione, depicts the two sisters Rachel and Leah, in this case pointing to the well where a flock of sheep is drinking. At the right of the composition, the patriarch Jacob, dressed in shepherd's garb and carrying a staff, approaches them, again in a landscape of bucolic and pastoral atmosphere. Another example, also preserved at the Hermitage, is the canvas *Jacob meets Rachel*, from about 1659 by the painter Pier Francesco Mola (1612–66), known as Il Ticinese (fig. 8).<sup>51</sup> This painter, who spent most of his career in Rome, as di Lione depicts Rachel and Leah at the well. In this case, however, Rachel is seated beside the well while Leah stands behind her, with her hands resting on her younger sister's shoulders. Jacob, on the other hand, is on the right side of the composition, with a shepherd's staff and his right foot resting on a rock, chatting with them. Between the main figures, a flock of sheep and a dog drink from the well, while, in the background, a sheep-filled landscape opens to the mountains on the horizon.



Fig. 7. *Jacob and Rachel at the Well*. Andrea di Lione. The State Hermitage Museum. St. Petersburg © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Pavel Demidov, Alexander Koksharov, Konstantin Sinyavsky

<sup>50</sup> On this type of painting by Andrea Di Lione, see Cóndor Orduña (1987): 19-31; Di Penta (2016): 13-83.

<sup>51</sup> On Pier Francesco Mola and this canvas, see Cocke (1972): 37 and ff.; Kahn-Rossi (1989): 248.

In sum, all these examples, despite their compositional differences, share one key element in common: they represent the development of a grazing scene.

According to the Old Testament, Rachel was a shepherdess who had gone to water her flocks when she met Jacob. The staff and the sheep around her are thus iconographic attributes that help to identify her. Likewise, the presence of her sister Leah, the characterization of Jacob as a shepherd himself, and his representation or that of another figure uncovering the well, are all elements present in most of the works cited above which facilitate the identification of the subject. These, however, are not present in Giordano's early work in the Museo del Prado.



Fig. 8. *Jacob meets Rachel*. Pier Francesco Mola, known as Il Ticinese. Ca. 1659. The State Hermitage Museum. St. Petersburg © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Pavel Demidov, Alexander Koksharov, Konstantin Sinyavsky

Moreover, this will not be the only work by the Neapolitan artist in which he depicts this Old Testament matriarch. In a private collection, there is another work from around 1690 depicting the *Encounter between Rachel and Jacob at the Well*.<sup>52</sup> In this mature painting, Giordano depicts Rachel seated at the well, wearing a bright blue cloak and carrying her shepherdess's staff. Jacob stands in

<sup>52</sup> Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 60–61.

front of her, holding her hand and interacting with her, accompanied by another male figure. On the right side of the composition, the rest of the scene is occupied by other shepherds watering their flocks. Animals, children, and women drawing water from the well are also included.<sup>53</sup> Although one is a painting of youth (Prado) and the other a painting of maturity (private collection), the differences between the two are very marked in iconographic terms, so with regards to the attributes of the female figure.

Furthermore, we should not ignore the fact that Giordano depicted these matriarchs on other occasions and in other contexts. In the Prado Museum there is another oil painting by the Neapolitan artist, this time executed on copper, which has given rise to debates about its iconography regarding these Old Testament matriarchs. The copper in question, dated ca. 1687 and formerly titled *Jacob's Journey to Canaan* or *Rebekah's Journey to Canaan* (fig. 9), has aroused heated discussions regarding whether the female protagonist in this painting is Rachel or Rebekah.<sup>54</sup> Recent research has supported the hypothesis that this oil painting represents the “Encounter between Rachel and Laban” after the daughter stole the idols from her father.<sup>55</sup> This latest thematic identification is based on Pérez Sánchez's thesis relative to the iconography of the female figure: namely, the presence of the child on her lap (possibly the future patriarch Joseph), the shepherd's staff in her right hand, and the presence of another female figure accompanying her, also richly dressed and easily identifiable as Leah, Jacob's other wife and Rachel's sister.<sup>56</sup> Once again, we meet a shepherdess, Rachel. The matriarch is at the center of the composition. She carries her staff and is accompanied by her sister Lia and, in this case, by her son Joseph, since this copper depicts a later moment in her story. The scene is populated by animals and human figures, in the style of the ‘Journeys of the Old Testament’ popularized by the Bassano brothers and Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, known as “Il Grechetto”.<sup>57</sup> This style was very popular in Naples in the 16th century, as shown in the work by Andrea di Lione's *Jacob's Journey to Canaan*, which is also kept in the Museo del Prado, among others.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, we see that the staff in Rachel's depictions and the pitcher in Rebecca's are the two key iconographic attributes enabling their identifying and preventing our confusing these two women. And Luca Giordano was aware of this. The master of the *fa presto* brought the representation of these biblical matrons to the

<sup>53</sup> A low-resolution reproduction of this painting is available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings\\_of\\_Jacob\\_and\\_Rachel#/media/File:Luca\\_Giordano\\_-\\_Jacob\\_and\\_Rachel\\_at\\_the\\_Well\\_-\\_WGA9009.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings_of_Jacob_and_Rachel#/media/File:Luca_Giordano_-_Jacob_and_Rachel_at_the_Well_-_WGA9009.jpg) (accessed on August 11, 2025)

<sup>54</sup> Spínola (2001): 300; Ferrari / Scavizzi (2002): vol. 1, 359; Pérez Sánchez (2002): 84; Ferrari / Scavizzi (2003): 76.

<sup>55</sup> Álvarez Seijo (2024): 84-95.

<sup>56</sup> Pérez Sánchez (2002): 84

<sup>57</sup> Falomir Faus (2001): 62-63; Úbeda de los Cobos (2017): 168-171.

<sup>58</sup> Pérez Sánchez (1985): 220.

wall in some of his most important frescoes, as well as in various oil paintings on various supports.

An example of this can be found in the frescoes present in one of the vaults of the minor naves of the church of the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, the so-called *Vault of the Triumph of the Purity of the Virgin* (1693).<sup>59</sup> It is an ode to the Virgin Mary, who appears in the central scene of which accompanied by a series of saints and virgins. In the corners of the vault, Giordano represents the strong women of the Old Testament as a clear prefiguration of the life, virtues and values of the Virgin Mary.<sup>60</sup> In this frescoed vault, Giordano depicts the two matrons together in one of the pendentives, as if they were emerging from the clouds, below the figure of Queen Esther. Rachel, dressed as a shepherdess, looks up with her staff at the fainting queen. Rebecca, at Rachel's opposite side, also looks toward Esther, holding her pitcher with both hands.<sup>61</sup> Thus, in this iconographic program we see how Giordano, reduced the representation of the biblical women to the essential elements, without telling their story, chooses the staff and the pitcher as the elements that allow us to identify these women of the Old Testament.



Fig. 9. *Jacob's Journey to Canaan or Rebekah's Journey to Canaan*. Luca Giordano. Ca. 1687. Museo Nacional del Prado. Madrid © Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

<sup>59</sup> Hermoso Cuesta (2006): 104-105.

<sup>60</sup> Portela Sandoval (2001): 371-373.

<sup>61</sup> A contemporary description of the vault can be found in Palomino (1724): 469

## 2.2. Rachel is, in fact, Rebekah: ‘Meeting of Rachel and Jacob’ by Andrea Vaccaro

Having seen the different ways in which the story of Rachel and Jacob has been brought to the canvas over time, and the importance of the staff and the jug in the representations of the matriarchs, it is time to analyze the representations of Rebekah.

Close to the period and style of Giordano's work, there is an example of the story of Isaac and Rebecca in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Titled *Isaac Meeting Rebekah* and dated c. 1640,<sup>62</sup> this painting, by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1609–64), shows Rebekah on a horse, pulling on the reins to hold the animal still because she has just seen her future husband. Isaac, in turn, looks up at Rebecca holding his hand to his chest, struck by her beauty. In this canvas, Castiglione frames the characters in a bucolic landscape full of animals and figures, as was typical of his pictorial production.<sup>63</sup> While the moment chosen in this pictorial representation precedes the one chosen by the young Giordano, both have some elements in common. In both paintings, Rebekah travels on horseback rather than on a camel; the protagonist is portrayed as enormously beautiful and delicate, carefully dressed; and, lastly, although both are landscapes with a certain bucolic and pastoral air, full of animals and figures, in neither of them does the female figure carry a shepherdess's staff.

There is also another documented painting, now lost, attributed to the Neapolitan painter Domenico Gargiulo (ca. 1609–75), known as Micco Spadaro, that depicts the *Encounter of Rebekah and Isaac* in a manner very similar to that of Castiglione, but with the display of affection we find in Giordano's work.<sup>64</sup> In this painting, Spadaro, better known for his landscapes, genre scenes and historical paintings, depicts Rebekah getting off her camel, grasping the hand that Isaac holds out to support her.<sup>65</sup> Thus, in this example the Neapolitan painter presents the topic as a landscape scene, with a variety of animals and minor characters, similar to the works of Castiglione and the young Luca Giordano.<sup>66</sup>

To conclude, we would like to discuss two works by another Neapolitan painter, Andrea Vaccaro (1604–70), both in relation to the theme of the encounter between Rebekah and Isaac and to Giordano's early painting in the Prado.<sup>67</sup> These

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/31851?lng=en> (accessed on August 11, 2025).

<sup>63</sup> Gavazza (1985): 62–70; Standring (1987): 151–81.

<sup>64</sup> *Incontro di Rebecca e Isacco*, Fototeca Zeri. Fondazione Federico Zeri, Università di Bologna <https://bit.ly/4iykj4t> (accessed on April 6, 2025).

<sup>65</sup> Whitfield / Martineau (1982): 248–254.

<sup>66</sup> Scavizzi / De Vito (2012): 56–57; Scavizzi (2017): 19; Causa (2019): 24.

<sup>67</sup> For an updated biography and a complete catalog of the Neapolitan painter's production, see Tuck-Scala (2012). And for more information about Andrea Vaccaro's paintings in Spain, see Tuck-Scala and Mauro (2009a) and Tuck-Scala / Mauro (2009b).

two paintings, one held at the Museo del Prado (fig. 10) and the other at the Palazzo Reale di Napoli (fig.11), have so far been identified with the two Old Testament themes that we have previously discussed, namely, the *Meeting of Isaac and Rebecca* (Museo del Prado) and *Meeting of Rachel and Jacob* (Palazzo Reale di Napoli). In our view, it is worth comparing these works with Giordano's painting, for it is our contention that the same mistake could have been made regarding the thematic attribution of one of them.



Fig. 10. *Encounter of Rebekah and Isaac*. Andrea Vaccaro. Ca. 1645–50. Museo Nacional del Prado. Madrid © Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

While we believe that the one preserved at the Museo del Prado is correctly identified, we are compelled to propose that the subject treated by Vaccaro in the painting held at the Palazzo Reale di Napoli corresponds, indeed, with the meeting of Rebekah and Isaac. The canvas held at the Museo del Prado, entitled *Encounter of Rebekah and Isaac*, represents the episode we have been analyzing in depth so far: that when Isaac meets Rebekah, who comes accompanied by Abraham's servant to become his wife (Genesis 24:62–67).<sup>68</sup> As early as 1985, in

<sup>68</sup> Pérez Sánchez (1985): 332.

the catalogue to the exhibition *Pintura napolitana de Caravaggio a Giordano* (Madrid, October/December 1985), Pérez Sánchez pointed out that the theme represented by Vaccaro had been misinterpreted on several occasions, being confused with the compositionally analogous episodes of Rebekah and Eliezer at the well, on the one hand, and Jacob and Rachel at the well, on the other.<sup>69</sup> In fact, we are offered a fairly classical representation of this Old Testament story. However, as already pointed out, these three scenes are very similar in both iconographical and compositional terms, which makes it easy to fall into such misinterpretation. In addition, some iconographic elements are present which could contribute to a misfire in the identification of this canvas.



Fig. 11. *The Meeting of Rachel and Jacob*. Andrea Vaccaro. Ca. 1650. Palazzo Reale di Napoli. Napoli. © Palazzo Reale di Napoli, Napoli

As in Giordano's canvas, Vaccaro places the protagonists at the center of the composition, here brought closer to the foreground. Rebekah gestures toward her breast while Isaac, staff in hand, addresses her. Between them appears an older man—likely Abraham's servant Eliezer—who points toward the young woman.

<sup>69</sup> Pérez Sánchez (1985): 332.

Behind Rebekah, three figures stand around a well, while a small group of sheep gathers at her feet.

Several elements in this scene could either appear dissonant with the Rebekah narrative or lend themselves to misreading. The lack of visible affection between the protagonists, who are shown merely conversing, recalls Giordano's treatment. Isaac's staff and the nearby sheep might also be read as pastoral attributes, aligning the image more closely with Jacob and Rachel at the well. Yet, since Rebekah herself does not hold a staff, Isaac's may instead be interpreted as a pilgrim's attribute—unusual in his iconography but attested elsewhere. The inclusion of animals and attendants, meanwhile, is too common a feature of such scenes to determine the subject decisively.

Nevertheless, other details support Pérez Sánchez's identification of the scene as the meeting of Isaac and Rebekah. Eliezer's gesture toward the bride underscores her role, while the dog placed between the couple—a traditional emblem of fidelity—may allude to the marriage about to be contracted. Moreover, the protagonist's appearance argues against identifying her with Rachel: her attire, refined beauty, and lack of pastoral attributes emphasize her role as bride rather than shepherdess.

This large canvas (195 × 246 cm), distinguished by its compositional balance and delicacy, belongs to Vaccaro's mature period, probably between 1645 and 1650. Its refined forms, subtle chromaticism, and details such as the backlit figures set against a luminous background reveal affinities with the work of the Neapolitan painter Bernardo Cavallino (1616–1656), though here on a larger scale and with a pronounced Roman-Bolognese academicism.<sup>70</sup> This work belonged to the art dealer Florencio Kelly and was subsequently acquired by King Charles III.<sup>71</sup> It first appeared as part of the royal collections in the inventory of the New Royal Palace in 1772, being mentioned as follows: “13184-(23)- Queli=Another of Eleazar and Rachel of three rods long and two and a half of fall original of Andrea Baccaro”. In the following inventory of the New Palace, made in 1794, the painting is identified with the theme of Jacob and Rachel: “13545-(23)- Three rods long and half a rod high Jacob with Rachel-Andrea Baccaro-8000.” We must wait for the inventory of the same place in 1814 to find the first mention of Rebekah: “Blue piece- 21432- (366)- Two of four rods less a third high, the daughters of Lot making their father drunk=Rebekah.” As we can see, these two paintings are not attributed to Andrea Vaccaro in this inventory. Rather, they appear without an author. However, it is highly plausible that they refer to Vaccaro's works, since both paintings are inventoried together and with the same dimensions, Lot intoxicated by his daughters and The Encounter of Isaac and Rebekah. The canvas depicting Lot and his daughters, which also belongs to the

<sup>70</sup> Tuck-Scala (2003): 25-37.

<sup>71</sup> Saltillo (1948): 17-20; Águeda Villar (1989): 287-295; Aterido / Martínez Cuesta / Pérez Preciado (2004): vol. 2, 348-349.

Prado Museum and is currently deposited in the Museo de Girona,<sup>72</sup> is the only other work by Vaccaro held by the museum which has an Old Testament theme, and it has practically the same dimensions than the painting depicting Rebekah and the Patriarch.<sup>73</sup> Despite their similar dimensions and their stylistic resemblance, we cannot ascertain these works to form a pair, or to both belong to a larger group of paintings by the Neapolitan. What we can affirm, nonetheless, is that it would make sense to associate them with an inventor entry of the paintings in the palace.

We must wait twenty years to find an inventory that identifies the subject as *Isaac and Rebekah*, and which attributes the canvas to Vaccaro. The Prado Inventory of 1834 lists a painting of *Isaac and Rebecca* by Vaccaro and another one by the same artist with the subject of *Lot drunk by his daughters*. Both are valued at the same amount and lack further description.<sup>74</sup> However, in the museum's catalog of 1854, written by Pedro de Madrazo, we are going to find this painting identified as the encounter of Isaac and Rebekah and now, with a full description of the topic: "Vaccaro / 742. Isaac and Rebekah. / Isaac is admired when he contemplates the beauty of Rebekah. The latter, with an air of candor and innocence, shows the pleasure she experiences at his sight. On one side are seen Isaac's servants, and on the other several shepherds in observation near a well. / Height 7ft; width 8ft, 10 in."<sup>75</sup>

Thus, as it was the case with Giordano's canvas, we can see how the subsequent inventories over the years have assigned the canvases to one of these two subjects, always producing a confusion between the two Old Testament matrons and, therefore, between both scenes. Consequently, in light of this frequent misattribution, an iconographic analysis of the paintings is needed to rigorously determine which female figure and, therefore, which theme, is actually being represented. Such analysis is accomplished below on the canvas *The Meeting of Rachel and Jacob*, also by Vaccaro,<sup>76</sup> and kept at the Royal Palace of Naples.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Pérez Sánchez (1985): 350, fig. 146; Orihuela (1991): 94; Roig i Torrentó (1995): 62-73.

<sup>73</sup> To see the painting: <https://visitmuseum.gencat.cat/ca/museu/museu-d-art-de-girona/objekte/lot-embrigat-per-les-seves-filles> (accessed on August 12, 2025).

<sup>74</sup> AMNP. *Inventario de las pinturas del Museo hecho a la muerte de Fernando VII* (1834): no. 463 and no. 467. <https://bit.ly/4pf0z8M> (accessed on August 11, 2025).

<sup>75</sup> AMNP. *Catálogo de los cuadros del Real Museo de Pintura y Escultura de S.M. / redactado... por Pedro de Madrazo* (1854): p. 172, no. 742.

<sup>76</sup> According to the Palazzo Reale di Napoli, this Vaccaro painting shares the same dimensions (232 x 318 cm) as *Orpheus and the Bacchae* (inv. 632/1980), suggesting they may have been conceived and commissioned as a pair—a hypothesis to be explored in future research. For further information on the Orpheus canvas, see Lattuada (2009): 89–92.

<sup>77</sup> We would like to thank the Documentation Department and the Photographic Archive of the Royal Palace of Naples, especially Stefano Gei, for their collaboration and diligence in providing us with the measurements and unpublished image of this painting by Andrea Vaccaro.

Firstly, what Vaccaro is actually depicting in this scene must be analyzed. A young couple can be seen holding hands at the center of the composition. The young woman, dressed in blue with a yellow cloak, looks at the male figure. The latter, in profile, leans towards her with a gesture suggesting he is about to kiss her. Next to them, two groups of figures seem to stand apart from the main action, on either side of the composition. The group on the left, composed of three women, one of whom is accompanied by a child, and a man, is arranged around a well next to the main woman. Standing on top of the well, as if drawing water from it, is one of these female figures. In addition, a small flock of four sheep is placed to the right of the well, and a dog, in profile, is placed next to the main female figure. In front of the well and on the ground, in the foreground, there is a representation of a pitcher or bucket of reddish colors. On the other hand, the group to the right of the protagonist is made up of five male figures. Three of them are in the foreground, slightly in front of the central couple, while the other two are placed further back, behind a tree seemingly acting as a sort of natural division between both groups of male figures. Within the group in the foreground, a young man with his back turned looks to the right, outside the composition, while pointing his index finger at the older man behind the tree, who is in turn resting both hands on a staff.

The pitcher in the foreground in front of the well; the dog next to the protagonist; the intertwined hands of the young couple and the kiss that seems to be about to take place; and the figure of the elderly man pointed out by the young man whose back is turned in the foreground, are all elements which, as noted above, constitute a recurring presence in the various works depicting the encounter between Rebekah and Isaac. While the pitcher is the attribute par excellence that helps identify Rebekah; the affection between the young protagonists, although it has on occasions being present in representations of the meeting between Rachel and Jacob, is nonetheless a more characteristic element in the iconographic tradition representing the moment of the first meeting between Rebekah and Isaac. Similarly, the figure of the old man could be identified with Eliezer, who is present in most of the paintings telling the story of this encounter, and whose presence, in this composition by Vaccaro, is emphasized by the index finger being pointed at him.

Secondly, as already mentioned, to make a correct iconographic identification, equal attention should be paid to the absent elements from the representation. What is missing does equally provide crucial information. In this case, important iconographic absences would be paramount were this canvas depicting the meeting of Jacob and Rachel at the well. In this regard, despite the presence of the small flock of sheep, the absence of further references to shepherding is striking. This is especially so regarding the female figure, who carries neither a staff nor shepherdess's garb. Neither can we find references to the slab that covered the well; none of the figures around the well are depicted

uncovering it, nor is there any trace of the slab in the vicinity of any of them. Likewise, none of the female figures can be clearly identified with Leah, Rachel's sister, who is often shown with her in these scenes.

Finally, if we compare this painting with the representation of Isaac and Rebeka by Vaccaro which can be found at the Prado Museum, several similarities between them come to the fore. In both compositions, two groups of figures, respectively male and female, are placed on either side of the protagonists around a tree and a well. Another figure, in this case a male one, seems to be drawing water from the well in the painting held at the Prado. Moreover, Vaccaro places a dog next to the couple in both paintings, in the middle of the lovers in the case of the Prado, and next to the protagonist in the Naples painting. Next to the dog, again in both canvases, a small flock of sheep can be seen, although there is no further evidence linking this figure to shepherding. Finally, Vaccaro does also include an elderly male figure in both representations. In the canvas held at the Prado, he is emphasized because he appears to be pointing his finger at the young couple, whereas in the one held in Naples, his presence is emphasized by being pointed out by the male figure who turns his back on the viewer.

All these reasons together make us that both Vaccaro canvases in the Prado and the Palazzo Reale di Napoli, do represent the same scene despite their minor compositional and iconographic differences. In fact, the elements linking them together clearly outweigh those that separate them. Therefore, assuming that the Prado canvas is correctly identified as the encounter between Isaac and Rebekah, the Neapolitan painting should equally be identified with this same theme.

In fact, Pérez Sánchez has already linked the two paintings based on their perceived stylistic and compositional similarities, to the point that both canvases could even belong to the same set.<sup>78</sup> In our view, however, it is hard to sustain that they could be either a pair or part of the same commission, due to both canvases being very different in size.<sup>79</sup> Rather, it seems more plausible to uphold that the observed relationship among the two is actually the result of both paintings being versions of the same subject, by the same painter, and conducted at a similar point in his career.

## CONCLUSIONS

In sum, we contend that, in light of the arguments presented above, the youthful canvas by Giordano in the Prado Museum (currently deposited in the Museo de Belas Artes of A Coruña) and the painting by Vaccaro preserved in the

<sup>78</sup> Pérez Sánchez (1985): 332.

<sup>79</sup> As we mention above, the painting by Vaccaro at the Prado Museum is 195 x 246cm. The information provided to us by the Palazzo Reale di Napoli indicates that Vaccaro's painting 'Meeting of Rachel and Jacob' (inv. 633/1980) is 232 x 318cm. Thus, the difference in their dimensions is substantial.

Palazzo Reale of Naples—both previously identified as depicting the meeting between Rachel and Jacob—should instead be recognized as representing the Encounter between Rebekah and Isaac.

The confusion that has persisted over the years regarding the iconographic identification of these two scenes, and more specifically the figures of Rebekah and Rachel, finds a clear example in these two seventeenth-century Neapolitan paintings. From the analysis undertaken here, three observations follow.

First, the importance of undertaking thorough iconographic analyses must be emphasized. Such analyses should consider not only the elements present in the image but also, crucially, those absent—yet traditionally associated with the theme or figure—since omissions can be as revealing as inclusions.

Second, these analyses not only allow for the correction of thematic misidentifications but also contribute to reconstructing and verifying the evolution of an iconographic tradition across different periods, geographies, and stylistic contexts. Accurate identification, in turn, enables scholars to trace potential iconographic or thematic connections with other works by the same artist, to reconstruct possible commissions, and to investigate the provenance of pieces recorded in inventories and archival sources.

Finally, this approach requires acknowledging that these matriarchs were not merely significant figures in the Book of Genesis, but also bearers of complex theological meaning in early modern Catholic culture. As wives of patriarchs, mothers of miraculous children, and figures invested with moral and spiritual authority, they participated in broader discourses on virtue, divine election, gender roles, and the prefiguration of New Testament events. Their stories were interpreted through the lens of Counter-Reformation exegesis, which sought to draw moral exempla and doctrinal lessons from Old Testament narratives.

In this light, Rebekah and Rachel—despite important parallels in both their biblical stories and the histories of their representation—were in fact distinct and independent biblical matrons, each with considerable weight in the sacred narrative. Yet in both text and image, they have often been overshadowed by the stories of their male counterparts, with insufficient attention paid to the visual and narrative details that could have distinguished them.

The Old Testament granted Rebekah and Rachel not only a story but a name, unlike many other so-called “strong women” of Scripture. It is therefore incumbent upon art historians to restore to each her rightful identity and value in those works where they appear as protagonists, whether alone or alongside their husbands. By ensuring accurate iconographic identification and assigning new, more appropriate titles, their names will be recovered and their stories retold—reminding us that Rebekah was never meant to be Rachel, and Rachel never meant to be Rebekah.

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