



Rachel's Lament

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The child Rachel carried within her as the family journeyed south from Bethel would come as an answer to years of earnest prayer. As Genesis depicts her, this young woman merely wanted what all wives hoped for: to bear children, especially sons, to their husbands. Until now her hopes remained frustrated.

“When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb,” we learn several chapters earlier, “but Rachel was barren” (Gen 29:31). Only God and the narrator knew of this plan to keep things even, however, so both women suffered. Thanks to divine intervention, Leah bore Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. As their names suggest, Leah presumed with each birth that a son would at last win Jacob’s heart (Gen 29:32-34). When fruit of her body did not secure Jacob’s love, Leah called her fourth child Judah, which comes from the Hebrew verb for heaving something heavenward in the gesture priests use when giving thanks. The same sign indicates surrender. Leah had finished with trying to earn her man’s love (Gen 29:35).

Rachel, meanwhile, enjoyed her husband’s affection but had little else to show for it. Envious, exasperated, and oblivious to the justice being worked out on some other plane, she demanded of her husband, “Give me children, or I shall die!” Jacob responded as though Rachel had challenged his manhood. He blamed her

From Jeremiah we first hear Rachel's lament, but her memory continues, from Genesis to Matthew, in Jewish and Christian tradition, in theology and church, in literature and culture. Ultimately none survives the journey of the people of God on earth, save for the promise of God, who heard and still hears Rachel's lament.

plight on the handiest scapegoat and, unwittingly, the correct one: "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Gen 30:1-2).

Only twenty verses but six births later, including two more for Leah but none for her sister, we finally read, "Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb" (Gen 30:22-23). Thus ended the reproach Rachel endured as a barren wife. When her son was born she didn't name him for her gratitude, however. She called him Joseph, which loosely translated means, "Let there be another." One child would not satisfy Rachel. All who uttered the name of her first-born would join Rachel's prayer for another.

"Fearful or not, she had another son, but she would not nurse or raise him. The answer to her prayer had killed her."

For a long time those entreaties received no response. By the time Rachel conceived again, Leah's sons had grown into men and the family had returned to the region of Jacob's birth. Despite all the waiting and endless beseeching invested in Rachel's second pregnancy, Genesis relates its final stages almost in passing. By chance, the birth pangs came while the family traveled. At God's direction, Jacob had gone to Bethel and built an altar (Gen 35:1-15). Now he led his family south. Somewhere near Bethlehem, "when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor" (Gen 35:16-21). The fearsome implications in that understatement hover over the midwife's encouragement to Rachel: "Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son." Fearful or not, she had another son, but she would not nurse or raise him. She perished there, on the road near Ephrath. The answer to her prayer had killed her.

With her dying breaths, Rachel named her child Ben-oni, which means "son of my sorrow." This was the perfect name for a child born to a mother of Rachel's experience, but Jacob did not let it stand. Instead, he called the boy Ben-jamin, "son of the right hand, son of good fortune." With perfectly understandable motivations, Jacob had stilled Rachel's dying voice. He silenced her lament. So many had joined her prayer for a second child, but none would share her grief at losing him. Jacob did not leave Rachel without memorial. He buried her where she died and set up stones to mark her grave. The pillar of Rachel's tomb is there to this day, the narrator notes (Gen 35:20). It remains to our own day as well.

MEMORY OF RACHEL IN THE DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY

Then, "Israel journeyed on," the narrator explains matter-of-factly. With that, we expect never again to hear of, or from, Rachel. Like a handful of memorable mothers, she might have become at most a name recalled in genealogies (as at Gen 46:19, 22). On his own deathbed in Egypt, Jacob mourned for Rachel one last time (Gen 48:7). Yes, Jacob remembered Rachel, but Israel journeyed on.

Some six centuries later, after bondage in Egypt, exodus, wilderness, taking the land, and the era of the judges, Israel's first king counted Rachel as his ancestor. Moreover, the ancient mother's place of burial played a role in his selection as ruler. When Samuel anointed Saul, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, as king, he gave Saul this sign to prove this designation came from the Lord: "When you depart from me today you will meet two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah, and they will say to you, 'The asses which you went to seek are found, and now your father has ceased to care about the asses and is anxious about you'" (1 Sam 10:2).¹ It seems a vindication of sorts, that one of Rachel's great grandsons would become king, but not before a visit to her grave. Nevertheless, silence falls once more over Rachel and her tomb, at least in the Deuteronomistic History's account of Israel's monarchies.

JEREMIAH RESTORES RACHEL'S VOICE

That silence finally broke dramatically, but not before a thousand years had passed since Rachel perished and Jacob renamed Ben-oni. The prophet Jeremiah remembered that motherless child's original name and in a fitting moment, he restored Rachel's voice. He called her from her tomb to weep over the slaughter of her children. She wept inconsolably:

Thus says the LORD:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more. (Jer 31:15)

Few figures in the canon of Scripture knew tears as intimately as Jeremiah, for the vocation he could not shake had made him a traitor. He suffered mightily in the role of handing over God's people to a cruel enemy, while at the same time working to convince the same people that forfeit would prove their only hope (Jer 38:14-28). His pleas unheeded, Jeremiah endured Nebuchadnezzar's horrific sack of Jerusalem (Jer 39). Unlike many others, the prophet survived the city's fall and soon found himself in Ramah, north of Jerusalem, where Babylonian officers collected survivors bound for exile.

The brutality of exile finds expression in the Hebrew word for it (נָלַץ), which means literally "to go naked." The expression derives from the Assyrian practice of stripping captives before driving them on forced marches to other regions. Naked prisoners proved more easily controlled than those left with clothing and personal

¹References to Rachel's tomb outside the Pentateuch locate the site imprecisely. Here, Zelzah is generally considered a secondary addition. Cf. Diana V. Edelman, "Zelzah," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 6:1073-1074. Locating the tomb "in the territory of Benjamin" is problematic in light of Gen 35:16-21, since Bethlehem, though near the tribal boundary with Benjamin, clearly belonged to Judah.

effects. The Babylonians did not repeat that same cruelty, but the word for exile stuck. Clothing could not cover the nakedness that came from losing everything.

“As the exiles departed, Jeremiah heard Rachel’s lament. Now she watched again as life and a future slipped away.”

A Babylonian guard let Jeremiah choose between exile and remaining in Judah’s ruins (Jer 40:1-6). He chose the latter. Apparently, however, Jeremiah watched as the broken, battered survivors began their trek to oblivion on the highway that ran from Jerusalem, past Ramah, up to Bethel, and on to Shechem. On this same route (though reversed) Jacob and his family had taken the fateful journey that brought them a millennium earlier to the place of desolation outside Ephrath. As the exiles departed, Jeremiah heard Rachel’s lament. She wept bitterly, refusing all consolation. Rachel had lost her own life in giving life to Benjamin, and through him to the people of Israel and Judah. Now she watched again as life and a future slipped away. She saw no hope. She accepted no comfort.

A few verses beyond Rachel’s disconsolate cries we hear another who speaks in grief and abject pleading. That voice belongs to Ephraim, son of Joseph, grandson of Rachel, one whose name eventually came to signify the northern kingdom (cf. Hos 11:8) the Assyrians had mercilessly destroyed a century earlier. “Bring me back, let me come home,” Ephraim pleads (Jer 31:18-19). “I was only a boy and did some really stupid things. I’m sorry, humiliated, and ashamed. Please bring me back.” Mother Rachel wept not only for Jerusalem and Judah, but for the whole family that accompanied her from Bethel to Ephrath, for Leah’s loss as well as her own.

Having heard her lament, Jeremiah, who had prophesied capitulation as Judah’s only chance for life, now finds hope for God’s people even in the great debacle he had threatened and tried so desperately to avoid. That hope hangs on a new promise of God, one that comes in response to Rachel’s tears. More specifically, over Rachel’s loud lamentation, Jeremiah heard this:

Thus says the LORD:

Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;

for there is a reward for your work,

says the LORD:

they shall come back from the land of the enemy;

there is hope for your future,

says the LORD:

your children shall come back to their own country. (Jer 31:16-17)

Because these verses come amidst a collection of hopeful oracles in the book of Jeremiah,² the reader easily overlooks the startling impact of Rachel’s lament. It

²Commentators generally call Jer 30-33 a “book” of hope, comfort, or consolation.

effects in God's attitude toward Israel and Judah a reversal every bit as stunning as that in God's bill of divorce against unfaithful Israel in Hos 2 or in the ritual stoning of God's rebellious child in Hos 11.³ Up to this point, nothing in the record of Jeremiah's prophetic career gave reason to expect anything but the end of Israel and Judah. Jerusalem's last hope had rested in a surrender King Zedekiah refused to offer. All was now lost.

Except for Rachel's lament.

RACHEL IN LATER JEWISH TRADITION

That, at least, is how Jewish interpreters have read Jeremiah for many centuries. Their commentary and midrashic offerings prove most insightful. For example, in the midrash to Lamentations, the rabbis describe God's grief over the loss of Jerusalem and the exile of the people. While weeping, God summons Jeremiah and charges him to call Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses from their graves to join in God's mourning. Jeremiah complies, and the ancient worthies arrive. Each weeps and performs other signs of grief. One by one, however, they also urge God to restore the people. Abraham requests this in honor of his obedience when ordered to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac in turn offers his compliance in the same scenario as reason for God to answer his prayer. Jacob lamely rehearses the long years of labor he gave Laban and the times he risked his life. Moses attempts to take matters into his own hands. He bids Jeremiah lead him to Babylon, from which he expects to lead another exodus and bring the exiles home. God does not allow it, for Moses had received no calling to such a mission.

Finally, Rachel comes before the Almighty. She holds before God an example of compassion that not only moves God, but solves an old mystery. Did you ever wonder, O Blessed One, she asks, why my husband didn't recognize the one with whom he slept on his first wedding night? That happened because I knew our father's plan, and I anticipated as well Jacob's anger and what he might do to my sister. So as my beloved lay with my sister, I hid beneath the nuptial bed and every time Jacob spoke, I answered. "And if I who am but flesh and blood was not jealous of my rival, and did not shame her, but acted with love, why should you, Eternal King, loving and merciful one, be jealous of idols...and deliver your children into exile and let them be slain by the sword and suffer their enemies to inflict upon them inhuman suffering?"⁴ God responds to Rachel's pleading, for she had acted not from obligation, but in spontaneous, unselfish love.

In another midrashic tradition, the same characters come before God, only to blame God for the ruin over which God grieves. Abraham points out, for example,

³The "bill of divorce" in Hos 2 proceeds through various "therefore" clauses (vv. 6, 9) that lead to the expected declaration of divorce. Instead, at v. 14, God calls for a second honeymoon. Hos 11:1-9 depicts God handing over Israel/Ephraim as an incorrigible child fit for execution, as prescribed in Deut 21:18-21. God ultimately chooses not to continue prosecution and receives the executioners' blows instead of letting them fall on Israel alone.

⁴Cited in Samuel H. Dresner, *Rachel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 158-161.

that God stopped him from killing Isaac. Could God not stop the Babylonians from destroying Jerusalem? Similarly, Moses asks why God couldn't save Jerusalem just as the children of Israel had been rescued from Pharaoh at the Red Sea. All of them reproach God and no one mourns with God until Rachel arrives. She says lit-

*“where the prophets’ and patriarchs’ bold theologizing failed,
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the weight of grief”*

tle and blames no one. She simply weeps inconsolably. In this version, too, God responds to Rachel with a promise. Where the prophets’ and patriarchs’ bold theologizing failed, Rachel’s tears granted what God sought, namely, another to share the weight of grief. In turn, God gave to Rachel something she surely desired but didn’t request. “There is hope for your future,” God said. “Your children shall come back to their own country.”⁵

In a later Jewish text, the mystical *Zohar* of medieval times, Rachel plays a role as perpetual intercessor for exiles. Moreover, it suggests that the *Shekinah*, or presence of God, “never departed from the tent of Rachel.” Thus, God always hears and heeds her lament. Indeed, at one point the mystical tradition works playfully with the Hebrew letters of Rachel’s name, *RHL*. By substituting different vowels, Rachel’s name becomes *RuaHEL*, “Spirit of God.”⁶ In that role, she has continual access to God. From such traditional lore has grown the ancient as well as modern popularity of Rachel’s Tomb as a shrine where people seek healing of body and spirit.

The Jewish mystical tradition also affords Rachel an ultimate honor in response to her tears. Another text from the *Zohar* teaches that God will ultimately send the Messiah specifically in response to Rachel’s weeping. Following his year-long campaign to put the world right, the Messiah will enjoy a month’s sojourn in heaven before returning as ruler of the whole earth. Of all places on earth, where shall the Messiah be crowned?

On the way to Ephrat
At the crossroads,
Which is Rachel’s grave.
To mother Rachel he will bring glad tidings.
And he will comfort her.
And now she will let herself be comforted.
And she will rise up
And kiss him.⁷

⁵Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956) 628-631.

⁶Dresner, *Rachel*, 181-184. In Hebrew characters, Rachel is רַחֵל, and “Spirit of God” אֵל הַרוּחַ. Paul’s assertion that God’s Spirit “intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26) resonates with this tradition.

⁷*Ibid.*, 204-205, quoting from *Zohar* 2.7a-9a.

RACHEL IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

The Christian tradition's remembrance of Rachel's lament begins in Matthew's Gospel. Here, too, the Messiah's coming cannot happen without a stop in Ephrath. In the reversed exodus scenario that Matthew presents as Jesus' birth narrative, a new Joseph dreams dreams and a dastardly new "pharaoh" slaughters Hebrew babies. Once again, a single child escapes the carnage to become the people's savior. In the midst of all the commotion, however, one voice from ancient tradition remains the same. Quoting Jeremiah, Matthew once more calls Rachel from her tomb to weep for slaughtered innocents:

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (Matt 2:17-18)

RACHEL IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

By sounding Rachel's lament at the beginning, Matthew makes certain no part of Jesus' story, no piece of the church's narrative tradition regardless of how sweet or apparently innocent, escapes the shadow of the cross. In response, Christian preachers in every era have connected Christmas to Good Friday. Martin Luther, for example, spoke of parents in all times and places when he described how the mothers of Bethlehem, on the night Joseph was warned to take his family and flee to Egypt, fed their children porridge, rocked their cradles, and went to sleep without a care. Next morning, not a household in Bethlehem remained intact. The murdered children, Luther declared, were taken straight to heaven as blessed martyrs. Rachel, meanwhile, weeping and refusing all comfort, remains the voice of parents who will only later learn that "the Lord was come into the world in order that he might lay down his life."⁸

Today, numerous organizations that seek healing for people in grief employ Rachel and her lament as identifying symbols.⁹ In circles of Christian theological discourse, Christopher Morse has made the most extensive use of Rachel's appearance in Jeremiah and Matthew. The disconsolate cries of Rachel insist, according to Morse, that in some situations, especially when innocents suffer, only God may speak of hope. All glib assurances amount to blasphemy.

What Rachel does is refuse all false comfort and facile explanation. She refuses to be consoled. And by her inclusion this refusal is honored in the Gospel as a faithful testimony. In the darkness surrounding Rachel, just as much as in the light surrounding the natal star, the birthplace of the Christ is revealed. At the Nativity a manger somehow adjoins her tomb. Of this her disbelief of all consolation

⁸Cited in Roland H. Bainton, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1948) 74.

⁹E.g., "Rachel's Day," a project of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, supports children facing violence. The Rachel Foundation offers services to women who have had abortions.

not of God becomes the faithful witness. Her voice, so Jeremiah tells us, is the one God hears.

In the godforsakenness of God's own Son on the Cross (Matt. 27:46) the promised hope for Rachel is embodied. By not believing any consolation short of God's own descent into hell in Christ, the refusal of Rachel becomes a faithful witness pointing to the Resurrection. From the perspective of Resurrection faith, both the credulity that seeks comfort in false hope, and the cynicism that says there is no hope that can be trusted in the manger adjoining Rachel's tomb, are revealed as *not* to be believed.

Wherever we find today the credulity willing to believe anything comfortable that passes itself off as spirituality or God-talk, and wherever we find today the cynicism that says there is no hope or faith worth trusting, Rachel's refusal becomes a most timely witness to a Resurrection faith.¹⁰

*“doubtless he never forgot the sound of Rachel's weeping
and how her lament made way for something new”*

Jeremiah spent most of his life uttering words by which God meant “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow” (Jer 1:10). Only near the end, it seems, came authorization for sharing a hopeful message with the power “to build and to plant.” Doubtless he never forgot the sound of Rachel's weeping and how her lament made way for something new.

Albert Camus once wrote that Jesus, too, must have lived as a man of sorrows and incurable melancholy, for surely he heard Rachel's cries every night of his life as he pondered the evening long before when he alone escaped from Bethlehem.¹¹

All who count themselves disciples of Christ and claim his death as their own through baptism do well to keep alert for the sound of Rachel's lament as they pursue their various callings. Whether proclaiming the gospel or comforting one another with hope, Christians include themselves in the list of Rachel's children. Working and praying as they do somewhere between Jesus' cross and Rachel's tomb, they accept for themselves, for each other, and for the world no cheap consolation.

The gospels' many fishing stories and tales of hazardous sea voyages point to the early Christian community's love of nautical imagery for describing the church. As a community called to ply the waters of this world at the work of “fishing for people,” we could find no more eloquent description of that vocation than the one that closes Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. One of the whaling ships in this story rich with biblical imagery bears the name Rachel. After an encounter with the white whale in which the *Rachel* loses part of her crew, including her captain's young son, the captain begs Ahab and the crew of the *Pequod* to assist in a search

¹⁰Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994) 10-11.

¹¹Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Vintage, 1957) 112.

for the missing. Ahab refuses. He has no time for such pursuits. As the *Rachel* and her stricken captain depart the scene, Melville writes:

But by her still halting course and winding, woful way, you plainly saw that this ship that so wept with spray, still remained without comfort. She was Rachel, weeping for her children, because they were not.¹²

Later, after the *Pequod* has sunk, Melville's epilogue reveals how Ishmael, the novel's narrator, survived to tell the story of Ahab's doomed quest. The suction of the sinking ship nearly pulls Ishmael under, but he survives that first threat with the aid of a coffin that floats free of the wreckage and serves as a life-buoy. Then Ishmael explains:

For almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.¹³

The church of Christ makes a journey that ultimately none survives, neither mothers nor their children, save for the promise of One who heard, and still hears, Rachel's lament.

"There is hope for your future. Your children shall come back," comes the astonishing response. ⊕

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¹²Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin, 2001) 579.

¹³*ibid.*, 625.