

Rachel Weeping

JEWES, CHRISTIANS,
AND MUSLIMS AT
THE FORTRESS TOMB

Fred Strickert



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*For my own
Rachel,
Benjamin,
and
Angela:
always on the way*

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Prologue

On October 17, 2000, in the streets outside Bethlehem's Rachel's Tomb, thirteen-year-old Muayad Jawarish was shot to death. It was one of those AP headlines that caught my attention. Only weeks earlier the second *intifada* had erupted after then-Minister of Housing Ariel Sharon paid a visit to the area in Jerusalem that some call the Noble Sanctuary and others the Temple Mount. Religious sensibilities play a big role in this part of the world. Reports spread to the four corners of the world about scores of people injured and killed, and the world shuddered as yet another peace plan was pronounced dead on arrival. Now the violence had spread from the streets of Jerusalem to the cities of the West Bank.

For a long time the main Jerusalem-Hebron road that ran along Rachel's Tomb had been a flashpoint for violence. It was relatively close to the Bethlehem checkpoint manned by the Israeli border police, and in recent years an Israeli security post had been constructed just north of the tomb. This location was thus natural for Palestinian demonstrations. Youth often gathered, and stone throwing occasionally ensued. On this particular day, the stone throwing was supplemented with Coke-bottle gasoline bombs, and the soldiers retaliated with tear gas and gunfire.

According to the newspaper reports, young Jawarish was not one of the demonstrating youth. At two o'clock in the afternoon, he was on his way home from school when his route took him near the action. Like many youths, he paused to watch, curious about what was going on. He paused, seemingly at a safe distance. Unexpectedly, a high-velocity bullet from the gun of an Israeli sniper stationed atop Rachel's Tomb hit him in the base of the skull. That evening Muayad Jawarish died at al-Hussein Hospital in Beit Jala.

Everyone would agree that something's wrong with this picture. Any time children are killed it is a tragedy. The wartime setting only multiplies the emotional pull. In this particular case there are other factors. The holy city of Bethlehem. The century-long conflict in a land of promise. The setting outside Rachel's Tomb. Youth showing lack of respect for religious

space. Soldiers shooting from the roof of a shrine. Add to all these the name of Rachel. It is not just any holy place. It is Rachel's Tomb. Rachel is the age-old symbol of the grieving mother. Her children are dying, Palestinian and Israeli alike. And Rachel continues to weep for them. Rachel cries, and so do Israeli and Palestinian mothers. How appropriate that a reporter recorded the lament of Muayad Jawarish's mother: "My son! My son! They killed my son! God give me strength!"¹

When I read the newspaper account of Muayad Jawarish's death, it stirred up memories of my own visits to Bethlehem. My first trip in 1974, similar to the experience of most tourists, is a blur of images and seemingly hundreds of historic sites and stories. I vaguely remember the Bethlehem shrine. It was the only time I ever set foot inside. If I had kept a journal, I imagine the entry would have been rather short with words like "quaint," "insignificant," "the same old thing." Little did I know that the shrine would find its way to center stage in later years.

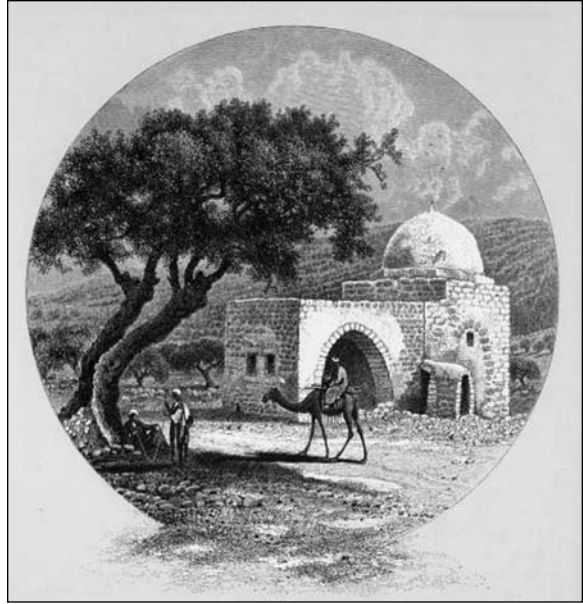
I drove by that same Rachel's Tomb almost every day during my 1995–96 sabbatical when I was a senior fellow at the Albright Archaeological Institute in Jerusalem and lived at the Lutheran Church compound in Bethlehem. How well I recall one such trip in the back seat of a *sherut*, one of the shared taxis that left Damascus Gate in Jerusalem and dropped off passengers at the Beit Jala junction along the Jerusalem-Hebron Road in Bethlehem for two shekels. On that particular day an unfamiliar woman was sitting in the back of the vehicle. I, too, made my way to the back where three passengers usually sat, but she would not allow me to sit beside her. Speaking no English, she motioned that I was to leave a seat vacant between us. The Palestinian driver motioned, but she signaled that no one was to sit in that middle seat. With a shrug of his shoulders he started the engine, seeming to understand. She was a Hasidic Jew with strict rules forbidding men and women touching each other. I watched her closely throughout that twenty-minute taxi ride before she exited at Rachel's Tomb. Most Jewish visitors to the tomb travel there in bulletproof buses or in police-escorted caravans.² How different this woman

¹ Denis Barnett, "Palestinian boy, policeman die in day of anti-summit rage," *Agence France Press* (October 17, 2000); Jamie Tarabay, "For ninth-grade boys, clashes are a game of cat and mouse," *The Associated Press* (October 18, 2000). Charles Sennott also was moved by this incident to write about it in *The Body and the Blood: The Holy Land at the Turn of a New Millennium* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001) 357–60.

² "To Rachel's Tomb in a Bulletproof Bus," *Haaretz* (November 23, 2000); Doron Geller, "Sense of Mission," *The Jerusalem Post* (November 12, 1997).

appeared on this particular day!

This woman in the taxi, totally humble, totally quiet, bobbed her head in prayer while focusing on the Hebrew prayer book inches in front of her face. How different from the other visitors to Rachel's Tomb! What was it that brought her, a Hasidic Jew, to ride in a shared taxi with mainly Palestinian



Engraving of Rachel's Tomb—year 1881

men? Why wasn't she in one of those escorted vehicles? I don't know the answers. Yet the more I've learned about Rachel's Tomb, the more I'm willing to hazard a guess. Likely this young woman was having trouble conceiving. She was different from the many Hasidic wives leading around a large flock of children. Her trip to Rachel's Tomb was motivated by human need. It was likely a case of desperation. With no children her family role was threatened. She lived in shame. Unless something changed quickly, she might end up divorced and shunned. Being barren was not something she would want to discuss openly, especially with her husband. In desperation she, like other women before her, was making a quiet trip in a Palestinian taxi to seek the aid of Rachel, the symbol of motherhood. Who knows what became of that young mother? I, of course, never saw her again. Yet her image stays fixed in my memory, a figure of sincere devotion.

Months later in early 1996, things began to change at Rachel's Tomb. My daily taxi rides were diverted through Bethlehem side streets while construction workers began to change the face of this ancient monument. That historic route taken by several-millennia-worth of travelers was changed permanently four years later so that traffic no longer passes in front of Rachel's Tomb. The renovations took eighteen months and cost well over two million

dollars. Part of the reason for the project was to facilitate larger numbers of pilgrims; the prayer area multiplied five-fold. But most of the changes were in the name of security. Thirteen-foot-high security walls now block the view of the well-recognized white dome from all directions but above.



Photo of Fortress Tomb—year 2000

The Israeli government unveiled the new Rachel's Tomb to an estimated thirty-thousand ultra-orthodox Jews at the commemoration of the matriarch's death on November 11, 1997. Associated Press reporter Dina Kraft characterized the scene as one of celebration, with festive music booming from loudspeakers and individuals swaying in prayer as they waited in long lines for their turn inside the tomb. The mood inside had a different tone, "Worshippers crowded shoulder-to-shoulder despite the expansion of praying space. Wails and sobbing were heard from the women's side of the tomb where young women fervently prayed for safe pregnancies and births."³

Most of the worshipers and seemingly the reporter were buffered from the commotion in the streets outside. According to Associated Press writer Samar Assad, the crowd of pilgrims had attracted young stone throw-

³ Steve Rodan and Margot Dudkevitch, "Rachel's Tomb reopens after renovations," *The Jerusalem Post* (November 12, 1997) 2. Dina Kraft, "Thousands worship at fortified tomb," *AP News Service* (November 11, 1997).

ers, most only eleven years old. Into that crowd walked nine-year-old Ali Jawarishe with his bright red backpack on his way to buy pencils to do his homework after school. He was hit in the head with a rubber-coated steel bullet fired at close range by an Israeli soldier trying to disperse the boys. Ali died the following day, and his parents donated his organs to save the lives of other children, both Palestinian and Israeli.⁴

Again, it is obvious that something is not right with this picture. Jews traveling to a holy shrine in armored vehicles. Soldiers guarding a holy place and shooting young children. Inside the tomb, women wailing with tears over pregnancy and childbirth. Outside, mothers sobbing uncontrollably over the deaths of their sons.

It is a scene repeated all too often in recent years in Bethlehem. Rachel's Tomb, a holy place, has been turned into a fortress. The thing about fortresses is that they mark power and exclusivity. In late October 2000, after the second *intifada* had begun and shortly after thirteen-year-old Muayad Jawarish's death, thousands of pilgrims made their way for the annual commemoration of Rachel's death. The words spoken by one worshiper to *Reuters* reporter Christine Hauser are telling: "It's terrible that we are praying in our holy spot, to our God, in a fortress."⁵

In this particular case a fortress is totally out of character. Rachel, as the ideal mother, is the mark of vulnerability and faithfulness. Her appeal over the centuries is to victims, who like her remain vulnerable and faithful at the same time. Her burial is significant because it is located at the side of the road, still on the way to her destination and still vulnerable. That's what makes her so appealing. And her tomb on the way has given access over the centuries to all, no matter their national identity or religion.

The purpose of this book is to take another look at Rachel and her tomb. We will read her biblical story fresh as the vulnerable and faithful woman

⁴ Samar Assad, "Palestinian boy fights for life," *AP News Service* (November 12, 1997). Joel Greenberg, "Strife Claims Small Victim As Rachel's Tomb Is Reopened," *The New York Times* (November 12, 1997) A3. Margot Dudkevitch, "Parents of child killed by IDF: 'Organs can go to Jew or Arab,'" *The Jerusalem Post* (November 16, 1997) 2. Although having similar last names the two boys described in this prologue, Muayad Jawarish and Ali Jawarishe, are not related.

⁵ Christine Hauser, "In Bethlehem, faithful pray in the shadow of the gun," *Reuters News Service* (October 28, 2000). "MKS Pray at Besieged Tomb," *Haaretz* (November 10, 2000); Margot Dudkevitch, "Activists try to reach Rachel's Tomb despite IDF ban," *The Jerusalem Post* (November 10, 2000) 3A.

always “on the way.” We will also survey the later traditions about Rachel, especially how she becomes a model for victims in various situations: the exiles heading to Babylon; the boy babies slaughtered in Bethlehem; and individual women struggling with motherhood and pregnancy. What we will see is that the matriarch Rachel is held in esteem by all three monotheistic religions. We will also analyze carefully the biblical references to Rachel’s Tomb, coming to the conclusion that the location of Bethlehem is ironically wrong. The biblical witness points to a location north of Jerusalem. This finding is nothing new. Biblical scholars have recognized the problem of a Bethlehem location for years. Yet this conclusion has often been presented only as short notes in biblical commentaries or encyclopedia articles. The topic has not been the subject of a full treatment. The exception is the fifty-four page article in Italian by G. Lombardi in *Liber Annuus* in 1970.⁶ A comprehensive, up-to-date study in English is overdue. Lastly, we will survey the literature about the Bethlehem tomb over the last two thousand years, asking how this tomb came to be associated with Rachel. We will see that Christians, Muslims, and Jews have all had a share in the various stages of building and have been tolerant of one another in their prayers over most of this period. In the final analysis we will see that the idea of Rachel’s tomb as a fortress with exclusive access is totally contrary to the character of Rachel, the woman of faith, always on the way.

Finally, the purpose of such a critical analysis has a practical bent. In our ever-smaller world, we need to learn to live together. Perhaps we might even imagine Rachel speaking through her tears, “Children, please share.”

—Fred Strickert

⁶ G. Lombardi, “H. Farah—W. Farah presso Anatot e la questione della Tomba di Rahel (Gen 35,16-20; 1 Sam 10,2-5; Ger 31,15),” *Liber Annuus*, XX (1970) 299–352. The article was later published as a monograph G. Lombardi, *La tomba de Rahel* (Jerusalem, 1971).

Introduction

At the end of the Book of Genesis, the patriarch Jacob reflects on his adventurous life—a story that began in chapter 25 and reaches its culmination in chapters 48–49. The episode that strikes him most is the tragedy of his wife Rachel. With an efficiency of words he recalls: “For when I came from Paddan, Rachel, alas, died in the land of Canaan on the way, while there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath’ (that is, Bethlehem)” (Gen 48:7).¹

Claus Westermann attributes this section to the Priestly writer in sixth-century Babylon in exile.² The story of Rachel is quite fitting for exiles who reflect on their own loss: the failure of the Judaic monarchy; the destruction of the temple; the fall of Jerusalem; the end of the Israelite nation; the separation from land. What does this all mean in relationship to the covenant, to their role as people of God, to their hope for the future?

Rachel’s loss is their loss; their loss is Rachel’s loss.

There is nothing in the Genesis text that explains the meaning of the tragedy. Joseph does not ask “why,” and Jacob only tells him the what, the when, and the where of his mother’s death. Rachel died. That’s a fact of life.

As far as the future, Genesis 48:7 provides few clues. Nevertheless, it is significant that Jacob’s reminiscence about Rachel was elicited by the death-bed visit of Joseph, Rachel’s firstborn. It is followed by Jacob’s blessing of their grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh who now will stand on the same level as his twelve sons—tribal patriarchs in their own right. How sad that Rachel was not still alive to see this moment for herself.

The fact is that Rachel died years before and now Jacob himself is dim of sight so that he has no clear vision of the future. This is the stuff of the

¹ All Bible citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted for the sake of pointing out variations from the Hebrew and Greek.

² Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary*, trans. by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 182. Contrast Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981) 36, who attributes verse 7 as well as 8–22 to the Elohist. Noth, like Westermann, agrees that verses 3–6 belong to the Priestly writer.

great faith chapter of Hebrews. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Jacob is, of course, mentioned in that long list of ancestors for his faith in blessing the two sons of Joseph (v. 21). Of all the events in his long life, this typifies the stance of faith. Hope is a glimpse of the future that even the dim of sight might grasp, not seeing but believing all the same.

So Jacob is counted in Hebrews 11 among the faithful. But what about Rachel? Is it possible for someone with such a sudden and unexpected death—for someone youthful and dying before her time—to die with such faith and hope? Certainly from the perspective of the Priestly writer, history has given meaning to her tragic death. Generations have come forth from her. Stories innumerable have been written about her offspring—their successes as well as failures, acts of piety and charity as well as acts of selfishness, lives of faith as well as lives of sin. Stories of Rachel’s offspring weave together a tapestry that influenced a significant part of the world over a period of several centuries. Figures such as Saul, Samuel, Jeremiah, Esther, and the Apostle Paul himself are a tribute to her beginning. Though not seen, these were surely the things Rachel hoped for. The words of Jacob in that final reminiscence underscore the characterization of Rachel as a woman who was on the move—someone with a past and with a goal.

Rachel’s death occurred when she and Jacob “came from Paddan” and yet had “still some distance to go to Ephrath.” These words are rather significant for the reader who has followed her story with interest, for she has for all practical purposes cut herself off from her past in Paddan, having left the house of Laban in much the same way that her husband’s grandfather Abram left “his father’s house” for the land that God would show him. Like the patriarchs and matriarchs before her, Rachel had staked her claim with Jacob on the promise expressed repeatedly in Genesis in terms of numerous offspring and land. Her death in childbirth points to the fragility and vulnerability of the former. The author’s reference “in the land of Canaan” points to the “not yet” character of the latter.

This brings to mind Walter Brueggemann’s study of land. “The Bible itself is primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place,” he says in the opening chapter.³ The patriarchs and matriarchs were living out the twofold promise of Genesis 12:1-3 for land and progeny,

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenges in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Fortress: Minneapolis, 2002) 2.

with land functioning as a symbol of all they were seeking. So Jacob and Rachel are the perfect example of homeless people who were constantly on the way to landedness. Still, land always became a problem. “The very land that contained the sources of life drove kings to become agents of death. Society became the frantic effort of the landed to hold on to turf, no matter what the cost.”⁴ Thus the story is in constant movement from landlessness to landedness and back to landlessness. Appropriately, at the moment Rachel moves into the land and bears her child Benjamin, she loses her stake in it.

The expression that best captures the Genesis characterization is perhaps found in the three words “on the way.” In fact, the expression occurs twice in this lengthy sentence: “For when I came from Paddan, Rachel, alas, died in the land of Canaan *on the way*, while there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there *on the way* to Ephrath’ (that is, Bethlehem)” (Gen 48:7). Rachel was a woman on the way. This expression captures the tragedy of her life, yet it also reveals her faith and hope.

The Genesis story of Rachel can be divided into five basic parts—a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue—each typified by her on-the-way character.

Prologue: Rachel, the young shepherdess, on the way to water her flocks, encounters the traveler Jacob at the well.

Act 1: Rachel, on the way to marriage, patiently and faithfully endures seven years waiting and then is delayed by Laban’s deception.

Act 2: Rachel, now married, is on the way to motherhood—barren and struggling to conceive, giving birth yet crying out “give me yet another!”

Act 3: Rachel is on the way with Jacob to the land of his birth, struggling as he struggles, though not victorious as he, when she succumbs to the pain of childbirth, naming her second born Ben-oni, son of my sorrow.

Epilogue: The on-the-way character of Rachel’s offspring, Joseph, is sent on his way far from the land of promise to Egypt. He in turn awaits reunion with father and brothers only when the risk is taken of sending the youngest son Benjamin, the epitome of vulnerability.

Unlike the other matriarchs whose stories do not extend beyond the pages of Genesis, Rachel’s story continues through people, like Joseph and Benjamin, who themselves are on the way. Following the sixth-century destruction of the Jerusalem temple, when the exiles are amassed for

⁴ Ibid., 11.

deportation, Jeremiah describes faithful Rachel still by the roadside, weeping for her children, offering her lament, but also a word of hope (Jer 31:15).

Later Matthew quotes these same words of Rachel weeping at the death of boy babies at the birth of Jesus as the holy family, forced from Bethlehem, finds itself also on the way.

For nearly two millennia Jews and Christians have reminded themselves of the on-the-way character of the life of faith, reading these words of Rachel weeping at the transition point of human life, the New Year. For Christians this takes place at the commemoration of the Slaughter of Innocents on December 28 at the end of the calendar year. For Jews the reading occurs at the beginning, on Rosh Hashanah II. People of all faiths can resonate with Rachel because they, too, are people of faith.

In a later midrash, *Lamentations Rabbah*, Rachel weeping mercifully for her children is a reflection of the divine attribute of mercy and faithfulness. This midrash describes the situation of the beginning of exile in Jeremiah's day. Jeremiah explains exile as punishment for the people's unfaithfulness to God, their idolatry while living in the land. First, Moses is called from his grave beyond the Jordan to appeal on the people's behalf. Then all the patriarchs from their common grave at Machpelah make their appeal. Yet it is to no avail. The people have broken the covenant. They have not been faithful while God remained faithful. Finally, Rachel appears from her roadside grave where she had been buried alone. Her tears of mercy are justified because her faithfulness exceeds all others. She speaks:

"Lord of the world! It is perfectly self-evident to you that your servant, Jacob, loved me with a mighty love, and worked for me for father for seven years, but when those seven years were fulfilled, and the time came for my wedding to my husband, father planned to substitute my sister for me in the marriage to my husband. Now that matter was very hard for me, for I knew the deceit, and I told my husband and gave him a sign by which he would know the difference between me and my sister, so that my father would not be able to trade me off. But then I regretted it and I bore my passion, and I had mercy for my sister, that she should not be shamed. So in the evening for my husband they substituted my sister for me, and I gave my sister all the signs that I had given to my husband, so that he would think that she was Rachel. And not only so, but I crawled under the bed on which he was lying with my sister, while she remained silent, and I made all the replies so that he would not discern the voice of my sister."⁵

⁵ *Lamentations Rabbah* 24, ed. and trans. by Jacob Neusner, *Scripture and Midrash in Judaism*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995) 57.

While this midrash clearly elaborates and takes liberties with the details of Leah's marriage in Rachel's stead, it eloquently expresses the depth of torment that Rachel suffered in her obedience and faithfulness to Jacob while he was less than faithful to her. So who better to understand what it means to be faithful in the midst of unfaithfulness?

Like Abraham and Job, Rachel has solid ground to appeal for God to be true to the attributes of mercy and faithfulness. So she continues:

"I paid my sister only kindness, and I was not jealous of her, and I did not allow her to be shamed, and I am a mere mortal, dust and ashes. Now I had no envy of my rival, and I did not place her at risk for shame and humiliation. But you are the King, loving and enduring and merciful. How come then you are jealous of idolatry, which is nothing, and so have sent my children into exile, allowed them to be killed by the sword, permitted the enemy to do whatever they wanted to them?"⁶

These words appeal to all people of faith. Rachel's relationship with her sister Leah is a model of faithfulness. Rachel is not a matriarch who can be tied down to one time and place but is available to all on the way. This is the prevailing theme of this book.

While chapter 1 treats the biblical story of Rachel, chapters 2–4 look at the ways in which this story is interpreted by Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Chapter 5 turns to the part of the Genesis story yet to be mentioned, Rachel's Tomb. It is altogether fitting that Genesis describes her burial place on the way, and not in the established tomb of the patriarchs and matriarchs at Machpelah near Hebron. However, like Rachel, the tomb itself is more a matter of faith than sight. Debates about the actual location continue even today. A more detailed discussion about the exact location of Ephrath as Rachel's burial place is given in an appendix. As far as Rachel's Tomb outside Bethlehem, the location of this shrine has led to centuries of cooperation; Muslims, Christians, and Jews have all made pilgrimage and said their prayers at this tomb. Chapters 6–8 explore the relationship of Jews, Muslims, and Christians to the tomb, as pilgrims and caretakers, throughout history. In recent times Rachel's Tomb has changed in character. No longer an easily accessible shrine to the memory of Rachel, it has become a fortress tomb representing permanence and exclusiveness. This is the subject of chapter 9, "The Politicization of Rachel's Tomb." Sadly, Rachel's Tomb has once again become a place of violence.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

PART ONE

Mother Rachel

CHAPTER 1

The Biblical Rachel

Prologue: At the Well (Gen 29:1-12)

It is appropriate that the story of Rachel begins at a well.¹ Wells are places for people along the way. Strangers meet. Strangers converse. Often they go again on their own separate ways. Wells are meeting places. At a well, a tired and weary Jesus paused for rest and engaged in a memorable conversation with a woman from Samaria (John 4). Jews and Samaritans did not normally interact. Yet this encounter was possible at the well, among people on the way. At a well, Moses met his future wife.² He, a Hebrew; she, a Midianite. They were strangers, yet he came to the aid of the young women harassed by the local shepherds (Exod 2:15-22). The reward was hospitality, a place of refuge.

Rachel is introduced to the reader of Genesis as a young woman on the way. Jacob had previously arrived at the well and was inquiring about Laban³ with men from Haran when they announced her arrival. “And here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep” (Gen 29:6). Her arrival is a surprise to Jacob. It is not the appropriate time for the sheep to be gathered together and watered. Yet here she is coming to the well.

¹ A most helpful source for this entire section is Samuel H. Dresner, *Rachel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

² Susan Niditch notes that the four Genesis scenes at wells (Gen 16:7-14; 21:8-21; 24:10-27; and 29:1-12) have an underlying theme in the ancient world associating fertility and water, “Genesis,” in Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992) 16.

³ Sharon Pace Jeanson suggests that the narrator withholds introduction of Laban to prolong the drama. *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar’s Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 70–86, especially 71. However, this is a story of Jacob and Rachel, not Jacob and Laban.

4 Rachel Weeping

Perhaps it is surprising also that she is a woman shepherdess. Such a profession points to a measure of vulnerability in the world of men. That element is certainly part of the story of Moses' future wife encountering ruffians at the well. It also comes across in the name Rachel, because *RHL* in Hebrew means "lamb." Innocent as a lamb, they often say, yet as a shepherdess she would also have attributes of resourcefulness and strength. However, the implication of vulnerability is always present just below the surface. She is vulnerable and dependent. Her trips to the well must coincide with those of the male shepherds. The stone covering the well was too large for her to lift by herself. Only the cooperation and coordination of all the shepherds would result in access to the well's cool and refreshing water. Rachel was resourceful, but that meant working together to complete this daily task.

In some ways, Jacob and Rachel are a lot alike. He, too, is on the way, having traveled from Beersheba in the south to Haran north of the Euphrates, carrying with him the burden of his estrangement from his brother Esau, of guilt over deceiving his father, of loneliness from saying good-bye to mother and home, and of separation from land and covenantal promise. He is a stranger at the well and to some degree also vulnerable. Yet he is a man of strength, self-reliance, and resourcefulness. He proved that already in his dealings with his own father Isaac in obtaining his brother's birthright. At the well he is not dependent upon his hosts from Haran to offer him a drink of water. Rather, in a demonstration of machismo, he shows off to young Rachel, rolling away the stone from the mouth of the well and watering the flock.⁴ Finally, in a show of impulsiveness completely unexpected and foreign to social norms, Jacob publicly shows his emotions, kissing the young Rachel and weeping aloud.

This initial scene ends with Rachel running to tell her father that she has met Jacob. The reader is left wondering about the meaning of Rachel's response. Is she afraid or excited, shocked or pleased? Will she keep her distance or seek to learn more about this stranger from the south? Is she merely a messenger that prepares the way for greater things for Jacob, or will she, a stranger from a far-off land, emerge to play a major role in this developing story of God's covenant relationship with the children of Abraham? What is the meaning of such an encounter at the well? Rachel offers no answer; she is silent.⁵ Yet as the encounter comes to a close, she is on her way once again, back home to her father.

⁴ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 223.

⁵ Her lack of description and voice leads the reader to await further character development. Jeansonne, 71.

Act One: On the Way to Marriage (Gen 29:13-30)

Marriage in the world of Rachel was determined by men. Previously, the reader was told that Jacob's journey to Paddan-aram was for the purpose of finding a wife. The covenant had passed from Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and Rebecca and then to Jacob, who must find the appropriate mate with whom to share the promises of God and to pass them on to future generations. For the biblical reader, the journey is not merely an aside in order to buy time, nor a detour that diverts from the main story line. The quest of Jacob to find a wife is of highest import. Now, after a month of hospitality at the home of Laban, it is Rachel's father who raises the question of marriage. "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" (v. 15).

To the modern reader, this carries all the marks of a business transaction.⁶ Rachel still has no speaking part. Her opinion does not seem to matter. The men arrange the marriage, not for the immediate future, but after Jacob has served Laban for seven years.

Rachel is presented, therefore, on the way to marriage, patiently waiting seven years. Then her own father goes back on his word and deceptively and secretly substitutes Rachel's older sister whose hand he gives to Jacob in marriage. Leah, not Rachel, becomes the patriarch's bride. It is clearly a matter of deception since Jacob does not discover the truth until the following morning. He rushes angrily to the tent of Laban, both girls' father, where he protests.

The story is told from the perspective of Jacob, and the reader's sympathies align with the husband who has been outsmarted. Jacob, however, has in fact achieved his goal in traveling to Haran. He has found a wife from among his kinsmen. True, it wasn't his first choice, but he is now married. It is a fitting reward for seven years' labor, since Jacob out-tricked his own brother Esau in obtaining the birthright and deceived his own father in receiving the blessing of the first-born.⁷ Laban and Jacob deserve each other, and the rewards of their dealings are most fitting. So Jacob married Leah. Another seven years' labor would be the price for Rachel's hand in marriage.

Only on a subsequent reading of the text focusing on the woman's perspective does it become clear that Rachel is the real victim. She is a victim

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. by John Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 285.

⁷ In his excuse for substituting Leah, Laban uses the term "first-born," rather than "elder," drawing a connection with the Esau story. Jeansonne, 73.

thrice over. A victim because her own father has bargained away her future, not giving her a say in the matter. A victim because Jacob has played along with Laban's game, making her wait seven years without asking how it affected her. A victim because the men went back on their agreement, relegating her to a lifetime playing second fiddle to Leah. The insightful reader might add yet a fourth reason. Rachel was also victimized by the storyteller who totally ignored her voice, simply passing over the ways that this agreement and the subsequent breaking of the agreement would affect her life. The poor woman waits seven years for marriage and the storyteller gives the story a twist so that our sympathies rest with her fiancé.

Rachel was likely but a child when she first met Jacob at the well, perhaps just thirteen or fourteen years of age. She would spend one-third of her life on the way to marriage, the seven years agreed upon, then the week of Leah's matrimonial limelight, and even then the debt is not paid. Jacob must still work an additional seven years' labor before the marriage transaction is completed. Hers is a story of patient and faithful waiting, suffering in silence. One can only imagine the silent tears while older sister Leah took her place as the honored bride, the mistress of the house, the sharer of Jacob's bed. One can only imagine how one formerly known for her chosen status would always be known only as the second wife.

In the prologue, it is Rachel and Jacob who stand side by side for comparison and contrast. In Act One, the comparison shifts to Rachel and Leah. Rachel is the youngest, Leah the oldest. Rachel is graceful and beautiful, Leah distinguished by her eyes. Yet the reader doesn't know whether Leah's eyes are a positive or negative attribute. The Hebrew *rak* is uncertain. Modern translations range from "lovely" (NRSV; NAB; NJB) to "pretty" (New Living Bible) to "tender"⁸ (KJV) to "delicate" (NKJV) to "gentle"⁹ to "clouded" (Bible in Basic English) to "weak"¹⁰ (NIV; NAS; RSV).

The element of love pervades the story, mentioned explicitly with respect to Rachel no less than three times. Rachel is loved; Leah is not. Even earlier in the episode at the well, there seems to be the connotation of love at first sight. Jacob's public display of affection, his impulsive kissing and weeping (v. 11), were the cause of embarrassment for later interpreters. This simply isn't done

⁸ Speiser, 225.

⁹ B. Jacob, *Genesis* (New York: KTAV, 1974) 196.

¹⁰ von Rad, 286; Jeansonne, 72; John Skinner, *Genesis: The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956) 283.

among persons not yet married, for in that age people married and fell in love, not the other way around. Shortly afterward (a few verses for the reader; a month's visit for Jacob) when Jacob begins negotiations with Laban, the storyteller makes clear what has been assumed, "Jacob loved Rachel" (v. 18). With the agreement settled, the reader is immediately told that Jacob's seven years of service "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (v. 20). Then followed the first marriage and the agreement for another seven years of service because Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (v. 30).

Act One shows Rachel as beloved, yet on the way to marriage. In contrast, Leah, though married, is presumably on the way to love. In fact, the situation is worse for Leah than the comparatives "more" and "less" in verse 30 would suggest. Once Rachel's marriage was finally realized, Leah is described by the label "unloved" (v. 31).¹¹

Act Two: On the Way to Motherhood (Gen 29:31–30:24)

Just as Rachel spent seven years on the way to marriage, so, when finally married, she must journey to motherhood. In Genesis 29:31, the narrator reports that "Rachel was barren." It will take twenty-nine verses and seven additional years before she reaches her goal of motherhood.

The situation is dramatized by Rachel's first speaking part: "Give me children, or I shall die!" (Gen 30:1).¹² Motherhood for her is life. Ironically, motherhood will be the death of her. Nevertheless, at the birth of her firstborn, she has only partially reached her goal. "God has taken away my reproach," she says (Gen 30:23). Yet she names her child Joseph or Yusuf, which literally means "he adds." Her understanding of that name is linked directly to her understanding of her own essence. "May the Lord add to me another son!" she says (Gen 30:24). Her motherhood is incomplete.

In Act Two the comparison between Rachel and Leah reaches a new level. They now become rivals. Just as the women's father arranged that Leah be married first, so it is that the Lord opens Leah's womb first. The narrator underscores the contrast by mentioning in the very same verse that

¹¹ von Rad understands "hated" as legal terminology (Deut 21:15), 289. Jeansonne suggests that "hated" can mean "sexual revulsion," 74.

¹² Robert Alter notes that the term for "give" is often used for "peremptory and crudely material requests," emphasizing the brusqueness of the request, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 187.

the Lord opened Leah's womb but "Rachel was barren" (29:31). Leah will bear six sons to Jacob before Rachel bears her first.

Perhaps it is the understanding of the word "barren" that is the most difficult leap for the modern reader. Today, women in the West have more choices. They are not defined only by their ability to bear children, especially male children. This was not the case in Rachel's world, where motherhood, and motherhood alone, provided identity.¹³ Not to bear children was a one-way ticket to a perpetual journey without purpose or meaning. Not to bear children meant nothing less than to be always "on the way." The barren state was sufficient reason for divorce, rejection, and banishment. It was fully within Jacob's right to send Rachel packing.

So Rachel's plea to her very own husband betrays her utter desperation, her feeling of worthlessness, her own constant reproach. "Give me children, or I shall die!" she pleads, yet it seems that she is all but dead. Only divine intervention can save her. Rachel's plea also signals that Jacob's patience has been exhausted, his love tested, his devotion to her trumped by the bad hand dealt to her. "Til death do us part" had been the common adage. Yet Rachel's on-the-way status has brought her to the brink of death.

Under such circumstances, Jacob's love for Rachel soon turns to anger. "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (30:2). It is God who kills and makes alive. The gift to Jacob of her maidservant Bilhah,¹⁴ the acquisition of the mandrake aphrodisiac,¹⁵ the sending of her own rival Leah to her lover's bed, all show love as the most powerful motivation and faith that with God all things are possible. All the vital signs suggest that a child is not possible. Yet Rachel's faith in God and love of Jacob say otherwise. She continues on the way.

In the end, God hears her reproach, and Jacob perseveres, while Rachel holds onto the thinnest of threads. God opens her womb. Jacob begets her child. And Rachel finds motherhood, joining the ranks of the Genesis matriarchs. And it comes to pass that Rachel bears Joseph. This twelfth of Jacob's offspring—eleven sons and the single daughter Dinah—completes God's plan. The baby cries; Jacob smiles; the midwife sighs in relief; and Rachel seemingly reaches her destination. Against all odds, motherhood found her.

¹³ Jeansonne, 75. See Mary Callaway, *Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

¹⁴ For the practice of "giving birth on a woman's knees" see von Rad, 186, 289–90; Speiser, 230.

¹⁵ Jeansonne, 77–79; Jacob, 200–01.

Yet, even then, it was not enough. There must be another, a number thirteen, lucky or unlucky. “May the Lord add to me another son!” was her prayer. And so, the name Joseph—Hebrew for “The Lord adds.”

Not satisfied, Rachel—now mother Rachel—continued.

Act Three: On the Way to the Land (Gen 30:25–35:20)

Rachel’s status as wife and mother meant that she must be on the way again. As matriarch in the family of the covenant, she must return with Jacob to the land of Canaan and to Isaac’s home in Hebron. “And it came to pass that when Rachel had born Joseph, then Jacob said to Laban: ‘Send me away that I may go to my own place and to my own country’” (30:25). The culmination of one stage in Rachel’s life initiates the next: “When Rachel,” “then Jacob.” The Genesis writer underscores the cause and effect. “Send . . . that I may go.” Jacob had come to Haran for a wife. With the attainment of marriage and motherhood for Rachel, they must again be on the way. The return to Canaan and Hebron is a given.

By now the reader has been conditioned to expect that nothing happens according to plan in the Genesis story. Timetables, schedules, and well-laid plans are all out the window. The decision to return and the departure date are separated by another six years. Six more years are added to the fourteen for Rachel and Leah. Twenty years in all. Once again Laban intervenes to complicate Jacob’s plans.

Yet once again God provides the only intervention that ultimately matters. “Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred,” the Lord said to Jacob, “and I will be with you” (Gen 31:3). Jacob provides the only strategy capable of disrupting the counter plans of Laban. Taking his wives out to the fields—where not even Laban could spy on them—he informs both Rachel and Leah of the plan. Now the mother and fulfilled wife of Jacob, Rachel’s name has attained precedence. No longer is it “Leah and Rachel,” the older then the younger. The younger precedes the older. The second wife precedes the first wife. The mother of a single child precedes the mother of a half a dozen. So it is Rachel,¹⁶ especially, who confirms Jacob’s desire to be on the way. Leah is relegated to the silent spouse, while Rachel revels center stage in her speaking part.

¹⁶ The Hebrew word “replied” is singular.

“We are regarded as ‘outsiders’”¹⁷ is how she sizes up the situation (31:14). So there is indeed no place in her father’s house, no status, no wealth, no security.¹⁸ They are in Haran, but in reality they are already on the way. So the only solution is to do as God has told them. They depart without informing Laban.

There is the mysterious detail that Rachel takes along the house-gods of her father (31:19-35) while obeying without question the God of Jacob who calls for their departure and who promises to be with them. The presence of the *terafim* diminishes neither Jacob nor his God. However, their absence provokes Laban to action. Rachel finally shows that she has got the best of him.¹⁹

Being on the way implies vulnerability and risk. The journey is hard and long. Jacob’s enemies are many. From behind, Laban chases them down, while Esau’s forces lie in wait before them. Strangers surround them on all sides, and even God wrestles with Rachel’s husband and protector while camped at the River Jabbok.

Conscious of the risks and threats of the journey and the potential confrontation with Esau, Jacob positions the traveling party strategically. Jacob goes ahead to meet his estranged brother. Bilhah, Zilpah, and their children follow, with Leah and her offspring behind. In the rear are the most vulnerable of them all, the now-pregnant Rachel and young Joseph (33:1-3).²⁰ The encounter is risky, but it achieves its goals: peace and reconciliation. It is Jacob’s willingness to bring humiliation upon himself, to bow seven times to the ground before his estranged brother, and to offer extravagant gifts, that make it possible to enter Canaan in peace. Reconciled to his brother, he can return to the altar at Bethel where God appeared twenty years earlier at the beginning of the journey (Gen 28:10-22), and where God appears to him once again, forgiving, reconciling, and confirming the promise first spoken to Abraham ages ago (Gen 35:1-15).

Peace. Reconciliation. A return to the land. They come with promise. Yet life’s realities continue to hit them square in the face. The pangs of death give

¹⁷ This term for “foreigner” is the translation of Jeansonne. The NRSV has “are we not regarded by him as foreigners?” carrying with the term “foreigner” a negative connotation. Jeansonne, 81.

¹⁸ The language of verse 15 is very strong, the only time in the Bible that the word “to buy” is used for acquiring wives. Niditch, 20.

¹⁹ Rachel establishes herself as a trickster equal to Laban. Niditch, 21. Jeansonne, 81.

²⁰ Jeansonne, 85.

a somber tone to their celebration. The narrator first reports the death of the nurse Deborah outside Bethel (Gen 35:8) and later that of aged Isaac in Hebron (Gen 35:29). Both are reported merely in passing. But sandwiched in between in the course of five full verses, Rachel's death is recounted in elaborate detail (Gen 35:16-20). It was the worst thing that could happen at the worst possible time. Having just returned to Canaan to begin a new era in peace, she was ready to bear a second son. It is the worst of all imaginable worlds—death for Jacob's most beloved, death while giving life, death along the way. Twice the Genesis writer notes that Rachel's death occurred on the way—four times if one counts both the narration in chapter 35 and the summary statement in chapter 48.²¹ It was so unexpected, and it happened on the way. So many questions remain. On the way to where? The best the writer could say was a place named Ephrath, a place otherwise unnamed in the rest of the Pentateuch.²² How far along the road? At what point? The Hebrew is vague: a *kbrt* from Ephrath, a term only used elsewhere in Genesis 48:7 and 2 Kings 5:19.²³ At best the translators guess "a long ways off."

Rachel's labor increased in the midst of their journey, the pains became great, and childbirth ensued. It was a particularly difficult birth with the pangs described as "hard labor." Only divine intervention could save her. Why not? God had seemingly rescued her every time before. Perhaps that was the expectation of the midwife whose "Do not be afraid" echoes divine pronouncements. Had Jacob expected this development surely he would have planned otherwise—prolonging their stay at Bethel or hastening their arrival in Hebron. Such was the love of Jacob for Rachel, he would not have placed her in such jeopardy. But he didn't know better and he had no resource to change her fate. She had lived on the way and she would die on the way.

There was nothing Jacob could do but mourn and grieve with all the emotion of a man for the woman he loved dearly. He had wept openly upon meeting Rachel at the well some twenty years before and he would weep openly upon hearing the news that his son Joseph supposedly fell victim to

²¹ In addition, the paragraph about Rachel's death is sandwiched between two similar statements: "Then they journey . . ." (v. 16) and "Israel journeyed on . . ." (v. 21).

²² The reference to Bethlehem is clearly a later insertion attempting to clarify. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) vol. 2, 555.

²³ "An unknown measure of distance" according to Westermann, vol. 2, 554. "As far as a horse can run" implied by the Greek Septuagint translation. "About a mile," according to Ernst Vogt, "Benjamin geboren 'eine Meile' von Ephrata," *Biblica* 56 (1975) 30–36.

wild animals. Yet the writer does not include such details at Rachel's death. His description suggests more the elements of shock. Jacob matter-of-factly digs her grave and reaches into the recesses of his strength to lift a large pillar to mark the spot. Dying on the way meant that Rachel would not share the family tomb at Machpelah and find a resting place alongside the matriarchs Sarah and Rebecca, as even her rival Leah would. She would not have a resting place at Jacob's side in the Machpelah tomb. Just as he had lifted that heavy stone from the well when he had first laid eyes on her, so now at this farewell, Jacob lifted the stone in its place.

The harshness of this moment could not escape Jacob's ears. Rachel's final words still echoed as a reminder of her tragic life: "Son of my sorrow." As a final act, she named him Benoni,²⁴ yet Jacob would not have it. Rachel deserved more, so he did the one thing possible. "Son of my sorrow" must not become the final word. Her newborn must be transformed as a tribute to Rachel. Benoni would be called Benjamin, "Son of my right hand."

Epilogue: Children on the Way—Joseph and Benjamin

Jacob lost Rachel whom he loved dearly. His only hope was to remain close to her through their two sons. As for Joseph, Rachel's firstborn, his handsome appearance was a constant reminder of Rachel (Gen 27:17; 39:6).²⁵ He soon rose to be the father's favorite. As for Benjamin, the last born, if he was to be truly the son of Jacob's right hand, he would have to keep him close, protected and secure. So Jacob finally found himself in the settled life, no longer on the way. His ten eldest to be sure were often out and about, pasturing their flocks and competing with the inhabitants of the land. As for Joseph and Benjamin, they remained home with Jacob.

However, this was not to be. Like their mother Rachel, they were destined to be always on the way. Joining his brothers in the field, the teenage Joseph became the brunt of sibling rivalry. The gifted dreamer, the wearer of a colorful coat, the sheltered favorite soon found himself the possession of a trade caravan making its way to Egypt. As for Jacob, he was told Joseph had met his death. With such an end, the memory of Rachel was bound to cease,²⁶ so Jacob wept as if he were weeping for Rachel.

²⁴ Westermann, vol. 2, 555.

²⁵ Their appearance is described with the same terms. von Rad, 359.

²⁶ Dresner, 109–10.

Like mother, like son. Joseph is marked by his beautiful appearance, by the love of Jacob, and a life on the way. Like his mother, he too would die on the way in far-off Egypt. Like his mother, he too would find a burial place other than the Machpelah tomb of patriarchs and matriarchs.

Before the story of Joseph's death, of course, is the surprising story of Joseph's life in Egypt, a story that encompasses a significant portion of the book of Genesis. With an unexpected reversal, Joseph, now the successful government administrator, draws father and brothers away from the comfort and security of the famine-oppressed home in Canaan to this southern breadbasket. The story is told in high drama with ten brothers first making the trek (42:4), then also Benjamin (43:7), and finally also Jacob. The meeting comes not without tears, but also tricks and deception with Joseph first hiding his identity and planting the silver goblet in Benjamin's sack. Rachel's firstborn had been placed at risk. Yet life on the way meant a life of abundance in a time of famine. In the end there is reconciliation. For seventeen years Jacob and sons would join Joseph, living in Egypt, but because of Joseph they would live with full stomachs.

Instead of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, it was Joseph who rose to the status of patriarch. Rachel's firstborn became the preeminent leader both materially and spiritually—a prince among his brothers (49:26). As his final act, Jacob called forth all his sons for a blessing. When Joseph's turn came, there was a double blessing. Placing his hands upon the heads of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph, Jacob claimed them as his own two children and established them as leaders of the tribes of Israel (48:21). The irony was that Rachel's two grandsons became equals of Leah's sons. So it was that Rachel was remembered through her children.

Postscript: Jeremiah—On the Way to Exile

For more than a millennium following Rachel's death, she was remembered through her offspring. First, it was through her children Joseph and Benjamin, even as they found themselves in Egypt. Then grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh found themselves elevated as equals of Leah's sons. Later, generations of descendants found themselves still on the way during hard times in Egypt, and later still, others found themselves in the settled life with the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh calling forth her memory. Rachel's children produced leaders like Joshua, the successor of Moses; the prophet Samuel; and the first king Saul. With the division into

Northern and Southern Kingdoms, Ephraim soon became synonymous for the north while smaller Benjamin latched onto Judah in the south. It seemed that Rachel's offspring had found an end to life on the way. They were settled and secure at last. Rachel could rest in peace.

Yet Bible stories don't always end happily ever after. Rachel's offspring eventually found themselves again on the way, first with the Assyrians, then the Babylonians disrupting their lives. In the late eighth century, Ephraim and the other northerners found themselves in exile. By the sixth century, Benjamin and Judah followed. After a siege of three years, Jerusalem fell and its inhabitants were processed for deportation to Babylon at the town of Ramah. They were experiencing the spiritual death of exile from the land, and the only response was tears of grief. These were the same tears shed by mother Jerusalem for her children in Lamentations. Yet the most poignant expression of grief was that which Jeremiah imagined would be expressed by his own ancestress Rachel.

In the context of the deportation to Babylon, Rachel's descendant, the Benjaminite Jeremiah from the village of Anathoth, responded with a vision that marked Rachel with immortality.²⁷ Dead for over a millennium, she was still alive with her children, suffering through their misfortunes, pleading to God on their behalf:

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)

This single verse, remembered through the ages, is part of a larger section in Jeremiah known as the Book of Consolation (chs. 30–33).²⁸ After decades of proclaiming doom and gloom of impending destruction, Jeremiah

²⁷ As background E. Burrows points to a Semitic belief that mothers who died in child-birth became weeping ghosts in "Cuneiform and Old Testament: Three Notes," *Journal of Theological Studies* (JTS) 28 (1927) 185. Terence E. Fretheim states, "the image presented in v. 15 is not that of a dead Rachel weeping in her grave, but Rachel as the personification of all Israel's mothers," *Jeremiah: Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002) 434.

²⁸ The contrast between Rachel's Lament and the hopeful tone of the whole chapter and section provides a startling impact. Frederick A. Niedner, "Rachel's Lament," *Word & World* 22 (Fall 2002) 409.

offers a word of comfort. With Jerusalem captured and the exiles gathered for deportation at the town of Ramah²⁹—including the prophet himself (40:1)—Jeremiah provides a word of hope. Following exile in Babylon, God will intervene and bring about a return to the land.

Yet the return will not come through any merit of the exiles, rather only because of the emotion-filled plea of their all-deserving mother Rachel. The lament begins, “A voice is heard.” It is not a meaningless babbling or an endless repetition of empty words. The meaning is clear. God has heard.

Thus says the Lord:
Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears . . .
There is hope for your future,
says the Lord:
your children shall come back to their own country. (31:16-17)

God has heard, and only because it is Rachel pleading. As Terence Fretheim has noted, “Recognizing her weeping and her tears, God seeks to comfort her with a word of unconditional promise, completely without motivation or rationale.”³⁰ There is a strange aspect to this section because among the specific names, Ephraim is mentioned no less than six times with most endearing language:

Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he the child I delight in? (31:20)

Although the northern kingdom had been exiled years earlier, the prophet now sees Ephraim as symbolic of all Israel.³¹ They are Rachel’s children. Yet more than that, Yahweh now identifies with Rachel as parent.³² Strangest of all is the fact that the typical ways of the world no longer provide the answers. The ways of power and strength, of exclusivity and manipulation, have all failed. Instead, Rachel’s faithfulness and patient waiting have become a model for all.

²⁹ The issues around understanding Ramah as an ambiguous “height” rather than a specific place name are discussed in detail by William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: Hermeneia Commentary Series* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 186–87. See also Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 598.

³⁰ Fretheim, 434.

³¹ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, 176.

³² Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 45.

For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth;
A woman encompasses a man. (31:22)³³

In the male-dominated society of Jeremiah's day, God has turned the world inside out. It is not surprising that Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai later said, "Everything depended upon Rachel."³⁴

Rachel has emerged as the preeminent matriarch. How odd that Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah are hardly mentioned outside the Pentateuch, but Rachel found a lasting role as the mother figure who weeps for all those on the way. Certainly, her own character prepared her for that. Yet her earlier suffering and tears make it possible to suffer for others. Finally, one cannot discount the significance of her own death and burial. Unlike the other three matriarchs buried in the Machpelah tomb, Rachel was given a simple burial on the way. Her place there by the roadside remained accessible to all no matter their status, their family, their ethnicity. So it was that Rachel's tears extended also to her own rival Leah's children.

It is significant that Jeremiah placed the lament of Rachel in Ramah, a city within the borders of Benjamin north of Jerusalem. It is along this same road that Rachel once accompanied Jacob from Mesopotamia. Now the exiles were gathered to make that march in reverse. They were experiencing their own spiritual death and annihilation, just like Rachel years before. In mentioning Ramah, Jeremiah was clearly alluding to the memorial pillar erected by Jacob that the Genesis writer noted was standing "to this day." For some, this would be a sign of providence that her death and burial had taken place, not in Hebron, but there on the way where the exiles would one day be passing. For others, it was a mere coincidence. Whatever the case, it provided a powerful symbol in Jeremiah's day for those on the way. In future generations, the image of Rachel weeping for her children provided meaning for other passersby who saw Rachel's Tomb and remembered her story.

³³ The second part of this couplet literally means "a female surrounds a warrior." O'Connor, 176.

³⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* 71.2 according to the translation of Dresner, 163. See also Neusner, 116.