

Rachel weeping: Matthew 2:13-23

by [Frederick A. Niedner](#) in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue

On Christmas day we join choirs of angels and raise the strains of “Joy to the World!” Our children sing sweetly of the little Lord Jesus so peacefully asleep on the hay that he doesn’t cry out when animals wake him with off-key parts to the lullaby. But then the music changes drastically. We hear wailing and loud lamentation. Ancient mother Rachel weeps inconsolably over the loss of her children. Must we listen to this? Have we no season to block out the sounds of grief?

Though it hints at eventual sorrow, Luke’s six-scene operetta about Jesus’ birth has no song of lament. By contrast, Matthew’s birth story is drenched in children’s blood and needs Rachel’s lament. No other tears suffice.

Remember Rachel? Because Jacob loved her more than Leah, the sister he didn’t wish to marry, God apparently closed Rachel’s womb, says Genesis, while Leah bore many sons. Eventually, Rachel confronted both God and Jacob. “Give me children or I’ll die!” she demanded. When she finally bore Jacob a son, she named him “Joseph,” which means, “Do it again,” or “Let there be another.” Thus, all who shared her rejoicing and spoke her child’s name joined her prayer for another son.

When birth pangs came a second time to Rachel, the family was in transit. As so often happened then, something went wrong and Rachel died birthing the answer to her prayer. With her last breaths she named the baby Ben-oni, “Son of my sorrow.” Jacob could not bear the sound of his beloved’s sorrow in this baby’s name, so he called the child Ben-jamin, “Son of my right hand.” This second name lifted a burden from father and son, but it also silenced the dying mother’s voice.

For a thousand years Rachel rested in deep silence out there in her makeshift tomb along the roadside near Bethlehem. Then came a day when Jeremiah was watching as Babylonian soldiers marched Rachel’s offspring, children of Israel, naked and trembling along that same road toward exile far away. This prophet, himself so intimate with heartbreak that he wished both he and his mother had perished on the day of his birth, could not bear this grief alone. For company in sorrow, he called mother Rachel from her tomb and gave voice again to her cries that refuse all

consolation.

The rabbis explain in an ancient midrash why the next verses in Jeremiah contain a promise of God: “Keep your voice from weeping . . . there is hope for your future . . . your children shall come back.” Even God found the ruin of Jerusalem too much to bear alone, said the rabbis. So God called ancient worthies like Abraham and Moses to come weep. Both refused, blaming God for the devastation. “You stopped the knife from plunging into Isaac, and the Pharaoh’s armies from slaughtering the runaway slaves, but you couldn’t save Jerusalem?” they protested. At length God called Rachel, who came to share God’s own grieving. She refused all consolation, cheap or otherwise, and, according to rabbis, prompts God’s promise of hope. There are some desolations so profound they defy all but God’s own attempts to comfort, and even God must dig deeply to respond.

Later Jewish mystics took this a step further. They taught that when the Messiah came, only one place on earth would prove suitable for his coronation—not some high place like Sinai or Zion, but that lonely place on the road to Ephrath where Rachel lies in the dust. “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” (Zohar 2.7a-9a).

Matthew’s Gospel shares something of the spirit of these teachings. His story declares that Mary’s baby, Joseph’s son, is the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic hope. The magi come with gifts that declare this child a king, but we cannot crown this messiah unless we first pass through Ephrath and stop at Rachel’s tomb.

Matthew’s Gospel does more than pause there to listen. Although the Emmanuel child escapes Herod’s angry slaughter, his ultimate coronation will come not far from Ephrath, on Golgatha, where Mary will suffer the cruel robbing of her womb. This time, the Christian gospel proclaims, God also pays the identical price and knows the same loss as Rachel, Jeremiah, Mary and all who risk involvement in a creation of flesh and blood, love and hatred, joy and sorrow, song and sin.

In the midst of our celebrations we also listen to Rachel’s lament because today her children and her neighbors’ children are still dying with their hands on each other’s throats in blind rage over disagreements old as her own jealousy of Leah. Like Abraham and Moses in the ancient midrash, leaders Ariel, Mahmud, George and Tony step into the aftermath and lay more blame. They cannot take Rachel’s

disconsolate cries to heart because, truth be told, it would kill them, at least politically.

Only those already dead, or willing soon to die, can respond in a way that might give hope to Rachel's children and to all others caught up in all this world's whirlpools of violence and genocide. Supposedly, there are 2 billion such folks among us these days—a third of the planet's population who take the name of Christ, bear his cross, have been buried with him by baptism into his death.

Perhaps we can't do anything about Bethlehem and Ramallah, Jerusalem and Gaza, Iraq and Sudan, even 2 billion of us who no longer need fear death because the worst that can happen to us already has. But we can weep. We can join our voices with Rachel's.

Imagine the din. Someone would have to listen.

God would listen. We have God's promise. And maybe, just maybe, those who speak for God would listen, too.