

Matthew's echoes of older stories (Matthew 2:13-23)

When the holy innocents text makes reference to Rachel, it seems worth remembering her story.

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Matthew is the most intentionally Jewish of the gospels. In the first chapter Matthew traces the genealogy of Jesus as a son of David and a son of Abraham, and in the second he's layering stories with references to the Hebrew Scriptures.

For example, the visit of the Magi echoes the story of King Balak and the prophet Balaam in Numbers—including a frightened king, a wise man from the East, a star signaling a new ruler, an overthrow of power, and a return trip home. And it seems plausible that in this Sunday's reading, about the massacre of the holy innocents, Matthew is alluding to Moses being hid from Pharaoh's slaughter of baby boys, only to rise up later and lead his people out of captivity. Or maybe readers are to be reminded of Moses fleeing Pharaoh and staying away until God told him it was safe to return. Matthew's gospel weaves together threads of Hebrew history.

So when this text makes reference to Rachel, it seems worth remembering her story.

Rachel is Laban's daughter. She steals Jacob's heart and he works seven years for her hand, only to be tricked, when the lights are low, into marrying her sister Leah instead. So Jacob works another seven long years to get the woman he wanted in the first place. But, as it turns out, Rachel has a hard time conceiving, while Leah is birthing boys right and left. Rachel pleads with God, and she finally gives birth to Joseph—only to die after giving birth to her second, who she names *Ben-Oni*, "son of my sorrow." Jacob eventually renames him Benjamin.

The 12 tribes of Israel come from Rachel and Leah. And in Jewish lore, Rachel is buried near Bethlehem, along the road where the Israelites will be carried off into Babylonian captivity. Years later, the prophet Jeremiah recalls Rachel's inconsolable sorrow as if she were still crying from her grave for her children—for the people of Israel. So Matthew weaves that into his gospel, quoting Jeremiah:

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.

As Matthew writes the nativity story, he's not just writing about Jesus. He's writing a multilayered reminder of how God works in and through history. Matthew is layering loss, longing, and liberation, and he places the coming of Jesus as the culmination of God's action in human history. The birth of Jesus is part of a woven

whole.

But what then of the dead babies? Are they just threads for a biblical tapestry? Are they simply characters in a scriptural allusion? Or should we wrestle with this story as it reads?

If the nativity invites wonder and warm feelings, this is a brisk and brutal reality check. This text typically falls on the Sunday after Christmas—still one of the Twelve Days but removed from the big crowds and typical festivities. Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:

Perhaps no event in the gospel more determinatively challenges the sentimental depiction of Christmas than the death of these children. Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed, to protect the power of tyrants.

Herod is threatened by a baby, so he orders all the babies killed. There's one in diapers who's a threat to the throne, a threat to power, and a threat to the ways of this world. And that mysterious threat inaugurates a clash that will stretch from cradle to cross. Put in the context of the unfolding story of redemption, it seems helpful to name the references and threads that run throughout Hebrew history.

Therefore, it seems fitting to wrestle with the text as it reads. The way of God in Christ is through the very hell of the death of children. And, while that may not explain the murder of the baby boys in Bethlehem, it doesn't ignore it either.