

## “Rachel’s Wailing”

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Today’s scripture reading is a hard one, and it is always assigned to this day, December 28th, still within the Christmas season. Today is known as the feast day of the holy innocents. It is a part of the Christmas story which secular culture completely ignores. It is hard to reconcile anything about this terrible event with the jollity of Santa Claus and winter wonderlands. Yet, this event is key to understanding the Christmas story as it is presented in the Gospel of Matthew. In earlier centuries, this day was counted as one of the 12 days of Christmas, integral to why Christmas matters. And I hope to show today that this story is just as important now, as much as our society tries to ignore it.

The terrible events described in today’s passage occur just after the Magi have brought their presents to Jesus in Bethlehem. On the way, they had stopped in Jerusalem to seek directions. They told King Herod about the star they were following. The Magi reasoned that it heralded the birth of a new king of the Jews. Herod doesn’t want any competition for his throne, so he slyly asks them to come back after they find the child. Please let me know where I can visit him, Herod says. But an angel warns the Magi not to return to Herod. An angel also appears in a dream to Joseph, urging him to flee with Jesus and Mary to Egypt to escape Herod. When Herod realizes the Magi are not coming back, he covers his bases by ordering the slaughter of all male babies two and under in Bethlehem. This is the massacre of the innocents.

This passage raises many thorny questions. First of all, did it happen?

King Herod the Great ( add this text: b.72 BCE, d. 4 BCE)

King Herod was a puppet king for the Romans. He wasn’t born Jewish, but he married a Jewish Princess. He was hated for his greed.

He kicked people off their land so he could give it to his friends. Proud landowners became indentured peasants on what used to be their own land. Under Herod’s rule, he rebuilt the temple, becoming one of the wonders of the Roman Empire. He had ten wives, proof of his wealth and influence. However, it also made him paranoid. Historians tell us he killed one wife and two sons when he suspected they were planning a coup. So, could Herod have ordered the

death of babies? He didn't hesitate to kill his own children, so killing other people's children doesn't sound far fetched. But just because it was in character doesn't prove that it happened. So far, scholars have found no historical proof that babies were killed in Bethlehem.

And that may not matter. The Gospel writer Matthew wanted to make a bigger point. Matthew spends all of his gospel drawing parallels with events from the Hebrew Scriptures. Scholars believe Matthew was addressing a Jewish audience, so Jesus is presented as the new Moses. So, Matthew underlines parallels between their two stories.

### Jesus and Moses

Jesus gives a sermon on a mountain, just as Moses received the ten commandments on a mountain.

Matthew also draws parallels between Moses and Jesus when they were babies. When Moses was born, the Pharaoh decided that there were too many Jewish slaves. He feared a revolt. So the Pharaoh gave an order to kill all the Jewish baby boys ( Exodus 1:22).

### Moses in basket

To escape this fate, baby Moses was placed in a basket and placed in the river to float, where he was found by the Pharaoh's daughter ( Exodus 2).

Matthew is making a clear parallel here: Pharaoh tried to kill all the Jewish baby boys, and Herod tried the same thing. In both cases, they feared insurrection.

Matthew is not trying to be strictly factual by accusing Herod of killing babies, but he is making a point. The kind of violent evil which existed in the days of Moses was still alive and well when Jesus was born.

But if that is Matthew's point, then we are faced with another very thorny problem. The murder of all those babies in Bethlehem. How can this be justified? There's no suggestion they or their families have done anything wrong. They are utterly innocent. Why didn't an angel appear to their mothers and warn them to flee Bethlehem? How could God allow this to happen? Even if this is fiction, Matthew is presenting it as something God would allow. How can that possibly be reconciled with the promise of Jesus?

Matthew has an answer, but he doesn't state it theologically, but through story and allegory. Once again, Matthew invokes Biblical history. He remembers Rachel.

### Rachel and Jacob

Almost 2000 years earlier , she was the beautiful and beloved wife of Jacob. Rachel and her sister Leah married Jacob, and between them, they became the mothers of 12 sons, who would be the founders of the 12 tribes of Israel.

So Rachel is symbolically remembered as one of the mothers of the nations of Israel. But her life was not easy. She waited a long time to have her first son, Joseph, the one with the multi-coloured coat. While he is still young, she dies in childbirth with her second son. Her death leaves Jacob heart broken.

Rachel's tomb - add caption: Rachel buried on the road to Bethlehem.

Rachel is buried on the road as her family is travelling from the city of Ramah towards Bethlehem.(Genesis 35:19). As we will see, this location will become important.

Now, skip forward another thousand years. The Babylonians conquer Israel. Their violent king, Nebuchadnezzar, leads a gigantic army that descends from the North, conquering Ramah, then Jerusalem. It is an utter disaster. Thousands dead, the temple looted and destroyed. The royal family was taken captive back to Babylon.

Refugees - add caption: Babylonians Conquer Israel 597 BCE

Everyone else, despondent and in mourning, are scattered . They seek safety by starting the long walk to Egypt, leaving everyone and everything they loved behind.

One of the eyewitnesses of this terrible refugee procession was the prophet Jeremiah.

As the despondent crowds walk southward past Bethlehem, he remembers Rachel, one of the mothers of the Jewish people. She was buried along this road, in childbirth. Jeremiah writes:

Rachel weeping ( slide includes text)

‘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.’

(Jeremiah 31:15)

Jeremiah imagines Rachel, the mother of the nation of Israel, weeping over all the Hebrews who have lost their lives in the destruction of Jerusalem. She refuses to be consoled.

It is this Rachel whom Matthew invokes during the slaughter of the innocents after Jesus is born. The mother of all Jews. Rachel who cries without consolation. A mother who knows the pain of loss to the core of her being and wails without relief. She represents the pain of all these mothers of Bethlehem. Matthew does not say anything like, “don’t worry, it was all worth it because Jesus was born.” Or, “this is a fair trade for the birth of the messiah.” None of that. Matthew draws on tradition to admit that to a mother who has lost her child to violence, there is no way to make it better. The pain is real, and it is going to last.

So, this takes us back to that earlier question: why does God let this happen? Why didn’t God warn the mothers, to save their babies? Matthew’s answer is brutally realistic: because these things are going to keep happening. Pharaoh did it, the Babylonians did it, Herod did it. This is how the world works when rulers embrace cruelty. If God prevented every act of human cruelty before it happened, we would no longer be human. We would have no free will. That is not our path. Human beings have free will. Which means we will have to choose between cruelty and kindness, between violence and peace. Matthew invokes all this history to make a point: The Pharaohs and the Nebuchadnezzars and the Herods will keep coming unless we choose another way.

This point is just as true today. This past year has been a rude shock for everyone who believes in human progress. We have seen that people will vote for authoritarians. People can opt out of vaccinations and put their children and other children at risk. People can elect candidates who promise to dismantle democracy and weaken the courts. Cruelty doesn’t always win through an invasion or a military coup. Cruelty can be elected, with eyes wide open.

No leader in our time gets to the top without millions of accomplices, enablers and voters. If this situation is going to change, the solution must address the followers and enablers, the normal people, so that the hard-hearted politicians never get a chance to reach the top.

So how do we do that? How do we change the hearts of those who can vote for the persecution of others? Matthew suggests that it starts with recognizing the pain of others. He offers no solace to Rachel when the babies are killed in Bethlehem. The pain of others is real. It can’t be dismissed as unjustified. If people are in pain, if they feel their needs are not being met, their jobs have disappeared, their self respect is in trouble, others must listen. In our polarized age, we choose our camps and dismiss the pain others are feeling. It is easier. It is less work, and less painful. But that approach has backfired. Those in pain will elect dictators unless their pain is heard and acknowledged.

Matthew's Gospel reminds us that God is with Rachel. God feels the pain, on the day of the slaughter in Bethlehem, and long afterward. For Jesus escapes, but not forever. He, too, is captured by the authorities. His mother will feel the pain of watching her son nailed to a cross, to die a horrible death - the slaughter of an innocent man. The pain the mothers felt in Bethlehem experienced all over again by Mary, and by God in Jesus on the cross. God does not dodge this pain.

But, the Gospel does offer a way out. Through Jesus, the pain of all the world's Rachels is heard - in Gaza, in Israel, in Ukraine, in Sudan, in Toronto. Jesus has experienced our pain, but he has not been defeated by it. Jesus acknowledges victims' pain, and the pain of their enemies. He offers the violent a way out - through repentance, forgiveness and peace. He offers forgiveness, even from the cross, an escape for those who embrace violence, a second chance, a second life. Jesus is born and dies to show us a new way forward. That is the gift of Christmas, why the birth of the Christ child is paired with Rachel's pain. Christ's life offers a gift to the world, a way out of violence. A way to Peace on Earth. This gift is more valuable than anything the Magi carried on their camels. It is the gift that can save the world. Amen.