



## Why Rachel?

by Dr. David Crabtree

*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.”*

An unexpected reference to Rachel in Jeremiah 31:15 describes her as weeping in an otherwise upbeat context. Scholars have dubbed Jeremiah 30-31 the Book of Consolation, and it stands in stark contrast to what precedes it—namely, Jeremiah’s message of impending judgment (captivity by the Babylonians) for Judah’s wickedness. In chapters 30 and 31, however, Jeremiah reassures his listeners that God’s punishment will come to an end; He will “turn their mourning into joy.” So why in the middle of this good news does Jeremiah mention Rachel, who had died hundreds of years earlier, and why is she weeping?

Genesis 29-35 tells Rachel’s story. In the past, I have not found Rachel to be endearing. Her character does not seem admirable, and we see her doing desperate things to get a child and whining when she does not succeed. Her sister, Leah, on the other hand, has always elicited my sympathy. Even though she bore her husband six sons, she could not gain his love. But having reexamined the Genesis account, I no longer think this is how the author wants us to assess these two women. Genesis is a complex narrative with puzzling interpretive issues, but if we look at Rachel in the context of the story about the

patriarchal generations, she emerges as the kind of person perfectly suited to her role in Jeremiah 31:15.

Rachel was the favorite wife of Jacob, the inheritor of the promises God made to Abraham. Because his parents did not want him to marry a Canaanite, Jacob had traveled north to Haran where he fell in love with Rachel, one of his uncle Laban’s daughters. Jacob worked for Laban for seven years in order to marry her, but the day after the wedding he discovered his father-in-law had tricked him: Jacob was married not to Rachel but to her older sister Leah. Jacob resigned himself to what had happened and agreed to work an additional seven years to marry Rachel.

An ugly competition that lasted years developed between the two sisters. Rachel was beautiful and loved by Jacob, but she was barren. Leah was homely and not loved by Jacob, but she got pregnant easily and had many children, mostly sons. Leah bore Jacob’s first four children, all of them sons. Being very jealous, Rachel made a bold and dramatic demand of Jacob—“Give me children or else I die”—as if Jacob, who had already sired four children, were the obstacle. Rachel was placing the blame on him nevertheless—as though it were in Jacob’s power to change the situation. Jacob, not liking being blamed for what God alone was capable of rectifying, responded in exasperation, “Am I in the place of God?” Of course Jacob was right. Rachel’s quarrel was actually with God, not Jacob.

Rachel decided to settle for a partial consolation. Like Sarah before her, she decided



to have a child vicariously through her maid, Bilhah. A baby boy was born, and Rachel, as the adoptive mother, named him Dan (“justice” or “vindication”). Not content with one adopted child, however, Rachel gave her maid to Jacob again, and Bilhah had a second son. Rachel named him Naphtali saying, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled [*naftulei Elohim niflalti*] with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed” (NASB translation). Two aspects of the wording are worthy of note. First, the word translated “wrestlings” has a basic meaning “to be crafty, wily,” which suggests that the contest Rachel is describing is not physical as much as mental and emotional; her wrestling with Leah was primarily “head games.” And second, the wording suggests that Rachel understood that her struggle was not just with Leah but also with God. The word for “God” (*Elohim*) is used in this phrase, but it is generally understood in this context to be intensifying. Thus the NASB translates it as “mighty wrestlings” and includes the marginal note “With wrestlings of God I have wrestled with my sister...” to capture this more clearly. However, the use of this wording in this context also hints at the possibility that although Rachel’s struggle was most clearly with her sister, she understood that her struggle was more fundamentally with God Himself—a struggle to come to terms with the fact that God was giving Leah sons and withholding children from Rachel.

Rachel’s “wrestling” brings to mind Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel when Jacob was returning to Canaan (Genesis 33:24-32).



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## Why Rachel? continued

God, in the form of an angel, appeared to Jacob in the night and wrestled with him. The struggle was so heated that Jacob suffered a dislocated hip. But in spite of the injury, Jacob continued to hold onto God and would not let go until God blessed him. Over time, Jacob had come to value the promises and the blessings of God as the highest good, and so he was willing to do whatever he had to do to gain them from God. As a result of his persistence, God gave Jacob a new name—Israel—“he who strives with God.” Rachel was carrying out her own wrestling match. At the time of Naphtali’s birth, Rachel does not seem to have reached the same level of understanding and commitment that Jacob had reached, but she was very much in a similar kind of wrestling match with God, and she was coming to recognize that fact.

In the sister competition, Leah retaliated against Rachel’s use of her maid by giving her own maid, Zilpah, to Jacob to bear two children, after which Leah bore two more sons of her own. Genesis makes clear that after the birth of her sixth son to Jacob, Leah was still hoping desperately that she would win the love of her husband. Unlike Rachel, Leah showed no signs that she recognized that God was the one with whom she had to come to terms.

God finally responded to Rachel’s years of pain, humiliation, and petitioning. He opened her womb, and Rachel gave birth to a son. She named him Joseph saying, “God has taken away my reproach. May the Lord give me another son.” The meaning of his name, which sounds like the Hebrew words for “take away” and “add,” involves a double pun, not an uncommon occurrence for biblical names. On the one hand, Joseph was vindication (Rachel was no longer barren); on the other hand, she was optimistic that he was just the beginning (she hoped for more sons). God had blessed her with a son, and she wanted more. I think the author of Genesis wants us to see this moment in Rachel’s life as being parallel to the time when Jacob wrestled with God and begged for a blessing.

The story of Jacob wrestling with the angel and fighting to get God’s blessing used to bother me. It seemed to me to be no different from greed, but I no longer think this.

To want what God wants to give me is not wrong. And to want more of what God wants to give me is not wrong either. When Jacob wrestled with the angel, he wanted God’s favor. That is a good thing. In Rachel’s case, she wanted children. In a situation where God had promised the descendants offspring without number and possession of the land of Canaan, it was not wrong to want those things and to pursue them. We just need to recognize that God is in control of how and when promises are realized.

Once Joseph was born, Jacob decided to leave Haran and return to Canaan. Unbeknownst to Jacob, Rachel had stolen her father’s “teraphim” before departing, and when Laban came to find them, she hid them under a saddle and sat on it. Much has been written to try to explain what was happening here in Genesis 31:30-35. Part of the confusion is the absence of clear information as to the significance of the teraphim, and scholars have made many different arguments. To my mind, Susannah Rutherglen offers the best explanation, and it does not depend on a correct understanding of the significance of the teraphim:

*For Rachel and Leah, the fear [of separation from their father and all they have known] is deeper: they are suddenly leaving their home forever, going away to a place they have never seen. They pack essential things. Rachel seizes her father’s teraphim, the gods of the hearth, of the home she knows and with which she has bonds of family and domestic ritual.*

(“Rachel and the Household Gods: An Interpretation of Genesis 31”; 2002 Norton Scholar’s Prize-winning Essay.)

In other words, Rachel’s emotions and instincts kicked in and caused her to grab the idols as a means of preserving some ties to her life as a daughter of Laban—a kind of security blanket. There is a sense in which she should have known and probably did know better, but she was psychologically fragile at this time and was just trying to figure out how to cope with the change.

This incident was one of the reasons that I used to see Rachel in a negative light. It indicated to me that she had not broken completely with her pagan past and was

not “all in” with respect to Yahweh. And I currently do not see how this passage could suggest otherwise. However, it has become increasingly clear to me that all of the patriarchs struggled with respect to their faith. And they struggled because we all struggle. In some areas of our life we become able to act in faith sooner than in other areas. This incident merely shows that Rachel was struggling mightily to determine who God, Yahweh, would be to her.

After spending a few years in the north of Canaan, Jacob decided to return to the south where his father Isaac was still living. Rachel was pregnant, and on the way she went into a severe labor. The midwife was able to deliver the baby boy but unable to save Rachel. With her dying breath she named the boy “Ben-oni,” but Jacob, who did not name any of his other sons, stepped in and changed the boy’s name to “Benjamin” (Genesis 35:16-18).

Like so many key words in Genesis, both the names are ambiguous, but I am inclined to see them in the context of the development of faith in Rachel and Jacob. Rachel has been coming to value the promises of God in the context of her wrestling match with Him. She wants to participate in God’s promise to Jacob and his family, but God has not granted this easily. Rachel has had to wait a long time and to suffer a great deal of anguish to get children. She has born one son, and in the process of giving birth to a second, she is suffering agonizing pain and is, in fact, about to die. So from Rachel’s perspective it is fitting with the way her life has gone that God would not give her easily what was promised and would not allow her to enjoy her children. Naming her son “son of affliction” focuses on her experience of being close to receiving the promises of God but not quite getting to enjoy them.

Jacob is able to see things from a more balanced perspective. Jacob, who understood and appreciated Rachel’s intent, wanted to take the situation in a more positive direction. Benjamin can mean “son of the south.” Haran, the place from which Jacob’s whole entourage had come, was to the north of Canaan. Benjamin is the only son of Jacob born in Canaan—the land God promised to give to the descendants of Abraham. Canaan was, in this sense, “home.” Rachel

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bore a child in the land God gave to them. Although this was a very partial fulfillment of the promise that God had made, Jacob wanted to draw attention to the fact that more of God's promises had been realized than Rachel recognized. Rachel's name for her son emphasized the perspective that Rachel had come short of enjoying the full realization of God's promises; Jacob's name emphasized the reality of the partial fulfillment of those promises.

"So Rachel died and was buried *on the way* to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)" (Genesis 35:19; emphasis mine). Years later, when Jacob was bestowing his blessing on Joseph's children, he recalled Rachel's death, saying she died "on the way" and she was buried "on the way." This repetition of the phrase is purposeful and meaningful. Jacob was recognizing something important about his deceased wife. Rachel stood out in contrast to Leah and his concubines. She shared with Jacob a passion for the promises of God.

The narrative of Genesis shows each of the patriarchs and matriarchs on a distinct learning curve. They were all flawed and foolish people, but, over time, they each came to understand the inestimable value of the promises God made to Abraham and his successors. Those promises could be summed up as progeny without number and possession of the land. Over time, these promises began to be viewed as place holders for an eternal blessing that transcended anything in this world. As the patriarchs recognized the value of these promises, they began to refocus their lives. The pleasures offered by everyday life faded. They began to emulate in their moral behavior the righteous giver of those promises, Yahweh, and they sought to entrust those promises into the hands of children who would cherish them. None of the patriarchs moved directly and easily to this understanding. They each followed their own peculiar, tortuous route. But they each showed signs of being on this trajectory.

The author of Genesis seems to want us to see Rachel as being on this same trajectory. As is often the case with biblical narrative, we are not given many clues as to what people are thinking when they do what they do, but the author subtly indicates that Rachel's thinking went through an evolution over the course of time. She slowly came to appreciate

the value of God's promises to the patriarchs, a process that paralleled what happened to Isaac and Jacob. She had a particularly difficult route that included several missteps, but she slowly came to value the eternal over the ephemeral.

Jacob, who had his own set of missteps, seemed to recognize in Rachel a soul mate. He understood that Rachel wanted what God was offering and, in her own way, was wrestling with God to receive his blessing. But she died short of receiving what God had promised. She wanted many sons but died giving birth to her second. She wanted to possess the land but died before she arrived at the homeland she had never seen. In this sense, Rachel was "on the way." And it is in recognition and in honor of this that Jacob blessed her oldest son with the blessing due the first born. He gave her posthumously some of what he had seen her come to hunger and thirst for. Rachel epitomized one who dearly wanted the promises of God but who tragically died before they were substantially realized.

Let us now return to the question with which we began: Why does Jeremiah 31:15 mention Rachel, and why is she weeping?

Jacob's family was heading to Bethlehem when Rachel died. Genesis 35:20 says, "Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day," which suggests that her burial site continued to be honored and remembered several hundred years after she died. Although the traditional location of Rachel's tomb is just outside Bethlehem, some believe it is closer to Ramah, where Jeremiah says Rachel's voice was heard. Located about thirteen miles from Bethlehem on a main north-south roadway, Ramah had a large spring, making it the perfect location for a large group of travelers and their livestock to rest on their trip from Bethel to Bethlehem. It was also the perfect place for the Babylonians to gather the captive people of Judah before taking them to Babylon (Jeremiah 40:1).

Putting all the pieces together, here is the picture that emerges. After the Babylonians had destroyed and plundered Jerusalem, they identified and took into custody all the leading people of Judah's society and sent them to Ramah where they were kept until everyone destined for Babylonian exile was collected. It

was while these captives were waiting in this temporary concentration camp that Rachel's voice of lament was heard in Ramah. She is weeping inconsolably over the people of Judah being taken into exile, assuming they are as good as dead to her and there is no future for Judah.

Rachel came to be seen as the mother of all Israel—that is, both the northern and southern kingdoms—and there is some justice to such a claim. She was the grandmother of Ephraim, whose descendants came to dominate the northern kingdom to such a degree that it was sometimes referred to as Ephraim. She was the mother of Benjamin, whose tribe combined with Judah's to make up the southern kingdom. And she was the mother of Joseph, who was the savior of all of Israel. So Rachel was one who could be expected to intercede on behalf of all of Israel in these desperate times. She could identify with their despair and had a motherly concern. At the same time, she understood what God had promised to her people, and she understood what a valuable gift that was. She also understood God to be a hard master, but ultimately gracious and loving. So it would have been confusing and sad beyond comprehension to Rachel at such a time that God would have seemingly allowed Israel to be snuffed out like a candle. It looked like there was no hope for Israel, so she refused to be comforted.

God's response to Rachel in Jeremiah 31:16 is especially powerful. He says to her, "Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears." God was saying it might look like all is lost, but that is not the case. God had heard Rachel's appeals, He had seen her works in which He saw evidence of her valuing His promises, and He was going to act to reward the fervency of her desire for His blessing by bringing the exiles back to the land where they belonged. "There is hope for your future," God tells Rachel. He will make good on his promises, and Rachel's progeny will occupy the land God promised to them.

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## Please be praying...

Last month we reported that because of Gutenberg's financial situation, the board was on the verge of deciding whether or not Gutenberg would accept a freshman class for fall 2016. We are pleased to report this month that Gutenberg will accept a freshman class in the fall. Although Gutenberg's financial situation remains the same, we have decided to continue on with aggressive steps to improve our financial situation and the promotion of the college. Whatever steps may be taken in pursuit of these goals, we will never change Gutenberg's commitment to a quality Great Books education grounded in the truth of a

biblical worldview. The quality of Gutenberg's education has never been in doubt, as our students and others would attest. The team who first evaluated Gutenberg for accreditation said this:

Gutenberg College's unique combination of a Great Books curriculum, Socratic pedagogy, intimate community environment, and deep commitment to character development within a family-like setting were designed to offer a Christian undergraduate education quite distinct from the institutional paradigm dominant in American higher education.... Thankfully, a tree is known by its fruit, and so the students have shown us the fruit of the Gutenberg approach to undergraduate education.

The financial sustainability of the college, however, has often been in doubt—at least,

from a human perspective. We are thankful that God has provided for Gutenberg for over twenty years now, and we pray that He will continue to provide for the college for many years to come. In light of the financial hurdles that Gutenberg faces, please pray with us that God would provide the following:

- (1) Wisdom to find more effective ways to promote the college with integrity;
- (2) Financial stability for the college;
- (3) More students;
- (4) Encouragement for Gutenberg's staff, faculty, and shepherds, as well as their continued willingness to accept whatever comes from God's hand.

We'll keep you posted.

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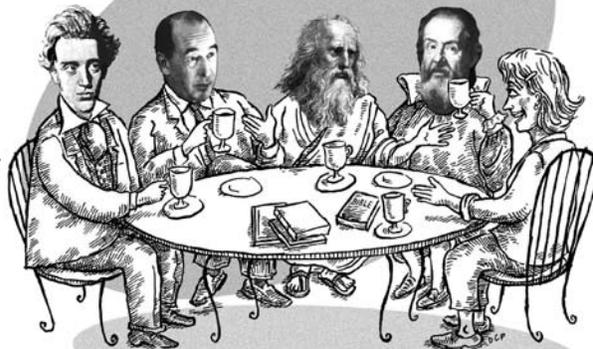
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