

The Fifth Day of Christmas: Rachel, Desolate and Restored

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[0 : 00] Welcome back. For the fifth day of Christmas, I'm doing something I was hoping to do yesterday on the Feast of the Holy Innocents and look at the character of Rachel. Rachel as a character within the story of Matthew chapter 2 and see how the significant verses that are quoted from the Old Testament help us to see how her character is present within this text and within these events.

If you look at Matthew chapter 2, you'll see two key citations of the Old Testament, more lengthy citations of the Old Testament. The first in verse 6, But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

And that's a citation from Micah chapter 5 verse 2. And then the second is found in verse 18, Now, if we look back at Micah chapter 5, we'll see that the character of Rachel is there.

In this immediate context of Matthew, we do not see the character of Rachel, But the person who knew the story or who knew the text of Micah 5 well, And Micah and its surrounding chapters, would have discerned that character, lying behind all that is said here.

If you go back to Micah chapter 4, you read in verse 6 following, Now, why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in your midst?

[1 : 58] Has your counsellor perished? For pangs have seized you like a woman in labour. Be in pain and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in birth pangs. For now you shall go forth from the city.

You shall dwell in the field, and you shall go even to Babylon. There you shall be delivered. There the Lord will redeem you from the hand of your enemies. It's a significant passage because the character who's in view here is Rachel.

If you see in verse 8 the reference to the terror of the flock, Migdal Eda. If you go back to chapter 35 of Genesis, Then they journeyed from Bethel, and when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel travailed in childbirth, and she had hard labour.

Now it came to pass when she was in hard labour that the midwife said to her, Do not fear, you will have this son also. And so it was, as her soul was departing, for she died, that she called his name Ben-oni, but his father called him Benjamin.

So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. Then Israel journeyed and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eda, or the tower of the flock, Migdal Eda.

[3 : 18] And it happened when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine, and Israel heard about it. That last verse isn't relevant, but as you look within this text, you'll see references to specific places, important places.

Migdal Eda, Bethlehem, Ephrath. And these references are surrounded with references to a woman who's groaning in travail, and the twin themes of death and birth.

This threat of the Assyrians, the threat of captivity in Babylon as well, and that threat of death being surrounded with a promise of new birth, that these birth pangs are not going to just lead to death, but there will be new birth.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time that she who is in labour has given birth. Then the remnant of his brethren shall return to the children of Israel, and he shall stand and feed his flock, etc.

The significance of this then is found in the woman, the connection with the places, the struggling in trial birth, the connection between kingship and this child, and the twinning themes of death and birth.

[4 : 41] The death of Israel and the birth of this new child, this one who will rule. And this is associated with Rachel's own giving birth to Benjamin. Benjamin is given birth and immediately named son of my sorrow.

And then he's named son of my right hand, an association with kingship and rule. We have other associations elsewhere within the Old Testament between Rachel's death and significant events. In Ramah, the references to Ramah and Gibeah and the near destruction of the tribe of Benjamin in chapters 19 following of Judges, there are allusions to Rachel at that point.

There's allusions to Laban's house, towering there with the father-in-law. And these help us to see something of the significance of what is going on. This child that is almost destroyed, Benjamin is almost lost.

And in that context, we hear behind the surface of the text, Rachel's voice coming to the surface. So this text from Micah chapter 5 verse 2, although in the citation in Matthew 2, it does not explicitly mention Rachel, Rachel is all the way in the background.

[5 : 52] She's there within the original text. It's the struggle of her in childbirth. The immediate verse afterward is about the one who being given up until she who is in labour has given birth.

So these events are deeply charged with significance, typological significance, one associated with the events of Rachel's death and the birth of Benjamin.

The second quotation is found in verse 18 of chapter 2 of Matthew. And this mentions another significant place, Ramah, which again is associated with Rachel's death on the road to Bethlehem. And in this location, you hear a voice heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they were no more.

This is in the context of the massacre of the innocents. So we have once again, Rachel, this figure from Israel's history, this tragic figure at this point, associated with death, with the seeming death of her child.

[7 : 03] We have these two children of Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin. And these two figures are associated with near death, whether that's the tribe of Benjamin that is almost wiped out at the end of Judges, or whether it's Joseph that's almost killed, seemingly killed in the land of Egypt, being taken into slavery and lost.

And then we also have the events of Benjamin's birth, that it's associated with sorrow, it's associated with pangs, and it seems to be fruitless. It yields death for the mother, but yet there is this birth of this child, who is then associated with kingship, the son of my right hand.

What more is going on? If we look at Jeremiah, and the original context of that text, we see the promise of birth.

Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the ends of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the one who a child, and the one who labours with child together. A great throng shall return there.

They shall come with weeping, and with supplications I will lead them. I will cause them to walk by the rivers of water, in a straight way in which they shall not stumble. For I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

[8 : 21] Now, that's worth remembering. And then it references the shepherding of the flock, at this point, that Israel will be once more established, with the shepherd of its flock.

And it's in this context, straight after that, that it references the voice of Rachel, weeping for her children, because there are no more. And there's an immediate response to that. In verse 16 of chapter 31 of Jeremiah, thus says the Lord, refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord.

And they shall come back from the land of the enemy, for there is hope in your future, says the Lord, that your children shall come back to their own borders. I have surely heard Ephraim, been moaning himself. You have chastised me, and I was chastised, like an untrained bull.

Restore me, and I will return, for you are the Lord my God, etc. Is not Ephraim my dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still.

Therefore my heart yearns for him. I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord. And this reference to the son returning, the firstborn son, Israel is my firstborn son.

[9 : 32] Out of Egypt I called, Ephraim is my firstborn son. Out of Egypt I called my son. These are themes that are richly present within the text of Matthew. Matthew chapter 2 has these themes of the returning firstborn son, the one who is called out of Egypt.

And this weeping of Rachel is immediately followed in the prophet with this promise of the returning of the son. And that's immediately what we hear afterwards.

But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Arise, take the young child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel. For those who sought the young child's life are dead.

Then he arose, took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. So the character of Rachel lies behind the story. The character of this mother of Joseph, and this mother of Benjamin, and the tragic events that are associated with the birth of Benjamin, with Rachel's death, and that sorrow which hangs over the story of Israel.

The story of a mother who seems bereft, this mother who has died in childbirth, when all seems futile. And here we have this story evoked once more.

[10 : 45] But it's evoked in the context of promise. It's evoked in the context of this child that will restore Israel's fortune. This is the return of Israel to its borders. This is the one who is the true shepherd that was promised in Micah chapter 5 verse 2.

He is the one that, the woman who struggled in birth, who seems to have experienced a futile birth, who is dying in the process, who is going into exile, who is facing the assaults of the Assyrians and others, her birth.

That struggle in birth will not be in vain. There will be the birth of the one who will shepherd his people. The tower of the flock is associated with this one who has come to shepherd his people. And that story of Rachel helps us to see how deep themes from the whole text of Scripture, from Genesis onwards, texts that resonate through Judges, through 1st and 2nd Samuel, and which are present within the prophets in Micah and Jeremiah and elsewhere, that these come, and they lie beneath the surface of the text of Matthew.

And as Matthew helps us to see these things, as we read Matthew in the light of these echoes and these evoked stories, we'll begin to see a promise made right and fulfilled to Rachel, the restoration of her children, and the fulfillment of all God's good purposes for his people.

[12 : 10] The firstborn son is going to be established. The shepherd of the people is going to be brought out. The youngest, the one who's weakest, or the one from the smallest, as it were, of his brethren, is going to come forth.

And it's going to be this small town, this small town of Bethlehem, Ephrath, this association with Migdal Eder, all these places that are charged with deep memory in Israel, the memory of the death of the matriarch.

And it will be in that site, and the site where the children are seemingly lost, that there will be a restoration, that things will be made whole, that the son will come into birth, that there will be the shepherd who was born, and he will lead his people.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. If you'd like to support this and other videos like it, please do so using my Patreon account or my PayPal account. And I trust that you are continuing to enjoy a wonderful Christmas season.

God bless. God bless.