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Q&A#12 The Meaning of Rachel's Tears in Matthew 2

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Alastair Roberts

Today's Question: "What does the conception of Issachar have to do with Matthew 2:16-18?"

For Rabbi David Fohrman's reading, see <https://www.alephbeta.org/course/lecture/tisha-bav-2015>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm going to answer a question that involves bringing together a lot of different threads of biblical theology. And the question is, what does the conception of Issachar have to do with Matthew 2, 16-18? Matthew 2, 16-18 reads as follows.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry, and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem, and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they were no more. Now, the background to this question is some thoughts that I gave in the Think Theology conference on the future of complementarity, where I referred to a reading of Jeremiah 31 by Rabbi David Foreman.

The passage in question in Jeremiah 31, 15-17 reads as follows. Now, there are a number of questions that arise from this particular passage, but the one that Rabbi David Foreman particularly focuses on is the one that he says, is the question of why does God say, For your work shall be rewarded? Why not say, For I have seen your tears, or I have taken compassion upon you, or I have seen your travail? All these sorts of things would

make sense, but no, for your work shall be rewarded. This is a significant statement, and he argues that there is an explanation for this.

One of the things that will help us to understand the reason for that expression, he argues, is seeing the different ways in which the verses that proceed draw upon, as it were, present us with catchphrases that sum up certain episodes within the story of the great story of the lost son, of Joseph, the son that is deemed dead and is taken away into Egypt and finds himself in captivity and imprisonment there. And so, as you read through these verses, it harks back to different episodes with key words. So, the bitterness, the intensified word for bitterness here, is the same as the word used in reference to Joseph's bitterness that Jacob refers to, the bitterness that he experienced at the hand of his brothers and in Egypt.

The voice lifted up on high, it relates to the voice of Potiphar's wife, the voice lifted up on high in accusation against Joseph. The weeping for the children and refusing to be comforted, that's the response of Jacob to the loss of his son, the apparent death of his son, that he sees the token, as it were, of Joseph's demise and he refuses to be consoled. And the child being no more, the child being gone, that's a reference to Reuben's experience of looking in to the pit where Joseph was supposed to be and finding that the child had gone.

This is the tragedy of the lost son being replayed over, but replayed over in a reverse order. And it's a tragedy that is being evoked within the context of exile, Israel going into exile and this weeping of the great matriarch, Rachel, over their fate. Now, what is the meaning of reward? What is the meaning of the reward in this context or the work that was done? For that, Rabbi David Forman argues that we need to return to the story of Genesis 30, which is the story of two rival sisters.

It's the story of Leah, the unloved wife, but who's fruitful, the one who Laban tricked his son-in-law, Jacob, into marrying. When Jacob has served to marry Rachel, but yet he's given Leah instead. And Rachel, who's the loved wife, but yet the wife who's not fruitful.

And so there's a tension here and the sisters are great rivals. And you can see this in the way that Rachel names her children. Now, I'll read this passage.

Now, when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister and said to Jacob, give me children or else I die. And Jacob's anger was aroused against Rachel. And he said, am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb? So she said, here is my maid Bilhah, go into her and she will bear a child on my knees that I also may have children by her.

Then she gave him Bilhah, her maid, as wife and Jacob went into her. And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, God has judged my case and he has also heard my voice and given me a son.

Therefore she called his name Dan. And Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, with great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and indeed I have prevailed.

So she called his name Naphtali. When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took Zilpah, her maid, and gave her to Jacob as wife. And Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son.

Then Leah said, a troop comes. So she called his name Gad. And Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son.

Then Leah said, I am happy for the daughters will call me blessed. So she called his name Asher. Now Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah.

Then Rachel said to Leah, please give me some of your son's mandrakes. But she said to her, is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also? And Rachel said, therefore he will lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes. When Jacob came out of the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, you must come into me for I have surely hired you with my son's mandrakes.

And he lay with her that night. And God listened to Leah and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, God has given me my reward or my hire because I have given my maid to my husband.

So she called his name Issachar, meaning hire or reward. Now, many people have wondered about the significance of the story, the little episode with Reuben gathering the mandrakes and then Rachel and Leah's bargaining over these. It's a very peculiar story with very odd details within it.

Now, he argued, Rabbi David Forman argues that it's a significant story within the context, as you see Rachel's relationship to her sister developing. In the earlier, in the children are born through her and maid Bilhah, she calls them first of all Dan, meaning to judge, that God has judged her case. And then the second is called Naphtali, meaning my wrestling.

I've wrestled with great wrestling with my sister and have prevailed. These are very significant names, names suggesting this intense rivalry, this battle between the two, this vicious conflict and God having to intervene, God having to judge on behalf of Rachel. And that's how she's perceiving that relationship.

But then this curious episode occurs. This episode is one that involves the firstborn son of Leah, Reuben, going out into the fields at the time of wheat harvest and collecting mandrakes. Now, what are these mandrakes? Some have argued that they're something

that gives fertility.

Others have argued that they're a special sort of flower for beautifying oneself. Whatever it is, it seems to be some object that's significant in itself. But Rabbi Forman argues that that's simply not the case.

We don't know what these things are. The word does not occur elsewhere in Scripture. This is not something that we're expected to know.

It's not some detail that is very significant that has somehow got lost in the course of time. No, these items may as well just be dandelions. It's not significant what they are.

What is significant is that they are a gift from Reuben, the young child Reuben, to his mother Leah. And it's the significance of that that helps us to understand what's taking place. So what is the significance of the gift of Reuben? The significance is that it's the gift of the firstborn son to his mother.

It's the first expression of something being given back to the mother. The mother has given all of her effort and labor to bring this son to birth and to raise him up. And now he's giving something back, an expression of his love for her.

And parents know that that's a very precious thing, whether that will be some flowers that are picked, some weeds that are picked and just put in a vase on the mantelpiece, or whether it's some painting that your child has drawn that's fairly unclear what it's supposed to be. But it will go on the fridge in pride of place because it is something that represents the love of that child for you, their parent. And the significance of this gift was that it was the expression of the love of the son, the firstborn son to his mother.

And Leah and Rachel asked for some of those flowers, not all of them, just some of them. That's a very significant thing to ask for. It's asking, as it were, your child has brought some flowers back for you, your young, your first child, and the first thing that they have ever given you, perhaps.

And someone else asks you for some of those. It's a very significant thing to share with someone. And what Rachel is asking for is a share in Leah's relationship with her son, that to no longer see her merely as a rival, but to share in her joy, to share in something of what she's receiving back, no longer to be her opponent, but to stand with her as a sister.

Now, Leah's reaction to this is quite striking. Leah is angry. Not only has Rachel taken her husband, Rachel also wants to take her son's flowers, this expression of his love for her.

She wants to butt in on that, too. She's already intruded upon her relationship with her husband. Now she wants to intrude upon her relationship with her son also.

This just seems so wrong. And for Rachel, you can imagine that this was startling for her, realising how Leah saw the situation. Now for her, Leah was the one who had stolen her husband.

She had taken, her father had used her older sister and given her older sister to Jacob, Jacob tricking him and wronging her so that she no longer has the husband that she loves and who loves her to herself. Rather, she must share this husband with another woman, with her sister who is now placed as her rival. And there's a big problem there.

There's a problem of a rivalry between the two of them that just does not seem to be solved. When you actually look at what's taking place, though, Rachel is trying to heal this breach. Rachel is trying to overcome this, and she recognises the problem that Leah has now.

And what she does is significant. She says, so therefore he will lie with you tonight for your son's mandrakes. So she offers what was taken from her, what was stolen from her.

She offers it to her sister. Now she gives it to her in exchange for the mandrakes, in exchange for the expression of Reuben's love for his mother and sharing in that. She will give to Leah, her sister, what was once stolen from her.

And so the rivalry between the two, Leah, you can imagine, and Rachel now sees probably that Leah sees this situation very differently. For Leah, Rachel had a choice. She had a choice whether to marry Jacob or not.

The wrong had occurred. Was she going to compound that by placing herself in rivalry with her sister? Was she just going to let it alone and say, OK, I've been wronged. I'm just going to have to move forward.

No, she decided to marry Jacob. And then Leah was put in a situation where she could only be the unloved wife. A very difficult situation for her.

But within this action, we see Rachel trying to heal this wound, trying to overcome this breach. And the result of this is not actually a child for Rachel. It's a child for Leah.

It's a child who is called Issachar or reward or hire. It is her reward, Issachar. Now, the significance of this in when we get to Jeremiah 31 is that there's a reference to the reward, the Issachar, that Rachel will receive from God.

And this reward, this child, this reward that she will receive is the bringing back of these children from captivity. She mourns over this lost child. And that child will be returned.

The voice lifted up in Ramah is also a significant place. Ramah is just a few miles up the road from Bethlehem. And in Genesis 35, 16, we read, Then they journeyed from Bethel.

And when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel travelled 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 son was soul was departing for she died that she called his name Benoni or literally son of my sorrow.

But his father called him Benjamin, son of my right hand. 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.

So it's a significant location. It's this location of the mourning of Israel's matriarch. Rachel's story is a very tragic story in many ways.

She's tricked by her father Laban. And so her husband is taken from her. She struggles with childlessness and barrenness, and she struggles in rivalry with her sister.

Eventually, her son is taken away. Her son, Joseph. Now, she is not alive at that point, but that son is taken away.

She dies in childbirth with Benjamin. And again, these are very significant events. These are events that are the tragic story of Israel's mother.

And these are stories that alluded to in various places. For instance, the story of Gibeah in Judges 19 and the Levites' concubine. That story again alludes to the story of Rachel, this tragic story of Israel's mother.

And when we get to Matthew 2, we see this allusion to the story in the context of Christ. Christ being in Egypt and the killing of the children of the sons in Bethlehem and all its districts. So again, it's the significant location, the area around Bethlehem, the area of Rachel's death.

And her voice is lifted up in this location, the great mother of Israel weeping for her lost children. And as we hear this voice in weeping, we remember this whole tragic narrative of Israel's mother. We remember the story of her wrestling with her sister, of her being cheated by her father, of her being childless, of her dying in childbirth, of her son, her one promised son, Joseph, being lost and taken into slavery.

And that whole story is resonating beneath the surface of this text. It's all there, this whole tragic narrative. And then the story, the prophecy of Jeremiah 31.

The story of tragedy also contains the seed of a promise that there will be a reward. And what will that reward be in the context of Jeremiah 31? That her children will be brought back, returned to their own borders. Within Jeremiah 31, most of you will have recognized that passage.

It will have clicked. This passage is more famous for other things. What is it famous for?

It's famous for the promise of the new covenant.

The promise that God will bring his people back, that he will form a new covenant with them. That those days of the past won't be remembered anymore, but God will have this new situation. And all of this is a fulfillment of God's promise to Rachel.

That her tears, the tears of this matriarch have been heard and that she will be rewarded. As we look through the story of Matthew, Matthew tells his story in a way that is supposed to draw upon these themes of the Old Testament. The very beginning of his story, he introduces it with a genealogy.

With the genealogy of these three sets of 14 generations. The generations from Abraham to David, the generations from David to the captivity, and the generations from the captivity to Christ. And these generations are an encapsulation of Israel's history.

Six times seven, 42. Or a broken seven. When you think about it, it's a time, times and half a time.

12, 24 and 6. It's a significant number. This number of waiting for that next week, the next week that will lead up to the Jubilee. There's 42 and now there's the hope for that extra week, that final week that will bring in the fulfillment.

Then we have this story of a man called Joseph who's dreaming these dreams, who brings his family into Egypt. And then this story of being delivered from Egypt, of words that arise, take the young child and his mother, flee to Egypt and stay there until I bring you word. For Herod will seek the young child, destroy him.

And then later on, 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. And again, this is a reference to the story of the Exodus.

And he draws upon prophecy, out of Egypt I have called my son. Christ fulfills this, that just as God took his people out of Egypt, now there's a greater escalation of that theme as God takes his beloved son out of Egypt. He takes his only begotten son, Christ himself.

Now, the story of Herod killing the infant male children. Again, this is a story that recalls the story of Egypt. It's a story that recalls Pharaoh's killing of the baby boys.

And now this is again a tragedy of the history of Israel, of its travails, expressed as the mother weeping. Now, if we go to the beginning of Exodus, we'll see this theme of Israel and travail presented as if a woman groaning in birth and God remembering her. What we see in that context is stories of actual specific Israelite women and other women involved within this travel.

The Hebrew midwives of Jochebed and of Miriam. And these figures represent Israel as a woman who's groaning in birth, waiting to be delivered. And God has heard and will deliver.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah, the prophet, saying a voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they were no more. What might Matthew mean by the fulfilling of this word? How exactly? This doesn't seem to be what's referred to in Jeremiah. What might it mean that this is fulfilled? Well, I think it's fulfilled in the sense that this is the whole tragic history of Israel groaning in birth come to a climax.

This is the point where the tears of Rachel, the tears of the mother of Israel, the tears that are spread throughout the Old Testament, tears of persecution, of oppression, of childlessness, of loss, of death and of miscarriage. All of these stories come to a climax here as this great wailing over the lost baby boys is finally reaches, the tears reach their height. But that very moment the tears reach the height, the promise of a new covenant is bursting into life.

That Christ, the one who will fulfill the promise of the new covenant that is given in the context of Jeremiah 31, that he is about to enter into his land. 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 were dead. Then he arose, took the young child and his mother and came into the land of Israel.

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there and being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee and he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled, which was spoken by the prophets, he shall be called the Nazarene. And so now this tragic history is about to be met with the response of God's grace, a response of grace that is sufficient to overcome all this tragedy. There is an answer that where God enters into that tragedy itself and drains it and a God who overcomes that with his love.

Now, how does this relate to the conception of Issachar? Well, in the context of Jeremiah 31, the allusion to Issachar is an allusion to the birth of this child to Leah after the action of Rachel that healed the breach between the two sisters. And God has seen what Rachel has done. And she will get her Issachar, her reward.

What is her reward? Not the conception of Issachar, that is Leah's reward. Her reward is that her sons will be brought back, her sons that are in the land of captivity, her sons that have been torn away from their borders. And so what it has to do with it is that Christ, this son, this one who arises in the realm of Bethlehem, who arises in this realm of Israel's sorrow, the sorrow of Israel's mother, the death of Israel's mother and her tears.

That as that voice is raised up in that very site, we have God's answer, that we have God bringing back those people to the borders, the children being brought back to the borders. The first fruits is Christ, the one who comes from Egypt and is brought, enters back into the promised land. And Christ is the first fruits of all humanity from exile, from God's presence.

This exile that Israel experienced in captivity in Babylon is but a small, is a small representation of our alienation from God, our deeper alienation from God, which Christ overcomes. And that bringing back from exile is one that Christ accomplishes as he reconciles us to God, as he brings us back to God's presence. And so the bringing back of Christ that immediately follows this is an initial answer, is the first rays of dawn in response to the weeping of Rachel.

It's the first response, full response to her sorrow and the first full fulfilment of what Jeremiah prophesied concerning the new covenant. So it's a very exciting set of different threads that are brought together in scripture, threads that run throughout the biblical text, Old and New Testament. The story of the woman struggling in birth and then the story of Christ as the one who is the promised son, the one who is the seed that will crush the serpent's head.

And so all the weeping, all the sorrow, all the tragedy of Rachel's life has been heard and there's been a child. She died giving birth to the son of my sorrow, to Ben-Oni, to the child that was later raised up by his father to be called the son of my right hand. And Christ in the same way is associated with all this sorrow, but is the one raised up to be the son of the right hand.

He's the one of the tribe of Judah who delivers Benjamin, who comes into that site of Rachel's sorrow and delivers her child. Now, Judah, eventually after his role in deceiving and in his role in selling Joseph into slavery, he intercedes on behalf of Benjamin. And that relationship between Judah and Benjamin is very significant.

It plays out throughout the rest of scripture. And Christ, the son of Judah, a son of Judah, is one who fulfills the promises to Rachel who died giving birth to Benjamin. Again, I think these are significant themes.

There's a lot more that could be said on this, but I hope this is a helpful initial answer to that question. If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. I'll leave the link for that below.

Thank you and hopefully see you again in the next day or so.