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Rachel Weeping: Intertextuality as a Means of Transforming the Readers' Worldview

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Abstract: The episode of the Bethlehem massacre (Matt 2:16-18) uses many levels of intertextuality as a rhetorical device, to solicit an emotional response powerful enough to influence the reader's worldview. What effect do these intertexts have on Matthew's readers? How is this affective appeal concerning Rachel's tears intended to impact the reader's response to Matthew's story? Rachel weeping is an emotionally charged image that somehow merges two opposites: hope and sorrow. The intertextuality of this figure can influence readers encouraging them to criticize imperial ideologies that have used violence against innocent people in the past, and oppose those which do so currently.

Keywords: Matthew's Gospel; Rachel; Intertextuality; emotion; Reader-response; injustice; Jeremiah

1 Introduction

Literary texts commonly invite emotional responses, which influence the readers' construal of meaning and shape their worldview.¹ From a reader-response approach, I propose to examine the emotional aspects of the complex intertextual appeal to Rachel's tears in Matthew's story of the massacre of the children of Bethlehem.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"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." (Matt 2:16–18)

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This horrifying text reveals the dark side of the Christmas story. Despite our distaste for the events it recounts, we must admit that the narrative addresses an all too common occurrence: the suffering of innocents. Among the disturbing events of 2015, few were more upsetting than the account of the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi washing up on the beach, a very young Syrian boy who drowned while fleeing from Aleppo with his family. We were also shocked by news coverage of terrorist attacks in Paris that targeted youths in France. Why did they die? Who is responsible for this: God, the military, political and economic systems, humanity?

Matthew's reference to a fulfillment of prophecy makes intertextual links with other emotionally charged situations described in the Bible. Matthew quotes Jeremiah (31:15), who commented on the Babylonian exile and/or the Assyrian invasion by evoking Rachel's memory, a matriarch whose death during childbirth while on the road to Bethlehem appears in the book of Genesis (35:16–20). In addition, there is a strong resonance with the book of Exodus (1:15–22), which narrates Pharaoh's massacre of infant Hebrew males. Each of these intertexts emerges from a context of suffering under a foreign empire. What effect do these intertexts have on Matthew's readers? How is this affective appeal concerning Rachel's tears intended to impact the reader's response to Matthew's story? The story of the Bethlehem massacre uses many levels of intertextuality as a rhetorical device, to solicit an emotional response powerful enough to influence the reader's worldview. Traditional exegesis struggles with the violence of Matthew's text. With a reception-oriented interpretation, however, this difficult passage can be read in a new light.

Literary critic Stanley Fish's affective stylistics was conceived in part as a response to Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Affective Fallacy."² For Fish, a narrative cannot be understood apart from its effects. A text's effects are essential to accurately describe its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of the reader. Exegetes such as Karl Allen Kuhn emphasize the importance of the affective dimension of biblical narrative. He calls fellow interpreters to discern how affective appeal is meant to impact the reader's response to a passage and discern how the use of pathos betrays rhetorical goals for an entire work.³ Studying the effects of a text must include an affective component; that involves a non-semantic discourse or level.⁴

² 'Affective fallacy' is a term from literary criticism used to refer to the supposed error of judging or evaluating a text on the basis of its emotional effects on a reader. W. K. Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley, "The affective fallacy," *Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (1949), 31–55. Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," *New Literary History* 2, no. 1 (1970), 123–62.

³ Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Heart of Biblical Narrative: Rediscovering Biblical Appeal to the Emotions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

⁴ For an introduction to affect theory: Melissa Gregg, and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Set against the backdrop of first century Palestine, this narrative could therefore be an implicit critique of the abuse of Roman imperial power that dominated the region. The complete barbarity of the narrative prompts the reader to seek justice elsewhere, rather than from the negatively portrayed king. But what about today's readers? How does this story affect us?⁵ A common response to the Bethlehem infanticide is to question God's responsibility. Why did God only save Jesus and allow the other babies to die? I propose to address this question by placing it in the context of Matthew's gospel as a whole. The reader will see that eventually Jesus was executed, like the other children of Bethlehem, by the religious and political leaders of Jerusalem. In the end, there is an astonishing reversal. A new and unexpected life comes from a situation where there was nothing but certain death. In order to transform his audience's worldview, Matthew harnesses the affective impact which earlier narratives had produced, through the use of intertextual echoes.

2 Reception-Oriented Intertextuality

Reader response is a literary theory which focuses on readers and their reception of a literary work. We must, first of all, define intertextuality within the framework of a method that focuses on the reader. Biblical studies generally use intertextuality in a way that has nothing to do with the post-structural concept described originally by Julia Kristeva.⁶ For her, every text "is constructed as a mosaic of citations, every text is an absorption and transformation of other texts."⁷ Thus, texts are set in dynamic networks with other texts.

Intertextuality is not source criticism.⁸ The goal is not to find out which texts Matthew had in mind while writing.⁹ In reader response criticism, the

5 This article is concerned with a 21st-century reader that (1) has a general knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and can make intertextual connections, (2) has read Matthew's gospel as a whole and (3) is aware of interpretations made by previous readers such as exegetes and literary critics. This way of situating the reader comes from my own reading stance. I will quote different readers of Matthew as examples of the "real" effects produced by the text on contemporary readers.

6 George Aichele and Gary Allen Phillips, "Introduction: Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis," *Intertextuality and the Bible*, Semeia 69–70 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 7–18.

7 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press), 146.

8 "Intertextuality is not a matter of allusion or source tracking; it is a matter of transformation." George Aichele and Gary Allen Phillips, "Introduction: Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis," *Intertextuality and the Bible*, Semeia 69–70 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 11.

9 Moisés Mayordomo-Marín makes this point very clearly in "Matthew 1–2 and the Problem of Intertextuality," *Infancy Gospels: Stories and Identities*, eds. Claire Clivaz, Andreas Dettwiler, Luc Devillers and Enrico Norelli (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011): 257–79. Other critics of the current

objective is to describe the effects of interactions on the reader, not the probability that the author had one text or another in mind while writing. The central question is not “What did the author want to say?” or “What is the meaning of this text?” but rather “What is the effect of this text?”¹⁰ Intertextuality consists of an endless interplay between texts and their social and cultural contexts.¹¹ Intertextuality has a political and ethical aspect to it. What is the impact of our biblical interpretations? That question moves us from reader response to reader responsibility.

In this article, I will use Matthew 2:16–18 in relationship to other texts, both past and present, to understand the different meanings the passage allows readers to draw from it. I will show that these quotations and allusions are textual elements that allow readers access to conversations opened by intertextuality.

3 Matthew’s Story (2:16–18)

3.1 Herod’s Rage (Mt 2:16)

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. (Matt 2:16)¹²

The double use of πάντας, πᾶσιν [all the children, the entire vicinity] gives readers the impression of a great massacre. There is a contrast between the estimated

way of using intertextuality in biblical studies can be found in Paul Foster, “Echoes without Resonance: Critiquing Certain Aspects of Recent Scholarly Trends in the Study of the Jewish Scriptures in the New Testament,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38, (2015), 96–111; Leroy A. Huizenga, “The Old Testament in the New, Intertextuality and Allegory,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38, (2015), 17–35; Samuel Emadi, “Intertextuality in New Testament Scholarship: Significance, Criteria, and the Art of Intertextual Reading,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, (2015), 8–23.

¹⁰ A question asked by Stanley Fish, “Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,” *New Literary History* 2, (1970), 123–62.

¹¹ As Jonathan Culler writes: “Intertextuality ... [is] less a name for a work’s relation to prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture.” *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 103.

¹² Τότε Ἡρώδης ἰδὼν ὅτι ἐνεπαίχθη ὑπὸ τῶν μάγων ἐθυμώθη λίαν, καὶ ἀποστείλας ἀνείλεν πάντας τοὺς παῖδας τοὺς ἐν Βηθλέεμ καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ὀρίοις αὐτῆς ἀπὸ διετοῦς καὶ κατωτέρω, κατὰ τὸν χρόνον ὃν ἠκρίβωσεν παρὰ τῶν μάγων.

number of male children in such a village (around 20)¹³ and the amplification of the scope of infanticide beyond what was possible (64,000 in the Syrian Martyr calendar).¹⁴ These readers are simply responding the text's rhetoric. The story is structured in such a way as to accentuate the magnitude of the disaster.

The fury of Herod is triggered by his feeling of being ridiculed [ἐμπαίζειν] by the magi.¹⁵ The wrath of Herod is in direct contrast to the joy of the magi (Matt 2:10) described a few verses earlier. This passage gives a very negative characterization of Herod. The king of Judea kills innocent children that he, as king, is responsible for. The narration infers to readers that the kingdom of Herod is not legitimate. Readers could then wonder who the real king was. In this narrative, therefore, violence is an important rhetorical element used to subvert empirical ideology.

3.2 Fulfillment (Mt 2:17)

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah... (Matt 2:17).¹⁶

The formula for introducing the quotation about the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy is different from that used with other quotations (Matt 1:22; 2:15; 2:23). The habitual ἵνα or ὅπως [because] are replaced by τότε [then, at that time]. The idea of intentionality is less apparent. The consensus among commentators is that this word choice is to show that God is not the cause of evil.¹⁷ Moreover, the

13 For example, Brown shows that for an estimated population of 1000 people living in Bethlehem, there would be about 30 births per year, and therefore approximately 15 males. With the high rate of infant mortality at the time, for a period of 2 years there would be about 20 male babies born. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York/London: Doubleday, 1993), 204–205.

14 For more details about the history of interpretation of the number of “holy innocents,” see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 205.

15 The same verb is also used in Matthew when the soldiers laugh at “king” Jesus (Matt 27:29, 31, 41). There are multiple links between the chapters about Jesus' origins and those concerning his passion.

16 τότε ἐπληρώθη τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ Ἱερεμίου τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος·

17 This view is held by these commentators: Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (Leipzig: Diechert, 1903), 19; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St Matthew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 18; Erich Klostermann, *Das Matthäusevangelium* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1927), 18; Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (Paris, J. Gabalda, 1948), 34; Ernst Lohmeyer and Werner Schmauch, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck: U. Ruprecht, 1958), 29; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (Westminster: John Knox, 1975), 10, 19; George M. Soares-Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew: An Enquiry Into the Tradition History*

quotation about Judas' payment for betraying Jesus in Matt 27:9 is introduced in the same way.¹⁸ In both cases, the guilt is placed squarely on those who oppose God's plan.

3.3 Rachel's Weeping (Mt 2:18)

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. (Matt 2:18)¹⁹

This is a quote from Jer 31:15, an emotional poetic text that evokes multiple layers of biblical allusions. The exact wording used by Matthew does not match either the Greek Septuagint or the original Hebrew text.²⁰ One important modification is the addition of the word *πολύς*, by which Matthew indicates that there are several complaints and tears. We can see in this word a reference to various biblical narratives connected with Rachel's suffering.

4 A Biblical mosaic

4.1 Rachel in Genesis

Rachel's story is told in the book of Genesis. In this account, Rachel has two sons, but contrary to what is said in Matthew and Jeremiah, Rachel did not have

of Mt 1–2 (Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 50–1; Robert Horton Gundry, *Matthew; a Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 35; John P. Meier, *Matthew, New Testament Message 3* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 14; Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 205.

18 “τότε ἐπληρώθη τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ Ἰερεμίου τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος·” (Matt 27:9).

19 φωνὴ ἐν Ῥαμὰ ἠκούσθη, κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὄδυρμὸς πολὺς· Ῥαχὴλ κλαίουσα τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς, καὶ οὐκ ἤθελεν παρακληθῆναι, ὅτι οὐκ εἰσίν.

20 For Krister Stendahl, this quote is a version of the Hebrew text, see *The School of St Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1954). For Ulrich Luz, it comes from a fusion between the Greek and Hebrew texts, see *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 118–9. There is a comparison between Matt 2:18 and Jer 31:15 in its different versions in Michael Knowles, *Jeremiah in Matthew's Gospel: The Rejected Prophet Motif in Matthaean Redaction* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 36–8 and Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 223–5.

a chance to mourn the death of her children. In fact, she died giving birth to the second (Gen 35:19). This fact causes us to lean toward a metaphorical interpretation of Rachel's weeping.

Various elements of the Genesis story connect Rachel and suffering. First, she is the victim of her father's manipulation, as he wants to marry his two daughters to Jacob (Gen 29:15–30). Then Rachel complains bitterly to Jacob because of her sterility (Gen 30:1). Finally, Rachel's life ends in tears during a difficult birth on the roadside while travelling toward Ephratha/Bethlehem (Gen 35:19). While dying, she names her second child "Ben-Oni", which means "son of mourning". Her husband Jacob later changes the child's name to Benjamin, effectively silencing his wife's negative declaration.

After the death of Rachel, the fate of her sons is marked by misfortune. Joseph is sold by his brothers. Believing that Joseph is dead, Jacob mourns for him: "All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted." (Gen 37:35). In Jeremiah and Matthew, Rachel refuses to be consoled in the same way as Jacob refuses in Genesis.

4.2 Rachel in Jeremiah

In Jeremiah 31:15, Rachel is presented as the symbolic mother of the nation: defeated, exiled and suffering. Commentators disagree about which exile is targeted in this depiction. Several commentators argue that Jer 31:15 probably refers to the captivity and deportation of the Israelites of the northern kingdom when it was conquered by the Assyrians in 722–721 BCE.²¹ Indeed, some of the main northern tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim, are considered to be the descendants of Rachel.

Other scholars see in Jer 31:15 a reference to the tribe of Benjamin, descendants of Rachel, who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah and were destroyed

²¹ John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 281–2; John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1980), 573; George M. Soares-Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narrative of Matthew: An Enquiry Into the Tradition History of Mt 1–2* (Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 256; William L. Holladay, and Paul D. Hanson, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1986), 186–7; Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 205–6, and J. W. Mazurel, "Citations from the Book of Jeremiah in the New Testament," *Reading the Book of Jeremiah. A Search for Coherence*, ed. Martin Kessler (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 181–9.

by the Babylonians in 597 and 587 BCE.²² Jer 40:1 indicates that after the fall of Jerusalem, the captives were brought to Rama. According to these scholars, such as Barnabas Lindars, Jer 31:15 is a warning to the people of Judah, who will soon experience exile as did the northern kingdom. History will repeat itself.

From a Matthean perspective, it makes more sense if the Babylonian exile is the one described, because of the way the genealogy frames this event (Matt 1:11–12,17). However, for the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to choose definitively between the two options. Both moments of history create a similar effect on the reader. Both refer to a major defeat caused by a foreign empire that brought death, suffering and exile to the people.

Jeremiah 31:15 is part of a literary ensemble that speaks of consolation (Jer 30–33). The verses that follow this one contain a poem rich in images and metaphors (Jer 31:16–17). God tells Rachel and the people to stop crying, since her children will return from a foreign land. The pathos of a mother's lament moves God to respond with comfort and assurance: "Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country" (Jer 31:16–17). This book of consolation offers real hope that God will respond to the basic needs of life: land and freedom from oppression.

The overall context of Jer 30–33 invites the reader to see a reversal.²³ The reader can understand that this intertextual link is built around the theme of exile/return, in which suffering points to hope and anticipation that there will be a restoration. However, Michael Knowles opposes this interpretation by stating

²² Robert H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St Matthew's Gospel with Special Reference to the Messianic Hope* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 210–11; Barnabas Lindars, "Rachel Weeping for Her Children – Jeremiah 31:15–22," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 12 (1979), 47–62; Bob Becking "'A voice was heard in Ramah.' Remarks on structure and meaning of Jr 31.15–17," *Biblisches Zeitschrift* 38 (1994), 238.

²³ Many commentators hold that Matthew draws on the larger context of hope in Jer 30–1. Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (Leipzig: Diechert, 1903), 109–10; Basil Ferris Campbell Atkinson, *The Christian's Use of the Old Testament* (London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1952), 83; R.V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 43–4; William Foxwell Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), lxiii; H. Benedict Green, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 60; Brian M. Nolan, *The Royal Son of God* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 137; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 86; Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 217; Jeannine K. Brown, "Genesis in Matthew," in *Genesis in the New Testament*, eds. Maarten J. J. Menke, and Steve Moyise (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 56.

that since Matthew only quotes verse 15, the author was not interested in the overall context of chapters 30–33 of Jeremiah, but only in the lament of Rachel.²⁴ In Matthew, Rachel is still crying, because despite what Jeremiah's poem indicates, she is not comforted. God's answer to this lament is not immediate.

4.3 Exodus

Unlike the quote from Jeremiah, there are no explicit links between the book of Exodus and Matthew 2. Here, intertextuality is about thematic allusions. Yet the relationship is so strong that some commentators believe that when Matthew wrote of the birth of Jesus, he was inspired by the aggadic stories of Moses' birth.²⁵ Certainly, the killing of children in Bethlehem echoes the massacre of the male Hebrew children by Pharaoh (Exod 1:15–22). Both stories feature a bloody tyrant and murdered newborns. The massacre of children in Matthew reminds the reader of the persecution in Egypt. There is definitely a typological relationship between Pharaoh and Herod, and between the children killed in Egypt and those slain in Bethlehem. Both narratives also speak of the birth of a hero who will save his people: Moses/Jesus.

4.4 An Overview of Biblical Intertextuality

Matt 2:16–18 echoes the massacre of the male Hebrew children by Pharaoh as well as the exiles to Assyria and Babylon. This passage allows the reader to remember the worst periods in Israel's history: moments characterized by violence, destruction, exile, death and lack of hope. All of these were caused by the violent actions of foreign empires. The issue of God's lack of intervention in these events sparks a

²⁴ Michael Knowles, *Jeremiah in Matthew's Gospel: The Rejected Prophet Motif in Matthean Redaction* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 42–52. A similar view is held by Barnabas Lindars who thinks that Matthew did not understand the positive context of Jer 31, in *New Testament Apologetic* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

²⁵ "The haggadic legends surrounding the birth and early life of Moses have determined the content of Matthew's source." W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I–VII* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 193. Also Renée Bloch, *Quelques Aspects de la Figure De Moïse dans la Tradition Rabinique* (Paris: Cahiers Sioniens, 1955); Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); John Dominic Crossan "Virgin Mother or Bastard Child?," *Hervormde theologiese studies* 59/3, (2003), 663–91. Roger David Aus, *Matthew 1–2 and the Virginal Conception: In Light of Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaic Traditions on the Birth of Israel's First Redeemer, Moses* (Lanham: Oxford University Press, 2004).

rich theological reflection. Surprisingly, several books of the Hebrew Bible interpret these very events as symbols of hope. The consoling and liberating presence of the Lord is brought forth during the most difficult moments. For example, chapter 40 of Isaiah describes how God frees and comforts his people in exile. Also, Exodus shows that the Lord frees the Hebrews from the tyrannical power of Egypt. In Matthew, this role is attributed to Jesus, who by his names is presented as Ἰησοῦ, the one who will save his people (Matt 1:21) and as Ἐμμενονοῦήλ, God with us (Matt 1:23).

5 Effects of Matthew 2:16–18

5.1 Original Audience

The Gospel of Matthew was written for subjects of the Roman Empire. Warren Carter and others have shown that this gospel demonstrates a critical attitude toward the empire.²⁶ The original audience²⁷ could identify with the people of Bethlehem and with Rachel's tears. Jewish Christians who had been forced into exile because of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE would probably consider Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Herod in this narrative in relation to their desire to subvert Rome's oppressive power.²⁸ Matthew's gospel asks: "Who is the real king, Herod or Jesus? The emperor or the Christ?" Reading this narrative with the emotional force of its intertextual links may have led its first audience to reflect on their own world and how it needed to change.²⁹

26 Warren Carter, "Matthew and Empire" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, (2005), 86–91; Warren Carter, "Matthew's Gospel: An Anti-Imperial/Imperial Reading," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34, (2007), 424–33.

27 With sensitivity to political questions, today's competent readers can come to this interpretation. It is only reasonable to assume that first century Christians and Jews drew the same conclusions too.

28 The reflection on Matthew's original audience has generated many scholarly propositions. Although there are many different opinions, there is a consensus that Matthew's first audience was post 70 CE and composed of people who would see themselves as both followers of Christ and members of Israel. See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 45–60.

29 See Eugene Eung Chun Park, who shows the tragic massacre as a form of criticism of the abuse of imperial power: "Matthew's citation of Jer 31:15 in conjunction with Herod's infanticide would have evoked in the minds of the Jewish Christian audience, who directly or indirectly would have experienced another fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, a highly complex set of emotions." Eugene Eung Chun Park, "Rachel's Cry for Her Children: Matthew's Treatment of the Infanticide by Herod," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, (2013), 482.

5.2 Modern Responses

As explained at the beginning of this paper, intertextuality is not only about the past. Contemporary responses to Matt 2:16–18 must also be considered.³⁰ Many of these question God's responsibility in the Bethlehem massacre. A reader who identifies with the slaughtered children, or with their mothers, may question the image of God doing nothing to prevent this act of violence and even seeming to be a cause of it.³¹ This question is asked by authors as early as John Chrysostom, but becomes more acute in modern writings.³² Here are two quotes: one from George Nicol, an exegete, and the other from a philosopher, Albert Camus.³³ According to Nicol: "This is perhaps the most shocking story in the New Testament."³⁴ While Camus had the following to say:

The children of Judea massacred while his parents were taking him to a safe place – why did they die if not because of him? Those blood-spattered soldiers, those infants cut in two filled him with horror. But given the man he was, I am sure he could not forget them. And as for that sadness that can be felt in his every act, wasn't it the incurable melancholy of a man who heard night after night the voice of Rachel weeping for her children and refusing all comfort? The lamentation would rend the night, Rachel would call her children who had been killed for him, and he was still alive!³⁵

30 Instead of trying to identify the implied reader or other notions that do not take into account real readers, I prefer to point to specific examples of modern interpretations of this text to understand its effects.

31 Sharon Betsworth conducted an interesting study of real women reading Matt 2: "Our first impression of Matthew 2 was that the storytelling lacks any degree of emotion. We struggle with the matter-of-fact manner in which the narrative was recounted." I think that a lack of biblical knowledge prevented these women from fully appreciating the intertextual connections surrounding the figure of Rachel. As this paper demonstrates, Rachel's weeping adds an emotional aspect to Matthew's story. Sharon Betsworth, "The Child and Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 1, (2010), 1–14.

32 "Herod, thou hast full well deprived of excuse, and proved him blood-thirsty; but thou hast not yet solved the question about the injustice of what took place. For if he did unjustly, wherefore did God permit it?" John Chrysostom (1888). "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel according to St. Matthew", in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. George Prevost and M. B. Riddle, (New York: Christian Literature Company), 56.

33 Another reflection on divine injustice can be read in E. Frank Tupper, "The Bethlehem Massacre – Christology against Providence," *Review and Expositor* 88, (1991), 399–418.

34 George G. Nicol, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," *Expository Times* 97, no. 2 (1985), 55–6.

35 Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Vintage, 1957), 112–3. Quoted in Frederick M. Strickert, "Rachel on the Way: A Model of Faith in Times of Transition," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34, (2007), 444–52.

Why does God ignore and abandon the other families of Bethlehem? Rachel's weeping emphasizes the tragic side of the massacre in Bethlehem. Why is it that God only saves one child? The horror caused by the violence against innocent children leaves the reader with a feeling of injustice.

For Ulrich Luz and George Nicol, Matthew does not share the reaction of injustice that contemporary readers experience.³⁶ According to them, the narrator does not raise the question of theodicy regarding the role of God in the suffering of innocent children. The injustice we feel is not commented on by the narrator. In fact, to find answers to the question of the apparent injustice of God, I believe that the reader must continue his or her careful reading of the rest of the Matthew's gospel.

5.2.1 Retreat and Return as a Response to the Question of Divine Injustice

In an excellent article, Richard Erikson presents the theme of withdrawal [ἀναχωρέω] as a way to understand the divine answer to violence.³⁷ In the story of the Exodus, Moses takes refuge ([ἀνεχώρησεν] in LXX) in Midian (Exod 2:15). Moses identifies with the people and their suffering, and ultimately returns to save them. In Matt 2 there is a connection between Jesus and the people with the quotation of Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called my son," which speaks of Israel in its original context. Jesus, representing his exiled people, returns to the land of Israel after the death of Herod (Matt 2:19–20). For the reader, this return from exile contrasts with the exile mentioned in the genealogy (Matt 1:11–12) and in the Jeremiah quotation (Matt 2:18). According to Erikson, this interpretation allows for an initial reply to the injustice. The children who died at the hands of the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians are no more, just like those of Bethlehem. Nevertheless, they are represented by Jesus, who returns to the land of Israel. Erikson's solution to the injustice felt by the contemporary reader is that with the return of Jesus, children are symbolically restored. Nevertheless, as a reader of the gospel, this only partially satisfies me.

³⁶ "It does not bother Matthew that God saves his Son at the expense of innocent people." Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 121. Also George G. Nicol, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," *Expository Times* 97, no. 2, (1985), 55–56.

³⁷ Richard J. Erikson, "Divine Injustice? Matthew's Narrative Strategy and the Slaughter of the Innocents (Matthew 2:13–23)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (1996), 5–27.

5.2.2 The Execution of Jesus as Subversion of Imperial Violence

When we continue to read the gospel, we see that the connection between Jesus and the people is such that he died in the same way as the children of Bethlehem: murder at the hands of the politico-religious authorities of Jerusalem. Jesus identifies with the suffering of the people. The one who had escaped the violence of Bethlehem comes back and suffers from that same violence, but he subverts it. His suffering and death allow an unexpected break in the cycle of violence perpetrated by his opponents.

Political and religious authorities in Jerusalem succeeded in killing Jesus. He died just like the Bethlehem children did. However, since God raised Jesus from the dead, symbolically the children can also be seen as having been raised with him. Jesus was executed by the imperial powers who had been pursuing him since birth. His resurrection subverted the power of the empire. As Warren Carter wrote:

If Jesus' crucifixion is the apparent victory of the ruling elite, a display of its ultimate power to take the life of those who resist it, His resurrection is God's victory, a revelation of the limits of Roman imperial power that can't keep Jesus dead, and a display of the empire's vulnerability to God's life-giving purposes.³⁸

Rachel weeping for the death of her children presents an image that readers can associate with the mothers who witness the crucifixion of Jesus: "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (Matt 27:55–56). In this passage, no emotion is attributed to the mothers, but Rachel's lament may still linger in the readers' ears as they reflect upon these two horrifying texts. In the following chapter, these mothers came to the tomb to mourn their loss. They found that the tomb was empty and they left with "fear" and great "joy" (28:8). A reader who identifies with these mothers can follow the story and feel the same emotions. Even though Rachel refused to be consoled, these women were moved from death to joy.³⁹

³⁸ Warren Carter, "Matthew and Empire," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, no. 3 (2005), 87.

³⁹ To explore the image of wailing women serves as a powerful symbol of survival. See Juliana Claasen, "The Image of the Wailing Woman and the Task of the Feminist Theologian: With Special Attention to the Role of Lament in the Book of Matthew," in *Ragbag Theologies: Essays in Honour of Denise Ackermann, a Feminist Theologian of Praxis*, eds. M. Pillay, S. Nadar and C. Le Bruyns (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2009), 193–204.

In a cognitivist interpretation of Matthew, Jesus' resurrection can be seen as a "surprise."⁴⁰ Chapter 28 with its unexpected reversal invites the readers to go back and rethink the whole narrative they just finished reading. We are moved to reread the story, to see how places of death could also be indicators of new and unexpected life.

Herod's plan to kill the child messiah and his massacre of innocent children also finds resonance in other images of violence in Matthew's gospel. I have chosen to focus on the death and resurrection reversal because of the importance of its effect during a sequential reading. Cognitive psychology notes the importance of primacy and recency effects.

The reader retains the meanings constructed initially to whatever extent possible, but the text causes them to be modified or replaced. The literary text, then, exploits the "powers" of the primacy effect, but ordinarily it sets up a mechanism to oppose them, giving rise, rather, to a recency effect. Its terminal point, the point at which all the words which have hitherto remained "open" are sealed, is the decisive one.⁴¹

Attention to the beginning and the end of the narrative is thus very important. The resurrection works as a reversal, a surprise (in the cognitive sense)⁴² that makes the reader reassess his earlier ways of understanding the narrative. This reversal is the turning point of Matthew's gospel. It produces significant effects in the context of a sequential reading, much more than other accounts of violence in the narratives. However, the understanding of other accounts of violence (especially apocalyptic violence)⁴³ in the narrative is also reconsidered by readers when they read the resurrection reversal.

40 "Surprise, whether mild or sharp, local or plot-length, actional or cross-level, is an index of false understanding and a belated call for realignment; the rise of curiosity signals that the past has been deformed into alternative formations; suspense throws us forward to the opacity of the future. Although different in thrust, all involve the construction of rival hypotheses with which to fill in the gaps opened up by the sequence about the world's affairs and whatever attaches to them by nature or art, which in narrative means everything." Meir Sternberg "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity," *Poetics Today* 13, (1992), 531–32.

41 Menakhem Perry, "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates Its Meanings," *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1–2, (1979), 57.

42 Meir Sternberg "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity," *Poetics Today* 13, (1992), 531–2.

43 David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

6 Intertextuality Continues

As readers, we are also motivated to rethink our way of understanding the world in which we live. Rachel weeping is an image that goes beyond the agony of the survivors of Bethlehem's massacre. She gave a voice to all tragedies in the history of Israel, and still today she can be heard when words are an insufficient response to a painful situation. The metaphorical image of Rachel weeping has inspired responses to the Holocaust;⁴⁴ abortions;⁴⁵ infertility and miscarriages;⁴⁶ various problems affecting women and children;⁴⁷ the Vietnam war;⁴⁸ Rwanda's genocide;⁴⁹ people killed by the military junta in Argentina;⁵⁰ malnutrition in Argentinian children;⁵¹ young protesters killed in the Congo;⁵² war in general;⁵³ mass shootings in US schools (Columbine,⁵⁴ Sandy Hook⁵⁵);

44 K. Thieme, "Auschwitz und Bethlehem", *Kairos* 4, (1962), 133–4.

45 John W. Montgomery, *Slaughter of the Innocents* (Westchester: Cornerstone, 1981); Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," *Fundamentalist Journal* 2, (1983), 21–2, and Jane Vajnar, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," *Transformation* 3, (1986), 19–20.

46 Millicent C. Feske, "Rachel's Lament: The Impact of Infertility and Pregnancy Loss upon the Religious Faith of Ordinary Christians," *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* 22, (2012), 3–17.

47 J.B. Campbell and Centre for Development and Population Activities, "Justice for Rachel's children." *Interfaith Reflections on Women, Poverty and Population* (1996), 95–101. This article discusses women and children hurt by budget cuts; sexual exploitation; undernourishment; poverty; child labour; teenage pregnancy, and deprivation. The sex ratio is very imbalanced in South and West Asia and China. The plight of missing girls reminds the author of Rachel's lament.

48 J.R. Nelson, "O Little Town of Phuvinh," *Christian Century* 84, (1967), 1619–20; W. Beach, "Advent amid the Slaughter of the Innocents," *Christianity and Crisis* 29, (1969): 322–3.

49 Michel S. Kamanzi, "Rwanda: Quelle réconciliation?," *Études* (2004), 584.

50 Néstor O. Míguez, "The Holy Innocents," in *Global perspectives on the New Testament*, ed. Mark Roncace (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2014), 7–8.

51 M. Lais Tourn, "When Wailing and Loud Lamentation is Prophecy," *Reformed World* 53, no. 1, (2003), 14–16.

52 "C'est Rachel qui pleure et ne veut pas être consolé," n.p. (accessed 10 December 2015), available online, <http://evecheinongo.blogspot.ca/2015/01/cest-rachel-qui-pleure-et-ne-veut-pas.html>.

53 J. Forest, "How Far to Bethlehem?" *The Otherside* 153, (1984), 12–3.

54 Darrell Scott, Beth Nimmo and Steve Rabey, *Rachel's Tears: The Spiritual Journey of Columbine Martyr Rachel Scott* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000).

55 Mike Lux, "Rachel's Lament," n.p. (accessed 18 March 2013); available online, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-lux/rachels-lament_b_2315429.html; Lorenzo Albacete, "Sandy Hook/Slaughter of Innocents," n.p. (accessed 18 March 2013); available online, <http://www.ilsussidiario.net/News/English-Spoken-Here/Culture-Religion-Science/2012/12/19/SANDY-HOOK-Slaughter-of-Innocents/348597/>; Barry H. Corey, "O Little Town of Newtown," n.p. (accessed 18 March 2013) available online, <http://offices1.biola.edu/president/communications/2012/dec/20/o-little-town-newtown/>.

homeless families,⁵⁶ and child poverty.⁵⁷ These articles were written by scholars, pastors, journalists and civil authorities who were asked to comment on the tragedies. All of them show that Rachel's weeping is an essential reference for injustice and violence wherever and whenever they occur. Imperialism has changed in 2000 years, but injustice and violence remain present in many forms.

6.1 What is our Responsibility?

Atrocities and injustice are unfortunately still present in our world. Children are being killed by military groups such as Boko Haram in Africa, and youth are targeted by terrorists such as in the recent attack in Paris. Other examples include the life and death of refugees like Aylan Kurdi. If we wonder why God did not stop Bethlehem's massacre, we can also turn the question around and ask ourselves if we are guilty of the same crime when we close our borders to refugees. How can we attribute divine guilt when we ourselves are doing nothing to prevent injustice and death? Thus, the reading of Matt 2:16–18 and its intertextual references can generate a response for greater social justice. From reader response, we then move toward reader responsibility.

6.2 From Death Comes New Life

I conclude with a touching story told by Paul Tillich, that reminds us that the new life of the Messiah can arise only from a place of death.

In the Nuremburg War Crime Trials, a witness appeared who had lived for a time in a grave in a Jewish graveyard in Wilna, Poland. It was the only place he, and many others, could live, when in hiding after they had escaped the gas chamber. During this time he wrote poetry, and one of the poems was a description of a birth. In a grave nearby, a young woman gave birth to a boy. The 80-year-old gravedigger, wrapped in a linen shroud, assisted. When the newborn child uttered his first cry, the old man prayed: "Great God, hast Thou finally sent the Messiah to us? For who else than the Messiah Himself can be born in a grave?" But after three days, the poet saw the child sucking his mother's tears because she had no milk for him.⁵⁸

56 Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Crown, 1988).

57 Douglas W. Oldenburg, "Remembering Rachel's Tears: Lament," *Church and Society* 91, no. 5 (2001), 153–9.

58 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1948), 165.

The Gospel narratives are so often commented on and repeated that they seem to have lost their power to transform. At Christmas, we prefer to focus on the joy of the magi (Matt 2:10) instead of entering into the deep distress related to the birth of Jesus. Similarly, at Easter Jesus' tomb is often just a quick passage on our way to the triumph of his resurrection. Yet it is only in places of death that hope may rise in a new life, whether in Egypt, Babylon, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Paris or Wilna.

There are many elements that could not be addressed in the context of this brief article. The importance of the feminine aspect of Rachel's image as a way to decenter male hegemony in its various forms (sexual, military, political, and religious) has been explored by Elaine Mary Wainwright,⁵⁹ but could be re-examined in Matthew's narrative as a whole. I chose to understand Matt 2:16–18 in light of the astonishing reversal at the end of the gospel, but another option would be to examine how the genealogy, and in particular the mothers it mentions, prepare the reader to interpret the image of Rachel weeping for her children. In such an analysis, the key could be to follow Schaberg's point of view that the women included in Jesus' origins had to take matters in their own hands and did not benefit from divine intervention.⁶⁰ A study of Matthew's quote of Jeremiah could also be undertaken in light of the other Hebrew Bible quotations in Matt 1–2.⁶¹ Finally, a resistant reader could further propose a deconstructive reading of Matthew's gospel, focusing on Rachel's refusal to be consoled. I do not contend that the interpretations offered in this article are the final word on the question. On the contrary, I am well aware that Matthew 2:16–18 opens many questions that will likely always remain open. It is important that the ambiguities in narratives are preserved, as they propel readers into quests of the sort described in this article.

In this article, I presented Rachel weeping as an emotionally charged image that somehow merges two opposites: hope and sorrow. The intertextuality of this figure can influence the readers' worldview, encouraging them to criticize imperial ideologies that have used violence against innocent people in the past, and oppose those which do so currently.

⁵⁹ Elaine Mary Wainwright, "Rachel Weeping for Her Children: Intertextuality and the Biblical Testaments – a Feminist Approach," in *Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies*, eds. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 452–69.

⁶⁰ Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

⁶¹ See Bernard Crow's proposition to highlight a reversal in interpreting these quotations: "Fulfillment in Matthew as Eschatological Reversal," *Westminster Theological Journal* 75, (2013): 111–27.

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