Welcome back. For the fifth day of Christmas, I am 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 the text and within these events.

If you look at Matthew 2, you will see two key 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.” This is a citation from Micah 5:2. The second is found in verse 18: “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, if we look back at Micah 5, we will see that the character of Rachel is there. In this immediate context, in Matthew, we do not see the character of Rachel in the citation. But the person who knew the story or who knew the text of Micah 5 and its surroundings well would have discerned that character lying behind all that is said here. If you go back to Micah 4:6ff, you read,

In that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame. I will gather the outcast and those whom I have afflicted; I will make the lame a remnant, and the outcast a strong nation, so the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion, from now, even forever. And you, O Tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, even the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem. Now, why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in your midst? Has your counselor perished? For pangs have seized you like a woman in labor. Be in pain, and labor to bring forth, oh 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 is a significant passage because the character who is in view here is Rachel. In verse 8, there is a reference to the “tower of the flock”—*Migdal Eder*. If you go back to Genesis 35, you read:

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 labor. Now, it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, 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 Eder [or the ‘tower of the flock’].

As you look within the text of Micah, you will see references to specific places—important places—Migdal Eder, 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—the threat of the Assyrians and the threat of captivity in Babylon as well. Yet that threat of death is accompanied by a promise of new birth; 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 labor has given birth. Then the remnant of his brethren shall return to the children of Israel, and he shall stand and feed his flock…

The significance of this is found in the woman, the connection with the places, the struggling in childbirth, the connection between kingship and this child, and the twinning themes of death and birth. 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 is named “son of my right hand,” in 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 Judges 19 and the chapters that follow. There are allusions to Rachel at that point. There are allusions to Laban’s house, tarrying for an excessive length of time with the father-in-law. And these help us to see something of the significance of what is going on. This child 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.

This text, from Micah 5:2—although in the citation in Matthew 2, it does not explicitly mention Rachel—has Rachel in the background. She is there within the original text. It is her struggle in childbirth. The immediate verse after it is about the one who had been given up until she who is in labor has given birth. So, these events are deeply charged with significance—typological significance—when associated with the events of Rachel’s death and the birth of Benjamin.

The second quotation is found in Matthew 2:18. And this mentions another significant place, Ramah, which, again, is associated with Rachel’s death on the road to Bethlehem. And in this location, the voice is 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. We have, once again, Rachel—this figure from Israel’s history, a tragic figure at this point, associated with death, and the seeming death of her child. Rachel had two children: Joseph and Benjamin. And these two figures are associated with near death, whether that is the tribe of Benjamin, which is almost wiped out at the end of Judges, or whether it is Joseph, who is presumed killed by his father, but seemingly lost to slavery in the land of Egypt. We also have the events of Benjamin’s birth, which is associated with sorrow and pangs. It all 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 woman with child, and the one who labors 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.

Now, that is 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 is in this context, straight after that, that it references the voice of Rachel weeping for her children because they are no more. And there is an immediate response to that. In Jeremiah 31:16ff:

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,’… 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,” “Out of Egypt I called my son”—these are themes that are richly present within the text of Matthew. Matthew 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 is immediately what we hear afterwards the reference to Rachel’s weeping in Matthew.

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.

The character of Rachel lies behind this story—the character of this mother of Joseph and Benjamin—and the tragic events that are associated with the birth of Benjamin, with Rachel’s death. There is this sorrow which hangs over the story of Israel, the story of a mother who seems bereft, this mother who’s died in childbirth, when all seems futile. And here we have this story evoked once more. But it is evoked in the context of promise. It is evoked in the context of this child that will restore Israel’s fortunes.

This is the return of Israel to its borders. This is the one who is the true shepherd that was promised in Micah 5:2. Here is 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 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 1 and 2 Samuel, and which are present within the prophets, in Micah, and Jeremiah, and elsewhere—that these lie beneath the surface of the text of Matthew. And as Matthew helps us to see these things—if we read Matthew in the light of these echoes, and these evoked stories—we will 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.

The firstborn son is going to be established. The shepherd of the people is going to be brought out. The youngest, the one who is weakest, the one from the smallest of his brethren is going to come forth. And it is going to be the small town of Bethlehem, Ephrath, Migdal Eder, and all these places that are charged with deep memory in Israel—the memory of the death of the matriarch. It will be in that site, the site where the children are seemingly lost, that there will be a restoration, that things will be made whole. The Son will come to birth, there will be the shepherd who is born, and he will lead His people.