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The Tomb of Rachel

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What may appear to be a simple and unimportant subject can give excellent principles of teaching to show how some traditions may be essential factors in biblical understanding.

Many people today feel that traditional teachings are unimportant in comprehending the doctrines of the Bible. Yet this was not the belief of the biblical writers. Traditions were held in high esteem on some occasions. And while it must be admitted that the traditions (whether historical, geographical, or even doctrinal ones) were not always true, they were often accorded high respect in the apostolic period. The question of Rachel's tomb is an example of this.

The New Testament mentioned the killing of the children of Bethlehem near the time of our Lord's nativity. Matthew said it was a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy about Rachel weeping for her children.

"Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, 'In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation; and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.'"

• *Matthew 2:17-18*

Matthew placed the geographic fulfillment of this prophecy to the village of Bethlehem. Yet Jeremiah said it was associated with another village called Rama. Rama (mentioned many times in the Old Testament) was not located at or near Bethlehem. In fact, Bethlehem is situated five miles south of Jerusalem within the tribe of Judah, while the Rama of the prophecy was five miles north in the tribe of Benjamin. And the Bible shows that Rachel was buried near Rama. Yet, contrary to Old Testament indications, Matthew seems to put the repose of Rachel close to the village of Bethlehem.

Why did Matthew do this? The answer can provide an excellent lesson to all of us. It can show a principle of interpretation that could better help us to understand the scriptural revelation.

Where Was Rachel Buried?

Rachel's original tomb was not located at or near Bethlehem. Let us look at the evidence that makes this certain.

Jacob came to Bethel with Rachel while she was in an advanced state of pregnancy. While all the other eleven sons of Israel were born in Mesopotamia, Rachel was to give birth to her last son in the land of Palestine while they were encamped near the central highway, just south of the city of Bethel.

“And they journeyed from Bethel; and there was but a little way to come to Ephrath; and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labor ...

And Rachel died, and was buried in the way [near the highway] to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day. And Israel [Jacob] journeyed, and spread his tent beyond the tower of Edar [the tower of the flock].”

• **Genesis 35:16, 19–21**

Notice that Jacob proceeded southward beyond **“the tower of Edar”** after burying Rachel. In Micah 4:8, the location of this “tower” is shown to be at Mount Zion in Jerusalem. This reference means that Rachel was buried somewhere south of Bethel but north of Jerusalem. She was entombed on the side of the road to Ephrath [Bethlehem]. The original Hebrew does not mean her sepulcher was **“a little way”** from Bethlehem,¹ but there was **“still some little distance to go.”** This is what the original actually means. To put it plainly, it shows there was “quite a little distance to go to reach Bethlehem.” This indicates that Rachel must have been buried several miles north of Jerusalem and even further from Bethlehem (probably a little more than ten miles north of Bethlehem). The narrative in Genesis 35:16 (repeated in Genesis 48:7) makes this plain.

Further Evidence

There is more information to show this to be true. About 600 years after Jacob, certain historical events occurred in the vicinity of Rachel’s tomb that clearly pinpoint its location as being north of Jerusalem and somewhere not far from Bethel.

Saul (who later became King Saul, Israel’s first monarch) was born in Gibeah, a city of Benjamin. This city was situated about four miles north of Jerusalem and five miles south of Bethel. His father’s donkeys had become lost and Saul, with a companion, went north from Gibeah looking for them.

“He passed through Mount Ephraim [the region in the north quarter of Benjamin and in southern Ephraim]. ... And when they were come to Zuph [in Ephraim, see 1 Samuel 1:1] Saul said to his servant with him, ‘Come, let us return [back to Gibeah]; lest my father leave carrying for the asses, and take thought for us.’”

• **1 Samuel 9:4–5**

They then went to the prophet Samuel for advice. Samuel informed them that the animals had been found. Then the prophet anointed him to be the future leader of Israel. To confirm this prophesied kingship, Samuel told Saul to return south to his home at Gibeah. But on the journey he would meet two men **“by Rachel’s sepulcher in the border of Benjamin”** (1 Samuel 10:2). From there he was to go to **“the hill of God”** (Bethel) and prophesy with the men resorting to that holy place (Samuel 10:3–13).

This information shows that Rachel’s tomb was situated near the border of Benjamin (in this case it was Benjamin’s northern border) and not too far from Bethel. This area is clearly 9 to 10 miles north of Jerusalem, and is even further north from Bethlehem.

The Witness of Jeremiah

We can come even closer to the location of Rachel’s sepulcher by reading Jeremiah. He told us that Rachel was weeping for the children in association with the village of Ramah (Jeremiah 31:15).

¹ This is how the Revised Standard Version translates it, along with the New English Bible. *ELM*

This makes it plain that Rachel was buried nearer the Benjamite town of Ramah than any other. It probably means her tomb was a short distance north of Ramah but not far enough to locate it in another township. This means that Rachel's tomb was nowhere near Bethlehem. Indeed, it was not even situated in the tribe of Judah. All of the Old Testament references make this clear.

Why Did Matthew Place the Prophecy in the Wrong Location?

We now come to one of the most interesting aspects of the whole story. Matthew, who was certainly aware of the Old Testament teachings about the burial place of Rachel, deliberately changed the fulfillment of the prophecy to another location. This may not seem proper on the surface, but let us first look at a few facts which may explain why he did it.

Really, it was the Jewish people themselves who changed the location of Rachel's "tomb" before the time of Matthew. Note what happened there. The land of Palestine, along with its civilization which existed from the time of Jacob and Saul to the time of Jeremiah, were destroyed by the Babylonians on such a scale that many cities, villages, ancient landmarks, etc., had been completely obliterated. The land remained in desolation almost seventy years. When the Jews returned from Babylon after their long period of captivity, they found themselves unable to identify some of the ancient sites that existed before the desolation.

"Many towns were destroyed at the beginning of the sixth century B.C. and never again occupied; others were destroyed at that time and partly reoccupied at some later date; still others were destroyed and reoccupied after a long period of abandonment

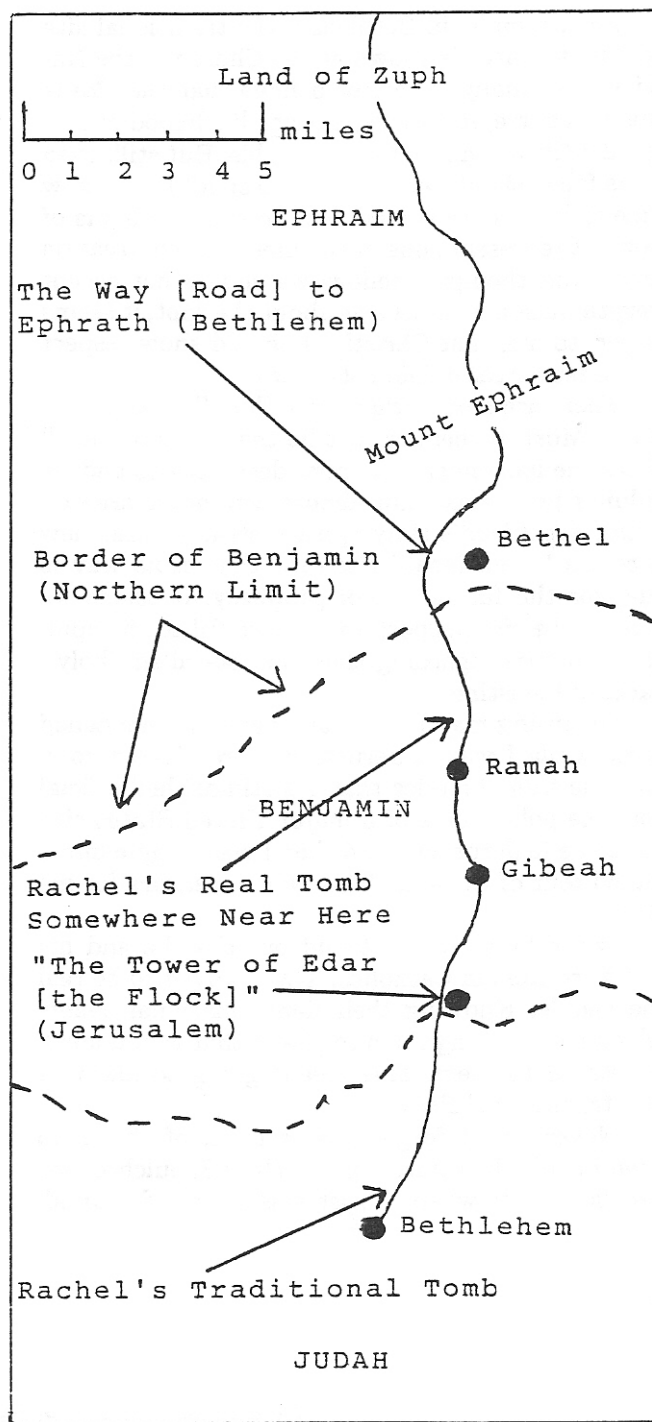
There is not a single known case where a town of Judah proper was continuously occupied through the exile period."

• William F. Albright,
The Archaeology of Palestine, pp. 41-42

This description accords well with the prophecies of Ezekiel about Jerusalem and the land of Israel.

"For I will lay the land most desolate, and the pomp of her strength shall cease; and the mountain of Israel shall be desolate, that none shall pass through."

• *Ezekiel 33:28*



If no one was to pass through the mountain country of Palestine for many decades, it is no wonder that some of the ancient sites (especially if they were small as Rachel's tomb must have been) were never located again.

During the seventy years' absence from the land, the exact location of Rachel's sepulcher became lost to the Jewish people. However, the Jews still had the Bible which said that Jacob buried Rachel in a place near the main road from Bethel to Ephrath [Bethlehem]. Not finding any remnants to the original tomb (wherever it was), the later Jews decided to raise up a monument to her honor near Bethlehem. It was quite acceptable to do such things in those days. The later Jews also erected a monument [a cenotaph] to King David in the upper city of Jerusalem, several hundred yards away from where David was actually buried.² Also, King Herod, though buried in the Herodion (some 8 miles south of Jerusalem), was also given a monument in Jerusalem to commemorate his reign. Even today, we raise up memorials to our war dead, and these can be seen in city after city over the land, yet those members of the armed forces were not buried at the site of the memorial.

So it must have been with the memorial to Rachel. In Christ's time, the "sepulcher" was relocated about 10 or 12 miles south of where it originally stood. This new site did not deter Matthew from applying the prophecy of Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children to this memorial area. Even to this day, the place of "Rachel's tomb" is found in the same place on the main road from Jerusalem about one mile north of the center of Bethlehem.

What Does This Mean For Us?

Is it not interesting that the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to pick a traditional location for the fulfillment of prophecy rather than the real place? Since this is the case, it may have some teaching for us. Look at it this way. I have escorted many students over the area of Palestine. Though well meaning, some have tended to scoff at the traditional sites where biblical events supposedly took place. Since most of the students were well aware that many of the sites cannot be true, the tendency to ridicule them was sometimes there. And I am not blaming the students for this because at one time I tended to do the same as well.

For example, in Bethlehem the traditional site for Christ's birth is shown at the Church of the Nativity. Personally, I cannot believe that the site is true. Of course it may be, but the likelihood of precise identification is very improbable. But still, even if it is false, should we ridicule the spot? I have now come to believe we should not. To many millions of people it represents one of the most sacred areas on earth. And though I believe we should not accept everything someone tells us about the spot, it seems proper, to me, that Christians should show respect, at least for the opinion of others.

There are many other such "holy" sites in Palestine. Most of them cannot be the true sites at all (Palestine has undergone more destructions and rebuilding programs than almost any other area on earth), but if God's Holy Spirit instructed Matthew to pick a "traditional" site (one that in no way is true) for the fulfillment of prophecy, it seems we ought to be circumspect and respectful to the opinions of others regarding the other so-called "holy" places of Palestine.

In closing let me relate an event that happened to me while I was in Jerusalem. I received a communiqué from America that a distinguished official from the police force of a major United States city was to be in Jerusalem and that I was to give him a guided tour of the area. This was a pleasure for me to do.

² Actually, it was King Herod (after his disastrous and deadly attempt to pillage David's sepulcher) who erected a cenotaph at the entrance to King David's Tomb. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 16:181–182:

“However, he [King Herod] had a great desire to make a more diligent search, and to go farther in, even as far as the very bodies of David and Solomon, where two of his guards were slain, by a flame that burst out upon those who went in, as the report was. So he was terribly frightened, and went out, and built a propitiatory monument of that fright he had been in; and this of white stone, at the mouth of the sepulchre, and that at great expense also.”

When he arrived I found out that he and his wife were Roman Catholics. They proved to be real fine people. Knowing their denominational beliefs helped me in taking them to places that would mean something to them. This meant going to many of the “traditional” sites.

Never will I forget the reaction of this man when he left the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (the traditional site where Christ was crucified, buried, and resurrected). Tears of respect were streaming down his face. I did not have the heart to tell him that the place may not be the correct one (~~on the other hand, it is quite possible that it could be~~).³ In talking to him later, I found that it was not so much the place that was “holy” to him. It was far more than that. He said he was reflecting on the things that happened to Christ almost 2000 years ago. This caused the man to show respect. Indeed, if it helped him to love Christ more, what was wrong in the place that inspired it? And as for me (since that time and knowing how the Holy Spirit selected even a “traditional” site for the fulfillment of prophecy), I have held respect for those areas too even when I know they are not the right places.

Do not get me wrong, though. I sincerely believe there is not an ounce of salvation attached to any of the places (and more than half of them are no doubt in the wrong place),⁴ but I show concern to them because other people do. Really, it means I am showing respect to people, not so-called holy areas.

It must be admitted, however, that there is a tendency for mankind to venerate physical areas too much. Some even idolize them. This is very wrong. This was no doubt why God ordered the burial place of Moses to be secreted so that people would not worship the area as a “holy” spot:

“So Moses the servant of YHWH died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of YHWH. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: but no man knows of his sepulchre unto this day.”

• **Deuteronomy 34:5–6**

But simple traditional areas may not be wrong at all. Let us recall that Matthew was instructed to move the fulfillment of an important prophecy to the “traditional” sepulcher (nowhere near the original one which was long ago destroyed). If the Holy Spirit has done this, perhaps we ought to show a more general respect (not worship) of the other “traditional” sites in the Holyland. Perhaps it may allow all of us to be more kind and respectful to others. If this is the result, it can’t help but be a good thing.

Ernest L. Martin, 1977

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³ Dr. Martin’s research after 1977 demonstrated that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher could not possibly be the site of Christ’s crucifixion. This is the subject of Dr. Martin’s book *Secrets of Golgotha: The Lost History of Jesus’ Crucifixion*, 2nd ed., (Portland, OR: ASK Publications, 1996). Jesus was crucified on the Mount of Olives. Dr. Martin came to understand that the site is likely the sepulcher of John Hyrcanus, a Jewish national hero, ruler, and Jewish High Priest of the 2nd century BC. “DWS

⁴ Dr. Martin came to understand that much more than half of the sites are incorrect, and that indeed almost none are the correct site. In other words, traditional sites are usually wrong unless biblical identifiers still exist. On pages 403–404 of *Secrets of Golgotha*, Dr. Martin wrote about erroneous sites:

“I have no religious interest in holy places on earth. Such things are only of archaeological and historical relevance to me. Though I take pleasure in visiting them (and even honoring them because others do), they are only of academic interest to me. Still, the true sites contain a great deal of spiritual symbolism associated with them. In my view, it is important to determine the actual locations of these geographical spots since such symbolism can provide us of modern times a better comprehension of the messages in the Gospel. ... From my point of view, I see no reason why these two [erroneous] sites cannot be honored and respected as memorials for Jesus’ burial and resurrection. There may be biblical evidence to allow this. In the time of Jesus even the Tomb of Rachel was located just outside Bethlehem (where it is still situated to this day), but the Old Testament makes it clear that her actual tomb was at least ten miles north of Bethlehem. I have explained this in detail in a research paper titled “The Tomb of Rachel.”