

## Rachel Weeping: Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the Fortress Tomb

Fred Strickert



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Rachel's story is one of the great dramas of the Old Testament. It begins with a passionate love story 'the shepherdess meets Jacob at the well and he is moved to weep and kiss her. So great is Jacob's love for Rachel that he works seven years for her hand in marriage and then, tricked into marrying her sister Leah, he works another seven years for Rachel. After years of heartbreaking barrenness, Rachel gives birth to Joseph. While giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, Rachel dies on the way to the family's new home. She is buried there beside the road, not in the family tomb. The very nature of Rachel's burial site means she will be a dramatic figure weeping for the Israelites as they are led into captivity by the Babylonians, and again for the children massacred by Herod after Jesus ' birth.

It is this on-the-way character of Rachel that marks her story and the monument outside Bethlehem where Christian, Jewish, and Muslim worshipers remember her. The monument is tangled in questions of historical authenticity and sectarian struggle. For centuries it has been passed by, recorded in diaries, worn by earthquakes and neglect, and embellished by members from al three traditions. Finally, in the early twenty-first century, it has been surrounded by a wall, cut off from the very road that brought pilgrims by for so many years. Yet pilgrims continue to gather, and women come to pray for the blessing of childbirth. In *Rachel Weeping*, Fred Strickert takes the reader on a journey into the nature and significance of Rachel's story and the story of her tomb. With meticulous scholarship and a clear sense of how the monument fits into the current history of the Middle East, Strickert tells the story of Rachel, the woman on the way.

*Fred Strickert is Professor of Religion at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. He is the author of* Bethsaida: Home of the Apostles (*Liturgical Press*).

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