

The Location of the Tomb of Rachel

Topics: The History of Jacob and Rachel

Rachel's Tomb is Located Near Ramah

Arguments For and Against Her Tomb Being Near Bethlehem

The Actual Reason that Most Scholars Place Rachel's Tomb Near Bethlehem

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A Picture of Rachel's Tomb

Preface: There is some disagreement as to the location of the tomb of Rachel, Jacob's wife and true love. ZPEB tells us that *Many scholars think that the Bible presents two divergent traditions with regard to the site of the grave.*¹ Basically, the two views are that Rachel's tomb is either on the northern border of Benjamin, about 10 miles north of Jerusalem; or, that it is to be found very close to Ephrath. The second location is the inaccurate one which should be borne out by a careful examination of the pertinent passages.

1. Most of you recall the story of Jacob and Rachel. Jacob fell in love with this woman and worked for seven years for her father in order to marry Rachel. Rachel's father, Laban, a chiseler just like Jacob, substituted her older sister, Leah, for Rachel. Jacob did not know until the next day. He still loved Rachel and he worked for an additional seven years for Rachel. Jacob's two wives and two mistresses (their personal servants) provided him with 11 male children and 1 female. Only one child, the youngest, was by Rachel. They left Laban's ranch after working for Laban for twenty years. His oldest children were in their late teens or early 20's (see Gen. 34). Then Rachel, Jacob's only true love of his four women, became pregnant again and went into severe labor. At the time, they were living in Bethel, so named because God spoke to Jacob there and most assume that this is the Bethel which is in northern Benjamin, on the border of Benjamin and Ephraim. Jacob and company left Bethel and journeyed toward Ephrath (and there are two glosses which identify Ephrath with Bethlehem in Gen. 35:19 48:7). Rachel went into severe labor at the time when they were **some distance from Ephrath**, and she died during labor, giving birth to Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin. Jacob buried her where they were and erected a pillar over Rachel's grave, which remained even to the time of the final recording of the book of Genesis (Gen. 35:20). Now, what I have observed is that several scholars place this tomb in Judah, near Ephrath and Jerusalem. However, there is no reason that Rachel's tomb needs to be that far south. Jacob and his family, for whatever reason, had a beginning point, Bethel, and a destination, Ephrath. Somewhere between the two places is Rachel's tomb. There is no reason to suppose that Jacob and company traveled 1 mile, 10 miles or the full 20 miles between the two cities. Given that they were a considerable distance from Ephrath (and assuming that Ephrath does refer to Bethlehem-Ephrath), we are probably 1–5 miles south of Bethel.
2. When Jacob was dying, some of his last words to Joseph were: **"Now, as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, in the land of Canaan on the way to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath" (that is, Bethlehem).** (Gen. 48:7). The word *way* could also refer to a *road* and, in keeping with the first point above, we have no contradiction, nor are we able to specifically point to a place (outside of along the 20 mile route between Bethel and Ephrath) where Rachel was buried. What is very likely is that there is an established road between Bethel and Ephrath, and that was the road that Jacob and family were on when Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin.
3. When Samuel begins to prophesy to Jacob about where he will go and who he will meet up with, he tells him, **"When you go from me today, then you will find two men close to Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah..."** (I Sam. 10:2a). If we are in Ramah, Samuel's hometown (which is the locale that I lean towards), then Rachel's grave should be somewhere between Ramah and Gibeah, Saul's hometown. If the tomb of Rachel is a mile or so east-northeast of Ramah, then all of this fits together quite nicely.

¹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 5, p. 25.

4. In Jer. 31:15, we read: Thus says Jehovah, "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." The implication is simple here. Rachel is closely associated with Ramah. We spoke of Ramah as being the city where Saul met Samuel. My guess is that Rachel's tomb is to be found a mile or so east of Ramah, which is completely in keeping with the location implied above.

5. The strongest argument for a location close to Bethlehem is the fact that Jer. 31:15 is quoted in Matt. 2:16–18, which reads: Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slaughtered all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its surrounding areas, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning; Rachel weeping for her children and she refused to be comforted because they were no more."

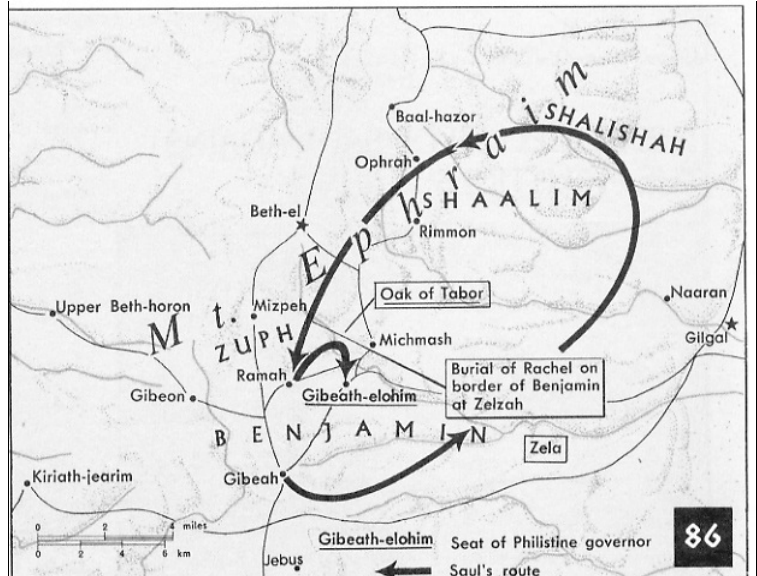
a. Now, note that Ramah is still mentioned. Ramah is mentioned because Rachel's grave is near Ramah. Ramah and Bethlehem are 20 miles apart. One might want to say that Rachel's tomb is near Bethlehem because of these two passages, but that would demand for Ramah and Bethlehem to be equally close. So here is how we are to interpret this: Rachel's grave is still near Ramah—hence, Ramah is named in both passages. However, Rachel is the

mother of Benjamin and Jerusalem and Bethlehem are properly in the territory of Benjamin. There is every reason to believe that there is a significant Benjamite population in these areas (as well as some from the tribes of Judah and Simeon). However, Rachel, being the mother of Benjamin, would also be reasonably seen as the mother of the children in that area, that area being the territory of Benjamin. Therefore, speaking of Rachel as crying because of the deaths of hundreds of children who are her children is a reasonable picture for the prophet to paint. Does this mean that the actual Rachel in heaven is literally crying for her descendants? Certainly not. Does this mean that the mothers of these children, most of them daughters of Rachel, are crying for their children? Absolutely. This passage is really saying nothing about the location of Rachel's tomb. It simply tells us that the mothers in the territory of Benjamin are crying because their children have been slaughtered, an event to which Jeremiah prophetically refers.

b. Secondly, recall that *Ramah* means *height*. Therefore, it would be reasonable for one to stand upon such a height and look down upon the events which are transpiring, and weep over what has occurred. This is the picture that Jeremiah paints for us.

c. You must also bear in mind that the interpretation that we have in Matthew is Herod's and/or his advisors'. He interprets her grave site as being near Bethlehem and then extends the perimeter considerably. Had he known Scripture more than he did, he would have no doubt executed the young males between Bethlehem and Ramah.

d. Now, maybe you find my interpretation reasonable, but now you are thinking that Jeremiah was too abstruse? Not in the least. Often in Biblical prophecy, we have multiple fulfillments. Very often there is the near fulfillment and the far fulfillment. In Jer. 40:1–3, we read: The word which came to Jeremiah



Rachel's tomb would be located south of Beth-el and east of Ramah. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are both out of the picture to the south. Gibeah of Saul is further east and possibly further south than Gibeath-elohim.

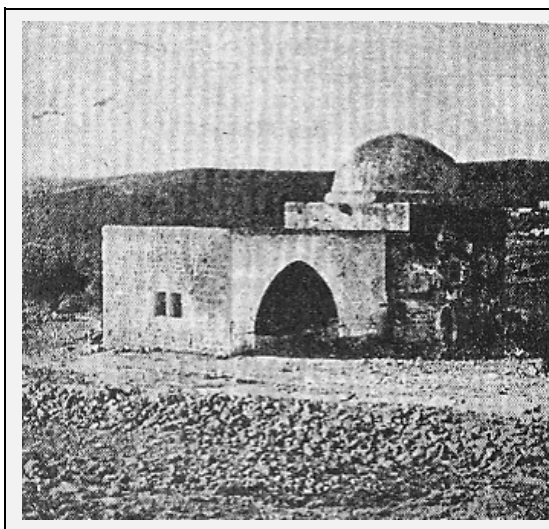
This map was scanned from *The MacMillan Bible Atlas*; 3rd Edition; Aharoni, Avi-Yonah, Rainey, and Safrai; MacMillan; ©1993 by Carta; p. 70.

from Jehovah after Nebuzaradan, captain of the bodyguard, had released him from Ramah, when he had taken him bound in chains, among all the exiles of Jerusalem and Judah, who were being exiled to Babylon. Now the captain of the bodyguard had taken Jeremiah and said to him, "Jehovah our God promised this calamity against this place and Jehovah has brought it on and has done just as He promised. Because you sinned against Jehovah and did not listen to His voice, therefore, this thing has happened to you." Again, Rachel, representative of the mothers of that general area, would weep to look upon all of her children taken captive and being marched in chains outside of the Land of Promise, the land given them by God. Therefore, this is a likely fulfillment of Jer. 31:15 as well (not every fulfillment of a prophecy needs to point back to where such a thing was prophesied and proclaim, "I told you so." Jeremiah prophesied many times concerning the deportation of Israel, as did even Moses back in Lev. 26).

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6. The primary reason that scholars believe that there are two possible locations for the tomb of Rachel is that there is a *traditional* site for her tomb 1 mile north of Bethlehem. ZPEB: *Josephus and the Talmudists agree in placing her tomb near Bethlehem. Origen, Eusebius and Jerome accepted this site. Later the pilgrims described it as a pyramid formed of twelve stones. The Crusaders rebuilt it, erected a building twenty-three ft. square formed by four columns bound by pointed arches twelve ft. wide and twenty-one ft. high, the whole crowned by a cupola. In 1788 the arches were walled up giving it the appearance of a well.*²



This is a picture of the traditional location of Rachel's tomb. This is taken from *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; Vol. IV; p. 2524.

- S. D. Press, who wrote the article for ISBE, seems to agree with the traditional site (he writes *It is doubtful, but probable, that it marks the exact spot where Rachel was buried*).³ Press notes that Jews, Christians and Moslems unite in honoring this particular site, which in itself is a good argument against the accuracy of this location. He also offers two other locations and (as is mentioned in ZPEB) offers another location of Ephrath (that is, indicates that there is another Ephrath found only in the Genesis passages). Now, I would certainly agree that their opinions should be taken seriously, even though these men were separated by millenniums from Rachel's burial. However, for this to be Rachel's grave site flat out contradicts Gen. 35:16 and 48:7, where Ephrath is said to be *some distance* away. A mile outside of Bethlehem-Ephrath does not really fit that description. If we were 5–10 miles north of Bethlehem and *if* there was independent Scriptural backup for such a location, then I would certainly go along with that as being a viable location. However, the only reason for such a site is *tradition*, which is not reason enough. It is strong tradition, based upon the works of several great ancient scholars, but it is tradition nonetheless. Basically this is what we are looking at: accept tradition and we are faced with a possible contradiction; reject tradition, and the contradiction disappears.
7. Not all scholars place the burial site of Rachel right outside Bethlehem. T. C. Mitchell, who covered Rachel's life in *The New Bible Dictionary*, does not even give notice to this location. He appears to place the tomb of Rachel slightly further south than I do, but we are in the same ballpark. Furthermore, he says that the exact

² *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 5, p. 26.

³ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*; James Orr, Editor; ©1956 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; © by Hendrickson Publishers; Vol. IV; p. 2524. *Doubtful, but probable?*

location is *unknown*, which directly contradicts the traditional location.⁴ After completing this doctrine, I later found that Robert Gordon also places her grave closer to Ramah than to Bethlehem.⁵

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 5. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, pp. 712–713; Vol. 5, pp. 23–24, 29.
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⁴ *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p.1074.

⁵ Robert Gordon, *I & II Samuel A Commentary*; Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI; ©1986; p. 117.