
If Rachel Does Not Weep, Who Will?

A Pro-Choice Quality of Life Womanist Reading of Matthew 2

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The children of Black women (especially of poor Black women) enter this world in stigmatized and marginalized blackened flesh targeted for annihilation; they are subjected to a lower quality of life than their White counterparts through systems, structures, laws, policies, and practices that devalue, refuse to protect, and criminalize Black life while tolerating and normalizing violence against Black women and the children they birth. How is it that pro-life activists love Black women's embryos and fetuses that cannot be seen and hate the Black flesh that they can see and encounter in this world? Black mothers and their children who have survived the birthing process are socially constructed as a threat to the domination of whiteness and the properties and wealth accumulated through enslaved and oppressed Black people. The dominant fear, particularly post-emancipation, is that things will change, that a status reversal will occur if White people do not maintain their dominance both numerically, socio-economically, and theo-politically. White supremacy wasted no time transforming Black enslavement into the mass criminalization and incarceration of Black people. As Toni Morrison states, the "slave body is the Black body."¹ The school-to-prison pipeline or the disproportionate incarceration of Black men and women is enslavement by another name.² White supremacy nationalism will do all in its power to keep Black mothers and their born children from possessing and exercising their citizenship rights with the full protection of the law, equal and living wages, affordable housing and unobstructed property ownership, accessible quality health care, free excellent education, and so on. But to maintain the status quo of White supremacy dominance, Black babies must continue to be born into an underclass upon which whiteness continually dominates at the expense of Black life and flourishing. In Harriet Washington's book *Medical Apartheid*, she recounts the painful dehumanizing history of gynecological experimentation on enslaved Black women's bodies by J. Marion Sims, the father of modern gynecology, for the benefit of White

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women's survival and health.³ Some things do not change. Rachel cannot be consoled.

Under the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which essentially overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973), almost fifty years of legal precedence, poor women, and particularly poor Black women, who experience the highest percentages of rape on the basis of race/ethnicity, will be forced to carry all pregnancies to term, despite systemic diminishment of Black women's quality of life.⁴ The Justices argue that Black children can be put into the already overburdened and troubled foster care system or adopted out. Black children disproportionately age out of the foster care system without being adopted. Poor Black women experience difficulty locating affordable livable housing for themselves and their children. In his book *Evicted*, Matthew Desmond argues that while Black men are being incarcerated in large numbers, Black women (and their children) are disproportionately evicted.⁵ Under the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, states are empowered to criminalize abortion, regardless of the circumstances under which the woman is impregnated and any threat to the mother's life.

In Matthew chapter 1, Mary gives birth to a baby boy who is named Emmanuel, which means God is with us. In chapter two,

3. Harriett A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006).

4. Nancy J. Thompson, Robin McGee, and Darren Mays, "Race, Ethnicity, Substance Use, and Unwanted Sexual Intercourse among Adolescent Females in the United States," in *Western Journal of Emergency Medicine* 13.3 (2012): 283–288.

5. Matthew Desmond. *Evicted. Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown, 2016).

1. Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard* (New York: Vintage, 2019), 77.

2. See, for example, Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Incarceration in an Age of Color Blindness* (New York: New Press, 2012) and Beth Ritchie, *Arrested Justice. Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

wise men (*magoi*) from the east arrive in Jerusalem where they immediately commence public inquiry about the geographical location of the baby whom they believe has been born and is destined to be the king of the Jews. God is with the baby Jesus and his family through other human beings. The wise men (*magoi*) have been guided to Judea by a star, but they had to be open and choose to follow the star when it arose in the east. The wise men prudently arrive in Jerusalem after Jesus' birth. Once there, they humbly ask around town for the assistance of other human beings to find the exact location of where the child has been born. The star takes them so far and no farther; they must involve other human beings in the search. The wise men could be Jewish or not, but their purpose is to worship the royal child in the way that men of means do, with gold and expensive oils. Word about the nature of their inquiry reached King Herod the Great, Rome's puppet King of Judea. Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled by what they heard. Herod was disturbed because of the potential threat to his dominance, and the people perhaps because they knew Herod. He had a reputation as a violent and evil king. Herod's primary concern should be loyalty to Caesar, but he will also protect his own position and that of his children who would inherit his power, property, and position (the children he fathered, of course, whom he had not already murdered). Amy-Jill Levine states:

As in the book of Exodus, an evil king orders babies killed, and a special child, a savior adopted by a stepparent from a royal family survives... whereas Exodus 1 depicts women who subvert Pharaoh's decrees..., Matthew 2 emphasizes Mary's maternal role... and records the voice of Rachel, weeping for her children [Jer 31:15]... Matthew may also be contrasting Joseph's care for his family to Herod's infamous executions of his Hasmonean wife Mariame, their two children, and numerous others. Archelaus, the brother of Herod Antipas, who reigned 'in the place of his father' Herod (2:22), was one of the few sons to survive.⁶

Herod summoned high priests and scribes of the Jewish people who after reading the writings of the prophets, informed Herod that the child would be born in Bethlehem of Judea. Jin Young Choi asserts that the

scheme of Herod, the vassal king of the Roman Empire, to 'destroy' (*apollymi*) the newborn king Jesus (2:13) is closely connected to the destructiveness of the imperial/colonial rule. The chief priests and the elders, as well as the Pharisees, are not just Jewish religious leaders, but the nation's political elites in collaboration with Rome's client rulers... What is striking is that the object of 'destroying' is not only Jesus, but also the people of

6. Amy-Jill Levine, "Gospel of Matthew," 465–477 in *Women's Bible Commentary, Twentieth-Anniversary Edition, Revised and Updated*, eds. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 468.

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Israel. The people are referred to as 'lost' (*ta apolōta*, 10:6; 15:24)... If we consider 'lost' not merely as meaning 'astray' but as 'destroyed,' the political meaning of this expression is apparent.⁷

The angst of the dominant, race/ethnicity, gender, and class intersect to compel Herod to murder babies and infants.

Troubled by what he had heard, Herod secretly summoned the wise men who respectfully listened to his words and commission. When they found the child, they were to return to share the information with Herod so that he too could worship the child (2:16). Herod used the same language of worship (*proskuneō*) as the wise men, but his intention was to murder the baby. Men of power in patriarchal societies can do great harm to women and their children when motivated by fear of loss of power, of being replaced, of becoming both marginalized and colonized like the masses they oppress.

The wise men believed in dreams; their ancestors taught them that dreams mean something. They can carry in their bodies the epistemologies of their ancestors *and* worship God. The wise men could be Jewish; they could be Egyptian Jews who did not view study of the stars as antithetical to their worship of God and God's Messiah.

The fear and panic that drove Herod to infanticide of babies and murder of children must have been heightened by the gold and other expensive gifts the wise men planned to gift to the would-be king of the Jews, the baby Jesus. A poor Messiah may be less of a threat than one with access to some wealth; he might be more difficult to find and kill. He has means to flee. The child can be born, but then he must die, if not today, tomorrow, but inevitably. If Jesus had not been identified as king of the Jews, as God with us, would the men from the east have traveled so far with treasure chests of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to deliver to the child's mother? Women and their children without social status and royal lineage are generally considered unworthy of such gifts. Indeed,

7. Jin Young Choi, "Weren't You with Jesus the Galilean? An Intersectional Reading of Ethnicity, Diasporic Trauma, and Mourning in the Gospel of Matthew," 1–21 in *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity: Constructed Intersectional Identity and Early Christian Texts*, eds. Mitzi J. Smith and Jin Young Choi (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), 11.

God appears to be with Mary by gifting her with the assurance that her child will enter the world with purpose, and with some means to give the child a decent start in life. Those who refuse to make the world a place for all children to flourish and yet insist that all mothers who conceive, regardless of the circumstances, give birth against their will are at best indifferent to the quality of life of parents and child and at worst lessen the chance that the child will survive and thrive. Many will champion the birth of children but have no qualms about disenfranchising their mothers and thereby cutting their life spans short and diminishing their quality of life once they are born. They will not interfere with birth and but will institute death-dealing laws and policies that welcome children into the world as the mules of society on whose bodies wealth and empires are built. After which, they are disposable.

While majority Republican-led states moved quickly in the wake of *Dobbs v. Jackson* to categorically criminalize abortion, Black women and girls continue to disappear, but states have done little to find them. Over 60,000 black girls go missing each year, and in 2020 that number was almost 100,000 but they received little, if any, national media coverage.⁸ Black girls go missing, are mistreated, and murdered and the files are closed and stories untold. An indifferent nation will never weep for them. The website Our Black Girls tells the stories of missing, murdered, and mistreated Black girls and women because they have been forgotten and their cases archived and unsolved.

Black children are more likely to be riddled with sixty bullets by the police for running away in fear of their lives while White children and men are generally taken into custody after committing mass murders and violence. They are not seen as a threat in the same way that Black and Brown bodies are. White and whitened police officers show restraint toward violent criminals who look like them; they sympathize with whiteness and have no mercy on Black men and women and their children. If dominant society demonstrates no love for the Black child they can see, can it possibly love the fetus they cannot see? Rachel weeps and mourns, but the nation is silent.

What kind of God will do for his Son what he will not do for the children of others? What kind of God cannot or will not save all the children and destroy the murderer? God did not intervene to save the murdered children. Jane Schaberg argues that the women in the genealogy did not benefit from divine intervention.⁹ Perhaps, the author of Matthew (likely an elite owner of enslaved persons himself)¹⁰ could not imagine such a God, a God that might turn his world upside right. It is other human beings who have an interest in and are committed to save

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the life of the child born to be God's Messiah. No human beings intervene for the babies and children—two years old and under, whom Herod murders. Any real or perceived threat to the empire and those upon whom the empire depends—cogs of the imperial engine and the oil that lubricates the machine—are dangerous to the *pax Romana* (the Roman peace maintained through brute violence). The children Herod ordered to be murdered have no state protection; it is the state that has declared them dangerous. Their mothers are lazy hypersexual “welfare Queens” and their children are potential thugs and “super predators.”¹¹ Race/ethnicity, social status, wealth, economic gain, gender, quality of life and life expectancy are interconnected. Perhaps Herod convinced the state that the children's mothers could not care for them properly anyway, they would be a burden to the state, and the only thing they might contribute to society is violence.

Today Black women (and women in general) are more likely to die during childbirth than from an abortion.¹² Black women, regardless of social status, give birth to babies that enter a world hostile to Black people. Poor women and their children have nowhere to flee the violence, nor the means.

Joseph and Mary's baby Jesus is ultimately saved through fugitivity; they could flee. The wise men who traveled to welcome Jesus' birth received dreams through which they were warned to avoid Herod; they fled, returning home by another route. Ironically an angel appeared in Joseph's dreams warning him to flee to Egypt, but not in the wise men's dream (2:12–15, 19). Only men receive dreams in this story. The mothers of the murdered children received no warning in the story and could

8. Sharon Pruitt-Young, “Tens Of Thousands Of Black Women Vanish Each Year. This Website Tells Their Stories,” NPR.org, September 24, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/24/1040048967/missing-black-women-girls-left-out-media-ignored>

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

10. See Mitzi J. Smith, *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

11. Katie Riley, “Hillary Clinton Apologizes for ‘Superpredators’ Remark,” *Time*.org, February 25, 2016, <https://time.com/4238230/hillary-clinton-black-lives-matter-superpredator/>

12. Elizabeth G. Raymond and David A. Grimes, “The Comparative Safety of Legal Induced Abortion and Childbirth in the United States,” 119 (2012): 2015–2019. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22270271/>

not flee Herod's sword. After Herod dies, an angel tells Joseph to take his wife and child and return to Israel (2:19). But when Joseph hears that Herod the Great's son, Archelaus succeeded him as ruler over Judea, Joseph is afraid to return to Judea (2:22a). Consequently, in another dream he is instructed to immigrate to Nazareth (2:22b). Interestingly, the last warning comes as a result of Joseph's fear. At critical junctures in the narrative (of the search for the baby Jesus, the birth, infanticide, and the state-sanctioned murder of children, fugitivity, and immigration), the narrator inserts the words "this was to fulfill" or this was done so that the words of the prophet Jeremiah or the prophets might be fulfilled. Those words inspire readers to uncritically accept the depiction of God as most concerned with the existential reality of his Son as of greatest importance and to justify the murder of the innocent babies and toddlers because the one child who matters in the story is saved. But this thinking encourages readers to read from a position of privilege where many of us do not live and to feel no need to comfort Rachel in the only way she can be consoled—through justice. Sébastien Doane argues that "Rachel did not have a chance to mourn the death of her children, [which] causes us to lean toward a metaphorical interpretation of Rachel's weeping."¹³ As long as Rachel's children enter into the world in stigmatized flesh, die because their flesh is stigmatized, and the cycle continues without justice, Rachel cannot be consoled. Dána-Ain Davis argues that

"Black women are *at risk*, and they are *a risk*. When something (or someone) is considered to be a risk, a state of unease takes over... Risk can contribute to states of anxiety, to which the response is various forms of governmentality... Simply *being* Black indexes distrust and precipitates profiling and assignment into risk categories based on nonthreatening behaviors. Labeling is a dangerous endeavor... How is it, one might wonder, that women who have given birth fit into categories of risk? Or is it that racialized bodies are in constant need of surveillance regardless of circumstances? Again, it is hard to know, but this is the kind of uncertainty that plagues many Black people in the United States."¹⁴

Doane understands the image of "Rachel weeping as an emotionally charged image that somehow merges two opposites: hope and sorrow."¹⁵ But hope and sorrow are not necessarily two opposites. African Americans and other oppressed and marginalized peoples have had to embody both sorrow and hope. Hope, as Mariame Kaba insists, "isn't an emotion... [and it] is not optimism... I believe that there's always a potential for transformation and for change. And that is in any direction, good

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or bad."¹⁶ Kaba heard the idea of hope as a disciple from a nun who discussed it while addressing the necessity of viewing ourselves as people who are "of the world and in the world," as opposed to living life as if we already reside in an afterlife.¹⁷ Hope is an everyday choice and practice. This idea of hope as a discipline, which "doesn't preclude feeling sadness or frustration or anger or any other emotion that makes total sense," really resonated with Kaba

because in the world we live in, it's easy to feel a sense of hopelessness, that everything is all bad all the time, that nothing is going to change ever... I understand why people feel that way. I choose differently... to think [differently]... to act [differently]... to trust people until they prove themselves untrustworthy.¹⁸

The oppressed stumble into bed at sunset and wake when the sun rises in the east; they choose or embody hope in the ways that they persist, improvise, and resist the multiple, intersectional, or overlapping forms of violence that pin their backs against the wall.

Doane asks "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."¹⁹ Doane argues that God does not spare his Son from the fate of the other children; "he died in the same way as the children of Bethlehem: murdered at the hands of the politico-religious authorities of Jerusalem. Jesus identifies with the suffering of the people"; he escapes but returns and is subjected to "the same violence, but he subverts it."²⁰ Jesus' crucifixion unexpectedly disrupts the cyclical violence, and the dead children are symbolically raised with Jesus.²¹ However, Jesus had the chance to live his life to maturity; to live into his potential; the other children did not. Our grave sites are rife with unfulfilled potential. Their lives and futures mattered too. God

13. Sébastien Doane, "Rachel Weeping: Intertextuality as a Means of Transforming the Readers' Worldview," in *Journal of Bible Reception* (2017): 1–20, 5–6.

14. Dána-Ain Davis, *Reproductive Justice: Racism, Pregnancy, and Premature Birth* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 107.

15. Doane, "Rachel Weeping," 17.

16. Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021), 26.

17. Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, 26–27.

18. Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, 27.

19. Doane, "Rachel Weeping," 12.

20. Doane, "Rachel Weeping," 13.

21. Doane, "Rachel Weeping," 13.

does not intervene for Rachel's children through angels, wise men, and parents able to flee the violence. Just as God sent his Son into the world in human flesh to accomplish for humans what God could not do as God, human beings must be agents of wholeness for other human beings, for one another. Perhaps, God cannot or will not do for humans what God created humans to do for one another. As in the story of the Garden of Eden, God did not find God's self a suitable helper for the human being God created; it had to be another human being. The murders were executed by a human being and no other human beings stopped it. Doane asks a necessary question, "How can we attribute divine guilt when we ourselves are doing nothing to prevent injustice and death?"²² Throughout the story, human beings intercede on behalf of the baby Jesus but not for the other babies and children whom Herod murders. Injustice flourishes when human beings cannot be inconvenienced to prevent it or fear inhibits actions. Evil seems propelled by fear but fear paralyzes good people. Sometimes our faulty theologies inhibit us from fighting for justice for all: God is in control; thus, we cannot interfere; we must wait on God. Or we say, it was the murdered person's time to die; therefore, like Pilate we wash our hands of it. But as long we do nothing to disrupt injustice and murder, we let Rachel mourn. Perhaps, we will tire of mourning over injustice, and do our part as individuals and communities to stop it. If Rachel doesn't mourn, who will? As long as unjust systems, structures, policies, and practices flourish, Rachel cannot be consoled.

In the early years of my teaching career in Detroit, an African American woman enrolled in one of my introductory Bible courses. It was obvious to me that she was too distracted, and troubled to do the coursework. When I met with her, she shared her story with me. Her only son had been murdered over ten years earlier—by his cousin (her sister's son) who fled the state and evaded justice. She confided that the relationship between her sister and herself was strained. Pastors had counseled her to move on and let go, to forget about justice. She could not move on; she needed justice. I agreed and said I would pray that she received the justice she needed. I also told her that the stress of being in seminary was compounding her trauma. I advised her to take a break from seminary, and she did. About a year later, I received a telephone message from her on my office phone. She sounded like a different person. Her nephew had been found and brought to trial; she could now move on with her life. I share this story often with my students. Justice is only an urgent matter when we are the ones who need it. But injustice that is allowed to flourish will eventually impact all of us; it will sooner or later find its way into our backyards. In the meantime, Rachel refuses to be consoled.

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22. Doane, "Rachel Weeping," 15.