"On the road to Ephrat, at Bethlehem, at the crossroads, stands Rachel’s Tomb so that when her children will come to Israel they will be able to stand at her grave and remember her" (Midrash Lekach Tov, Genesis 48:7)

The concept of saint both in Jewish popular culture and in Jewish written sources is somewhat nebulous. The Hebrew word *zaddik*, which is typically translated as “saint,” refers to any righteous person, alive or dead. Although Jewish linguistic usages do not make this distinction explicit, there traditionally have been certain *zaddikim* (pl.) who have attracted cultic activity. A small number of these *zaddikim* have been the recipients of long-term cults. It is to this category that I refer when I use the English term “saint.” In this chapter I shall focus upon Rachel — popularly known as “Our Mother Rachel” — the only female figure around whom a long-lasting and extensive Jewish cult crystallized. Because the basic legendary ingredients which form the mythic charter for this cult can be found in certain Biblical and midrashic passages, the first half of this essay will focus upon textual evidence. The active cult of Rachel, however, is a more recent phenomenon, and the second half of this essay will look at contemporary aspects of the cult.
Sacred Biography

In the following pages we will trace the principal Rachelian themes as they appear in Jewish literature. Beginning with the Biblical portrait of Rachel as a very human wife and sister, we shall then see how most of the significant Rachelian notions — her piety, merit, intercession, and death — developed in the midrashic texts. We shall end with a short discussion of Rachel in the Kabbalah and in more contemporary sources.

The Biblical Rachel

Rachel appears in six places in the Bible: Genesis 29ff., Genesis 46:19 & 22, Genesis 48:7, Ruth 4:11, Jeremiah 31:14ff., and I Samuel 10:2. Her biography, which is related primarily in Genesis 29ff., is hardly that of a saint. Indeed, her life story seems to more closely resemble that of a fairy-tale heroine. Jacob’s parents had sent him to Haran so that he could find a wife among the women of his mother’s family. Falling in love with Lavan’s beautiful daughter Rachel, Jacob offered to serve Lavan for seven years in exchange for the right to marry Rachel. Lavan agreed, and Jacob worked for seven years “and they seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had for her” (29:20). But when the great day finally arrived, Lavan tricked Jacob, giving him Leah, his elder daughter, instead of the beloved Rachel. The morning after the wedding, when Jacob discovered that he had married the wrong sister, he confronted Lavan with his treachery. Lavan then consented to Jacob’s marrying Rachel in addition to Leah, in exchange for another seven years’ labor.

Jacob continued living with his two wives and their father, but “he loved Rachel more than Leah” (29:30). God saw that Leah was hated and “opened her womb; but Rachel was barren” (29:31). After Leah had borne four sons, Rachel turned in anger to Jacob, telling him that she would die if she would not conceive.
Jacob answered her, “Am I in place of God, who has withheld from your womb fruit?” Following this scene, Rachel and Leah sent their maids, Bilha and Zilpa, to Jacob’s bed, so that each could bear children in the name of her respective mistress. In another incident, one of Leah’s sons gathered mandrake, a plant known for its power to encourage fertility, and Rachel pleaded and then bargained with Leah for some of it. Finally, “God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb. And she conceived and bore a son; and said, God has taken away my shame; and she called his name Joseph” (30:22–24).

Shortly after Joseph’s birth, Jacob, Leah and Rachel decided to leave Haran and return to Canaan, the land of Jacob’s father. One puzzling incident concerning Rachel occurred during their departure. Without Jacob’s knowledge, she stole the household gods (teraphim) from her father’s house. When Lavan came to search Rachel’s tent for the missing teraphim, she cunningly hid them in her camel’s saddle and then told her father that she could not rise for him to search “for the way of women is upon me” (31:35). These teraphim are not mentioned again in the Biblical story.

After a short reference in Genesis 33, the next time that Rachel appears is in Genesis 35:16–22. Here we learn that Rachel once again conceived, but after a difficult labor died in childbirth. As she was dying she named her newborn son Ben-oni [son of my poverty or suffering] but Jacob changed his name to Binyamin [son of my right].

“And Rachel died and was buried on the way to Efrat, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day.”

The other portentous Biblical Rachelian passage is situated in the context of the Babylonian Exile. Jeremiah 31:14ff. uses the imagery of Rachel’s death from Genesis 35 as a metaphor for God’s promise to return the people of Israel to the land of Zion. “Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Rama, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children. She refused to be comforted for her children, because they are not [here]. Thus
says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your acts shall be rewarded, says the Lord; and they shall come back again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for your future, says the Lord, and your children shall come back again to their own border.”

The Biblical information concerning Rachel can easily be summarized: She is the beautiful beloved wife of Jacob. She is first cheated out of her wedding night and then suffers years of barrenness, bears one son, and finally dies in childbirth. Her grave, marked by a pillar, becomes, in Jeremiah, in some way associated with the return of the Jewish people to Zion. In the Biblical text she neither behaves in a particularly saintly manner, nor has she any special mystical or magical powers. Her story is more that of a heroine in a tragic fairy-tale: A fair and righteous visitor from afar falls in love with a beautiful young maiden; the star-crossed lovers are tricked by her scheming father; even the fates seem against them — her sister conceives easily while she is barren; and the final tragic ending — she dies bearing her beloved’s son.

Rachel in the Midrashic Texts

Rachel, like many other Biblical characters, is “fleshed out” in the midrashic literature, and unclear or problematic aspects of her biography are explored and sometimes explained. It is tempting to present the midrashic material chronologically in order to demonstrate the development of Rachel’s cult. However, it is crucial to understand that the midrashim were preserved in collections which reflect oral traditions beginning many years (or centuries) before the collection was written in the form in which it has come down to us. The absence of a particular theme in a so-called early collection, or the presence of a particular theme in a so-called later collection, is no guarantee that this theme emerged during the later period. Therefore, although I cite the
accepted dates for the midrashic compilations, I warn the reader not to treat them as dates of origin for the specific themes. On the other hand, it does seem to be the case that midrashic attention to Rachel increased at around the twelfth century, and I shall draw attention to the texts which support this chronology.

Early Sources

The earliest extant sources give almost no elaboration of the Genesis story. In the Greek pseudepigraphic Testament of Benjamin (usually dated to the first century B.C.E.) the narrator, supposedly Rachel's son Benjamin, tells how his mother remained barren for twelve years after bearing Joseph. In this version, instead of raging at her destiny, as she does in the Biblical story, Rachel prayed and fasted for twelve days, and then conceived and bore Benjamin (Chapter 1).

In the Testament of Benjamin Rachel is presented as pious (praying and fasting). Shaping Biblical stories and figures so as to fit later notions of proper behavior is a common midrashic pattern. The theme of Rachel's piety is picked up again in Genesis Rabbah (approx. 400–500 C.E.), the midrashic collection that is the most important early source for Rachelian traditions. In Genesis Rabbah (parsha 71, saif 6), Rachel's jealousy of her sister is explained [away]: Rachel was not really jealous of Leah's fertility, but of her good deeds. Since much of what the Biblical Rachel did was problematic — she stole the teraphim from her father's house, she envied her sister, she berated God and her husband for her barrenness, she said that she would rather die than be barren — some midrashim attempt to modify these acts into more positive deeds. Other midrashim interpret the sorrows that Rachel suffered as punishments for her dubious behavior. For example, in a discussion of Rachel and Leah's bargaining over the mandrakes, the Rabbis conclude that both sisters were punished because of this incident. Rachel's punishments were fewer
children and not being buried with Jacob (parasha 72, saif 3). Later on in the same text the Rabbis suggest that Rachel died because she stole the teraphim (parasha 72, saif 9). In short, both sets of midrashim hint at the Sages’ discomfort with Rachel’s lack of appropriate behavior in the Biblical text.

Another motif in *Genesis Rabba* (parasha 70, saif 10) begins with the question: In what merit will God make all of our sins white [in Hebrew — lavan] like snow? “Behold, Rachel his [Lavan’s] daughter comes with the sheep (Genesis 29:6).” In other words, because of Rachel the sins of Israel will be made pure. The Midrash considers God’s pardon of Ephraim in Jeremiah 31 to be an instance of Israel receiving divine assistance because of Rachel’s merit: Because of her tears [merit] the exiles were returned from their captivity in Babylonia. In this and in many other similar midrashim the content of Rachel’s merit is not made explicit. It seems to be understood that the reader already knows why Rachel has the right or power to cause Israel’s sins to be purified. The only hint appearing in the early literature that sheds any light on the matter is the short reference we have already seen from *Testament of Benjamin*, in which Rachel is praised for her piety. This, however, is hardly an adequate explanation: Almost all Biblical heroines are credited by the Midrash with being pious, even heroines for whom there is no scriptural evidence of piety. Rachel’s piety, while commendable, is insufficient to explain why she has the special ability of causing Israel’s sins to be absolved.

The passage in *Genesis Rabba* which turns out to be the most important in later sources is the following: “R. Pinhas in the name of R. Simon said, ‘Because of Rachel’s prayers the tribes of Judah and Benjamin did not share the fate [dispersion] of the other ten tribes’” (parasha 73, saif 6). This theme, which is picked up and developed in many later midrashim, is the key to the legend of Rachel — her death and burial have cosmic significance. In the earlier midrashic collections, however, this theme remains a marginal one. In a brief passage in *Genesis Rabba* (parasha 82,
saif 10) we read that Jacob purposely buried Rachel on the road to Ephrat because he knew that the captives would pass by on the way to the Babylonian Exile and that Rachel would thus be in the proper position to request mercy for them.

“What did our father Jacob envision which caused him to bury Rachel on the road to Ephrat? It must have been that our father Jacob predicted that the exiles would pass by there; therefore he buried her there so that she will beg mercy for them.”

Another early midrashic tradition concerning Rachel appears in two places in the Babylonian Talmud. Because this is the tradition that is developed further in the later cultic sources, I shall cite the relevant passage at some length.

What modesty did Rachel possess? We read “And Jacob told Rachel that he is her father’s brother” (Genesis 29:12). Was he her father’s brother? Surely he was her father’s sister’s son. Rather we should understand it like this: He told her “Marry me.” She answered “Yes, however, my father is a cheat and you cannot get the best of him.” So he said to her “I am his ‘brother’ in deception.” She asked him “Is it allowed for a righteous person to excel at cheating?” And he answered her “Yes, ‘With the pure thou will show thyself pure; and with the perverse thou will show thyself subtle’ (2 Samuel 22:27).” And he asked her further, “What deception are you expecting?” And she answered “I have a sister who is older than I am and he will not marry me off before she gets married.” So he [Jacob] gave her signs. When night fell she said to herself “This will cause my sister embarrassment.” So she gave the signs to her sister. This is shown
in Scripture “And it came to pass in the morning and it was Leah (Genesis 29:25).” Until morning was it not Leah? Rather, due to the signs that Rachel gave to Leah Jacob did not know (who it really was) until morning. *(Megilla 13b)*.4

Before turning to the later sources there is one point which bears (at least tentative) mention. In the passage cited above from *Genesis Rabba* (parasha 82, saif 10) the active player in the story is *Jacob*, not Rachel. It is Jacob who foresaw that Rachel’s burial place would have future significance. Similarly, in the Talmudic passages *Jacob* gives the signs to Rachel; he is the one who takes the initiative in the story.5 I remark upon this because, as we shall see below, in the later versions Rachel’s volition becomes a crucial theme: *Rachel* is the one who foresees the significance of her burial, and *Rachel* is the one who gives Jacob the signs. While it is important to treat this kind of information with a large grain of salt — we are dealing with oral traditions in which it is difficult to know which versions came first — in light of the historical evidence which we have for a later development of a Rachelian cult, I am comfortable suggesting that the midrashic material does indicate Rachel’s transformation from a passive to an active role.

**Merit and Intercession**

The later midrashic sources expand the story of Rachel and the signs, develop the association between Rachel and exile, and devote attention to Rachel’s merit (*zechut*). The notion of merit or *zechut* is central to an understanding of the figure and cult of Rachel. In Jewish tradition *zechut* has a multiplicity of meanings. In the context of saints’ cults, *zechut* means the divine “credit” for worthy deeds, faith in God, and performance of divine precepts that a good Jew acquires over a lifetime. Merit is the power or privilege that accrues to a person because of his or her righteous-
ness. After death, one’s merit can be invoked by the saint’s descendants to encourage God to perform miracles and bring salvation. The entire Jewish people collectively share in the merit of the patriarchs, matriarchs, and saints, and prayers are often phrased in the zechut of these figures. Saints are Jews who are able, because of their zechut, to intercede on the behalf of individual Jews or the Jewish people as a whole. In Jewish thought, “The activity of the righteous and the influence of their merit do not cease with their death.”

In the case of Rachel, as we just saw, although the actual content of her merit is not spelled out in the scriptural passage, her intercessory powers are made clear. The theme of Rachel’s intercession is further developed in a number of other contexts in the midrashic literature.

In Pesikta Rabbati (a composite text usually dated between the 8th and 9th centuries C.E., certain parts may be as early as the 6th century) we see an emphasis on Rachel’s burial and powers of intercession. Here (chapter 3) Joseph asks Jacob why his mother was buried on the road to Ephrat and if he can now bring her body to the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Jacob tells Joseph that he can not move Rachel’s body because:

“‘I buried her there because God said to.’ Because it was revealed and known to Jacob that the Temple would be destroyed and his children would be exiled and they would go to the Patriarchs and ask them to pray for them, but this would not help. And because they would go this way they would come to Rachel’s Tomb and hug it and she would stand up and request mercy from the Holy One Blessed Be He and say to him ‘Master of the World, Hear my voice crying and have mercy on my children, or give me my compensation.’ Right away the Holy One Blessed Be He listened to her prayer.”
In *Aggadat Breishit* 3:51 (usually dated 10th century) the emphasis shifts to Rachel's volition: *She chose* to die on the road.

"And what reward did she [Rachel] have for shortening her days and dying on the road — that she will remind me [God] of my children, as it is written, 'There is a reward for your actions, said God ... And the children will return to their border-s."

The most important text concerning Rachel, the fullest treatment of the themes that we have seen thus far, is found in the Opening to *Lamentation Rabba* section 24. This passage is problematic to date: the compilation known as *Lamentations Rabba* is usually considered to have been collected in approx. 400–500 C.E. However, the Rachelian passage which I shall now cite is believed to be a later addition to the text.⁷ Although a number of early manuscripts of *Lamentations Rabba* are extant, the Rachelian passages do not appear in any manuscript before the 13th century.⁸ On the other hand, *Seder Eliahu Rabba* (approx. 6th century), *Pesikta Rabbati* (9th century), and Rashi (11th century commentator) have abbreviated versions of the same story, suggesting that the *Lamentations Rabba* narrative was not entirely new; what may have been new was the attention and elaboration which the narrative received in the 13th century.

The Rachelian verses in *Lamentations Rabba* are difficult to interpret. The context of the verses is a very long passage in which a variety of Biblical and supernatural figures testify against or for Israel, trying to convince God either to exile Israel or return Israel from exile. Among Israel's defenders are the Patriarchs and Moses, none of whom succeed in persuading God to cancel his edict against Israel. Here is the last section of the passage:

... At that time Our Mother Rachel jumped up in front of the Holy One Blessed Be He, and said,
“Master of the Universe, it is known to You that Your slave Jacob loved me excessively, and labored for my sake with my father for seven years. And when the seven years were over and the time of my marriage to my husband came about, my father schemed to replace me with my sister. And it was exceedingly painful to me, because I found out about this plan. And I told my husband (about it) and I gave him a sign so that he would be able to distinguish between me and my sister, so that my father would not be able to carry out the substitution. And after that I changed my mind and overcame my passion and had pity on my sister so that she should not be embarrassed. And in the evening my sister was substituted for me. And I gave my sister all the signs which I had (previously) given to my husband, so that he would think that she is Rachel. And not only that, but I crawled under (their) marriage bed and when Jacob talked to her she was silent, and I answered him everytime, so that he would not recognize her (different) voice. And in this way I was charitable with her and was not jealous of her, and did not allow her to be shamed in public. And now, if I, flesh and blood, dust of the earth and ashes, was not jealous of my co-wife and did not shame her in public, the more so You, the living everlasting merciful King, why were you so jealous of the worship of worthless idols, that you exiled my children, and they were put to death by the sword, and their enemies abused them?” Right away the Holy One Blessed Be He’s mercy was aroused and He said, “For your sake, Rachel, I return Israel to their land.” And this is what it says in Jeremiah, “A voice is heard in Rama ... Rachel is crying for
her children ... Thus says the Lord, ‘Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your acts shall be rewarded.’”

A number of elements of this story bear notice. To begin with, we see that the early midrashic tradition of the signs has become further embellished; not only did Rachel trick Jacob at the wedding ceremony but she also hid under the wedding bed to ensure that he would not discover the substitution.9 The irony here is magnificent: In a patriarchal tradition a woman is attributed with the highest honor, merit, and spiritual power because she saw her own allegiance as lying with her sister, not with one of the male Patriarchs. Not only do the roots of Rachel’s merit lie in something other than piety or female subservience, the roots actually lie in her trickery and cunning.10 But the bigger question that this passage raises is why Rachel was described as more powerful an intercessor than either Moses or the Patriarchs. I believe that the answer to this question must lie in the fact that a cult centered on her Tomb had already crystallized at the time that this midrash was formulated. I make this claim because there is no evidence in any earlier texts which could explain why — from a mythological or theological perspective — Rachel would be more powerful than Moses or Abraham. In other words, I am suggesting that the midrashic development was inspired by a cultic development.

The Rachelian traditions which I have described thus far continued and continue to be well known. In the 17th century kabbalistic work Yalkut Reuveni (VaYetse p. 128) the Lamentations Rabba story appears in a somewhat abbreviated form. In a similar vein, Rabbi Yehuda Asad (1679–1756) wrote that Rachel had to be buried outside of the Tomb of the Patriarchs so that we would know that it was Rachel’s prayer that God answered, not the prayer of the other patriarchs. “And from this we know that only Rachel’s prayer was heard, because of her great merit” (Divrei Me HaRi Parshat VeYishlach). In modern times, Rachel’s
role as intercessor continues to be stressed in a variety of Jewish texts. *In Sefer Tiul beParde* (Tanina Chapter 200, para.3)\(^1\) Rachel again negotiates with God on behalf of her people. Here, God promises Rachel that the next world will be good for her children, but she demands that this world also be good: “And our Mother Rachel refused those comforts [that the next world will be good] and demanded that her children will also enjoy this world.” This is of particular importance because it points to another key element in Rachel’s cult: her association with this–worldly rather than other–worldly matters. Cross–culturally, female saints in patriarchal traditions tend to be associated with immanent rather than transcendent concerns (e.g. Fatima, Mary).\(^{12}\)

**Female Patriarch**

A review of the Rachelian material shows Rachel becoming increasingly important in Jewish sources. In *Sefer HaYashar* parshat VeYeshev, pp. 140–141 (dated variously to the 11th and the 13th centuries) Rachel is grouped together with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The addition of Rachel to the Patriarchs rounds out the three Patriarchs to the necessary four legs of the Divine Chariot.\(^13\) Although this notion in and of itself may not have played a very important role in popular Jewish culture, it is of interest that the sources separate Rachel from the other Matriarchs (a large number of the traditions concerning the Matriarchs treat them as a group) and associate her with the more powerful Patriarchs. This is significant for two reasons. First, it is notable that in an otherwise exceedingly male–oriented tradition, one woman is raised up to join the male holy elite. But even more interesting is that this particular woman is one who is described in a number of sources as the paradigmatic or quintessential female.

A passage appearing in *Midrash Shmuel* Chapter 11 (uncertainly dated to no earlier than the 11th century) associates Rachel with Rosh Hodesh, the Festival of the New Moon. In
Jewish tradition Rosh Hodesh is described as a women’s holiday. Whether one prefers to see this in the context of the near universal association of women’s and lunar cycles or in the Jewish historical context described in *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 45\(^{14}\) it remains significant that Rachel is linked to this particular festival.

“Because of Our Mother Rachel’s merit Israel was given the festival of the New Moon. So, the initials of Roshei Hodeshim L’Yisrael spell out the name Rachel. Furthermore, the special Additional Prayer for Rosh Hodesh was written by Rachel because she foresaw that the women in the wilderness would not join the worshippers of the golden calf. And she put in that prayer an acronym for her name.”

Another midrashic tradition credits Rachel with changing menstruation from a physiological process shared by all humans to one that is specifically female (*Yalkut Shimoni* Parshat Mezzora 571, a compilation dated 1200–1300 but most likely based on earlier sources). In sum, in the later midrashic literature Rachel is “lifted up” from being a mere woman, and becomes, in alternative traditions, “one of the boys” or the ultimate woman.

Exile

Many of the earlier Rachelian themes were further developed in the kabbalistic literature, and of course, given a more mystical interpretation than they had held in the earlier midrashim. Rachel, in the *Zohar* and in other kabbalistic literature, is deeply connected with exile. The most famous Rachelian passage in the *Zohar* (1:175a) states that when the Jewish people will return from their exile they will cry on Rachel’s grave, because she cried there when they went into exile.
‘And Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave.’ R. Jose said: ‘He did this in order that her burial place should never be forgotten until the day when the Holy One Blessed Be He shall raise the dead to life. As it says, “unto this day,” which means until that very day.’ R. Judah said, “until the day” means until the day when the Shekhina will return with the exiles of Israel to that place, as it is written, “And there is hope for your future, says the Lord, and your children shall return to their own border” (Jer. 31:17). This is the oath which God swore unto her, and Israel are destined, when they return from exile, to stop at Rachel’s grave and weep there as she wept over Israel’s exile. As it is written, “They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them;” also “for your work shall be rewarded.” And at that time Rachel who lies on the way will rejoice with Israel and with the Shekhina.

Perhaps the most interesting variation in the Zohar 1:175b version of the Jeremiah verses is the idea that when the exiles return Rachel will rejoice with them (and with the Shekhina). In this passage we see Rachel in her dual personae as the one who weeps when her children are exiled and the one who welcomes them back into the Land at the end of their exile. In another passage in the Zohar (2:29b) it is asked why Rachel and not Leah is considered the mother of Israel; Rachel had only two sons while Leah had six. The answer is that Rachel is specifically concerned with galut or exile. The Zohar says that Rachel did not cry only when the captives passed by her grave on the road to Babylonia, “but each time they are exiled.”

It should be noted that in kabbalistic thought galut refers not only to the physical exile of the Jewish people from the land of Israel, but also (and more importantly) to the exile of aspects of
the Godhead from God. The exiled aspect, the *Shekhina*, is understood to be the feminine facet of God. In kabbalistic thought the Shekhina is the aspect of God that is most accessible to humans; the Shekhina is the aspect of God that resided in the Temple and that follows the people in their exile. The kabbalists identified Rachel with the Shekhina. Rachel, like the Shekhina, is feminine, associated with Israel in exile, and serves as an intermediary between God and humans. Interestingly, once Rachel is seen as the Shekhina, God rather than Jacob becomes her husband. This is the background to the Lurianic kabbalistic ritual known as Tikkun Hatsot.

This midnight rite consisted of two parts: the ‘rite for Rachel’ and the ‘rite for Leah’. According to Gershom Scholem, the kabbalists understood Rachel and Leah to be the two aspects of the Shekhina “the one exiled from God and lamenting, and the other in her perpetually repeated reunion with her Lord.”15 *Tikkun Rachel* is a ritual of lamentation in which men participate in the sufferings of the exiled Shekhina. The ritual was conducted as follows: The [male] kabbalist rose at midnight, dressed, and went to the door and removed his shoes. He would then veil his head, weep, put ashes from the hearth on his forehead (in the place where he would normally put phylacteries), bow his head, and rub his eyes in the dust on the ground. He would recite Psalms 137 and 79, the last chapter of Lamentations, and other special laments. This was followed by *Tikkun Leah* which was a rite of redemption in which messianic psalms and hymns were recited. This ritual continues to be included in contemporary prayerbooks.16

**Cult**

There is an allusion in the Genesis story that can be interpreted as a forerunner of a cult of Rachel: She died in childbirth, and the pillar which Jacob constructed over her grave
is there “til this day” (Genesis 35:21). In other words, the redactor of this chapter of Genesis seems to have known of some kind of visible marker at Rachel’s burial site. (The same seems to be true regarding the I Samuel 10:2 passage). If the redactor considered it relevant to remark upon the continued presence of the marker, it is possible that he was aware of a cult associated with her grave. There is a widespread legend that when a woman dies in childbirth her soul continues to hover over the earth helping/haunting her children.\textsuperscript{17} This, then, may be part of the key to the myth of Rachel. By dying in childbirth and so (in her case voluntarily\textsuperscript{18}) forfeiting the right and pleasure of seeing and raising her own child, she acquired the ability to eternally care for her child(ren), albeit in a less direct manner. The marker referred to in Genesis may have been some sort of cultic symbol related to women dying in childbirth. Similarly, the Jeremiah passage may possibly hint that there already was some kind of cultic activity at her grave. The prevailing opinion among Biblical scholars is that these particular verses are post–Exilic, thus allowing the possibility that a post–Exilic flurry of cultic activity gave rise to the weeping Rachel image attributed to the earlier period. However, given the absence of any midrashic evidence of a cult of Rachel until well into the Middle Ages, I am inclined to treat the Jeremiah passage as metaphorical and the Genesis passage as comparatively insignificant (as regards cultic activity), yet would be unwilling to totally rule out the possibility of an earlier (perhaps sporadic) cult centered at Rachel’s Tomb.

On the face of it, it is difficult to understand the Jeremiah verses: Why is Rachel the one who cries for the exiles, and not some other Patriarch or Matriarch? As we saw earlier, the Midrash was bothered by the same question. The simplest answer to this question lies in geography. According to Jeremiah, Rachel’s crying is heard in a place called “Rama.”\textsuperscript{19} Rama, located to the north of Jerusalem, was likely to have been on the route taken by the exiles on their way to Babylonia. The other Patriarchs and Matriarchs, buried in Hebron, were not on the exiles’ path.
Following this line of reasoning, we could conjecture that there was no special mythic or cultic sequence associated with Rachel’s Tomb in Jeremiah’s time; it was simply a matter of geographic coincidence that inspired Jeremiah to use the Rachel imagery in this passage. And then, since the other Biblical passages locate Rachel’s Tomb outside of Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem and most definitely not on the path of the exiles, in later sources the Jeremiah passages lost their geographic meaning and stood in need of mythic interpretation.

Recall that in the preceding section I identified the approx. 13th century passage in Lamentations Rabba as indicating some kind of change or development in the midrashic treatment of Rachel, and I argued that this change most likely reflected the growth of an active cult centered at her Tomb. Support for this dating can be found in the 12th century Midrash Lekach Tov Genesis 48:7, which is the first clear indication of a Rachelian cult. In contrast to earlier midrashim which focused upon the Biblical story, in Midrash Lekach Tov the present is stressed — how her tomb looks and what pilgrims actually do at her tomb. Midrash Lekach Tov also contains a number of allusions to contemporary events, such as the First Crusade. I suggest that this text reflects an increased interest in pilgrimage activity.

“On the road to Ephrat, at Bethlehem, at the crossroads, stands Rachel’s Tomb so that when her children will come to Israel they will be able to stand at her grave and remember her.”

In a pivotal passage in Midrash Lekach Tov we find the first description of the appearance of her Tomb and the manner in which it was built. Lekach Tov on Genesis 35:20 explains that each of Jacob’s sons placed a stone on her tomb, in the name of the twelve tribes. So did Jacob, whose stone was the highest one. In the Biblical text the pillar that Jacob built on her grave is described as being there “to this day.” The Midrash interprets:
Everywhere where it says "to this day," it means that the place has significance for ever.

Since the principal Rachelian mythic themes were known at least since the time of *Genesis Rabba*, it is difficult to see any sort of mythic or literary development which could explain the development of a cult of Rachel in the 12th century. It seems far more likely that geopolitical conditions of the 12th century permitted more Jewish pilgrims to reach the Holy Land, which then led to midrashic speculation regarding the location and the odd shape of her Tomb. According to historian Elhanan Reiner, "Pilgrimage modes, like other behavioral patterns of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael, were transformed beyond recognition during the course of the twelfth century in the wake of political and social changes occurring at the turn of the century primarily due to the Crusader conquest."20 The principal change which Reiner notes is a new emphasis upon the Destruction of the Temple and the future Redemption, as opposed to the earlier emphasis upon the Temple rites themselves. One can see how this shift in accent could be linked to enhanced attention given to Rachel and her Tomb — Rachel’s role in Jeremiah is essentially one of destruction and redemption, not one of grandiose, priestly ceremonies.

Another factor which cannot be ignored is the evidence that, "The cult of the *Mater Dolorosa* [weeping Virgin Mary] begins to rise in Italy, France, England, the Netherlands, and Spain from the end of the eleventh century to reach full flowering in the fourteenth, from the time when the holy places were recaptured and the pilgrim traffic to the Holy Land became a steady stream."21 Given that Rachel’s most salient persona is as weeping mother, it would be naive to overlook the emergence of the Marian cult of the *Mater Dolorosa* at the same time that Rachel’s cult began to flourish. Here again, I would point to Reiner’s observation regarding the influence of Christian pilgrimage tradition upon Jewish pilgrimage in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.22 It is perhaps non-coincidental that the Milk Grotto
of the Virgin Mary, a shrine associated with exile and fertility and located down the road from Rachel’s Tomb, was also “discovered” at this time.23

The Building

Rachel’s Tomb has historically been the center, both mythologically and geographically, of her cult. This has been the case despite the apparent inconsistency in the Biblical texts concerning the location of her Tomb (see note 19 above). What is relevant for us here is that for at least 2000 years pilgrims have believed that Rachel was buried where Rachel’s Tomb is located today, and that this location has remained a popular site of pilgrimage. It should be noted that in the early 19th century when the tomb was rebuilt, a very old tomb was in fact found deep down under the existing structure.24

Following is a small taste of the numerous reports of pilgrims who have visited Rachel’s Tomb throughout the centuries. Since most of the earlier descriptions were by Christian pilgrims (e.g., St. Jerome — 4th century, John Rufus — 6th century, Adomnan — 7th century), we will begin with the famous Jewish traveller Benjamin of Toledo. Note that consistent Jewish pilgrimage reports begin in the 12th century, which is, as we saw in the previous section, the tentative date suggested by the midrashic evidence for the beginning of a cult of Rachel.25

“And close to Bethlehem about half a mile away, is Rachel’s Tomb, which is near the road. And the tombstone is made out of eleven stones, the number of Jacob’s sons. And above that there is a dome on top of four columns. And all of the Jews who pass by sign their names on the tombstone.” (Benjamin of Toledo, Travels of R. Benjamin of Toledo in Eretz Yisrael and Syria, 1170 C.E.)26