

RACHEL, WEeping FOR HER CHILDREN  
A War Oratorio

by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

*I teach presently at Valparaiso University. I occupy a fully endowed chair named after its endower and his first wife: "The Emil and Elfrieda Chair of the University."*

*Emil himself is still living. I attended his 100th birthday last November. He has become a dear friend of mine--which eventuality is remarkable in academia: that the recipient of an endowment is given to know the endower. Usually these are kept apart, so that one may not influence or else restrict the other.*

*But before I accepted this position--already in 1990--I met Emil and came immediately to appreciate his direct, basic approach to life and faith and education. I've maintain friendship with him and his present wife, Emma, ever since. I serve him as much as I serve this educational institution: even so are the best relationships the blessings of others.*

*Emil's charge to me was marvelously broad: to be the presence of the Gospel throughout the entire University community. It has allowed me to develop both my teaching and my creative skills. I've written more than fifteen books since arriving here.*

*But I have also rejoiced in the relationship this community affords me with people of other talents: theater, music, theology, the visual arts.*

*Several of my published works have become theater pieces: *The Book of the Dun Cow* is a musical, written by Mark St. Germaine and Randy Courts; John Steven Paul directed it on our campus in our remarkable theater. Randy Courts (composer) and I have written a Christmas piece called *Angels and All Children*, also produced on our campus.*

*Recently the composer Dennis Friesen-Carper, who is also a member of the Department of Music, director of our symphony orchestra, a pianist of dazzling craft and spirit, has joined with me in the creation of an oratorio. Actually, we spoke about this just a year ago, 2003. I began my writing in the spring; worked on the piece through five revisions in the summer and the early fall; and finished the thing just a little while ago. Dennis, this man of enormous heart and unquestionable probity, will compose its music this spring and summer.*

*But I have thought of you, folks who may come to my writing studio during the time between.*

*Here is the oratorio,  
a war oratorio entitled*

*Rachel, Weeping for her Children.*

*I beg your earnest experience of the piece. And when we have a date for its performance, I will let you know on this site.*

*Walt Wangerin  
December 24, 2004*

## **PART I: The World at War**

### 1. **The Voice of Rachel**

*(This consists of two voices, both Mary's and Mariamme's)*

Ahhhhhhhh...

*(Established and extended, continuing through...)*

### 2. **Illumina**

Lighten our darkness, we beg you, O Lord!  
And by your mercies drive away  
The treacheries  
Of this unholy night.

### 3. **Response to Rachel's Wailing**

The Voice of Rachel

*(Rising more prominently)*

Ahhhhhhhh...

The Voice of Herod

*(the singer still sitting in CHORUS)*

Who is that?  
Who cries in the night?  
Who, so invidious,  
Shatters the peace  
Of my sleeping?

*(Rachel's voice lingers, then falls silent; brief silence)*

### 4. **The Rachel Theme**

Chorus

This fulfills that spoken by  
The Prophet Jeremy:

A cry....

Is heard in Ramah,  
Wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel, weeping for her children,  
Rachel, refusing consolation--  
For the children, all her children,  
Are no more.

A cry...  
A cry...  
A cry...

## **PART II: The Palace, in Jerusalem**

### **5. Receiving the Magi**

*(Under orchestral music, the principals stand and step forward)*

#### Herod

Unwise of you, O Magi,  
Not to seek me first;  
What troubles all Jerusalem  
Must trouble me much worse--  
So summoned I you.

#### Counselors

*(among themselves, as they rise from chairs, singing both  
severally and together)*

Are men from middle eastern regions  
Ignorant of protocol?  
Arabians? Could be Chaldeans....

*(to the Magi)*

Friends, we must redress a fault:  
Come first to the king!  
Make here your request!  
Don't trouble the people  
Creating distress  
And problems we must solve!

#### Herod

But I, King of the Jews,  
Am magnanimity!  
I welcome you, and beg that you  
Repeat your news for me.  
Sirs? All of the news!

#### Counselors

*(grandly, to the whole scene)*

Behold the lord who built the city  
Caesarea Maritima!  
Most brilliant seaport in the empire,  
Source of commerce for Judea:  
A harbor and breakwaters,  
Towers and docks,  
Warehouses, theaters--  
Aqueducts!  
Speak: greatness loves the least idea.

## 6. News of a Remarkable Star

### The Magi

Convulsions in the heavens  
Have borne one shining word:  
A single, silver, sailing star  
Declares a royal birth--  
And peace to the Jews!

Its tail describes a scepter;  
Its rays are coronal.  
What can we do but bow before  
The child the heavens call--  
The King of the Jews.

## 7. The Court Reacts to the News

### Counselors

King of the Jews?

Oh, travelers!  
In all the years this man has ruled--  
This Herod, this lean achiever,  
This personal friend of the Ceasars--  
No envoy has presumed  
There might have been  
Another king among the Jews but he--

Herod

*(interrupting)*

Ah, counselors:  
Don't play the proletarian fool.  
These Magi, these eastern dreamers  
Imagine a birth and a babe somewhere.

Were there a mightier  
Pretender to my throne,  
Wouldn't I, the multi-eyed,  
Already know?

*(to the Magi)*

You know something.  
Perhaps you don't know everything.  
Come, let's exchange intelligence,  
Fact for fact,  
And interpret the data together.

Magi

King, this we know:

A star.  
A newborn star.  
A star both fresh and legible  
Rose from the rim of our red horizon,  
And soared as a script in the western sky:

"I am,"  
So wrote the star.  
"I am, I am the light of him,  
Born on this morning, who, shot from Jesse,  
Is King of the Jews and of righteousness!"

That much we know.  
But we don't know where the birth took place.

Herod

So you say,  
And even so--

*(brief pause for thought, then:)*

No, I'm afraid  
I do not know  
A fact to match your facts...

Counselors

*(privately to Herod)*

King Herod, yes,  
You do.  
And if not you,  
The prophets knew.

Herod

*(to the counselors)*

Something the Magi said  
Is found in Scripture?

Counselors

Something the Magi asked  
Is answered there....

They speak of a star and a scepter,  
Majesty:  
These are the signs of Messiah's  
Ancestry.  
And the place of his birth did Micah  
Prophecy:  
The son who comes to rule again....

Herod

*(interrupting, first signs of fear)*

What son?  
Whose son?

Counselors

The Son of the Great King David!

Magi

And we have gifts to give him, sir,  
Of gold, of frankincense and myrrh.

Herod

*(aside to himself)*

No, this is some abuse  
Of our religious truth!  
None in the land  
Is more faithful than I!

And I would know  
If God anointed  
Kings besides myself:

Conspiracy!

*(Herod turns to the Magi)*

Friends: How long ago  
Did this insurgent star  
First disturb the skies?

Magi

It rose to write  
In cursive fire  
On the scroll of our  
Unfolding nights....  
Two years ago.

Herod

*(aside)*

When I was seventy-eight,  
And my fountainhead of future kings  
Already dry as a stick:  
I did not sire  
This treacherer.

*(to the counselors with some urgency)*

Counselors, finish your thought  
And name the place!

These read the stars;  
You read the scriptures:  
Where was this ... Son of David born?

Counselors

In Bethlehem of Judea.

Herod

In Bethlehem?

Magi

In Bethlehem?

Counselors

Yes.  
So says Micah:  
Bethlehem.

## 8. Herod Contrives to Identify the Conspirators

Herod

Go.  
Find the child.  
Do what you have to do.

Then come.  
Name that child,  
That I might worship too.

**1st INTERLUDE**

## 9. True Kingship

### Chorus

"How shall you know my servant?" says the Lord,  
"My child, my choice, in who my soul delights?"

"Go: find the one on whom I put my spirit;  
The one who brings forth justice to the nations!"

"My servant will not roar in city streets,  
Nor quench the tender flame,  
Nor break the bended reed,

"But will arise, enlightening the nations,  
Piercing blinded eyes,  
Releasing from their dungeons  
Captives crouched in darkness.

"O kings! O mighty kings, be servants too!  
What's good for those you rule,  
The weak, the child, the poor,  
Is the good the king must do!  
What's good for your countries, kings, is good for you!"

*(During the final verse of the First Interlude, the children's choir, ["the weak, the child, the poor"] rises and moves to "Bethlehem"; their mothers will rise during the children's first verse, but will stand at a nervous distance while they call their children back to them.)*

### **PART III: Bethlehem**

*(This should be a playing area distinguished from Jerusalem, though the actual space can overlap)*

#### **10. Mothers and Children React to the Heavenly Phenomena**

##### Children

*(delighted)*

Mother, it's wonderful!  
Look to the skies!  
Sunlight has multiplied:  
Two suns arise  
Giving light to this marvelous morning!

One's where it should be,  
But one's in the north!  
It comes from Jerusalem,  
Flames like the torch,  
In the hand of the angel of glory!

And mother, my shadow!  
Look at the ground!  
My shadow has doubled;  
There's two of me now,  
Dancing behind and before me!

##### Mothers

*(fearful)*

My darlings, come to me....  
Divisions of the sun,  
Must signify  
Some war begun,  
In heaven--

*(The Magi have risen; they enter the scene, following the star, which descends as the children describe it)*

##### Children

*(filled with glad excitement)*

Hooray for the heavens!  
Yow! Look at the star!  
It drops like an angel!

It falls through the air-- *(this next in hushed wonder)*  
To the top of the carpenter's house!

Mother, it's shining on  
Jesus's door!  
And strangers are following  
After the star--  
And Mary, his mother comes out!

*(In fact, Mary does now separate herself and move toward the boy Jesus)*

Mothers

*(more urgently)*

Children! Children!  
You must come in  
Until your father  
Is at home!  
It's late--  
And we're alone.

## 11. The Magi's Gifts

*(During this passage night falls; all the children save one return to their seats, leaving the mothers to watch alone; it is to this single child the Magi sing while Mary watches;*

*(The whole scene focuses on the tableau of this exchange)*

Magi

Our gifts are gold,  
(As golden is your royalty).

And frankincense,  
(The fragrance of divinity).

And lastly: myrrh  
(To oil your body piously  
When you shall die in infamy).

The Boy Jesus

Beautiful.

Beautiful.

You're doing  
A beautiful thing  
To me.

Mary

What sort of gift is myrrh,  
This muslin for the cruelest sleep!  
Oh, sirs!  
You sing a sword into my heart!

12. **Il Penseroso, Mothers and Chorus**

Mothers

And while our children lie asleep  
And while our husbands sink  
Into a rough, half-brutal rest,

We wake. We watch the night,

We watch.

We see--

--the strangers that followed the star  
Are departing in darkness.

*(During this verse, the Magi  
return to the chorus)*

And though they entered our village  
Down from the north,  
They leave on a highway that leads to the Sea,  
The Dead Sea, down to the south.

*(During the next passage, Mary and Jesus move to a separate place and  
wait, though Mary still sings with the other women hereafter.)*

We wake.

We watch

We see:

The carpenter departs in darkness too.  
He takes the mother of his boy,  
A bag of tools, but little else--  
And steals away by a southwest road  
To conceal himself  
In Egypt.

We wake.

We watch,

We pray:

Lighten our darkness, we beg you, O Lord!  
And by your mercies drive away  
The treacheries  
Of this unholy night.

## 2nd INTERLUDE

### 13. Rachel's Death--A Threnody

*(Mary, where she stands, and Mariamme, stepping forward, sing softly the "Ahhhh" of the beginning, but here underneath the choral music; together and alone, duet, they also sing the 3rd and 4th verses below)*

#### Chorus

Rachel died in childbirth.  
The womb that bore her little boy  
Became the wound that bled her dry....

O, departing mother!  
Your final breath expelled one word:  
With dry-eyed truth you named your boy....

#### The Mary's

Ahhhhhh. etc.

Ahhhhhhh, etc.

Rachel wailed, *Benoni!*

The name meant Son of All My Sorrow!  
Her last word meant to last a while.

But the dead keep nothing.  
Her husband killed the name *Benoni*,  
Cancelled that maternal word,  
And called the baby "Benjamin,"  
You son of my right hand!

HAAA! The dead can nothing keep!  
O Rachel,  
Once beloved of Israel,  
Mother of the nation still,  
Is this why you come back to weep?

*(Mariamme remains separate hereafter, and watches the exchanges between the King and the Counselors, until it is her time to move closer to Herod)*

## PART IV: The Palace

### 14. "Conspiracies Like Maggots Feed"

*(The scene begins with a nervous, hasty, tightened tension, strong contrast to the elegiac INTERLUDE above: plot-action begins again)*

Herod

In Bethlehem,  
'Twas Bethlehem!  
I know the place.

A male no more  
Than two years old:  
I know the age!

This boy intends  
To take my crown!  
I know his claim--

I do not know his name!

*(Above, HEROD spoke to himself; now begins a direct dialogue)*

I'm "old," you say?  
"Let go," you say?

What's good for me--  
Is good for my kingdom too.

Counselors

Arabians,  
Chaldeans, damn!  
The men are gone.

They have betrayed  
Your trust and all  
Jerusalem!

Conspiracies  
Like maggots feed  
On Bethlehem.

What's good for you  
Is good for Jews,  
O King! What will you do?

You are the king,  
And you've been king  
For nearly forty years.

No! Sir! We speak our fears!

Insurgencies  
That threaten you  
Imperil us as well!

What's good for you--

Yours is the power!  
Yours is the choosing!  
King, what will you do?

Mine is the kingdom!  
Mine is the glory,

King, what will you do?

Well, whatever I choose,  
It will be the Good,  
For I am righteousness!

King....

And I most worshipful.  
And mine is the power--  
For my right to govern  
Was bestowed upon me  
By the Empire!

*(The counselors withdraw)*

## 15. The King and Mariamme

### Herod

For I, at the age of thirty-three,  
Stood in the Roman Curia  
Between Mark Antony  
And great Octavian  
And there received the title,  
King of Judea! Galilee! Peraea!

Then straightway I, with royal courage,  
Crossed the cruel, mid-winter seas,  
Returned to the land ordained for me,  
And raised an army  
Of Romans and Jews,  
To take the kingdom to myself....

### Mariamme

And for the next three years  
You fought,  
My cunning strategist,  
To make the throne  
Your own...

Herod

Mariamme!

Mariamme

Mariamme: yes, indeed.  
Your betrothed  
While still you fought for Jerusalem.

'Twas during the siege of that city  
Merrily you rode to north to marry me.

And I laughed at the gallantry  
And I thrilled at your bravery--  
And I loved you then.

Herod

With right, and with a high delight  
We breached the walls, Oh, didn't we?  
And king and queen in triumph,  
We entered our own Jerusalem  
And ruled a kingdom from that city--

I loved you then.  
Mariamme!  
Never  
Have I loved another  
Half so well as I loved you then.

Mariamme

And fervid were our married years,  
My military consort,  
Bowman and horseman,  
You savvy commander.

Herod

We struck the evil Malichus,  
The King of Nabatea,  
Routing his forces

Expanding our lands--

And when the cunning Cleopatra  
Took her leave of Egypt and this life,  
Why, we had made ourselves supreme  
In all the regions east of Rome!

Those were wonderful years--

Mariamme

So long ago

Herod

But wonderful, weren't they?

Mariamme

So. Long. Ago.  
When I bore you.  
Two capable sons.  
Either one of which  
Could have inherited your throne,  
Could you have let them alone.

But now,  
Bent King in your old age,  
I have returned to require  
An accounting of your actions  
For the past twenty-two years  
Of my unhappy absence:

What have you done!

Herod

Why, pre-emptive strikes  
Have unified  
And granted peace to Palestine.

Right have I been  
To keep my power

By large wars and by little ones.

Mariamme

By large wars and by little ones?  
By connivings and by killings?  
O King, confess: What have you done?

Herod

I've made Rome love the Jews,  
And the Jews to love God harmlessly!  
I've built palaces, paid debts!  
Tried to keep my house in order--

Mariamme

Tried to keep your power private!  
Sir, I do not ask  
Why you,  
When my sons were five and six,  
Bereaved them of their mother.

I do not ask  
Why you condemned my neck  
And had me put to death--

Herod

Ah, but I suffered the act,  
I nearly went mad--

Mariamme

I only ask:  
What have you done to your household after me?  
What have you done with my sons?

Herod

Understand this:  
What's good for me  
Is good all the people!

Lo, I it is--  
I am the one--  
Has raised this nation unto God!  
My power builds  
A house of prayer  
More beautiful than Solomon's!  
Ten thousand Jews  
As pilgrims come  
To worship in Jerusalem!

What goodness must the kingdom lose--  
--Losing me?

Mariamme

*(Growing ever more stern, now driving the scene)*

I am Mariamme!  
More mother than ever anything else!

You scabrous King  
Inhabiting caves of your own conceiving,  
Answer me:

What have you done with my sons?

Herod

*(subdued, half confessing because of her moral force)*

I was persuaded  
They plotted against me.

Mariamme

What have you done with my sons?

Herod

Brought charges against them,  
Myself bore witness.  
Struck before they could strike me--

Mariamme

What have you done with my sons--

Herod

I had them strangled.  
I killed them in the city I had built.

*(Mariamme turns and leave Herod alone)*

Wait! I will not be alone!

## 16. **CHORAL REPRISE**

Chorus

*(As Mariamme turns and leaves Herod alone)*

HAAA! The dead keep nothing!  
The dead can nothing keep!  
O Rachel,  
Once beloved of Israel,  
Mother of the nation still,  
Is this why you come back to weep?

## 17. **The Command for One Brief War**

Herod

*(Much harder, now; determined)*

No! I will not be alone!  
Counselors!

Counselors

*(Approaching)*

What will you do  
To hold the throne?

Herod

In Bethlehem--  
What I have done before.

Counselors

What will we do?

Herod

We go to strangle  
Maggots, sirs,  
Before as locusts  
They destroy us!

Counselors

What will we do?

Herod

*(low, tense, articulate)*

What once before  
To two conspiring sons  
I had to do  
To save the nation  
From destruction....

*(Quietly, on the last somber lines, the children's choir rises and moves toward Bethlehem.*

*(HEROD moves to a place where he oversees the events about to unfold.*

*(There is no INTERLUDE between these PARTS)*

## **PART V: The Slaughter of the Innocents**

*(The march-step of the coming soldiers begins during this song and increases until it overwhelms the scene)*

### 18. **"The Nurses Song," and Slaughter**

#### Mothers

When the voices of children are heard on the green  
And laughing is heard on the hill,  
My heart is at rest within my breast  
And everything else is still.

Now, come home, my children, the sun is gone down  
And the dews of the night arise;  
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away  
Till the morning appears in the skies.

#### Children

No, no, let us play, for it is yet day  
And we cannot go to sleep;  
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly  
And the hills are all covered with sheep.

#### Mothers

Come home! Come home! The sun's gone down,  
The fogs of night arise!  
The soldiers are killing the children! The children!  
They die! They die! They die.....

*(And so the drum-beat tramp, the cries of the children, the wailing of the women, wordless, become a music; perhaps there are strains of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" during this aural violence;*

*(The 2 Mary's voices finally resolve themselves into the familiar cry of Rachel, the only sound to be heard;*

*(The children have returned individually to their seats to signify their deaths. As they die, the removal of their voices one by one has caused the diminishing of the noise.)*

19. **The Cry of an Uneasy Conscience**

*(Having watched during the slaughter, Herod gives signs that Rachel's persisting voice troubles him; his now becomes the cry of the damned)*

Herod

Who is that?  
Who cries in the night?  
Who strikes my soul  
And destroys my peace?

O Lord God,  
Shut the woman up!  
Remove her wailing  
Far from meeeeeeeeeeeeeee--

*(Rachel's voice outlasts his cry, lingers a remarkable moment, and then falls forever silent)*

20. **The Rachel Theme**

Chorus

This fulfills that spoken by  
The Prophet Jeremy:

A cry!  
Is heard in Ramah,  
Wailing and loud lamentation,                   A cry!  
Rachel, weeping for her children,                A cry!  
Rachel, refusing consolation--                   A cry!  
For the children, all her children  
Are no more.

*(This choral piece now receives its fullest expression, so that it clearly concludes the historical part of the oratorio and, at the same time, acts as an INTERLUDE, bringing us to the last part, the contemporary part of all)*

## **PART VI: A Call to Conscience**

### **21. The Other King**

Mary

I saved my baby from our king.  
I could not save him from our God.

Jesus

*(boy soloist, moves toward the audience, Mary stationary)*

The Spirit of God is upon me.

He has anointed me  
To speak good news to all the poor.  
To preach release to every captive.  
The Lord has sent me here  
To pierce the blinded eye,  
To set at liberty  
The souls of those oppressed!

O nations of the earth,  
I am your justice!  
I! In my humility!

Mary

I saved my baby from the king.  
I could not save him from our God.  
I could not save him from the crowd.  
And this is the sword that pierced my soul:  
I watched him perish on the cross.

Jesus

*(Now separate and alone. Terrible beauty: Is this an aria?)*

Father, forgive them,  
For they know not what they do.

Chorus--with the Magi

Convulsions in the heavens  
Produced one shining Word:  
A nova bright! A dying star,  
Who cried in this regard:  
"He dies for you!"

Golden was his blood  
Of incense was his breath  
And he who once was great as God  
Laid down his flesh in death-- *(the boy soloist sits)*  
And myrrh was his tomb.

But look: two lights arise: *(Indeed, the houselights come up)*  
Two shadows at your feet;  
The Son of Life, the sun of lies,  
Would both control your city streets:  
Which will you choose?

22. A Cry to Contemporary Leaders

*(Let this build, first Mary singing, then Mariamme, and finally the entire chorus of women, as mothers, singing)*

Mary

*(She starts; Mariamme joins, and then all the women)*

Gentlemen:  
Kings and governors,  
Rulers and presidents  
Magnates and all monarchs!

Ladies:  
Leaders, CEO's,  
Chairs and directors,  
Commanders of all kinds!

Oh, all you men!  
And oh, you women,  
People wielding power  
On other men  
And other women,  
Dominion over all the weak,  
And those insisting justice,

What have you done with our sons?  
What have you done with our daughters?  
And what will you do with all of our children -- tomorrow?

23. **Illumana**

Enlighten our darkness, we beg you, O Lord!  
And by your mercies drive away  
The treacheries  
Of this unholy night.  
Amen.

Walter Wangerin, Jr.  
October 6, 2004

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