In his Prologue to *Rachel Weeping: Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the Fortress Tomb*, Fred Strickert sets the tone for the rest of this book. Citing two incidents where children who were innocent bystanders were killed in violent confrontations outside the site of Bethlehem’s Rachel’s Tomb (the 9-year-old Ali Jawarish in 1997 and the 13-year-old Muayad Jawarish in 2000), Strickert remarks:

> Everyone would agree that something’s wrong with this picture…. The holy city of Bethlehem. The century-long conflict in a land of promise. The setting outside Rachel’s Tomb. Soldiers shooting from the roof of a shrine. Add to all these the name of Rachel. It is not just any holy place. It is Rachel’s Tomb. Rachel is the age old symbol of the grieving mother. Her children are dying, Palestinian and Israeli alike. And Rachel continues to weep for them. Rachel cries, and so do Israeli and Palestinian mothers. (vii-viii)

Why does Strickert chose to begin his treatment in such an emotionally wrenching manner? There are several reasons why Strickert is writing this book. They range from providing a new and fresh reading that sees Rachel as “the vulnerable and faithful woman always ‘on the way’” (xi-xii) to seeing that “the idea of Rachel’s tomb as a fortress with exclusive access is totally contrary to the character of Rachel, the woman of faith, always on the way” (xii). Both of these purposes, however, are in service to what he sees as the “practical” bent of this book: “In our ever-smaller world, we need to learn to live together. Perhaps we might even imagine Rachel speaking through her tears, ‘Children, please share’” (xii).

Following the prologue and introduction, the book is divided into two parts. The first part (chs. 1-4) examines the biblical story of Rachel and its history of interpretation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The second part (chs. 5-9) focuses on the role of Rachel’s tomb in the Bible and in history. The book concludes with an epilogue and an appendix that addresses the archaeological issue of the tomb’s location.

In chapter 1, Strickert embarks on a literary analysis of the Rachel story that is thoroughly laced with imaginative elements. Alongside narrative critical remarks are comments about Jacob and Rachel as if both are historical personages and Strickert an omniscient narrator who can see beyond the text into their minds and emotions. This approach has two immediate results: (1) it separates the analysis from more typical historical critical analyses by making it more imaginative than what one would normally expect in an exegetical treatment; and (2) it has the effect of making the treatment more appealing to non-scholarly audiences.

In chapters 2-4, readers are treated to a selection of points in Rachel’s history of interpretation. The brevity of the treatments reflects the author’s principle of selectivity as can be seen in the chapters’ subheadings (and their contents):
Judaism (ch. 2; 18 pp): Josephus, Early Translations (Septuagint), Targums (Jonathan), Historical Works of the Late Biblical Period (Demetrius, Jubilees, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs), Philo: Allegorical Interpretation, Rabbinic Literature (Midrash Rabbah, Babylonian Talmud), and The Mystical Tradition (Zohar)

Christianity (ch. 3; 13 pp): Matthew’s Infancy Account, The Church Fathers: Allegorical Interpretation (Justin Martyr, Cyril of Alexander, Augustine of Hippo, Gregory of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas, Dante Alighieri, Michelangelo, Richard of St. Victor), The Reformation: The Plain Message of Scripture (Martin Luther), Allusions in Popular Literature (primarily Herman Melville though others are briefly mentioned)

Islam (ch. 4; 7 pp): Rachel in the Qur’an, Muslim Commentaries (al-Tabari, al-Thalabi, al-Kisa’I), Implications for the Reverence of Rachel’s Tomb

While the arrangement and contents of the above chapters leave the author open to a number of criticisms—e.g. Dante and Michelangelo in the Church Fathers’ section? A Reformation section with Luther but not Calvin? An Islamic section a fraction of the length of the others?—one can appreciate Strickert’s efforts to examine the Rachel tradition through the lens of three faith traditions. To be fair, Strickert does not intend an exhaustive treatment but simply introduces his readers to a portion of the story’s rich interpretive life. It is the concept of a shared tradition that he is trying to convey and that allows him to then turn to what appears to be his passion—the history surrounding Rachel’s Tomb in chapters 5-9.

In chapter 5 (“Rachel’s Tomb in Biblical Texts”), Strickert spends 14 pages to examine the conflicting biblical traditions concerning the location of Rachel’s tomb. It is interesting that while Strickert admits the tomb’s exact location is problematic and eludes “historical certainty” (57), he never seems to doubt the existence of an historical Rachel and an actual tomb. Indeed in his epilogue he affirms that “Rachel was a real human being” (139), a move that is somewhat unnecessary given the power of Rachel as a symbol and one that will, no doubt, trouble many historical “minimalists.”

Chapters 6-8 (71-128) provide an historical survey of Rachel’s Tomb to show that the shrine is both a product of and has been used by all three faith traditions for a variety of reasons. However, in the last decades of the 20th century, Strickert notes, the shrine has become “exclusively for Jewish women” (127).

In chapter 9 (“The Politicization of Rachel’s Tomb”), Strickert comments on the role that politics has increasingly played in the tomb’s status. Not only has traffic been diverted away from the shrine, but new construction has turned the tomb into a walled fortress. The result is that all previous notions of a “shared” Rachel tradition focused on a single geographic location (her tomb) is eliminated, making “exclusive Jewish worship the only possibility” (137).

In his epilogue, Strickert returns to the poignancy of his prologue. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have shared a tradition of Rachel “on the way.” In this sense, Rachel and her history of interpretation becomes, for Strickert, a microcosm of the possibility of interfaith connectivity. But the current focus on a fixed geographical point (the