

Matthew 2:13-23 (NRSV)

¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Time after time, Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of OT prophecies about Israel’s Messiah. How do these prophecies help our understanding of Jesus’ birth?

Today’s Scripture passage, like all the Christmas passages, suffers from over familiarity. We know how the story goes, an angel tells Joseph to take Mary and the baby and flee to Egypt to escape the massacre of the male infants and toddlers that has been ordered by the fearful King Herod. Later, an angel tells them it is safe to return. But Matthew has crafted three powerful mini-scenes that not only reveal the larger story but also tell us much about Matthew’s understanding of Jesus and his use of the Old Testament scriptures.

“Out of Egypt” (scene 1, v. 13-15)

When the angel tells Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt, Matthew writes that this was “to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’” The prophet is Hosea and this is a quotation of Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

It’s a fair question to ask why Matthew uses this quotation. In the context of Hosea, it is clear that the “son” is Israel, the people of God, whom God rescued from slavery in Egypt. Matthew certainly knows that. So . . . was he merely thumbing through a concordance looking for a verse that incorporated “Egypt” and something like “son,” that he could then use to refer to Jesus to bolster his view that Jesus is the fulfillment of numerous OT prophecies? Hardly!

Instead, Matthew places himself firmly within a large stream of NT writings that want us to connect the Exodus from Egypt with the New Exodus in Jesus Christ. This is yet another instance that highlights the importance of reading Scripture for context, connection, and collision. Hosea 11:2 goes on to talk about the disobedience of Israel after their rescue from Egypt. This ought to help us see the contrast with Jesus’ faithful obedience and the rescue it accomplished.

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus may be refugees fleeing out of Israel to escape a murderous tyrant, but their flight is only the beginning of Israel’s redemption from bondage. Mary’s baby will grow to be the representative of Israel and all humankind whose faithfulness creates a New Exodus that transcends even God’s rescue of Moses and the slaves.

The second mini-scene (2:16-18) in today’s passage draws our attention to the world’s darkness. Here, the massacre of the infants is a fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophet of Jeremiah. The quotation is from Jeremiah 31:15, a woeful lament over the Babylonian exile. Ramah, a town about 5 miles north of Jerusalem, seems to have been a deportation depot for those being shipped into exile (see Jeremiah 40:1). Rachel was the favored wife of Jacob (see Genesis 25-35) and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin.

Angels¹

From the Garden of Eden to the renewed heaven and earth, angels are found repeatedly throughout the Bible. These beings are also spoken of as spirits, cherubim, seraphim, sons of God, the heavenly host, or in a few instances, even referred to by their proper names, such as Michael and Gabriel.

In the biblical text, angels are real living beings. They are supernatural and nonphysical, but may assume a corporeal appearance for a period of time. Angels are therefore not symbols of another reality. In one sense, however, an angel is an image – an image of the invisible God. Even their names, ending in “-el” (the Hebrew expression for God), as in Gabriel, suggests their close connection to the deity. On many occasions God chose to mediate his presence to his people through angels. When he revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Lord said, “no one shall see me and live” (Ex 33:20 NRSV). Thus, in reality, it was the “angel of the LORD” that appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush when God disclosed himself as the “I am,” or YHWH.

Primarily, angels are supernatural beings closely linked with the work of God himself. They are surrounded by an aura of the numinous [that which is wholly other]. A human encounter with an angel is in some sense an encounter with the divine. Angels are known to us not as individualized characters but as agents. Their primary activities are praise and worship of God in his heavenly court, making announcements and carrying messages on behalf of God to humans, intervening with guidance and protection in the lives of people, and dispensing the judgments of God.

1. Adapted from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*

Here, the connection to Jesus is pretty easy to see. Though the Jews began returning to Jerusalem centuries before, it would be a mistake to think that the exile ever truly ended. Herod’s killing of the babies is only the latest reminder that the exile continues. The exile is more than mere geography, for oppressors continue to rule over God’s people. Jesus and the salvation he brings will be the true end of exile, which he announces when he begins his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth (see Luke 4). Further driving home Matthew’s point, Jeremiah 31 is also where we find the famous New Covenant passage, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts . . .” (31:31-34).

“He will be called a Nazorean” (scene 3, v. 19-23)

The third mini-scene ends with a “quotation” that isn’t really a quotation at all! It can’t be found anywhere in the Bible or outside the Bible for that matter. When we look at Matthew’s words closely, we see that he is going about this one a bit differently than in his other quotations. No specific prophet is named and he uses a plural “prophets,” not the singular. He knows that this isn’t a specific quote.

Instead, it is a probably wordplay, using the similarity between the Hebrew word for “branch,” *neser* and the name of Nazareth. Though it is used only in Isaiah 11:1, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch/*neser* shall come out of his roots,” *neser* became an

important messianic theme among the Jews. The messianic figure of Isaiah 11:1 is the Emmanuel of Isaiah 7:14. Thus, Matthew cleverly prepares the reader for the surprising news that the hometown of God’s Messiah is Nazareth, a place bereft of all significance. As Nathaniel puts it when being recruited by Philip, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). Matthew replies, “Most certainly . . . the branch of Jesse!”

Fulfillment

Each of these mini-scenes are crafted so as to help us see the larger story that is being played out in the birth of Jesus. In fulfillment of God’s promises made long before, the time had finally come for God to break into human history in a new way.

The baby is the long-awaited Messiah and more. The Christ-child is God incarnate who brings the salvation that only God could bring. As Jesus would himself say later, “the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15).

Herod the Great¹

Herod the Great was probably about twenty-five years old when, as governor of Galilee, he successfully campaigned against Galilean bandits, executing the leaders and coming out of the subsequent showdown with the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem not only politically stronger but also with enhanced status in the eyes of Rome. When, in 40 B.C., the Roman Senate appointed Herod King of the Jews, he was given a prize still requiring conquest, for on the throne of Judea sat Antigonos II, the last of the Hasmonean rulers, newly placed there by Rome's enemies, the Parthians. Herod succeeded, with the backing provided by his friend Mark Antony, in taking Jerusalem in 37 B.C. Antigonos was executed by the Romans at Herod's request, and, in the same year, Herod married Mariamne I, a Hasmonean (one of ten wives). From 37 until his death in 4 B.C., Herod ruled as king of the Jews, a reign marked by his total loyalty to Rome, his grandiose and sometimes magnificent building programs, his family strife, and his harsh repression of any opposition. Herod showed an uncanny ability to maintain favor with the Roman leadership, managing, for example, to switch his allegiance from Antony to Octavian (later Augustus) after the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.

In honor of Augustus, Herod rebuilt ancient Samaria into the Hellenistic city of Sebaste (Gk., 'Augustus'), and he constructed, on the site of a minor anchorage on the Mediterranean coast called Strato's Tower, the magnificently planned and constructed city of Caesarea Maritima, a major port and the Roman administrative center for Palestine. There is much to admire in Caesarea, including the enormous blocks of stone with which a breakwater was constructed to make a harbor, the sewers that were designed to be flushed out by the sea, and the theaters and temples of the city. The crown of Herod's constructions, however, was the Temple in Jerusalem, which he rebuilt on a grandiose scale. The project, begun in 20 B.C., was not completed until A.D. 62, and it is this Temple that Jesus and his disciples knew. Recent excavations along the south and southwest walls of the Temple Mount have revealed the broad stairways leading up to the two wide gates on the southern wall, as well as many details of the construction of the walls and of the streets around them.

Herod also fortified his realm with a string of impressive wilderness fortresses. These fortresses served as prisons and, given the internal strife that marked Herod's relations with his family, occasionally as places of imprisonment and execution for members of the family. Eventually, Herod ordered the execution of his wife, their two sons, of other members of the Hasmonean family, and of another son, Antipater.

According to Matt. 2:1-18 (cf. Luke 1:5), the birth of Jesus occurred while Herod was king, probably no earlier than 6 B.C. The king's well-known ruthlessness in defending his throne against any threat forms the background for the story of the massacre of Bethlehem's children (Matt. 2:16-17).

After Herod's death in 4 B.C., Augustus Caesar resolved the dispute that broke out among three of Herod's surviving sons by dividing the kingdom but withholding the royal title from the heirs.

1. Adapted from the *Harper's Bible Dictionary* entry on Herod the Great.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, DEC 30 – JAN 5

There are ten "formula quotations" about Jesus' fulfillment of OT prophecies in Matthew's gospel. We looked at three in detail in the background study. Here are the other seven. What, if anything, do these have in common? What do they reveal about Jesus? What do they reveal about God's purposes? A study Bible will help you find the Old Testament references for these quotations.

Sunday, Matthew 1:8-23 An angel visits Joseph to tell him about Jesus' conception.

Monday, Matthew 3:12-17 Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee.

Tuesday, Matthew 8:14-17 Jesus heals many at Peter's house in Capernaum.

Wednesday, Matthew 12:15-21 Jesus as God's chosen servant.

Thursday, Matthew 13:34-35 The use of parables.

Friday, Matthew 21:1-5 Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Saturday, Matthew 27:3-10 The suicide of Judas.

Sermon Notes

Winter Bible Academy starts soon!!

Classes begin the week of January 13.

To register go to www.thebibleacademy.com

We've got another great class line-up including the enormously popular *Alpha* class on marriage, as well as the *Alpha* introduction to religion and faith. We have a Sunday morning class with Rev. Doug Meyer on holy habits. We're also offering two one-day Saturday workshops: Rev. Michael Reeves will be teaching us *How to Study the Bible* and Laura Zuber will repeat her workshop on spiritual gifts. Scott Engle will be teaching classes on Jesus and on David. Frankey Commer is leading class on Methodism. Bob Pannell's class is on the psalms. Laura Zuber is also leading a daytime class on Jesus' "I Am" sayings. You can see that there is the usual offering of diverse, interesting, and meaningful classes. Childcare will be provided.

Starting Next Week! *Exploring World Religions*

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

This series will be an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist! We'll begin with an introduction to Christianity and then, with humility and respect, we'll look at some of the basics of other religions and see how they differ from Christianity. Our goal will not be to become "experts" in these religions, but to understand our faith better by understanding what Christianity is not. We may even learn how to speak more confidently about our faith to friends and loved ones who are not Christian.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Sometimes we mistakenly think that Matthew's gospel was written to convince Jewish non-believers that Jesus was the Messiah and that Matthew employs scriptural "proofs" to make his case. But the gospel is, instead, written to, as Boring puts it, "express, clarify, and strengthen" the faith of believers. Further, if Matthew intended these quotations to be "proof," he certainly isn't very convincing. As I point out in the background study, using Hosea 11:1 to refer to Jesus and the flight to Egypt is a stretch and Matthew's quotation re the "Nazorean" isn't even from the Bible.

Yet, in keeping with the other NT writers, Matthew wants us to embrace and understand his "theology of fulfillment, namely that Jesus is the one to whom the OT Scripture and stories had always pointed. You could read Acts 2:14-36 or Acts 7 to see Luke's theology of fulfillment. A few weeks ago we saw Paul's theology of fulfillment at work in Romans 15:8, "Christ has become a servant of the Jews to that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs."

You might describe a "theology of fulfillment" in your own words. How would it affect you faith? Your understanding of the OT? Does it help you to understand why the early church insisted on keeping the OT as Christian Scripture and reading it that way? What are some of the ways in which Jesus is the fulfillment of the OT story? Try to be specific.