

Out of Egypt

Text: Matthew 2:13-23 (Reading Jeremiah 31:16-20)

In three short paragraphs Matthew completes his account of the early life of Jesus.

But it is a strange, strange story that comes so close on the heels of Christmas.

The text is commonly called “the slaughter of the innocents.”

We don’t usually tell or hear this part of the Christmas story.

I’ve never seen this part of the story on a Christmas card, or heard it sung in a Christmas carol, or seen it acted out in a Christmas pageant.

We sing and tell about the wise men’s coming...we act that out.

But we always cut the story short.

We do not include this episode,

even though what happens here is the direct result of the wise men’s visit.

But we leave this out!

Can you imagine what it’d be like if we insisted on including it?

Imagine me telling the J-Team or URY leaders that they must include this episode!

Recruit some children to play soldiers who will come in at the end and kill the babies.

It’s too harsh! Too gory!

Dead babies and Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as refugees running for their lives!

Not part of our Christmas picture!

But here they are. Right here in Matthew’s account.

What are we to make of this part of the story?

Why did Matthew include it in his story? Luke left it out, after all!

We need to look at the story in the light of the OT.

The presence of an angry ruler, a helpless infant, the slaughter of innocent children, and the land of Egypt...

For those with biblically trained ears...

these things call to mind the stories of the beginnings of the people of God...

the stories of Jacob, and Joseph, of Moses, Pharaoh, and the Exodus.

It seems that Matthew wants to portray Jesus as a kind of “second Moses” who delivers and frees his people.

Matthew’s weaving of these themes in his story is evidence of his marvellous skill as a master storyteller.

He connects the story of Jesus with the story of Exodus and exile. For Matthew the true fulfilment of Israel's Exodus occurs later in the gospel, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but this episode from the birth story is a kind of foreshadowing of that event.

And these Exodus and Exile themes are the ones we need to look for in this passage. That is why Matthew finished each paragraph with an OT quote.

So let's pick up the story.

The first thing we note is that when God became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ, he did not step into a life filled with good, exciting, fulfilling experiences.

He experienced life in the raw, with all its changes and challenges.

And this began even before he was old enough to understand what was happening.

Before he was even three years old, Jesus shared a life experience common to millions of other three year olds in our world.

He became a victim of political oppression and a fugitive in an alien land.

The magi leave as quickly as they arrive, and now finally Joseph and Mary are probably expecting life to take on some normal routine.

But for this family, things were about to get a whole lot more complicated.

Not only were they to receive yet more angelic visitations, They were also to undergo an ordeal that would have been incredibly trying.

King Herod wanted to kill their infant child.

Herod reacts promptly and typically when he realises the Magi are not coming back.

He hatches a new plot to get rid of a potential threat to his rule.

However human beings cannot stop God's plans.

God told Joseph of the danger in advance,

and he was able to take the child and Mary away to a safe place.

And Jesus was able to escape the murderous plot anyway.

Verse 13. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So Joseph's eventful and interesting life continues!

You could write a whole book about the flight to Egypt, but Matthew covers it in one sentence.

“So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.”

This was no carefully planned holiday...

This was flight in the night.

This is get up and go now.

Imagine the fear and difficulty of such a journey.

If you want to know what this experience was like, you only have to ask any one of the millions who are displaced around the world.

Those who have had to flee their homes in the dead of night,
leaving behind them property and friends and family.

Talk to some of our Sudanese people about their experiences of having to flee for their lives in the middle of the night.

Joseph and Mary’s hearts must have been in their mouths as they attempted to move quietly and quickly to the Egyptian border.

When God came to earth in the birth of Jesus, he met us where we were, and shared our life.

Jesus, from the start, experienced the uncertainties, dangers and hardships that so many others have experienced through the years.

Forced to flee with his parents, he became a displaced person.

A refugee. An asylum seeker in a foreign land.

The paragraph ends in verse 15 with an OT quote.

This is the first of his three OT quotes in this passage.

This quote is from Hosea 11:1.

When you turn to this verse in the OT, you find that it is not really about the Messiah who would come.

Rather it speaks of God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt many hundreds of years earlier, under the leadership of Moses.

How does this verse then apply to Jesus?

Did Matthew misuse Scripture?

Did he use it in a way that was acceptable in his day...but not for us today?

A careful study of the way the NT writers used the OT shows they saw parallels between the OT story and Jesus’ life.

They felt that, in a strange way, Jesus fulfilled the whole history of Israel and even re-enacted it.

Israel began as a family who fled sure death by famine and found shelter in Egypt.
Eventually they returned and settled in the Promised Land.

Jesus, new and perfect Israel, goes down to Egypt to find shelter,
and eventually returns to settle in Palestine.

The ancient nation of Israel faced annihilation because of the desperate rulings of a
power-hungry Pharaoh.

All males were to be drowned in the Nile to make sure that Israel didn't become
powerful.

But their leader, Moses, is spared and leads the people to freedom from slavery.

Here power-hungry Herod kills all the young males so that his power isn't threatened.
But the new Moses, Jesus, is spared in order to grow up and one day provide freedom
from the horrible slavery to sin.

Israel had been called out of Egypt to bring God's salvation to the world.

They failed.

Where they failed, however, Jesus would succeed.

So he too went down to Egypt and returned, in order to save the world and bring the
knowledge of God to all mankind.

Hosea was not predicting this...but Matthew uses it to make his point.

***The next paragraph, verses 16-18 is a brief account of Herod's reaction to the
Magi not returning.***

By this time Herod's paranoia reached its climax...

the final few years of his long reign.

There is no way this mad dictator was going to give any new King a chance to usurp
his position, even if it was the long awaited messiah!

King Herod stopped at nothing to protect his power and position.

He murdered his own wife, three of his sons, his mother-in-law, his brothers-in-law,
his uncle, and whomever else posed a threat to his throne.

He even arranged the murder of his son Antipater while he was lying on his deathbed.

In his will, Herod commanded that the leading men of the Jewish nation be rounded
up and executed publicly at the time of his death, to ensure "an honorable mourning
at the time of his funeral."

Caesar Augustus once said that it would be safer to be a pig in Herod's pen than a son
in his house.

Herod was a dangerous and bloodthirsty tyrant.

And the Bethlehem slaughter is just another blip on the screen of his life.

Given historical estimates of the size of this town,

it would seem that about 15-20 babies were probably murdered.

In the slaughter of the children Matthew gives it just a one verse summary.

He does not elaborate on the detail.

His interest does not lie in the detail...

but in something that Jeremiah said years earlier.

If we check Jeremiah, we find that those verses are for those being carried into exile.

Again, we ask what Matthew is doing, because this is not a clear or obvious fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy.

Why does he quote this seemingly unrelated passage?

Jeremiah, the prophet, was there at that deportation,

At the time the Israelite people were carried off into exile because of their sin and rebellion.

In poetic style he lamented that Rachel,

the symbolic mother of the nation of Israel, who was buried nearby, was weeping for her children as they were now being taken from the land of promise

And so, by quoting Jeremiah, Matthew makes the connection of that story, the story of the exile, with his story of Jesus.

Some commentators think the connection has to do with hope...

Because that is the message of Jeremiah 31.

And there is hope, so that connection is there.

Just as the exiles in Babylon held out hope of returning to their own land...

There was hope for Israel because the Messiah had escaped Herod's wrath.

Just as God brought hope and deliverance to a sad people,

in Jesus he has done that again.

Jesus brings hope to a desperate people, the hope so long waited for, the deliverance of sin.

Yet there may be more.

Commentators Boice and Carson see a change happening here.

The tears of the exile...when the Davidic line was dethroned...

Has now climaxed and ended with these tears of the mothers of Bethlehem.

The heir to David's throne has come, the exile is over, the true Son of God has arrived, and he will bring in the new covenant promised by Jeremiah.

The third of the historical episodes chosen by Matthew to fill the gap between the time of the wise men and the announcement of John the Baptist is the return of Joseph and his family to Nazareth. (Verses 19-23)

Matthew explains that after Herod dies in 4BC an angel again appears to Joseph in a dream telling him to return to Israel.

Joseph seems to have thought of returning to Bethlehem, probably assuming that this is where Jesus, as a descendant of David and Israel's future king should be raised.

But Joseph was anxious about returning to Bethlehem since the new ruler Archelaus, was as bad as his father.

He already had 3000 people put to death.

God understood this anxiety
While he was still wondering what to do,
God warned Joseph that this was a real danger.

So Joseph withdraws to Nazareth in Galilee,
Which was not in the territory of Archelaus,
But of his milder brother tetrarch Herod Antipas.

God was keeping and caring for Jesus and his family, despite all the dangers.
He will do the same for us.

Here comes the last of Matthews OT references.
This verse presents a difficulty because it doesn't refer to a specific verse in the OT.

So how do we handle this verse?
First, note that Matt introduces the verse with plural 'prophets',
rather than just a single prophet.
This seems to indicate a more general rather than specific quote.

But the problem still remains on where it relates to the OT.

Some have tried to relate it to the Nazirite vows,
in which a person consecrated themselves to God.
But there is no real connection between Nazareth and Nazirite.
And Jesus was not a Nazirite.

A better explanation is probably found in the fact that Nazareth was a despised place.

What Matthew seems to be saying is that the prophets predicted that the Messiah would be a despised person, a victim of racial slurs and taunts.

Remember how Nathaniel responded when Philip told him that he had found the Messiah...Jesus of Nazareth.

Nath replied... 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?'

Conclusion

It's easy to see, isn't it, that you cannot fully understand the Matthew's story of Jesus without first understanding the Old Testament.

With a few simple literary connections, Matthew is able to call to mind the Exodus and the Exile, the two watershed events in Israel's history.

In doing this he adds incredible depth and richness to the Christmas story and plants his gospel firmly in the fertile soil of the history of Israel.

What are the lessons we learn from this sorry story in Matthew?

Why does Matthew have to mess it up with Herod?

Why should we have to deal with him?

The truth is: whenever Jesus is born in Bethlehem, Herod wakes up in Jerusalem.

You can't get to Bethlehem without first going through Jerusalem.

The good news always has enemies.

And wherever you go in this world, the contest is the always the same:

It's King Herod of Jerusalem vs King Jesus of Bethlehem.

What Matthew is telling us is that:

Anytime, anywhere the light of hope is born among those who sit in darkness,
then those in power, who benefit from keeping it dark,
will do all they can to snuff out the light.

Anytime, anywhere hope is born among the oppressed, the imprisoned, the blind, the crippled,

then those who are deeply invested in the status quo will do all in their power, using whatever means necessary to kill that hope.

And our response should be to confess Jesus as our King,
rather than oppose him like Herod.

But more importantly,

We learn about the sovereignty of God,

particularly in the details of the birth and life of Jesus the Messiah.

God has it all in hand.

What comfort and assurance that gives us.