Chapter 4: Out of Egypt and into Nazareth

Matthew 2:13–23

In the first half of Matthew 2, we saw the right response to Jesus' rightful kingship through the worship of the wise men from the east. In the second half of Matthew 2, we will see the wrong response to Jesus' rightful kingship through the rage of Herod. Together, we are seeing that no one can remain neutral to the kingdom of Jesus. Either we will worship him, or we will seek to destroy him. Jesus Christ is born the king, and as the king, his reign makes a definite claim over our lives. More than that, this passage also puts a very clear expectation of suffering on those who would follow Jesus. If those who were associated with Jesus merely by the incidental details of the time and place of their births suffered because of Jesus, how much more should we who associate with Jesus by faith expect to suffer? While this is a challenging truth for us to ponder, it comes with a corresponding promise, that *Jesus claims his kingdom through suffering*.

Delivered but Exiled (Matt. 2:13–15)

After only the first three Greek words of Matthew 2:13, the wise men have departed, clearing the way for the rest of the interactions between Herod and Jesus' family.[1] Matthew then uses the word "behold" to signify something important: another angelic vision in Joseph's dreams (v. 13; cf. Matt. 1:20). In the dream, the angel commands Joseph to rise, and to take both Jesus and his mother to flee to Egypt, and to remain there until told otherwise, "for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (v. 13). For Joseph's part in this story, we are seeing another reflection here of Joseph's significant role as caretaker and adoptive father to Jesus, since the angel appears to *Joseph* to give instructions for how to avoid the coming slaughter.[2] In v. 14, Joseph immediately responds to the mandate he has received, actions that are recorded using the exact same words that had appeared in the angel's command from v. 13.[3] Baby Jesus is safe in Joseph's care.

For Herod's part, on the other hand, we see in full clarity the paranoia that was only hinted at in the previous section.[4] Herod is willing to do anything and everything he can to eliminate a threat to his kingdom. The only way for Jesus to avoid the wrath of Herod is to remain physically out of the country until Herod does, which comes about soon enough (v. 15). We will consider Herod's wicked, unrestrained violence more in the next section, when we read about the infanticide that he decrees.

The first scene of this section, then, portrays Jesus in grave danger. Furthermore, this first scene

[1] Osborne, *Matthew*, 97.

[2] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 74.

[3] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 43.

[4] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 75.

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gives the reason why Jesus had to be moved from Bethlehem down to Egypt. Matthew sees Jesus' journey to and from Egypt as significant for the fulfillment of prophecy: "Out of Egypt I called my son" (v. 15; Hos. 11:1). In the original context of this prophecy in Hosea 11, these words refer to the covenantal love of God to bring his people out of their bondage in Egypt, despite their ongoing unfaithfulness through idolatry. God rescued Israel out of their bondage and slavery in Egypt because of his love for the nation he counted as his own son, and not because of their merit. Jesus is also God's son, but in a truer, deeper way, as the only begotten Son from the Father.

Matthew quotes this verse to argue that Jesus is recapitulating in himself the story of Israel as a nation.[5] Israel, then, was a *type* of Christ, but even more than a type, since it was out of Israel that Christ was born, so that when Israel came out of Egypt, so too did Christ, in the loins of his ancestors (c.f., Heb. 7:9–10).[6] Beyond this, there are also close thematic connections between Christ's journey to Egypt and the earlier journey. Remember that Jacob (who was renamed Israel) took his entirely family to Egypt (including his son, Judah, the ancestor of Jesus; Matt. 1:2–3) to sojourn with Joseph during the great famine. Remember also that Joseph had originally gone down to Egypt because he was betrayed, beaten, and sold into slavery by his own brothers—in which Judah played a special role in suggesting the sale of his brothers to traders (Gen. 37:26–27). R. C. H. Lenski, then, shrewdly points out the similarity in circumstances: "So here we see how the wickedness of Jacob's sons brought Joseph to Egypt, and Herod's wickedness did the same in the case of Jesus."[7]

Furthermore, this passage also displays a number of similarities with Moses's story, as R. T. France shows: "Jesus is the new Moses, and it was in Egypt that Moses escaped the infanticide of Pharaoh, and from Egypt that as an adult he fled to escape Pharaoh's anger (Exod 2:11–15), returning eventually to Egypt when 'those who sought your life are dead' (Exod 4:19, echoed by Matthew 2:20…)."[8] Matthew will repeatedly portray Jesus as a new Moses, which begins here as Jesus' early life bears so many similarities with the early life of Moses.

Together, Matthew is demonstrating the protection of God for his beloved Son, Jesus, in the middle of threats and dangers from a wicked ruler who would seek to destroy Jesus. Calvin is right to see the looming shadow of the cross in this story: "Above all, let us never avoid the cross, by which the Son of God himself was trained from his earliest infancy. This flight is a part of the foolishness of the cross, but it surpasses all the wisdom of the world."[9] Christ was rightly worshiped by the wise men; however, according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge, Christ also had to be hunted by his enemies, so that he might also recreate Israel's story by emerging safely from Egypt after his sojourn there.

Distraught but Expectant (Matt. 2:16–18)

In the second section of this story, things go from bad to worse. Although Jesus escapes safely with his family, the other male infants suffer death at Herod's hands when Herod realizes that the

[5] Blomberg, *Matthew*, 67.

[6] Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 179.

[7] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 78.

[8] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 77.

[9] Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:155.

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wise men were not going to obey his orders to tell him the whereabouts of the newborn king (v. 16a). In a desperate attempt to eliminate the rival to his throne, Herod orders the death of all male infants two years old and under, according to the time when the star had appeared to the wise men (v. 16b). Some have wondered why such a brutal historical event is not reported elsewhere; however, if Bethlehem had a total population of one thousand people (as some estimate), this means that there probably would have been no more than twenty or so boys: "Terrible as such as slaughter would be for the local community, it is not on a scale to match the moral spectacular assassinations recorded by [Jewish historian] Josephus."[10]

The Old Testament background to Herod's murderous rage is in Genesis 27. There, Jacob tricks his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing rather than Esau. When Esau discovers what Jacob has done, he intends to murder Jacob, so that Jacob must flee the country to escape Esau's murderous wrath. We must remember that Herod himself is an Edomite, a descendent of Esau. So, we are seeing here a re-enactment of that early story: the descendent of Esau is enraged from being tricked, so he seeks to kill the descendent of Jacob. As Jacob escaped safely in the book of Genesis, so Jesus escapes safely in the Gospel of Matthew.

Once again, Matthew insists that this event fulfilled prophecy, and he cites Jeremiah 31:15: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." This is a notoriously difficult text to understand for a number of reasons. First, why is the focus on Rachel (one of Jacob's wives), who had been dead for so many years? Why not Jacob's other wives, especially Leah? Second, why is the weeping heard in "Ramah" (in the territory of Benjamin), when this slaughter happened in Bethlehem (in the territory of Judah)? This is especially confusing when we remember that Rachel was the mother of Benjamin, but that Leah was the mother of Judah (Gen. 29:35), so that these are *Leah's* children who have been slaughtered. It is very difficult to see a clear, tight fulfillment of prophecy here. Bible commentators have struggled to come up with a completely satisfactory solution to understanding Matthew's appeal to Jeremiah 31:15 here.

Instead of trying to see any one-to-one correspondence, it is probably more likely that Matthew is describing a complex typology, where we see the "fulfillment" as a number of small similarities and correspondences between the story of Rachel's death and burial in the book of Genesis, and the prophecy of the exile of Judah in Jeremiah. In the book of Genesis, Rachel died after giving birth to Benjamin (Gen. 35:18). Importantly, she died while she was traveling with Jacob from north to south—from Bethel, and on the way to Ephrath/Bethlehem (Gen. 35:16, 19). Genesis 35:16 tells us "they were still some distance from Ephrath" (Gen. 35:16) when Rachel went into labor, and eventually died. Bethel is in at the northern border for Benjamin, and Bethlehem is south of Benjamin, in the territory of Judah. Later, in 1 Samuel 10:2, we read that Rachel was buried "in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah." Ramah also is in the territory of Benjamin (Josh. 18:25).

Jeremiah's account of Rachel's weeping in Ramah seems to be thematically related to the site of her death. If so, there are a few more important points of contact between what Jeremiah writes and the story of Rachel's giving birth to Benjamin at her death. First, Jeremiah describes Rachel as "refusing to be comforted," and the Genesis account tells us that the midwife attempted to comfort her: "And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, 'Do not fear, for you have

[10] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 85.

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another son'" (Gen. 35:17). Second, when Rachel died, she named her son "Ben-oni," which means "son of my sorrow," before Jacob renamed him "Benjamin" ("son of the right hand"). Rachel's original inconsolable sorrow over her children took place when she gave birth, and then died.

Additionally, we must also consider the context of this passage in Jeremiah. Jeremiah tells us that Ramah is the place where Israelite captives were bound in chains to be taken away in exile to Babylon (Jer. 40:1).[11] Nevertheless, just two verses after Jeremiah 31:15 prophesies mourning and lamentation, the Prophet turns to give the people hope: "There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country" (Jer. 31:17). Leon Morris draws an important connection between the hope for the return of Israel's captives, and the hope for Jesus' return: "All this points to the fact that the child Jesus would in due course come back from his exile in Egypt."[12] Thus, this "fulfillment" subtly points us to a similar point as we saw in the previous section: namely, that after suffering, God is going to restore his people.

Despised but Escaped (Matt. 2:19–23)

Matthew does not tell us how much time Joseph, Mary, and Jesus spend in Egypt; however, after Herod dies, the angel of the Lord appears again to Joseph to recall him back to Israel (v. 19). The command in v. 20 is identical to the language that had appeared in the previous dream back in v. 13.[13] Here, we get another explanation, that "those who sought the child's life are dead," which is perhaps to be seen as an echo back to the Moses typology we saw earlier, where Moses is able to return to Egypt when "all the men who were seeking your life are dead" (Ex. 4:19).[14]

Once again, Joseph obeys, taking both his wife and Jesus back to Israel. When Joseph discovered that Archelaus was reigning in Herod's place, we once again read that Joseph is "warned in a dream" so that he withdrew to the district of Galilee (v. 22). Of Archelaus, Leon Morris writes, "He was noted for his cruelty even in an age when cruel men were not scarce, so it is not surprising that Joseph feared to settle in this man's dominions."[15]

We read, then, that Joseph settled his family in "a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene" (v. 23). Of all the "fulfillments" of this section, this is certainly the most difficult, since there is no clear prophecy that states that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene. There are two major suggestions about what "Nazarene" might refer to: (1) that Jesus would be a "Nazirite," like Samson (Judg. 13:5); or (2) that Jesus would be a *nētser*, as in Isaiah 11:1: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jess, and a *branch* (נֵצֶר; *nētser*) from his roots shall bear fruit." Both of those options, however, are not as close to the word "Nazarene" in the Hebrew language as they appear then they are transliterated into English.[16]

It is much better to see Matthew's point that Jesus would be called a "Nazarene" in the sense of a

[11] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 88.

[12] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 46–47.

[13] Osborne, *Matthew*, 96.

[14] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 77.

[15] Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 48.

[16] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 87–88.

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derogatory term given to someone who lived away from a place of importance like Jerusalem: "For someone to be 'called a [Nazarene],' especially in connection with a messianic claim, was therefore to invite ridicule: the name is in itself a term of dismissal if not of actual abuse" (John 1:46; cf. John 7:41–42, 52).[17] Or, as Lenski puts it, "If Jesus had been reared in Jerusalem, he could not have been vilified as the Nazarene. It was God who let him grow up in Nazareth and thus furnished the title of reproach to the Jews in fulfillment of all the reproach God had prophesied for the Messiah through the prophets."[18] While we don't read specific statements about *where* Jesus would grow up, the entire Old Testament bears witness to the fact that the Messiah would be despised—as despised as a Nazarene.

Taken together, all three of these scenes show Jesus in the midst of some kind of suffering. First, Jesus suffered by his exile to Egypt—but with the suggestion that he would return. Second, Jesus escaped in the midst of Herod's infanticide, which cause weeping and lamentation—but, again, which signified hope of eventual return. Third, Jesus finally does return, but when he does, he is still in danger, and must move to a place where he will be hated and reviled for having grown up there. Jesus' life is out of the frying pan, and into the fire—out of Egypt, and into Nazareth. This is indeed God's king for Israel; however, his kingdom will be established through suffering and scorn and shame, and not through outwardly impressive displays of power and adoration.

Discussion Questions

1. What Old Testament echoes appear in the first section of this passage (vv. 13–15)? How do we see Jesus as a new Moses? How do we see Jesus as recapitulating the exodus of the entire nation of Israel? What is Matthew getting at when he quotes Hosea 11:1, which describes Jesus as God's "son"? What does this opening section tell us about the suffering that Christians must expect to face in this life?

2. How does the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 27 form the Old Testament background to Herod's murderous rage at being tricked (v. 16)? What, then, are the various Old Testament echoes that play into the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:15, that Matthew quotes in v. 18? In what sense is this prophecy "fulfilled" (v. 17)? How does the prophecy not only describe suffering, but also point forward to expectant hope?

3. What Old Testament echoes appear when we read that "those who sought the child's life are dead" (v. 20; cf. Ex. 4:19)? What are the various options that have been suggested for what Matthew means when he speaks of the prophecy being fulfilled, "that he would be called a Nazarene" (v. 23)? What is the most likely explanation for what Matthew means? How does Jesus' move to safety in Nazareth play a role in Jesus' perception later on?

4. How do you normally respond to suffering? Why is it so difficult to see the hand of God in our suffering? What does this story teach us about the reasons that Jesus suffered as he began to lay claim to his rightful kingdom? What does this story teach us about the reasons that we must suffer with

[17] France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 94.

[18] Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 87–89.

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Christ (Rom. 8:16–17)? What challenges your faith as you consider this? What promises from this might strengthen you as you steel yourself for suffering that may come?

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