
Out of Egypt

Matthew 2:13-23

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Does God really care about us? We have seen some very dreadful days in this past year. Many have been sick. Many have died. There have been great fears, many difficulties, debates, and divisions. In a time when we ought to have been drawn together, there has been divisiveness and anger. Dark days indeed.

Our story will take any dark turn. From the glittering worship of Gentile magi, we come to deep hatred and murderous intents of a vile king. Writing to the church in the early days of pressure and persecution, Matthew has good words, strong hopes for faltering hearts in the darkest of days.

In a sense our story today is a continuation of what went before. The larger story opens and closes with a journey. It opens with the journey of the Gentiles to come and worship the true king. It closes with the journey of the Messiah to safety in Egypt.

This is a lesser-known part of the Advent story. Why is it that we know this happened, but we really don't focus on it much?

It does not fit in with our sentimentality. We want our Advent story to be warm, wonderful, beautiful. Some of you may even be a bit surprised that on Advent Sunday this is our text.

It is full of hatred, the death of children and deep, deep grief. We don't want our Christmas to be sad. We move quickly past this because somehow it just feels wrong to focus on it.

It challenges how we think about the Bible. How are we honestly going to deal with these quotes from the Old Testament? Again, the tendency is to talk in generalities - "cool how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament" - without really wrestling with why here in this text at this point. In what way does *this* fulfill *that*?

Yet, it really is a significant part of what Matthew wrote.

We should try to understand what Matthew is communicating in telling the story. He does put it *here* and he intends for us to read and understand it, even if it is challenging.

We should get some feel for how Matthew is handling the Old Testament. How is what he is saying a fulfillment of what the Old Testament said? How does that affect our understanding?

What does Matthew expect us to "take away" from this part of the story? He is not merely telling what happened. He is writing to the church for them, and us, to hear this in a way that applies to us.

A New Exodus of Israel (v.13-15)

The magi had found the infant king to worship Him. They have been guided to the house where He and His family were. The magi depart and head home a different way to avoid Jerusalem. They are not to report back to Herod.

¹³ Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, 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." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

The Journey Down to Egypt

The Warning

Joseph is warned to flee from Israel to Egypt. The warning is to leave immediately. It is to leave, now. Therefore, it is urgent. The child's life is at risk. Herod is plotting to kill Him. It is necessary to go. This is not an option. There is no plan B. Simply take Mary and Jesus and get out. Now.

The Obedience

Joseph gets up in the middle of the night after the warning and obeys. His obedience is immediate. He does not question. He does not wait till a more convenient time. He gets everyone up and starts out on the journey.

Joseph's obedience is wise. This is not a foolish, rash decision. Matthew is clearly communicating that Joseph gathers up a suckling infant and his mother because it is the wisest way to obey the angel's command.

While Joseph is leaving immediately and quickly, it is still risky. It is travel by night. He knows the child's life is in danger which probably means theirs as well. He needs to find the most direct and safest route from Bethlehem down into Egypt. But this is a risky trip. The baby is young. Mary may still be recovering. There is not a lot of time to prepare.

Joseph's obedience is immediate, wise, and yet risky.

The Duration

Joseph took his family to live in Egypt until Herod died. This raises an interesting question. How long would that have been? Herod died in March/April 4 BC. The decree to tax was issued in 7 BC and the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter was in 7 or 6 BC. This means that Joseph and his family likely lived in Egypt for 2 - 3 years. However, Matthew is not so concerned with how long they were there, but rather with Herod as the danger until he dies.

If it is that long, it is helpful to think about the difficulties involved in relocating work, family and so on. Joseph was a carpenter so his trade would be

widely needed. Again, there are so many questions and details we would like to know. But Matthew doesn't answer them.

The Fulfillment of a Prophecy

Matthew connects this flight to Egypt with a statement made in the Old Testament by Hosea.

This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Hosea 11:1 actually reads:

11 When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

Hosea's Original writing - Near Horizon

Hosea was writing referring back to the time of Israel in Egypt. Israel was the child that God loved and had called out of Egypt. Hosea is writing before the coming exile into Babylon. The near fulfillment or application was to remind Israel that they are loved by God. In the whole text in Hosea, he writes that though God appears to be doing something harsh and hard, He is still lovingly providing for them.

Matthew's Quote and Assertion

"This is to fulfill..." Matthew sees the statement in Hosea as "being fulfilled" with Jesus. In what sense? To what end? Is Matthew just looking for "This sounds like that..." Yet he uses the word "fulfill". Without going through the whole book now and showing how Matthew uses the word, let me just note that he does expect us to see a direct correspondence between what Hosea said and what happened to Jesus. In some way, it "fulfills" the Old Testament text.

Here is some of the discussion around this text...

"Out of Egypt" is the first of several parallels in Matthew's infancy narrative to events from the life of Moses, leading some to speak of a Christological portrait of Jesus as a "new Moses" (on this theme in Matthew more generally, see Allison 1993; Aus 2004). This motif is clearer elsewhere, however; here the parallel is more directly with Israel as a people. Clearly, though, a "new exodus" motif is present (France 1981). Moreover, Jesus will prove faithful where the nation had been faithless; in numerous respects he recapitulates the history of Israel as a whole (see Kynes 1991). Clearer still is Matthew's conviction that Jesus is God's divine Son, both as regal Messiah and as uniquely intimate with his Father. Luz (1989: 146) observes that "son" is the only Christological title in all of Matt. 2, making it that much more important. On the close link between "Son of God" and "Messiah" in Matthew, see Kingsbury 1975, but note also the important qualifications in

Verseput 1987. More generally, the passage also demonstrates God's providential care for his people.

Remember Matthew is writing his book to the church. It is about events before the death and resurrection of Jesus. But it is written to and for the church after the death and resurrection of Jesus. What Matthew wrote about happens in the Old Testament. But Matthew wrote it in the New Testament to the church. Matthew is connecting Jesus with Israel. Israel was a child loved by God when they were called up out of Egypt. That event in history is a picture of many things: redemption, deliverance from sin, need for blood to satisfy the wrath of God. Israel was a picture of the redeemed people of God. They were not the ultimate reality. Like everything in the Old Testament, Israel was meant to be a true but temporary picture of what was to come.

But it is Jesus who is the "called out of Egypt son" according to Matthew. Notice how Matthew shifts the son being Israel in Hosea, to the son being Jesus. This is the line of fulfillment. The events carry the correspondence. Matthew is beginning to introduce the idea that Jesus is not just the fulfillment of something predicted or prophesied. He is introducing the idea that Jesus is the reality to which those Old Testament things pointed. Some of the Old Testament is to give Jesus's true identity. Some of the Old Testament is to foreshadow Jesus's as the true reality.

Therefore, we suggest to you that Matthew is saying that Jesus is the New Israel. Israel was a beloved child who was called up out of Egypt. That beloved child, according to Hosea, even in dark and difficult days, was still loved and cared for. The fulfillment is in Jesus. Jesus is now the beloved, out of Egypt called son. Jesus is the true Israel of God. Through the first part of his book, Matthew will intentionally place events of Jesus' life to be parallel to Israel's history.

Jesus has come into the world as human and divine. In Him will all the people of God *be*.

The Highlight of God's Providence

From the quote in Hosea, we also see God's love and care for His people. He took care of Israel. He took care of Jesus. He will take care of you...

That Israel had been delivered from Egypt, that Israel would again be exiled but again be delivered from Babylon, and that the child believed to be the Messiah also had to return to Israel from Egypt formed too striking a set of parallels for Matthew to attribute them to chance. God clearly was at work orchestrating the entire series of events. Israel's time in Egypt and subsequent delivery. Hosea's relating that to the time of Israel in Exile. Now Matthew sees in all these events the providential hand of God.

All the hard dark, fearful things of this past year and possibly the year to come are in God's hands. He is orchestrating all for reasons we know and for reasons

we do not. What is critical is that we bow to the Lord. We submit to His providences. We relish His love and care of us even when it does not feel loving.

A New Murder of Babies (v.16-18)

When Israel left Egypt, all over Egypt, firstborns died. They died if the doorway to their house was not sprinkled with blood of a slaughtered lamb. And here...

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ "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."

The Cruelty of the King (v.16)

Herod somehow came to know that the magi had not come back. He saw this as being tricked. What he does next is simply wanton, uncontrolled cruelty. Herod exploded in fury. He sent his palace guard to Bethlehem. In the town and suburbs around it, they slaughtered every male baby two years or younger. This was not unusual for Herod. He had a growing and well-earned reputation for eliminating any opposition or threat to his power.

What a horrible night for soldiers and for families. Bethlehem was a relatively small town. But still this was a dreadful slaughter. Why does Matthew write this? One reason possibly is to correct the record. This slaughter of infants would have been long remembered. Why Herod did it was well known. Now the family that really was the impetus for this terrible tragedy – their son had become a well-known rabbi, teacher and healer who had claimed to be the Messiah.

The Grief of the Parents (v.17-18)

Matthew again says this is the fulfillment of an Old Testament text. This is from Jeremiah 31:15. Here is the extended quote around it.

¹⁵ Thus says the Lord:
"A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more."

¹⁶ Thus says the Lord:
"Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears,
for there is a reward for your work,

declares the Lord,
and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.

¹⁷ There is hope for your future,
declares the Lord,
and your children shall come back to their own country.

If we are going to understand what Matthew is doing, we need to understand what Jeremiah was writing. Jeremiah is writing from Jerusalem in the horrible years between the first time Babylon attacked and carried most of the two southern tribes into captivity. This was a time when Judah was rebelling against God's chastening. They were making alliances with Gentile nations to defend themselves. The thrust of Jeremiah's preaching was a call to submit to God's chastening, stop resisting His will or it is going to go very badly. And it did.

Jeremiah 31 is both a call to submission and a promise of hope. In verses 15-17, Israel, represented in this text as Rachel, is weeping for her children. They are gone into captivity. Many are dead. But in her stubborn refusal to submit to God, she refuses to be comforted. Grief may be godly. To refuse to be comforted is sinful. Their refusal to be comforted according to Jeremiah, was a way of rejecting God's providences.

Jeremiah not only writes a rebuke, but he also preaches hope. There will be a reward. There will be a return. There will be a redeemer. At the center of all that hope is the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-37).

The grief of Israel's mothers is entirely understandable. Both the parents of Jeremiah's day and those of Herod's purge, may grieve. That is not the point. Matthew is writing this much later than the events themselves. This is not intended to confront or comfort the families who lost children in Herod's purge. But to the church Matthew is making a connection. In the Jeremiah text, God was chastening Israel in the hope of the fulfillment of His promises grounded in the New Covenant. At the time of the death of the children at the hand of Herod, that promised hope is now going to be realized. The connection *in the prophecy* is in the death of the children and grief of the parents. The connection *in the fulfillment* is in the birth of the One who would bring the New Covenant.

This is the message from these events to the church in Matthew's day and to us. God is taking care of His people. He may save them from disaster. He may allow great difficulty and hardship. There may be many things to be sad over and to grieve over. But wise obedience flows out of the hope we have in Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant. Even in our deepest sorrows, our greatest risks, our troubling dangerous times, we are loved, and we kept by God's omnipotent hand.

A New Return to Israel (v.19-23)

God watches over and always keeps His people. God sends a messenger, an angel to tell Joseph it is safe to return home.

¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. ²³ And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Directed to a Safe Return (v. 19-21)

Herod has died. The danger has passed. It is now 4 BC. Jesus is probably 2 to 3 years old.¹ God sends the messenger, the angel, to let Joseph know it is safe to return. Once again, we see Joseph's poise to submit to the Lord. He waits until it is time. When the angel directs him, he is ready to go. He gathers up his family and begins the journey back towards home, towards Israel.

In the Old Testament, Israel went down into Egypt at the time appointed by God. They went down to Egypt to escape dying in a famine. In the New Testament, Jesus goes down to Egypt to escape dying at Herod's hand. At the appointed time God brought Israel up out of Egypt. At the appointed time, God brought Jesus up out of Egypt. God is caring and providing for Israel, for Jesus and for us.

Directed to a New Home (v.22-23)

As Joseph is entering Israel, he is planning to return to his old home in Judah. However, he hears some alarming news. Herod's son has been appointed to rule over Judea. Maybe it is not safe. Joseph is now fearful that Herod's son will be as dangerous as his father.

The promises, pictures and prophecies of the Old Testament are framing the life of Jesus. Even in this moment of fear and questions and "what to do now" the providence of God is guarding and guiding. The angel once again appears to Joseph and warns him that his fears are justified. The Old Testament had prophesied that the Messiah would someone who would be identified as a Nazarene². Joseph moves his family and establishes themselves in the region of Galilee in a town called Nazareth.

Reflect and Respond

Obedience to God's clear commands should be immediate and wise in spite of risks. Is that our poise?

God ways may be hard to understand at times. But He is in control, always working out His sovereign, good and wise plans.

Even in the darkest days of danger, difficulty, fears and hardness, God takes care of His people. He loved Israel and cared for her. He loves Jesus and cares for Him. He loves you and will take care of you. Rest in that.

¹ It is usually unhelpful to try to fit together the gospel accounts into a *Life of Jesus*. We were not given a biography of Jesus. Even Luke is selecting his material to suit a larger purpose. Luke entirely leaves out the threat from Herod, the flight to Egypt and subsequent return to Nazareth. According to Luke, Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day according the Mosaic Law. At some time later, Joseph takes his family to the Temple to follow the purification rites. This almost certainly occurred after the return from Egypt. While this interweaving of the texts may be what happened, solving it has no bearing on the truth, authenticity of each account by Matthew and Luke. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit guarantees that.

² This is not to be confused with being a Nazarite. A Nazarite was someone with a special dedication to the Lord, strict requirements and usually great ministry. Samson was a Nazarite. Jesus is from a town called Nazareth and thus was called a Nazarene. We would recognize that a "New Yorker" was from a city called New York. This is the same idea.