

Matthew 2:16-18

Introduction

We usually associate the events and circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth with happy and good things. But then there's this passage in Matthew chapter two:

- Matthew 2:16-18 — 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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: “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 question I suppose we all immediately ask is, “Why does Matthew include this terrible, gut-wrenching story?” What in the world is Matthew's point? In the context of the first two chapters of Matthew, this is now the fourth of five different “fulfillment” passages.

1. Virgin birth (quoting Isaiah)
Matthew 1:22-23 — All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).
2. Birth in Bethlehem (quoting Micah)
Matthew 2:4-6 — Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [Herod] inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.””
3. Called out of Egypt (quoting Hosea)
Matthew 2:14-15 — [Joseph] rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 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.”
4. Rachel's weeping (quoting Jeremiah)
5. Called a Nazarene (alluding to a prophetic theme in Isaiah)
Matthew 2:23 — [Joseph] 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.

Except for our passage this morning, it's clear that all of these “fulfillments” are intended to strengthen and encourage us by showing us how Jesus is the fulfillment (the *telos*) of prophecy (of the entire Old Testament). But this “fulfillment” in Rachel's weeping for these little boys who've just been slaughtered by Herod seems very different. It seems random and pointless. It

seems that it really has nothing at all to do with Jesus. It certainly doesn't seem that there's any hope or encouragement here.

Matthew is quoting from a passage in Jeremiah chapter thirty-one:

- Jeremiah 31:15 – 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.”

As one of Jacob's wives Rachel was one of the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel. She was the mother of Benjamin and Joseph (Manasseh/Ephraim). In Genesis chapter thirty-five we learn that Rachel died in childbirth while travelling south with her husband and family on the road from Bethel to Bethlehem and that she was buried on this “Bethlehem road” (Gen. 35:16-20). Ramah was one of the towns located on this road (about five miles out of Bethel and with ten miles still to go to Bethlehem). So what Jeremiah seems to be assuming here is a tradition that Ramah is the actual town along the way where Rachel was buried. When he says “a voice is heard in Ramah,” then, what he pictures is the spirit of Rachel as one of the mothers of Israel lamenting and weeping bitterly over her children (the northern tribes of Israel) who had been carried off into exile by the Assyrians and were “no more.” *Jeremiah* is describing something that's already happened in the past (100 years before Jeremiah), but now *Matthew* sees Jeremiah's words “*fulfilled*” in something that happened six hundred years after Jeremiah – in the weeping of Rachel for all the boys two years old and under who were slaughtered by Herod.

So what are we supposed to “do” with this story? What are we supposed to make of this “fulfillment”? We have to begin with the assumption that Matthew is doing good “exegesis.” In other words, he's giving us a model of how to rightly read and interpret the Old Testament in the light of Christ – who is the fulfillment (the telos) of all things. With this assumption, we can then look for clues that help us to see what Matthew is really trying to teach us in this passage.

In the passage just previous to this one, Matthew said that God sent Jesus down into Egypt not ultimately because of the danger from Herod, but in order that the Scripture might be *fulfilled* that says: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” The prophet Hosea (who Matthew quotes) was originally talking about *Israel's past* exodus from Egypt, *not* the *Messiah's future* “exodus” from Egypt! But Matthew knows his Old Testament. He knows that in the OT, it was foretold that the Messiah would be the “*true*” or the “*ideal*” Israel, for he would fulfill Israel's calling. He would succeed where Israel had failed by faithfully keeping the covenant (Isaiah 49:3-6). Matthew also knows that in the OT the salvation the Messiah would bring to Israel was often pictured as a second exodus from Egypt (only this time bigger and better and more wonderful; cf. Hos. 11:8-11). This future exodus and regathering to the Land of Promise will include not only Jews, but even Gentiles from all the nations of the earth. Even Gentiles like us, when they're united with Christ the Messiah (who *is* the “true Israel”) will be made part of this “true Israel” themselves. When the Messiah goes down to Egypt (much like when Israel moved to Egypt) and then comes out of Egypt (just like Israel came out of Egypt), it's clearly a sign that Jesus is the fulfillment of “Israel”—He is the one who faithfully keeps the covenant—and therefore He is the one who will bring about a second exodus when He redeems His people from their slavery and

bondage to sin and ultimately from all their enemies so that they might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness all their days (cf. Lk. 1:67-75). God sent Jesus into Egypt and then brought Him out of Egypt as a sign that Israel's history was being "*fulfilled*" in Christ (the "true" *Israel*) – as the prophets had already foretold.

We could say that in interpreting the OT, "Hindsight is 20/20." Some "prophecies" are rather obvious from the very moment they're given (born in Bethlehem / even the unbelieving Jews couldn't miss this). Other "prophecies" are initially a little more vague (the virgin birth / This one wasn't as "obvious," but it still should have made some people wonder). Then there are "prophecies" that can only be seen in hindsight ("out of Egypt I called my son"). These "prophecies" are not direct predictions, but according to God's sovereign plan they still find their "goal," their "end," their "fulfillment," their "*telos*" in Christ. Now that the fulfillment has come the whole OT is brought into a new light. We can only see its full beauty when we read it and interpret it in the light of its fulfillment in Christ. And that's exactly what Matthew is showing us *how* to do here in chapter two. So now in light of these things let's come back to our passage this morning.

I. Who is Herod?

We read at the beginning of this chapter:

□ Matthew 2:1-2 — Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod **the king**, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been **born king** of the Jews?"

Everywhere else that Matthew talks about Herod, he calls him just plain Herod. But when the wise men come looking for him who was **born king** of the Jews, Matthew calls him "Herod **the king**." Matthew is highlighting the contrast between Herod and Jesus. Herod is only half Jewish (his family converted to Judaism) and his only claim to the throne is that the Emperor of Rome appointed him to the throne. Toward the end of his life (and Jesus was born very near the end of his life), Herod basically went insane. He had his own sons and wives (including his "favorite" wife), and others very close to him put to death because he was paranoid of plots to overthrow him." (cf. Blomberg) When Herod the king hears of one who was born king of the Jews, we may be horrified but we shouldn't be at all surprised by what he does.

Matthew specifically emphasizes that the one *born king* of the Jews will shepherd God's people Israel (2:6). Herod was no shepherd. He was an oppressor of God's people. In light of the whole "out of Egypt" theme, we might also think of Pharaoh in the time of the Exodus – the Pharaoh who enslaved and oppressed God's people. Throughout Israel's long history, it seemed that God's people were always being oppressed (mostly due to their own sin), and Herod was just one more in that long line of oppressors. Where was the Messiah who would shepherd God's people?

We know what happened next. Herod summoned the wise men... The wise men were warned in a dream... An angel of the Lord warned Joseph and told him to flee to Egypt...

- Matthew 2:16 — 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.

We're reminded here—and no doubt Matthew's first readers would also have been reminded—of that very first oppressor of God's people.

- Exodus 1:22 – Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile.”

It's estimated that in Bethlehem and the surrounding region, there would have been no more than 20 boys two years of age and under. But obviously, this was still a horrific thing. And the people groaned under Herod's oppression just as their forefathers some 1500 years earlier had groaned under Pharaoh's oppression. Herod is just the latest in a long line of oppressors who have caused God's people to weep and lament.

II. What does it mean when Israel weeps and laments?

- Matthew 2:17–18 — Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: “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 pathos of this is overwhelming. We remember that in context, Jeremiah is describing Rachel's lamentation and bitter weeping when Israel went into exile and captivity in Assyria to live under the cruel oppression of Sennacherib. So now we have to ask: What was the deeper significance of this weeping in Jeremiah? What is the *meaning* of Israel's inconsolable mourning? What does it tell us?

Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31:15 where Rachel is weeping over the exile. But we'll see in a moment that what Jeremiah 31 is really about is a second exodus – the future, greater redemption that God has promised to bring to His people! When Rachel weeps in Jeremiah 31, it's as the prelude to this redemption. It's the overwhelmingly powerful expression of Israel's need for a Savior. When Israel wept and groaned under the oppression of Pharaoh in Egypt, what did it mean? It meant that they needed a deliverer. They needed a Savior.

- Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-10; 6:6-7 — The people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew... Then the LORD said [to Moses], “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I will redeem you with

an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I WILL TAKE YOU TO BE MY PEOPLE, AND I WILL BE YOUR GOD.”

So what is the meaning of Rachel’s weeping and lamenting here in Matthew? It means that Israel stands in desperate need of another and a greater redemption than the one when God brought them out of Egypt. What is the meaning of Israel’s suffering under yet another oppressor? It’s a reminder of Israel’s need for the one who would be their shepherd. If the fulfillment of the passage in Hosea (“out of Egypt I called my son”) was a sign that in Jesus, God was fulfilling His promises of redemption and salvation, then in this quotation from Jeremiah, Matthew’s showing that Israel’s need for that Messiah is just as great as it’s ever been.

Sin and rebellion. Oppression. Wrath. Exile. Weeping. Lamenting. How God’s people *need* the Messiah. The “true Israel” who will keep the covenant and succeed where they had failed. The one who will bring about a second and greater exodus from Egypt as He ransoms them from sin and death and ultimately from all their enemies – so that they might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness all their days. Let’s read in Jeremiah 31...

III. Jeremiah 31

Jeremiah 31:1-25 — At that time, declares the LORD, I WILL BE THE GOD OF ALL THE CLANS OF ISRAEL, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. Thus says the LORD: “... Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! **Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers...**” For thus says the LORD: “**Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob**, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘**O LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel.**’ [SLIDE] Behold, I will bring them from the north country and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth... I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.” Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a *shepherd* keeps his flock.” [SLIDE] **For the LORD has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD**, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and **they shall languish no more**. Then shall the young women **rejoice** in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be **merry**. **I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow...** [SLIDE] 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.**” Thus says the LORD: “**Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is... hope for your future**, declares the LORD... **I have heard Ephraim grieving, ‘You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored**, for you are the LORD my God.’ ... Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities... **For I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish.**”

When Matthew quotes from that single verse that speaks of Rachel’s weeping he knows it’s surrounded by promises that her weeping would be turned into joy – that God would comfort her

and give her gladness for sorrow – and he expects that we will know that, too. This “fulfillment” isn’t *just* a reminder of Israel’s desperate need for the Messiah’s salvation, but also, ultimately, of their sure confidence that God has seen their oppression. He has heard their weeping and lamenting, and He has now responded by once again calling His son out of Egypt. The Messiah has come. He is the true Israel who keeps the covenant, succeeding where Israel has only failed. And now all those who are “in Christ” (the Jew first in time and now also the Gentile) can be part of this “true Israel.” Through repentance and faith in Christ, the Messiah, we have now experienced this second and greater redemption from slavery to sin. And now we discover that Matthew has actually quoted from one of the most famous chapters in the OT, for Jeremiah goes on to say:

- Jeremiah 31:31-34 — “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

The first exodus was accompanied by a covenant (the Mosaic Covenant). The second and greater exodus is accompanied by a new and better covenant. This new covenant brings with it not only a deliverance from sin, but it’s what makes possible our final deliverance from all oppression and suffering and weeping and lamenting as we look forward to the Promised Land. One day, *all* of our mourning will be turned into joy. For *all* of our sorrow, God will give us gladness. And so even today, *all* weeping, *all* oppression, *all* suffering, *all* languishing, *all* sorrow – it’s all a reminder of how desperately we needed the Messiah’s redemption and the promise that because that redemption has come, God will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes. In that day, never again will the sound of weeping be heard in Israel.

- Isaiah 35:10 (cf. 25:8) – And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
- Revelation 7:16-17 – They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their *shepherd*, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.
- Revelation 21:1-4 – Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be

no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Matthew didn't emphasize the cruel oppression of Herod and the bitter weeping of God's people in order to be gloomy and morbid. Matthew wanted the Messiah's coming out of Egypt to be seen in light of the long oppression of God's people. And so Matthew wanted us to rejoice, knowing that what Christ has brought to us is ultimately the end of all oppression and of all tears.

Conclusion

The Bible divides all of history into just two ages – “this age” and “the age to come” (Mat. 12:32; 13:49; Lk. 18:29-30; Eph. 1:21). And yet there's also a sense in which the Bible speaks of these two ages as “overlapping,” now, in this unique time between Christ's first and second advents. Another way of thinking about the “already” and the “not yet” is this overlapping of the ages. And so the writer of Hebrews speaks of those who have tasted already the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:5). The powers of the age to come refer to all those realities that are made possible by the Holy Spirit of God. In other words, the age to come will be the age of life in the Spirit. Even our resurrection bodies will be “spiritual” bodies – physical bodies wholly fitted for and expressive of life in the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:42-49). And yet even now God has given us the Spirit as a “guarantee” of this spiritual resurrection body (2 Cor. 5:5). Even now, God has given us the Spirit as the “firstfruits” *already* of our future adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23). And so even now we can know already, even in the midst of the weeping and lamenting that still characterizes this age, that joy that belongs to the age to come.

- Galatians 5:22 — The fruit of the Spirit is... joy...
- Romans 14:17 (cf. Acts 13:52; 1 Thess. 1:6) — The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

One day, *all* of our mourning (no matter how bitter) will be turned into joy. For *all* of our sorrow (no matter how deep and painful), God will give us gladness. And so even today, *all* weeping, *all* oppression, *all* suffering, *all* languishing, *all* sorrow—it's all a reminder of how we needed the Messiah's redemption and the promise that because that redemption has come, God will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes. This is the meaning of Rachel weeping for her children. Already, we have tasted of that joy that belongs to the age to come. One day, we will experience that joy exclusively – in abundant, fullest measure. Be comforted, then, and look to Jesus with joy and hope.