

§ 015

THE CHILD JESUS CARRIED TO EGYPT, AND THE CHILDREN AT BETHLEHEM SLAIN

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."

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." ¹

Matthew 2:13-18

Introduction

1. From His earliest infancy the holy Child Jesus was in a very special way under divine protection, for, though God manifest in the flesh, He was not exempt from human suffering.²

¹ *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. 2001 (Mt 2:13-18). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² Spurgeon said: Our Prince steps along a pathway paved with prophecies. Yet see what trouble attends his early days! The weeping prophet foretells the wailing over the innocents. He is the innocent cause of the death of many innocents. Men say that religion has been the cause of cruelty and bloodshed: honesty should compel them to admit, that not religion, but opposition to religion, has done this. What! blame Jesus because Herod sought to murder him, and therefore made so many mothers weep over their dead babes! What three drops of gall are these—"lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning"! The triple mixture is all too common.

Our Rachels still weep; but holy women who know the Lord Jesus, do not now say concerning their little ones that "*they are not.*" They know that their children are, and they know where they are, and they expect to meet them again in glory. Surely, if these women had but known, they might have been comforted by the fact, that though their little ones were slain, The Children's Friend had escaped, and still lived to be the Saviour of all who die before committing actual transgression. [Spurgeon, C.H. (2009). *The gospel of the kingdom: A commentary on the book of Matthew* (8). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.]

- Angels watched over His early years like a heavenly bodyguard.
 - They announced His birth, even as Gabriel had predicted His incarnation, and
 - they were sent of God to explain the mystery of Mary's condition to Joseph; and then
 - they instructed him as to each step he was to take in order to guard his sacred charge from the vengeance of Herod and others who might seek to put Him to death before the appointed time.
2. The angels were created by the eternal Word, the Son, who in the fulness of time became Man for our salvation.
 - It was their joy to herald His coming into the world and to watch over and minister to Him in His humiliation down here.
 - Upon the departure of the Magi it was an angel who spoke to Joseph in a dream (which in itself reminds us how God often has revealed His will to men, as in Job 33:14–17).
 - Joseph was commanded to “take the young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt,” there to abide until further instruction came, in order to protect the Child from the wrath of Herod, who was determined not to permit anyone to live who might contest the rights of his family to the throne.
 3. According to the bidding of the angel Joseph “arose ... and departed into Egypt.”
 - There God was to provide a place of refuge where the holy Babe would be permitted to develop in peace and security.
 4. The family, with Jesus, remained in Egypt until word came that Herod had died, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called My Son.”
 - These words were spoken by Jehovah through Hosea (11:1) and referred primarily to Israel as a nation.
 - Now they were to be fulfilled a second time in Him who came to redeem Israel.
 - He, like the family of Jacob, went down into Egypt and was brought out of it in God's due time.³

Commentary

1. *An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.* Joseph again received a message from God, through a dream instructing him to take the child Jesus and His mother and flee

³ Ironside, H.A. (1948). *Expository notes on the Gospel of Matthew*. (19). Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers.

into Egypt. The instruction is very explicit that Herod would seek to take the child's life and that they were to stay in Egypt until God gave them the next word of direction.

2. Previously, the reference stated that the wise men found Mary and the child in the house, with no reference to Joseph.
 - During the day Joseph may have been at work in Bethlehem at his trade as carpenter.
 - However, the fact that God gives the communication to Joseph in a dream emphasizes the solidarity of the family, the responsible role of Joseph as the husband and head of the family, and the realism in which the birth of Christ is a part of the normal family life experience of Joseph and Mary.
3. *Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt.* The flight to Egypt was not especially unusual for a Jewish family.
 - Egypt afforded a natural haven for first-century Jews.
 - Even from Old Testament times Egypt had often provided a refuge when danger threatened Israel (e.g., 1 Kings 11:40; 2 Kings 25:26; Zech 10:10).⁴
4. A very large Jewish community lived in Egypt in this period.
 - Perhaps one-third of Alexandria, located in northern Egypt, was Jewish; with a population estimated at about one million, it was one of the empire's largest cities.
 - Alexandria included a well-to-do Jewish element, schooled in Greek thought; most inhabitants of Egypt, however, were agrarian peasants, some of the poorest in the empire.
 - Other Jewish communities had existed farther south, especially in Elephantine, for centuries.
 - Literature from Palestinian Jews indicates that many of them questioned the devoutness of their Egyptian Jewish kinfolk, although Egyptian Jews considered themselves faithful to God.
5. *Take the child and his mother.* "The child and his mother" reappear as in verse 11.
 - Matthew does _____⁵ call Jesus Joseph's child, perhaps to remind his readers of the virginal conception.
 - Also "the child" is mentioned before "his mother." Jesus remains the central focus of the text.

⁴ Augsburg, M.S., & Ogilvie, L.J. (1982). *Vol. 24: The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 24: Matthew*. Formerly The Communicator's Commentary. The Preacher's Commentary series (18). Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Inc.

⁵ not

- The angel tells Joseph to take his family and flee to Egypt because of Herod's murderous schemes.⁶
- These schemes will be described in more detail in verse 16.⁷

6. *He rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt.* The Nile made travel easy within Egypt, but the coastal road to Egypt from Palestine was not the finest, and Egypt would be even harder to reach from Bethlehem without traveling northward to Jerusalem (one would have to take the poorer route southward to Hebron).

- Egypt had served as a place of refuge in the past (1 Kings 11:40; Jer 26:21).
- By leaving "at night," Joseph's family made their route of departure impossible to trace; the language might also evoke Jewish readers' memory of Exodus 12:31.⁸

7. *He ... remained there until the death of Herod.* The death of Herod⁹ brought relief to many.

- Only then, for instance, did the Qumran covenanters return to their center, destroyed in 31 BC, and rebuild it.
- In Egypt, Herod's death made possible the return of the Child, Mary, and Joseph, who awaited a word from the Lord.¹⁰
- The Greek could be rendered "And so was fulfilled" (NIV) or "[This came about] in order that the word of the Lord ... might be fulfilled."

⁶ The motif of Jesus' withdrawal from hostility appears frequently in Matthew, but God's providence overrides any sense of defeat in retreat.

⁷ Blomberg, C. (2001, c1992). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (66). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁸ Keener, C.S., & InterVarsity Press. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament* (Mt 2:13). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

⁹ **Until the death of Herod** (ἕως της τελευτης ἡρωδου [*heōs tēs teleutēs Hērōidou*]). The Magi had been warned in a dream not to report to Herod and now Joseph was warned in a dream to take Mary and the child along (μελλει ζητειν του ἀπολεσαι [*mellei zētein tou apolesai*] gives a vivid picture of the purpose of Herod in these three verbs). In Egypt Joseph was to keep Mary and Jesus till the death of Herod the monster. Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 to show that this was in fulfillment of God's purpose to call his Son out of Egypt. He may have quoted again from a collection of *testimonia* rather than from the Septuagint. There is a Jewish tradition in the Talmud that Jesus "brought with him magic arts out of Egypt in an incision on his body" (*Shabb.* 104b). "This attempt to ascribe the Lord's miracles to Satanic agency seems to be independent of Matthew, and may have been known to him, so that one object of his account may have been to combat it" (McNeile). [Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol.V ©1932, Vol.VI ©1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Mt 2:15). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.]

¹⁰ In the early church, pagan philosophers such as Celsus attacked Christianity by describing Jesus as both an illegitimate child and as one who lived in Egypt and learned the sorcery and magic of the Egyptians. But Matthew makes clear that Jesus went to Egypt as a little child and that He returned from Egypt as a child. [Augsburger & Ogilvie, 18.]

- Either way the notion of fulfillment preserves some telic force in the sentence: Jesus' exodus from Egypt fulfilled Scripture written long before.¹¹
8. *This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."* Here Matthew sees the fulfillment of a scriptural pattern.
- Not that God, or Scripture, should be held responsible for Herod's action: Matthew's formula here does not as elsewhere use a final conjunction (*hina* or *hopōs*, 'in order that'), but (as in 27:9, where again a wrong action is seen as fulfilling prophecy) the neutral *then was fulfilled*.
9. *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious.* The ruthlessness of Herod's later years, particularly where a potential rival was concerned, is well documented; the victims included three of his own sons (Josephus, *Ant.* xvi. 392–394; xvii. 182–187), as well as several large groups of actual or suspected conspirators (*Ant.* xvi. 393–394; xvii. 42–44, 167), in one case with their families (*Ant.* xv. 289–290).
10. *He sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under.* It is thus not improbable that his fear of a potential rival should lead him to kill a few babies in Bethlehem.
- (The number of boys under two, if Bethlehem's population was about 1,000—and *AB*, p. 19, estimates only 300—would not be more than twenty.)
 - It was a minor incident in a period full of atrocities, and the absence of clearly independent accounts in secular history is not surprising.¹²
11. *Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah.* The quotation is a slightly abbreviated but correct translation (independent of the LXX) of Jeremiah 31:15.
- The following verses in Jeremiah go on to assure Rachel that her lost children (the reference is to captives taken into exile) will return, so that 'there is hope for your future'.
 - Perhaps Matthew intends us to see also in Bethlehem's mourning a temporary sorrow, out of which God will bring joy and deliverance through Bethlehem's Messiah, returning from a foreign land; there is no precise correspondence, but the

¹¹ Carson, D.A. (1984). Matthew. In F.E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (F.E. Gaebelin, Ed.) (91). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. *AB The Anchor Bible*, vol. 26: *Matthew*, Introduction, Translation and Notes by W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

¹² France, R.T. (1985). *Vol. 1: Matthew: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (91). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

relevance lies in the perception of God's working through disaster to blessing, through death to life.

- It is possible that the later tradition of *Rachel's* burial near Bethlehem¹³ influenced Matthew's choice of the text, but as the text explicitly locates Rachel's weeping at *Ramah* (in Benjamin, the earlier traditional site of Rachel's tomb, and the place where the exiles, including Jeremiah, were gathered for the march to Babylon in 586 BC, Jer. 40:1), this is certainly not the main point.
- The relevance is not in Ramah or in Rachel (Bethlehem was not in one of the 'Rachel' tribes), but in bereavement as a prelude to blessing.¹⁴

Conclusion

IN WHAT SENSE DID JESUS FULFILL HOSEA 11:1?

The OT quotation (verse 15) almost certainly comes from Hosea 11:1 and exactly renders the Hebrew, not the LXX, which has "his children," not "my son." (In this Matthew agrees with Aq., Symm., and Theod., but only because all four rely on the Hebrew.) Some commentators (e.g., Beng.; Gundry, *Use of OT*, pp. 93–94) argue that the preposition *ek* ("out of," NIV) should be taken temporally, i.e., "since Egypt" or, better, "from the time [he dwelt] in Egypt." The preposition can have that force; and it is argued that Mt 2:15 means God "called" Jesus, in the sense that he specially acknowledged and preserved him, from the time of his Egyptian sojourn on, protecting him against Herod. After all, the exodus itself is not mentioned till vv. 21–22.

Some commentators interpret the calling of Israel in Hosea 11:1 in a similar way. But there are convincing arguments against this. The context of Hosea 11:1 mentions Israel's *return* to Egypt (11:5), which presupposes that 11:1 refers to the Exodus. To preserve the temporal force of *ek* in Matthew 2:15, Gundry is reduced to the unconvincing assertion that the preposition in Hosea is both temporal and locative. In support of this view, it is pointed out that Jesus' actual departure *out of* Egypt is not mentioned until v. 21. But, although this is so, it is nevertheless implied by vv. 13–14. The reason Matthew has introduced the Hosea quotation at this point, instead of after v. 21, is probably because

¹³ Gen. 35:16–20 and 48:7 say she was buried *on the way to* Ephrath (Bethlehem), but 1 Sam. 10:2 shows that the actual site was in Benjamin.

¹⁴ France, R.T. (1985). *Vol. 1: Matthew: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (92). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

LXX Septuagint

Aq. Aquila's Greek Translation of the Old Testament

Symm. Symmachus

Theod. Theodotion

Beng. Bengel's *Gnomon*

he wishes to use the return journey itself to set up the reference to the destination, Nazareth (v. 23), rather than the starting-point, Egypt (R.E. Brown, *Birth of Messiah*, p. 220).

If Hosea 11:1 refers to Israel's Exodus from Egypt, in what sense can Matthew mean that Jesus' return to the land of Israel "fulfilled" this text? Four observations clarify the issue.

1. Many have noticed that Jesus is often presented in the NT as the antitype of Israel or, better, the typological recapitulation of Israel. Jesus' temptation after forty days of fasting recapitulated the forty years' trial of Israel (see on 4:1–11). Elsewhere, if Israel is the vine that does not bring forth the expected fruit, Jesus, by contrast, is the True Vine (Isa 5; John 15). The reason Pharaoh must let the people of Israel go is that Israel is the Lord's son (Exod 4:22–23), a theme picked up by Jeremiah (Jer 31:9) as well as Hosea (cf. also Ps 2:6, 12). The "son" theme in Matthew (cf. esp. T. de Kruijf, *Der Sohn des lebendigen Gottes: Ein Beitrag zur Christologie des Matthäusevangeliums* [Rome: BIP, 1962], pp. 56–58, 109), already present since Jesus is messianic "son of David" and, by the virginal conception, Son of God, becomes extraordinarily prominent in Matthew (see on 3:17): "This is my Son, whom I love."

2. The verb "to fulfill" has broader significance than mere one-to-one prediction (cf. Introduction, section 11. b; and comments on Mt 5:17). Not only in Matthew but elsewhere in the NT, the history and laws of the OT are perceived to have prophetic significance (cf. on 5:17–20). The Epistle to the Hebrews argues that the laws regarding the tabernacle and the sacrificial system were from the beginning designed to point toward the only Sacrifice that could really remove sin and the only Priest who could serve once and for all as the effective Mediator between God and man. Likewise Paul insists that the Messiah sums up his people in himself. When David was anointed king, the tribes acknowledged him as their bone and flesh (2 Sam 5:1), i.e., David as anointed king summed up Israel, with the result that his sin brought disaster on the people (2 Sam 12, 24). Just as Israel is God's son, so the promised Davidic Son is also Son of God (2 Sam 7:13–14; cf. N.T. Wright, "The Paul of History," *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 [1978]: esp. 66–67). "Fulfillment" must be understood against the background of these interlocking themes and their typological connections.

3. It follows, therefore, that the NT writers do not think they are reading back into the OT things that are not already there germinally. This does not mean that Hosea had the Messiah in mind when he penned Hosea 11:1. This admission prompts W.L. LaSor ("Prophecy, Inspiration, and *Sensus Plenior*," *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 [1978]: 49–60) to see in Matthew's use of Hosea 11:1 an example of *sensus plenior*, by which he means a "fuller sense" than what was in Hosea's mind, but some thing nevertheless in the mind of God. But so blunt an appeal to what God has absolutely hidden seems a strange background for Matthew's insisting that Jesus' exodus from Egypt in any sense fulfills the Hosea

passage. This observation is not trivial; Matthew is reasoning with Jews who could say, “You are not playing fair with the text!” A mediating position is therefore necessary.

Hosea 11 pictures God’s love for Israel. Although God threatens judgment and disaster, yet because he is God and not man (11:9), he looks to a time when in compassion he will roar like a lion and his children will return to him (11:10–11). In short Hosea himself looks forward to a saving visitation by the Lord. Therefore his prophecy fits into the larger pattern of OT revelation up to that point, revelation that both explicitly and implicitly points to the Seed of the woman, the Elect Son of Abraham, the Prophet like Moses, the Davidic King, the Messiah. The “son” language is part of this messianic matrix (cf. Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1905], 331–35); insofar as that matrix points to Jesus the Messiah and insofar as Israel’s history looks forward to one who sums it up, then so far also Hosea 11:1 looks forward. To ask whether Hosea thought of Messiah is to ask the wrong question, akin to using a hacksaw when a scalpel is needed. It is better to say that Hosea, building on existing revelation, grasped the messianic nuances of the “son” language already applied to Israel and David’s promised heir in previous revelation so that had he been able to see Matthew’s use of 11:1, he would not have disapproved, even if messianic nuances were not in his mind when he wrote that verse. He provided one small part of the revelation unfolded during salvation history; but that part he himself understood to be a pictorial representative of divine, redeeming love.

The NT writers insist that the OT can be rightly interpreted only if the entire revelation is kept in perspective as it is historically unfolded (e.g., Gal 3:6–14). Hermeneutically this is not an innovation. OT writers drew lessons out of earlier salvation history, lessons difficult to perceive while that history was being lived, but lessons that retrospect would clarify (e.g., Asaph in Ps 78; cf. on Matt 13:35). Matthew does the same in the context of the fulfillment of OT hopes in Jesus Christ. We may therefore legitimately speak of a “fuller meaning” than any one text provides. But the appeal should be made, not to some hidden divine knowledge, but to the pattern of revelation up to that time—a pattern not yet adequately discerned. The new revelation may therefore be truly new, yet at the same time capable of being checked against the old.

4. If this interpretation of Matthew 2:15 is correct, it follows that for Matthew Jesus himself is the locus of true Israel. This does not necessarily mean that God has no further purpose for racial Israel; but it does mean that the position of God’s people in the Messianic Age is determined by reference to Jesus, not race.¹⁵

¹⁵ Carson, D.A. (1984). Matthew. In F.E. Gaebelein (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (F.E. Gaebelein, Ed.) (91). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.