

LEARNING BASIC BIBLE STUDY METHODS

An Inductive Guide to the Study of the Bible,

Using the Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 3

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS

Matthew 2:13-23

The rest of Matthew 2 is essentially about how Herod killed the infants in Bethlehem, and how the holy family escaped that terror by going to Egypt, and then by settling down in Nazareth. It is a tragic report of how a wicked ruler tried to destroy Jesus, but how God prevented it from happening. The story lets the reader know immediately that the coming of the Messiah would not be welcomed by everyone.

This section will also give us the opportunity to study more closely how the New Testament uses passages from the Old Testament. Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah are all brought into the events recorded here. At the very least this will underscore the fact that God was at work in these events to reveal who Jesus was and what He was here to do.

Reading the Text

¹³When 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.” ¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

¹⁷Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

¹⁹After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” ²¹So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.

So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.

Observations on the Text and the Subject Matter

The story is marked off by three quotations from the Old Testament, showing that each of the three parts of the narrative--the flight to Egypt, the killing of the children, and the settling in Nazareth--fulfilled prophetic words.

Dreams again figure prominently in the account. The two that have verbal content quoted begin the account by telling Joseph to go to Egypt, and then begin the last section by telling him to return to Israel.

As you read the passage you might begin to make some preliminary connections, as if you have read something like this before. The setting is in Egypt, the story is about a wicked king trying to kill the little boys, and after the death of the king there is the Lord’s instruction to go to the land of Israel. We shall come back to these links to Israel in bondage in Egypt a little later.

Sorting out the story line is a little different here because we have three scenes. The first is about the Lord’s telling Joseph what to do and Joseph’s obedience; the second is about Herod’s killing of the children; and the third is about the Lord’s telling Joseph what to do and Joseph’s obedience. The first and last scenes are clearly connected to the second or middle scene--they flee to escape the slaughter, and they return when the threat is over. The point is clearly the preservation of the Holy Child.

Once again the human actors are Joseph, Herod, and Joseph. But behind Joseph’s actions there is God once again, revealing in dreams what he should do. And in contrast to Herod’s actions, God is forewarning Joseph. One reads these stories and gains the immediate sense that

God the Father was superintending all the details about the birth and childhood of Jesus. And the meaning of this story is pretty clear--there was a concerted effort to destroy the Christ child and to prevent the fulfillment of the New Covenant, but God was not going to let that happen. There is something very evil here, something Satanic (and we will meet Satan's attack in chapter 4). Other tyrants in different ages were also eager and willing to destroy the people of Israel in order to destroy the work that God seemed to be doing. Herod was simply the instrument that was available at the time.

Old Testament Prophecies

Since these figure so prominently in the passage we should probably give attention to them right away.

General overview. To start with, let me give you a little bit of an overview. (Do not be frustrated as you read some of these things and begin to think you do not know enough to make these kinds of connections. The more you do Bible Study, the more you will learn about the whole Bible, if you do it right, and then gradually these kinds of things will be easier to connect.) There were two major, major traumatic experiences for the nation of Israel in their Old Testament history, their bondage in Egypt and their exile in Babylon. The Jews never got over these, because they were the historical foundations of the covenants.

The Exodus from Egypt and the Old Covenant. The first experience in Egypt is the subject matter of Book of Exodus. Recall that God delivered Israel under Moses, by the blood of the Passover lamb applied to their doorways. When they got out, God made a covenant with them at Sinai, the Law. This covenant revealed to them God's standard of righteousness; but it also made provision for forgiveness through the blood of the sacrifice so that they could have fellowship with God. The New Testament writers clearly saw that Jesus was the fulfillment of these passages, the redemption out of bondage by the Passover and the atonement through the sacrifices on the altar. This is the substance of the Old Covenant.

The Babylonian Captivity and the New Covenant. The other crisis came at the end of Israel's kingdom period when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and carried the people into exile. Most of the prophetic books deal with this theme in one way or another. But in the middle of the trouble, when the cities lay in ruins, the prophets began to predict a New Covenant. This New Covenant would be characterized by several things, not all of which would happen at once: Israel would be regathered to the land, she would rebuild the city and the temple, the Messiah would come to drive out all enemies and to establish a kingdom of peace, the Spirit of the Lord would be poured out, the Law would be written in their hearts, and there would be universal righteousness in a new creation. The New Testament writers clearly saw that Jesus was also at the center of the fulfillment of these prophecies, even though the various fulfillments would take place gradually, starting in the upper room and extending to the second coming. This is the substance

of the New Covenant. The New Covenant could not be enacted until the Old Covenant was fulfilled--which Jesus did at the cross.

Now with that background in mind we can look at the first two Old Testament citations, the first referring to the Exodus from Egypt (the historical foundation of the old covenant), and the second referring to the Babylonian invasion (the historical foundation for the revelation of the new covenant).

Hosea 11:1 and the Exodus. Now then, when Matthew records how an angel directed Joseph to take the holy family into Egypt for safety from the king who was trying to kill the boy, he adds that this fulfilled what Hosea said, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” This is Hosea 11:1. If you read that passage you will see that Hosea is writing about the nation of Israel that God called out of Egypt at the Exodus. He refers to Israel when the nation was a child, meaning at the beginning of its national existence--a young nation. But the metaphorical language of the nation as a child, and as God’s son, comes from Exodus itself. Moses said to Pharaoh, “This is what the LORD says, Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, ‘Let my son go so he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go, so I will kill your firstborn son” (Exod. 4:22,23). God was about to bring retribution on the Egyptians for their killing of the Israelites. And in the announcement, there is a word play on “son.” The nation of Israel was God’s firstborn “son”--this is a figurative use of the word. But the firstborn “son” of pharaoh was a literal son. So there are two different meanings of the word “son” in the passage in Exodus. Hosea refers to the first when he refers to Israel as God’s “son.”

Matthew is fully aware that Jesus is God’s Son--in another sense of the word. This word to Matthew catches some of the meaning of both the uses in Exodus. He is the Son of God in that like Pharaoh’s son He shares the nature of His Father and is the heir to the throne (even though He was never procreated); and He is also the Son as Israel was a son in that He fulfills the destiny of the nation of Israel. In other words, Matthew sees Jesus as the true Israel, the Seed of Abraham in the purest sense. Everything Israel was supposed to be, Jesus would be. And the things that God did for and through Israel find fulfillment in the person and works of Jesus.

We will have to leave this for the moment since the subject would be too large to carry further; but to draw this point out would call for a survey of how the sacrifices, festivals, temple, and significant events in Israel were types and figures of the coming Christ.

But Matthew sees the parallels between Jesus’ sojourn in Egypt, preservation from the killing of the children, and return to the Promised Land, and the historical event of the nation in Egypt, being preserved through the killing of the children, and the call to leave Egypt and go to Israel. He sees the old event as a type, a preview, of the new event. Jesus would walk through (as it were) the experiences of the nation, in order to fulfill all the needs of the nation. So Matthew sees that Hosea’s words that were written for the nation of Israel using the figure of a son **find their fullest meaning in the experience of Jesus the Son** as He is “called” out of Egypt to go to the land of Israel. We therefore have two levels of meaning for Hosea 11:1--the primary reference is Israel in the Exodus, but the ultimate application is to the fulfillment of the exodus from Egypt in the person of Jesus. Matthew is not simply connecting Jesus’ return from Egypt with the exodus of Israel from Egypt; he is connecting all that was involved with that exodus with Jesus.

If you look at the verse in Hosea in isolation, the quote does not seem to make much sense. But when you put it into its whole context, in fact the context of the Bible and how God is working through history to prepare for the Messiah, then you can understand how the passage fits Jesus' Egyptian "sojourn." This may seem confusing to you at the moment because it is so different from simply quoting a proof text; but the more you see it working out in Matthew you will see that the New Testament writers came to realize how God's history with Israel was a preview of the person and work of Jesus.

Jeremiah 31:15 and the New Covenant. The second Old Testament citation is used in a similar way. It is a lament that comes from the Book of Jeremiah, 31:15. Jeremiah records his vision with tears of lamentation as he watches not only the city of Jerusalem being destroyed, but innocent children being slaughtered in the Babylonian invasion. He imagines, with his poetic vision, that Rachel, the wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin, is weeping for her descendants, her children. Rachel becomes the ancestral representative of all those mothers in the land who wept for their little children.

But his lamentation is in the middle of four chapters, Jeremiah 30-33, that are filled with comfort and consolation and joy. These chapters look beyond the grief of death to the dawn of a new age that will come with the Messiah's coming, One whom Jeremiah calls the Branch. And with that new age there will be a New Covenant that will pave the way for everlasting peace and righteousness. Out of the chaos of violence and death at the hands of wicked rulers there would come a New Covenant, bringing forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life.

Matthew knew that Jesus is the Messiah, the Branch, and that in the upper room at the Last Supper He inaugurated the New Covenant ("This cup is the new covenant in my blood" [1 Cor. 11:25]). So when he reported the killing of innocent children in Bethlehem, he immediately saw the parallel with Jeremiah's day. Once again God would bring life out of death, the life of Jesus out of the deaths of the innocent children, and with His life He would bring eternal life for those who died for him in that little village of Bethlehem. And Matthew indicated that if Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Messiah the Branch, and if He inaugurated the New Covenant by His blood, then the lamentation over the children in Jeremiah's day also finds fulfillment in the weeping of the mothers for their infants in Bethlehem in the days of Jesus.

It is one of the most tragic episodes in New Testament history. It is a reminder of how evil men can become in their quest for power. And to Matthew it is a reminder of how very much the world needs a Redeemer. The only solution for this kind of world is a Savior who will save people from their sins and usher in a new age of righteousness and peace.

Isaiah 11:1 and the Branch. The third use of the Old Testament comes at the end of the chapter. Joseph brought Mary and Jesus to the region of Galilee, and settled into a town called Nazareth. It was a little village, up in the hills away from the main roads. Remote, obscure, tiny, Nazareth was meaningless in most folk's opinion of Galilee--which also was not very high. This was a region of Gentiles, of despised place of impure commerce and traffic. And so Nazareth was a "nothing" town in a region that was looked on with contempt.

Matthew says this fulfilled what was spoken of the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” Now, you will look high and low, but you will not find a verse in the Bible that says that. But what Matthew has apparently done is relate the word Nazareth to a well-known prophecy, well-known in Hebrew of course. Isaiah 11:1 says, “And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a **Branch** out of his roots.” Here we see another use of the idea of a Branch. Isaiah pictured the kingdom of Israel as a tree. At the captivity God cut down the tree, but left a stump, which he said was the remnant of believers (Isa. 6). Out of the stump a little shoot would grow, a tender branch. And that branch out of the stock of Jesse would be King Messiah. The image of the tender branch is one of humility, or of lowly beginnings, one of inauspicious origins. That Jesse is mentioned and not David agrees with this, for it stresses the non-royal beginning of the family. Eventually that little branch would become the King of kings an Lord of lords, but His beginnings would be humble--and considered worthless by many, even despised.

The connection is that the Hebrew word for Branch in Isaiah 11:1 is *neser* (pronounced *nay-tser*). It sounds just like the name Nazareth. Matthew immediately saw the connection. Isaiah’s prophecy about the Branch (*neser*) meant that He would have a humble and inauspicious beginning; and when the family settled in Galilee, they settled in a humble and inauspicious village, called Nazareth. To Matthew the very word of that prophecy found its full meaning and therefore its fulfillment in Jesus the Nazarene. In His early days Jesus would be a man from a town not worth mentioning; a man away from the highways of life, seeing nothing of the great movements of kings and armies and caravans; a Nazarene.

But if you read the rest of Isaiah 11, this lowly Nazarene was to become a great King, empowered by the Spirit of God, judging the world in righteousness, and transforming all of creation into a peaceful, harmonious world.

So with these three Old Testament passages, Matthew charts the movement from flight into Egypt to the return to Israel in peace, from the lament over the slaughter of the innocent children to the hope that is in the life of the Savior, and from the adoration of the Magi and the attention of the wicked king to a humble life in the hills of Nazareth. But as one reads the section, one is keenly aware that Matthew will re-visit all these themes as the gospel narrative unfolds.

New Testament Correlations

The other gospels do not include any of this material. Luke 2:40 mentions that Joseph and Mary and Jesus had their home in Nazareth; and this was where Jesus grew up and was filled with wisdom and the grace of God. When Jesus began His popular ministry, the religious leaders were baffled: “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” “No prophet ever came from Galilee!” And interestingly, at the empty tomb the angel said, “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene who was crucified. He has risen!” (Mark 16:6). The contrast here becomes great--the lowly Nazarene has conquered the grave.

The New Testament does not deal with the slaughter of the children in Bethlehem. But it does emphasize the humility of Jesus in coming into this world. Again, the passage in Philippians 2 is the best example, because it stresses how He made Himself nothing and took on Himself the form of a servant. This theme then becomes one of the major points of the nature of Jesus as the promised Messiah who would be a suffering Servant before He would reign as King of Glory.

The Bible as a whole reveals how in the end of time the Judge of the whole earth will make things right. And part of His judgment will be to avenge the deaths of the martyrs and to make things right for them. We do not know how all this will be done, but we know that those who have lost their lives for Him will be fully recompensed in glory. In the Book of Revelation the martyrs are nearest to God in the heavenly scenes.

The passage's main emphasis fits the emphasis of both testaments, that is, that although Jesus was feared and hated by wicked men, despised by many who tried to destroy Him, humble and low in the eyes of the world, He is the Son of God, the King of Glory, the Imperial One in all the human race.

Clarification of Names and Ideas

There are not many words and names in the section that call for detailed study. The passage is pretty easy to understand, now that the Old Testament prophecies have been sorted out a bit.

Perhaps the dates and the kings might be put into perspective, although this is not really that critical for understanding the passage. But a little clarification on the family of Herod might be useful. Herod the Great died in the spring of 4 B.C.; his will divided up the kingdom among three sons. Archelaus was to rule over Judea, Herod Antipas received Galilee, and Philip received the northern frontier and some of the region of the Decapolis (so his lands were north and east of the Sea of Galilee). Philip lasted the longest, as we shall see later. He is the one who built Caesarea Philippi in the north. Herod Antipas is the Herod that Jesus dealt with in His life, as we shall see. Archelaus lasted only ten years in Judea. Rome removed him, and replaced him with a governor. These governors were called Procurators. The best known was Pilate who came later.

So Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled for Egypt some time before Herod died. We do not know how long they stayed in Egypt--a few months, a year or so? They returned to Israel when Archelaus was king, but apparently had heard enough about him that they went to Galilee to live, in the territory of Herod Antipas.

Conclusions and Applications

The narrative records how the holy child was preserved in safety when Herod sought to kill him. From a theological point of view, then, the passage reveals how God was ensuring that the work of salvation would be accomplished. God was not about to allow some wicked king like Herod to ruin the plan. And so the account essentially tells how God used angels and obedient people to carry out His will.

But in the process the events recorded here fulfilled several Old Testament prophetic messages. And this also reveals that God's plan was right on course. Even the hatred of Herod and the slaughter of innocent children was not something unexpected that God had to deal with quickly or lose His Son. No, the prophetic passages that are included here show that the pattern of the age-old conflict between good and evil had re-appeared, only now the threat was greater because the life of the Messiah was threatened. But out of the danger, and the flight, and the quiet and humble setting of Nazareth, would come one who would triumph over it all.

We can think through several ways to look at this passage in practical ways.

1. One point to be made at the outset is based on the evil recorded here. The passage reminds us how wicked humans can be, and how wickedness in power can act, especially when threatened by God's plan. At the very least these tragic events remind us how very much the world needs the Savior. Man in defiance of God will do what he will, no matter the cost. One can only guess at the countless innocent people who have been killed by wicked and corrupt leaders. Here Herod thought he was getting rid of the problem (the birth of the king) by killing all the children; but the child survived and would live to fulfill the will of God.

Our response to this certainly includes lamentation and sorrow over the suffering in this world; but it also must include hope and prayer for the Lord to make things right. Those who have this hope will then work to bring about peace and safety, and to promote life and justice for all, but especially for those who are victims of evil. Jesus' teachings will address this later in the book.

2. We can also make a point out of the Old Testament citations. What this passage shows is that every detail of the life of Christ is a fulfillment of the prophetic revelation. We need to remember that prophecy is only possible if God is in control of history--otherwise "prophecy" could only be guesswork, and not always accurate. But God was revealing His plan through the events in the Exodus with Christ in mind; He was working through the Babylonian captivity with Christ in mind. And what He had in mind for Christ is that He would deliver His people from bondage by becoming the Passover Lamb, and then He would bring in a New Covenant that would change everything by the power of the Spirit. These citations at the infancy of Christ point us in the direction the Gospel will go. And they remind us that God will not let anything interrupt His program in Christ.

Our response to this begins with our thanksgiving that Jesus is the One who can deliver people from the bondage of sin and death in this world and bring them into a New Covenant that will last forever. The Lord did not simply step in to judge the world; rather, He came to bring salvation first, to provide the way of escape. By His death on the cross which fulfilled the Old Covenant and inaugurated the New Covenant, and by the work of the Holy Spirit through this New Covenant, God is working in and through us to bring about a holy people who will champion

righteousness in the world. So in addition to our thanksgiving to God for sending His Son there should be our commitment to promote the plan of God in Christ--just as Joseph in the story was obedient to make sure that God's program succeeded.

3. And we are reminded of a principle in this passage too as we read how Jesus was known as a Nazarene. To the world He looked ordinary, commonplace, by no means kingly. But people forget how God works. He does not choose as the world chooses; the world looks on the outer appearance, but God looks on the heart. This lowly Nazarene would turn the world upside down; and at His coming in glory this exalted Nazarene will judge the world and create a new heaven and earth.

Our response to this should be to learn how to see things as God sees them. We are often too quick to judge people by their appearance or by their natural abilities. We should instead be trying to see what God sees in His people, and be assisting all of them to find their place in the work of God.

And finally, a word about Bible study methods. When we see citations of Old Testament passages with expressions like "that it might be fulfilled," we know that we have to understand the connections with the broader context in the Old Testament. The passage referred to may not be a direct prophecy (we will see those), but it may be an event or a person or a place that forms a parallel with the New Testament event, and owing to the fact that those passages are part of the prophetic message, the parallel with Christ was divinely intended. Thus, those passages have their fullest meaning in Him. So the process of studying Matthew will lead to a greater understanding of the Old Testament prophets.