

Matthew 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 12 February 2020

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They departed to their own country by another way. 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. And he 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.

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise man, 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 man.

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.

[2 : 27] She refused to be comforted, because they are no more. But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 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.

And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in the place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee. 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.

In Matthew chapter 2, Matthew is placing Jesus within the preceding narrative, but also demonstrating Jesus' credentials as the Messiah. It's important that he established the site of Jesus' birth.

Jesus is associated with Nazareth. He's called Jesus of Nazareth. But yet, he's also someone who, if he is to be the Messiah, needs some sort of association with Bethlehem.

[3 : 29] Matthew chapter 2 brings these two things together, helps us to understand how Christ is both a Nazarene, and also someone who is the son of David come from Bethlehem.

The Magi come inquiring about the one who is to be born King of the Jews. This is the first introduction of this expression, and in both times in the Gospel, it's voiced by the Gentiles.

It's a Gentile way of understanding the Messiah, perhaps. Themes of kingship are prominent within this section. There's the star and the Magi, and there's also Herod, who's described as the king. Many different theories have been brought forward for the nature of the star. Some have seen it as a comet, others a planetary conjunction, some a nova or supernova, and others have suggested that this should be seen as the Shekinah glory, leading them through the wilderness.

That connection would certainly heighten the irony of the situation, where magicians who were associated with the opponents of Aaron and Moses in Egypt are now coming to the land of Israel in search of the king of the Jews, whereas the king in the land is going to act the part of Pharaoh and seek to kill the baby boys.

[4 : 38] So there's a certain ironic reversal taking place here. It's an inverted exodus, perhaps. In the book of Daniel, the Magi also appear. As opponents, but then also as people that Daniel will rule over and lead.

We might also compare the Magi with the Queen of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba comes a long distance to see Solomon's wisdom and to bring gifts to Solomon. In Isaiah chapter 60 and also Psalm 72, there are references to kings coming that distance to greet Israel and to see the rise of their Messiah.

Psalm 72 verses 8 to 11 seems to stand in the background of part of what we're reading in this chapter. May he have dominion from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. May desert tribes bow down before him and his enemies lick the dust. May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute. May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him. All nations serve him. Isaiah chapter 60. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

[5 : 49] For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Lift up your eyes all around, and see, they all gather together, they come to you. Your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah.

All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense. They shall bring the good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you. The rams of Nebaoth shall minister to you.

They shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house. All of this is coming to pass in the story of Christ. In Christ, Matthew presents these kings coming from afar, bringing tribute, as an expression of the tribute of the Gentiles brought to the Messiah and to Israel at the time of the kingdom's dawning.

[6 : 58] The chief priests and the scribes, who within this story are characterised as if they were the magicians in the court of Pharaoh, because they're associated with this pharaonic character of Herod, they declare that the Messiah will be born in the city of David, in Bethlehem of Judea.

They refer back to the prophecy of Micah chapter 5 verse 2, But there's also an allusion to 2 Samuel chapter 5 verse 2, which refers to the fact that David is going to be established as the king, the one who will shepherd the people Israel, rather than Saul.

And this plays off the character of Herod as well. Herod is a Saul-like character, one whose authority will ultimately be taken from him, and the one who has all true authority, all authority in heaven and earth, is Christ.

Many have seen here an allusion in part to the story of Balaam and Balak. In the final oracle of Balaam, he says, Here we see a descendant of Edom, Herod, the Idumean king, and a descendant of Jacob standing off against each other.

Jesus is the true king of the Jews, and Edom is going to be dispossessed. The Idumean king Herod might also recall some of the conflict between Israel and Edom in the past.

[8 : 47] We might think, for instance, of the story of Hadad in chapter 11 of 1 Kings, which has a number of similarities with the story that we read of Christ here. And moving ahead a few verses, This is very similar to the story of Christ escaping from Israel to go to Egypt to take refuge there while Herod is seeking the life of the baby boys.

This story is playing out again, but the roles have been reversed. It's as if Christ is taking upon himself the burden of the sins of David's house.

And the fact that it is an Idumean king that's persecuting him brings to mind the rivalry and the opposition and the mistreatment of Edom by David in the past.

In the gifts that they give to the infant Jesus, the Magi present him as the king, but also in some ways as the bridegroom. The bridegroom, the lover, is connected with spices, with precious stones and metals and other things like that.

Jesus is not just the king, he's the bridegroom of the people. Dreams are important within the story, not just for Joseph, but also for the Magi.

[10 : 33] The Magi are led by dreams, and Joseph is led by dreams. Joseph is led by a dream to take Jesus and Mary into Egypt. We can think about the fact that in the previous chapter he's been introduced to us as Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Now there's another Joseph, the son of Jacob in the Old Testament. And Joseph, the son of Jacob in the New Testament, is playing out something very similar in terms of pattern of life. He's someone who has dreams, and he's someone who leads his people down into Egypt to take refuge.

In being delivered into and then later from Egypt, Jesus is a new Israel. And to underline this point, Matthew quotes Hosea chapter 11 verse 1.

The verse in Hosea chapter 11 verse 1 refers to Israel in the first exodus, but Matthew says it is fulfilled in Jesus and his deliverance from Egypt. Now part of what we're seeing here is that Matthew is using the Old Testament in a far more creative way than many people think.

Many people think that there's an Old Testament verse, and it directly points to Christ, and then there's the New Testament fulfillment. But then there's a problem when we see verses like Hosea chapter 11 verse 1, which clearly do not refer in the first instance to Christ.

[11:51] They refer to specific historical events. And it might seem to us as if Matthew is just taking verses randomly from the Old Testament and applying them for his own theological purposes, without any regard for the original purpose or context.

However, it's important to have a sense of the richer theology that Matthew is operating in terms of. He does not treat what happens to Christ as a straightforward fulfillment of a prediction, but rather something that's playing out a parallel, a model, and a fulfillment.

The Old Testament deliverance of Israel from Egypt was a symbol of something yet to come. We should also note the various inversions of themes that can be seen in this chapter. Jesus is brought out of Egypt, much as Israel was brought out of Egypt.

But Jesus is brought out of Egypt as one who has taken refuge in Egypt from a pharaoh-like figure who's on the throne of Israel. The chief priests and the scribes are the ones associated with the pharaoh figure, whereas the magicians are the ones that come from afar following the light to come to meet the king of the Jews.

The irony of the situation should not escape us. Jesus has a background in the surrounding Gentile world within Matthew's portrait, continuing the themes that we see in the genealogy, where the women that come in are Gentiles for the most part.

[13:14] In describing the massacre of the innocents, Matthew again draws attention back to the Old Testament. This, he argues, was to fulfill 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. As usual, it's important to go back to the original context to see where these words come from.

Matthew is bringing to mind the memory of Israel's exile. At this location, this was where the Judean captors were taken, from Ramah. And this mourning of Rachel is mourning the exile of her children. But there is the immediate promise after that, that her children will be restored, that there is hope for her future, that God will visit her in her plight. This is not the first time that Rachel might be lurking in the background of Matthew chapter 2.

In verse 6, there's a citation from Micah chapter 5 verse 2. And looking in the broader context of Micah chapter 4 and 5, there are many references back to the struggle of Rachel in birth with Benjamin, and the way in which she almost died in that situation.

[14:24] But now there's the promise that there will be a child that comes from Bethlehem. Rachel died on the way to Bethlehem, as she gave birth to Benjamin, who was the ancestor of the first king of the people, Saul.

But now, finally, they're going to arrive at Bethlehem. And it's going to be from Bethlehem that the true king is going to arise. So Rachel's story is in the background, in chapters 4 and 5 of Micah.

And now, Rachel's story again is recalled from Jeremiah chapter 31. She's the one who stands as the great matriarch of the people, as they go out into exile from the place near her death.

She mourns and she weeps for them. And as she weeps, God will hear her voice. These children will be restored. And the immediate verse that we have next is the death of Herod and the appearance of an angel in a dream to Joseph, telling him to return to the land.

Now, notice the way that it's described. But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel.

[15:33] For those who sought the child's life are dead. And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. In Exodus chapter 4, we find something very similar.

And the Lord said to Moses in Midian, Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead. So Moses took his wife and his sons, and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt.

These are very similar, because Moses is being connected with the characters of Jesus, and Joseph. The pattern of the Exodus is being played out again. Returning to the land of Israel, Joseph avoids the region of Judea, because Archelaus is reigning there in the place of his father Herod, and has a bad reputation too.

And he goes to the district of Galilee instead. The realm of the older Herod, the Herod that has just died, was divided between Herod Antipas in Galilee and Perea, the east of Jordan, Archelaus in Judea, and then also Philip.

The chapter ends by connecting Jesus with the town of Nazareth, where they settle in the district of Galilee. And on account of settling in Nazareth, we're told that what was spoken by the prophets would be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

[16:47] Now this is a very strange reference, and there are many different theories to account for it. There is no Old Testament verse that is clearly referenced here. Some have proposed Judges chapter 13 verse 7, where it's told that Samson shall be a Nazarite, but the word here is Nazarene, it's not Nazarite.

The words may be similar, but there seems to be some difference. The birth oracles connected with Samson and Samuel may have some similarity with John the Baptist, and while Jesus does play the part of a Nazarite at the very end of Matthew, it doesn't seem that he plays a Nazarite more generally.

He's one who comes eating and drinking. The other thing is that this is connected with the place name, the place where he ends up settling. So any explanation would seem to have to take account of that.

Others have suggested a connection with the Hebrew word for branch, Nazarite in Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1. Maybe there's something there. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit, and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

So it may be a reference to the shoot or the branch that comes up. Now, whatever we're supposed to make of this, it has to connect with Nazareth. And I think the most promising suggestion I've seen brings those two things together, and it's suggesting a play upon words, that Matthew is doing something a bit more creative here.

[18:19] Jesus is the branch, but also the branch that comes up out of dry ground, out of unpromising soil. And Nazareth is a new town. It has under a thousand inhabitants.

It's a place that has no particular auspicious things associated with it. In John's Gospel, chapter 1, Nathaniel asks, can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nazareth seemed to be a place that was not really regarded very highly.

And in that sense, it fit. This may be what it looks like for the Messiah to arise out of dry ground. And this lack of recognition of his origins is appropriate to a figure who comes, as it were, incognito, rather than with great fanfare from a centre of activity and power.

What Matthew has done by this point, though, is present a strong apologetic for Christ's identity. As one born in Bethlehem, as one associated with Nazareth, as one to whom the riches of the kings come, as one who plays out the story of Israel being delivered from Egypt again, he is one who bears all of the hallmarks of the true Messiah, the true leader of the people.

A question to consider. In Exodus chapter 4, verse 22, God describes Israel as my firstborn son. In Matthew chapter 2, Matthew quotes Hosea chapter 11, verse 1, Out of Egypt I have called my son.

[19:44] How do you think that Matthew's use of Hosea chapter 11 and the Exodus tradition is serving his characterisation of Christ, both in relationship to God and in relationship to Israel?