

Fulfilling the Prophets

Matthew 2:13-23

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus leave Bethlehem, go to Egypt, and return. This is a *there and back again* story, but Matthew's point is not that Jesus' family traveled quiet a bit under duress when He was a baby. Three times in this passage things happen to "fulfill" what the prophets foretold. Even as an infant, Jesus is fulfilling the promises of God for His people.

Out of Egypt

As soon as the wise men have departed, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt because Herod will try to murder Him (v. 13). They stay in Egypt until Herod is dead, fulfilling what Hosea said, "Out of Egypt I called My Son" (vv. 14-15; Hos. 11:1). In Hosea 11, God declares His love for Israel ("When Israel was a child, I loved him" 11:1a), exodusing him out of Egypt, teaching him to walk, and healing, feeding, leading, and freeing him. Israel forsakes God for Baals and carved images (vv. 2-4). Still, the Lord promises, He won't forsake and destroy Ephraim (vv. 5-9). There's hope yet because God will call Israel back to Himself. But strangely, Matthew quotes this verse while Jesus is still in Egypt. It's not about His exodus out of Egypt, but out of Israel. Israel is the new Egypt trying to bind and enslave; Herod is the new Pharaoh out to murder innocent life (cf. Ex. 1). Mary is like the midwives, faithfully deceiving Herod and protecting the one who will lead the true Israel out bondage into everlasting life. This isn't totally unprecedented because Israel has taken in Egypt before (1 Kgs. 11:40; 2 Kgs. 25:26; Jer. 26:21). Egypt is also where the tribes became a nation. Jesus takes refuge there and reconstitutes the people of God. He is faithful in all the ways Israel was not. The whole problem with the old covenant people of God is that they went after false gods, including in Egypt (Josh. 24:14). Jesus honors His Father, will redeem His people from slavery, and will lead the true Israel out of Israel.

Massacre of the Innocents

Jesus escapes, but the innocents in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas do not. All the male children two years old and under are put to death, probably a few dozen (v. 16). This fulfilled what Jeremiah said, "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (v. 17; Jer. 31:15). Remember, Matthew writes for a Jewish audience who knows the Tanakh (Law, Prophets, Writings = Old Testament). Rachel is a matriarch of Israel who died at Ephrath and ancient tradition holds it to be the same place at Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19-21). Jeremiah personified Israel as Rachel weeping for her children, Israelite exiles who are taken away from Ramah to far off lands. Ramah was a border city between Israel and Judah (cf. 1 Kgs. 15:17) about five miles north of Jerusalem where foreign armies would hold their captives before deporting them. This is a mourning place where people weep because they'll likely never see their family and friends again. But this verse in Jeremiah occurs amidst promises of the exiles returning to the land. They will reunite, rejoice, and flourish in Israel again: "Thus says the Lord: "Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future, says the Lord, that your children shall come back to their own border" (Jer. 31:16-17). Jeremiah 31 includes the glorious prophecy of the new covenant when God will put His law in their minds and write it on their hearts: "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (vv. 33-34). Not only are they coming back, but things

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are going to be different. God assures Rachel that her weeping is not the end of the story. New covenant restoration and glory follow exile and death. God is not the author of sin and does not commit the murder that Herod's soldiers carry out. He does not force His people into idolatry nor the consequences of grief, exile, and death. But He does bring us back from these things. Matthew alludes to this hope that restoration and healing are coming, but you're going to have to keep reading.

Just a Nazarene

The last fulfillment cited in this passage comes after the death of Herod. Joseph has a third dream, this time in Egypt, where the angel of the Lord tells him to take the young child and Mary to Israel (vv. 19-21). Archelaus is reigning in Israel over Judea, and Joseph is afraid to go there for good reason. While Herod was still alive, he had an eagle statue installed over the great gate of the temple in Jerusalem. Romans soldiers bore eagles on their shield and Roman temples had these images as well, so this was a way of saying all gods belong to the empire, something no faithful Jew could go along with. Two Jewish teachers instructed the eagle to be torn down, and after an attempt failed they were executed. After Herod died, a rebellion erupted at Passover over the execution of the teachers, and Archelaus squashed it by killing 3000 people in Jerusalem. The angel appears again warning Joseph in a dream, so he goes north to the region of Galilee, to the city of Nazareth, fulfilling what the prophets said that He would be called a Nazarene (vv. 22-23). The other fulfillments were spoken by the "prophet" (vv. 15, 17), singular, but this one is by the "prophets", and it's not a direct quotation from the Old Testament. It's a summary and a pun that indicates Jesus is a Nazirite, a holy warrior dedicated to the Lord like Sampson was (Jdgs. 13:5; cf. Num. 6). Matthew has already shown Jesus will bring Israel out of exile, and another name for the messiah who will do that is *netzer*, "branch": "In that day the Branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious; and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and appealing for those of Israel who have escaped" (Jer. 4:2). Nazareth is an unremarkable town, as Nathanael asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn. 1:46). Jesus will not grow up among the important teachers and wealthy elite in Judea. He come out of nowhere and from nowhere, but those who can see who He is will follow Him: "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. 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 of the fear of the Lord" (Is. 11:1). Matthew draws this incredible portrait of who Jesus is. He is the new Israel, the true man who loves His Father God, escapes violence, and leads His people out of slavery. He gathers the exiles, the poor and overlooked, the humble and downtrodden, to bring them into the land of Promise to inherit the blessings. He is the comforter to those who are bereft and weeping, and the dedicated warrior to fight on their behalf. He identifies with the humble but is truly great, and His kingdom will continue to grow and fill the earth. Mary and Joseph knew something of what was going on, but much of it had to be unclear while they were running for their lives. But they knew God was fulfilling His promises for His glory and their good. We must know the same.