

Bible Study Guide: Week of 12-26-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 2:13-23

¹³Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, 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.” ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

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There are many parallels between Old Testament events and the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Some of these, Matthew notes with language like, “This happened to fulfill what was written by the prophet.” Other parallels, however, are more direct. For instance, here Joseph’s many dreams from the Lord parallel the Old Testament Joseph and his role as a dreamer and interpreter of dreams. Likewise, the story of Jesus’ early years parallels the story of Moses and the people of Israel during the Exodus. For instance, the people of Israel fled to Egypt to escape famine and later came to the Promised Land. They passed through the Red Sea, were tested in the wilderness, and then struggled to keep God’s commands. Jesus, meanwhile, fled to Egypt with his family to escape Herod, returned to the land, passed through the Jordan in his baptism, was tested in the wilderness, and then carried out God’s commands faithfully where Israel had failed.

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Similar to Moses, Jesus escaped the wrath of a brutal dictator. Moses was spared from Pharaoh’s command to kill all male Israelite children; Jesus was spared from Herod’s command to do the same. There is no historical record beyond Matthew’s account to corroborate Matthew’s story of Herod’s grim command to kill all children under 2 years of age in Bethlehem, but there are many accounts of Herod’s brutality. Bethlehem was not a large town and such an order would hardly have been more than a footnote in Herod’s otherwise long and bloodthirsty reign.

The prophetic quote Matthew uses comes from Jeremiah 31:15 (note that Matthew doesn’t say this happened *in order to fulfill* what was written—that is evidently a step too far for Matthew to say that God *caused* or *allowed* this to happen *in order to fulfill* Jeremiah’s words). In its original context this passage coincides with the people of Israel being taken into captivity in Babylon. Rachel was one of

the wives of Jacob/Israel. She was the mother of Benjamin and Ephraim. Legend held that Rachel's tomb was located in Ramah, north of Jerusalem. The image is one of the Israelites being paraded past the resting place of one of their matriarchs on their way into captivity in Babylon. Jeremiah 31, however, is overall a hopeful chapter. The overarching focus is on God's promised eventual rescue and return of the exiles. Therefore, it may be that Matthew intended this otherwise bleak passage to end on a note of hope. Yes, horrible things were happening around the Holy Family, but Jesus would be the one to bring new life and hope in the face of such bloodshed.

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Once again Joseph has multiple dreams to tell him it is time to return to his own land, as well as to inform him that Nazareth in Galilee will be a safer long-term location for Jesus. Matthew uses this sequence to explain how Jesus was able to be born in Bethlehem, but was raised and worked in Nazareth. We can imagine that the story of a displaced, persecuted, and threatened Holy Family resonated powerfully with some of Matthew's original audience who were themselves displaced, persecuted, and threatened due to their belief in Jesus. God's providing for Jesus and his family through the horrors of persecution would have been a comfort for those who faced similar dangers in their own lives and families.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Why do you think Matthew includes such a gruesome story as this? Why not a sweet, simple story like Luke's birth narrative of Jesus from Luke 2?**
- 2. Some readers over the years have struggled with this difficult and painful story. Some readers wonder, “Why didn't the Lord warn all families of Bethlehem?” Can you relate to these feelings of wonder and doubt?**
- 3. Can you relate to the early hearers of this passage who would have found comfort in the idea of a “refugee Messiah?” What difference does it make to your life that Jesus fulfilled God's promises even amidst the disasters and dangers of a broken world?**