

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 01/01/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**First Sunday after Christmas**

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, January 1st

**Matthew 2:13-23**

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### The contrast of Joseph and Herod

On the heels of the Christmas birth narrative, the Gospel lectionary text for the first Sunday after Christmas is a reminder that Jesus did not just appear out of nowhere. The Gospel of Matthew was written to demonstrate specifically to a Jewish audience that Jesus was, without doubt, the promised Davidic Messiah of the Old Testament that is first hinted at back in Genesis 3:15. There are twelve verses in Matthew where the word "fulfilled" is used in conjunction with Old Testament Scripture where Matthew indicates how Jesus is a personification of Israel's history. Three of these statements are found in this week's text. The text also contains the abominable story of Herod's slaughter of the innocents - a desperate attempt to hold onto his worldly status. Yet Herod's attempts to rid himself of Jesus pale in comparison to the ever-increasing lengths that our society, dominated by the cult of the self, is willing to resort to in order to rid our culture of Jesus.

### Matthew 2:13-23 Commentary

The narrative picks up after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He was visited by the wise men from the East who worshipped Him and bestowed gifts upon Him. Herod had asked the wise men to inform him of where "the king of the Jews" was located so that he too could come and worship. The wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they departed by another route (2:1-12).

*<sup>13</sup> 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." <sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt <sup>15</sup> 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."*

After the wise men had left, Joseph is warned of the impending danger from Herod in a dream and is told to go and remain in Egypt until further notice. Barclay notes how there would have been Jewish communities in every major city in Egypt at that time.<sup>1</sup> Joseph's swift and total obedience parallels stories of Moses in Exodus and Joseph in Genesis 37-50. Matthew cites Hosea 11:1 which is a commentary of Israel's escape from Pharaoh's oppression of God's people. Now God will call Jesus out of Egypt. Matthew is keen to equate Jesus as a second but

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: The New Daily Study Bible*, rev. ed., vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 33-34.

greater Moses.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, it is Jesus' own people who persecute Him and yet here it is Gentiles (the wise men) who came to worship Him.

*<sup>16</sup> 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.*

When the infamous Herod realized he had been tricked by the wise men, he had every male child killed in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas who were two years or under in order to preserve his throne. Such action was not out of character. Herod had already demonstrated his ruthlessness. On coming to the throne, he began by annihilating the Sanhedrin (the supreme court of the Jews). Later he assassinated a further 300 court officials, murdered his wife, his wife's mother, three of his sons, and on his deathbed, he arranged for the slaughter of the notable men of Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

Given the size of Bethlehem and the relatively small population, estimates of how many male children seem to be in the range of twenty to thirty babies. While perhaps smaller than many imagine, it would still be devastating to a village. Many people will go to great lengths to get rid of Christ from their lives.

*<sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: <sup>18</sup> "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."*

Matthew points to personification of the mothers of Bethlehem mourning the deaths of their children at the hand of Herod to Rachel (the wife of Jacob/Israel) in her tomb in Ramah weeping for Israel's children carried off into exile and thus leaving Israel no longer a nation (Jeremiah 31:15). Rachel died on the way to Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19).

*<sup>19</sup> But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>21</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup> 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.*

The third "fulfilled" text now occurs. As promised in v.13, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in another dream while he and his family remained in Egypt. This time he learns it is safe to return to Israel. When Herod died and knowing the Romans would not allow one of his sons to rule the entire kingdom, he divided his kingdom into three. Judea was left to Archelaus; Galilee to Herod Antipas; and the region in the northeast and beyond the Jordan to Philip. Unfortunately for Joseph, Archelaus was no better than Herod who began his reign by slaughtering three thousand of the most influential people in the country.<sup>4</sup> Being warned again in a dream, Joseph settled his family in Nazareth in Galilee and thus outside of the control of Archelaus.

The final "fulfilled" statement remains a mystery since there is no such statement found in the Old Testament nor is Nazareth ever mentioned. It is believed Matthew is referring to the general theme in the Old Testament that

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<sup>2</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introductory Commentary* (London, England: Tyndale Press, 1963), 42.

<sup>3</sup> Barclay, 36-37.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

the Messiah would be despised (Psalm 22:6; Isaiah 49:7; 53:3) compared to how Nazareth was despised during the time of Jesus (John 1:46; 7:41, 52). There is also the possibility of wordplay since Nazareth sounds like the word "nezer" meaning branch. The messianic prophecy in Isaiah 11:1 states: "*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*" Jesus as the "Nezer-ene" is thus an identification of Him as a descendent of David, Jesse's son.<sup>5</sup>

### Reflections

In this week's text, Matthew provides a clear indication of the sovereignty of God at work. Not only is the idea of "fulfillment" on display, the divine protection of the Holy Family against worldly dangers is evident. God achieves His purpose by working through people. Not surprisingly, many thus ask, "*Where was God during the slaughter of the innocents?*" and "*Why does God allow such evil then and now?*" God does not ordain evil, the responsibility for such evil rests with the humans who choose to inflict such on others. While such evil is present in our world, it is the hand of God that directs us to safety, heals our pain and gives us hope.

The contrast between Joseph and Herod the Great could not be greater. Herod was the king (albeit a Roman client king) of a great nation whereas Joseph was a lowly carpenter from a relative backwater. Herod was obsessed with keeping his earthly power and willing to murder thousands, including John the Baptist and members of his own family. Joseph was driven solely by his faithfulness to God. Where Herod was willing to go to great lengths to achieve his earthly goals, Joseph was willing to go to great lengths to demonstrate his faithfulness to heavenly goals. Where Herod murdered babies to maintain his earthy status, Joseph was willing to adopt a baby to prove his faithfulness to God. If the rebuilding of the Second Temple began by Herod was his greatest legacy, it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. The temple Joseph helped to raise is still at work in the world today. History records Herod with the suffix "the Great" whereas not as single word that Joseph spoke made it into the Bible. Yet, which of these two men was the greatest in the Kingdom?

### Application

- Where do you see God's sovereignty at work in your life?
- What do think was the most important thing in Herod's life?
- Who did Herod worship?
- Who did Joseph worship?
- Looking at the contrast between Joseph and Herod, which of these two people does your life most resemble?
- If you have made any New Year's resolutions, do they reflect more of Herod or more of Joseph?
- To what extent is there any middle ground between Joseph and Herod?
- How can you make your life more like Joseph and less like Herod?
- What action does this text cause you to take?

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<sup>5</sup> Study note on Matthew 2:23, in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 1823.