

The Escape to Egypt
Matthew 2:13-23
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

- I. The Person of the Christ (1:1-4:11)
 - A. The Incarnation of the Christ (1:1-2:23)
 - 1. The Genealogy of the Christ (1:1-17)
 - 2. The Birth of Christ (1:18-25)
 - 3. The Prophecy of Bethlehem (2:1-12)
 - 4. The Flight to Egypt (2:13-23)

Matthew 1:1-17 details to whom Jesus was born, Matthew 1:18-25 details how Jesus would be born, Matthew 2:1-12 details where Jesus would be born, and Matthew 2:13-23 details how Jesus would be spared.

The escape to Egypt (2:13-15)

The word “departed” joins this section with the first half of chapter two. When the wise men left Judea to return to their homeland, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph (2:13, cf. 1:20, 24, where the angel of the Lord also is a messenger). This messenger of God anticipated Herod’s evil plan to kill Jesus, foreshadowing the future wicked plans that God would turn for good during Christ’s earthly ministry.

This is not the first time Israelites fled to Egypt. Jeroboam fled to Egypt when Solomon sought to put him to death (1 Kings 11:40), and the prophet Uriah, the son of Shemaiah, fled to Egypt to escape from King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26:21-23). The most notable Old Testament account of fleeing to Egypt was Jacob and his family escaping the famine in Canaan (Genesis 46). The proximity of Egypt south of Israel made it a common place of refuge.

Note the lack of specificity regarding duration of the sojourn in Egypt. They were to stay in Egypt until there would be an additional revelatory appearance by the angel of the Lord. The subsequent appearance is found in Matthew 2:19-20. We can see the faith of Joseph to move his wife and newborn from their homeland to a foreign country for an undisclosed period of time dependent upon an appearance by the angel to instruct them to return. Joseph did this immediately, “while it was still night.” The finances for this trip would be provided by the gifts of the wise men (Matthew 2:11).

Matthew notes the reason for this escape to Egypt was for the fulfillment of what the Lord had spoken through the prophet, “out of Egypt I called My Son.” This quotation comes from Hosea 11:1, where Hosea makes reference to the deliverance of the nation of Israel from their bondage in Egypt.

“When Israel was a youth I loved him,
And out of Egypt I called My Son.
The more they called them,
The more they went from them;
They kept sacrificing to the Baals
And burning incense to idols,
Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them in My arms;
But they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love,
And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws;
And I bent down and fed them.
They will not return to the land of Egypt;
But Assyria—he will be their king.”
(Hosea 11:1-5)

Hosea’s reference is to God’s faithfulness to the nation during the time of Moses and revelation of the coming judgment of God by the Assyrians (722 B.C.) leads to the question of how Hosea 11:1 was in any sense fulfilled by Jesus in Egypt.

The answer to this issue lies in Matthew’s wording, “to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.” Hosea was a prophet and his words were fulfilled in Christ, but Matthew never describes a *prophecy* as being fulfilled. Hosea, a prophet, made a descriptive statement about the Lord calling His Son out of Egypt. Not every statement made by a prophet is predictive of a future event.

For example, Micah 5:2 (Matthew 2:6), speaks for a future event in the birth of Jesus. Conversely, James 2:23 speaks of a past historical event in the faith of Abraham: “and the Scripture was fulfilled, which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’” (Genesis 15:6). James 2:23 is an example of a fulfillment of what was spoken in the Old Testament that was not predictive in nature.

The word “fulfilled” can refer to a predicted event that comes to pass in the future or it can refer to a past event which is fulfilled by a different event that later occurs that is much like the event that was originally referenced.

God sovereignly used the faith of Joseph and Mary to not only spare Jesus but to also fulfill prophecy from over 700 years prior.

The slaughter in Bethlehem (2:16-18)

Herod the King instructed the wise men to locate Jesus in Bethlehem and report back His location to him (Matthew 2:8). His stated purpose to worship Jesus was fraudulent as his goal was to kill his perceived rival (2:13). When he learned that the wise men did not carry out his instructions but left for their home (2:12), he became furious. He sent for all the boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and its vicinity to be killed.

Herod did this based upon information that he gained from the wise men during his meeting (2:7). We should consider Jesus to have been well under two years old by the time Herod determined that the wise men had not carried out his wishes since Herod would have seen no need to be conservative in his destruction.

There is no extant historical record of the murder of the male infants in Bethlehem beyond Matthew’s account. This has led many to dismiss Matthew’s account. This should not be surprising in light of the pattern of Herod’s evil. Herod murdered his wife Mariamme I, her two sons, her mother, her brother, her grandfather and three of his own sons. As he is considered to be willing to commit any crime to fulfill his goals, this event is fitting with his reign of terror. Bethlehem was a small village and the significance of this killing may not have been noteworthy in the secular annals of history.

Matthew records another fulfillment of prophecy (cf. 1:22-23, 2:6, 2:15) by naming the prophet Jeremiah. Matthew is the one Gospel that names Jeremiah (cf. Matthew 16:14 and 27:9). This is a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15.

Jeremiah 31:15	Matthew 2:18
A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation, and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children, She refuses to be comforted for her children Because they are no more.	A voice was heard in Ramah, Weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; And she refused to be comforted, Because they were no more.

As we can see, Matthew’s quotation of Jeremiah is close to identical with no significant differences to be noted.

This fulfillment is similar to 2:15 in that this is a reference to a historical event that is fulfilled in the sense of its similarity to the present event. The weeping and mourning of Jeremiah 31:15 is in reference to the people of Israel being taken captive to Babylon in 586 A.D. The reference to Rachel is to the wife of Jacob, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, who lived over 1,000 years prior to Jeremiah. Thus the imagery of Rachel weeping depicts the sorrow of the mothers of Israel whose people will be exiled.

Rachel has additional significance in Matthew as she was buried near Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19). This would even more connect the sorrow of the mothers of Bethlehem to Rachel weeping. Also, the fulfillment in Matthew 2 regards the death of children, which is for whom Rachel is weeping.

So while Jeremiah's words were not a prediction per se, they are even more fitting for the slaughter of the children two years old and younger of Bethlehem. The fulfillment of what had been spoken through Jeremiah was in the sense that it fit the sorrow surrounding the killing of the children.

The mourning of Jeremiah 31:15 is followed by God's promise of return to the land in 31:16. The entire 31st chapter of Jeremiah is filled with hope for the future. In the same way, the mourning over the death of the children of Bethlehem is a precursor to God's blessed deliverance of His people, even those murdered children themselves, in an everlasting kingdom through Christ.

This manner of Old Testament fulfillment is often referred to as a "type." The New Testament explicitly refers to typological fulfillments in Romans 5:14, with Adam described as a type of the coming Christ, and in Hebrews 11:19, with Abraham's offering of Isaac as a type of Christ. These analogies that foreshadow a later event are similar to the usage by Matthew of Jeremiah 31:15 and Hosea 11:1.

One working definition of a type is "an Old Testament institution, event, person, object, or ceremony which has reality and purpose in Biblical history, but which also by divine design foreshadows something yet to be revealed" (Donald Campbell).

The difficulty with typology comes when there are comparisons made that are not explicitly described as such in the Scripture. Since we see direct assertion of a type in Romans 5:14 and Hebrews 11:19, we can embrace the concept of typology. Other examples of intentional foreshadowings can be seen in Hebrews 9:8-9 with the tabernacle, Hebrews 9:19-20 with the sacrificial system, 1 Corinthians 5:7 with the

passover, 1 Peter 3:20-21 with the flood, and John 3:14 with Moses and the serpent. However, not every comparison should be considered a type.

Essentially, we should limit our declarations of what is in the Old Testament as fulfilled or a type of what is in the New Testament to comparisons that the New Testament actually makes. To seek to find comparisons may be illustrative of a principle of a New Testament passage but this is different from a divine intentional foreshadowing. Some have distorted the Scripture into meaningless spiritual analogies by the quest for typology.

The return to Nazareth (2:19-23)

Joseph experienced his fourth dream and third visit from an angel of the Lord. The purpose of this dream was to instruct Joseph to return to the land of Israel with the Child. This is the only occurrence of the phrase “land of Israel” in the New Testament and would include all the land given to the twelve tribes, including Nazareth (in Zebulun) where Joseph would settle.

Joseph learned after the dream, but before his return, that Herod’s son Archelaus was now reigning over Judea. Herod made a late change in his will to appoint Archelaus rather than another son, Antipas, over Judea. A following dream warned Joseph and led him to return to Galilee where he had lived before his trip to Bethlehem (13:53-58; Luke 1:26-27; 2:39).

Archelaus followed in his father’s brutal footsteps at the beginning of his reign by killing 3,000 at the temple who were honoring victims of Herod’s earlier oppression. His ruthless actions eventually led Rome to banish him in 6 A.D. The descendants of Herod will continue this persecution in the New Testament. His son, Herod Antipas, would order the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-11) and preside over a trial of Jesus (Luke 23:8-12). His grandson, Herod Agrippa, would have James the brother of John put to death with a sword (Acts 12:1-2). His great-grandson, Herod Agrippa II would preside over the trial of Paul (Acts 25-26).

As Joseph settled in Nazareth, Matthew notes this fulfills what was spoken through the prophets: “He shall be called a Nazarene.” The difficulty in this fulfillment is that there is no Old Testament passage that states that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene or even that He would come from Nazareth.

How can a prophecy be fulfilled when it doesn’t exist? It is important to note that it was not a prophet that spoke this but prophets (plural). Therefore, we should not necessarily

expect to find this statement in a single verse. It is a general truth communicated through several prophets about Christ reflecting qualities of a Nazarene. Matthew does not state that a prophet or prophets said this specifically, only that it was fulfilled.

Several suggestions have been given as far as how Christ would have fulfilled this statement:

- Some say Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirements of the Old Testament Law (Matthew 5:17-18; Romans 8:3-4), one of which was a commitment to a Nazarite vow to be separate unto the Lord (Numbers 6:2). However, Nazarite and Nazarene are different words and there is no evidence that Jesus took this specific vow.
- Some look to the word “Nazareth,” meaning “branch” and say that many prophets spoke of the Messiah as the “Branch” (Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12). However, this appears more clearly connected to where he would come from rather than a word play that is not even hinted at in the text.
- The best view understands the town of Nazareth as a despised place as evidenced by Nathaniel’s response, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). This seems most appropriate because the fulfillment is in reference to the city of Nazareth and the One coming as a Nazarene was predicted to be scorned and rejected by men (Isaiah 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3; Psalm 22:6-8; Psalm 22:13; Daniel 9:26; Zechariah 12:10). Several prophets noted this and Matthew emphasizes Jesus' humility (11:29; 12:19; 21:5) and rejection (8:20; 11:16-19; 15:7-8). Matthew also notes that Nazareth was an obscure gentile area (4:12-13; 21:11; 26:71) which fits with the plain understanding of 2:23.

Conclusion

These three prophecies of Matthew 2:12-23 do more than give us biographical facts about the early life of Jesus. These prophecies are central to proving Jesus' Messiahship. Yet they also prepare us for the future opposition to Jesus in the rest of this book. Just as Herod, the ruler of the Jews, would seek to kill Him, we will see future rulers of the Jews carry out His death according to the desire of the Jewish people. This opposition was predicted in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the life of Christ.

We not only see the opposition to Christ, we see the support of Christ from Gentiles who come to worship Him. This foreshadows the Gentiles that Matthew will highlight later in his Gospel (the Romans centurion in 8:5-13 and the Canaanite woman in

8:21-28). This opposition to Christ is felt in the suffering in Bethlehem and the opposition to Christ will be felt by His disciples (Matthew 10:16-42). While His followers will be persecuted, we must not fear (10:26) for He is with us always (28:20).