

The Flight to Egypt

2:13 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."

2:14 And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt

2:15 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."

In Matthew 2:8 Herod had told the wise men to search diligently for Jesus, and then report to him where He was so that he could go and worship Him. Matthew 2:13-18 reveal the real reason behind Herod's request; Herod wanted to kill Christ in order to get rid of any rival to his throne.

This is the second dream in Matthew where an angel appears to Joseph to instruct him. The angel tells Joseph to take his family and flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's wrath (2:13). Verse 14 says that the family departed **by night**. This could be because under the cover of darkness they would be less apt to be arrested by Herod. However, it more likely emphasizes Joseph's exemplary obedience and just how serious the situation was. Bethlehem was only a two-hour walk from Jerusalem and Herod's orders could start coming to pass by daybreak. Therefore, Joseph, awakened by the dream, departed for Egypt immediately – even before morning had shed its light.

Throughout history many Jews fled to Egypt when there was trouble in Palestine (1 Ki. 11:40; Jer. 26:21-23; 43:7). It was a well-organized Roman province with its nearest border about 75 miles southwest of Bethlehem (Broadus, 22). This was perhaps a 3- or 4-day journey by foot (ancient people walked long distances up to speeds of 3 ½ miles per hour; Edwards, Luke, 715, 716). But most importantly, it was outside of Herod's jurisdiction. According to Philo (writing about 40AD), Egypt had a population of about one million Jews (Carson, 90). Alexander the Great, in laying out the city of Alexandria (the city he named after himself), assigned a place for the Jews and gave them equal rights as citizens. In 150BC, a separate temple for the Jews was even constructed there for them. (Broadus, 22). It was most likely in Alexandria that the famous translation of the Hebrew OT into Greek (called the Septuagint) was written.

The stay in Egypt could have lasted for months or years depending upon when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem. The expensive gifts received by them (2:11) would have helped to finance the family's trip and stay.

When the family left Egypt to return to Israel, the prophecy "**out of Egypt I called my son**" (Hosea 11:1) was fulfilled. In Hosea, this is a clear reference to the nation of Israel being called out of Egypt (i.e. the exodus). The question naturally arises as to how this can be a legitimate use of the OT? That is, how can Matthew take a verse which clearly applies to Israel and then claim it is fulfilled in Christ? The answer is not simple, but three principles help us understand how this is a legitimate fulfillment.

(1) The first principle we need to remember is that the men who wrote Scripture did so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That is, they were guided by God so that what was recorded was without error. We, therefore, know that their use of Scripture is correct because the Holy Spirit directed them. (see MacArthur, 42-43 for a good clear explanation).

In addition, we need to know that a prophet did not always understand all that he wrote. When the Spirit revealed to the prophets what would take place, they sought to know more details (1 Pet. 1:10-

12), but it was revealed to them that their prophecies were not for them; they were intended for us! Those who spoke prophecy knew less about what they were saying than those who live in the age of fulfillment.

Even Caiaphas, an unbeliever, spoke prophetically without knowing what he was saying. After Jesus had been arrested, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said, "it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish." The apostle John then comments, "Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (Jn. 11:49-52). When Caiaphas spoke, God was also speaking through him, even if they were not saying the same things (Carson, 422; Acts 4:27-28).

Although Hosea was thinking about Israel's exodus from Egypt as he wrote, "**out of Egypt I called my son**", God was intending this to predict Christ's exodus from Egypt.

(2) Secondly, in the OT, the *Messiah and His history are inseparably linked to the nation of Israel*. Christ more completely fulfilled predictions concerning the nation and in a broad sense Israel's experiences were analogous to His. As France says, the essence of this kind of prophecy is typological, depending on "transferable models from the OT story" (France, 80).

For example, in the Book of Isaiah Israel is called the servant of the Lord in chapter 41, but this gradually becomes the title used exclusively of Messiah (see below).

41:8-9	Israel
42	Messiah (42:1-7) & Israel (42:18-20)
43:10	Israel
44:1, 2, 21, 26	Israel
45:4	Israel
48:20	Israel
49:3, 5-7	Messiah
50:10	Messiah
52:13	Messiah
53:11	Messiah

In other words, both Israel and Messiah are the servant of the Lord, but only Messiah fulfilled that role perfectly.

In a similar way, Israel is called "God's vineyard" (Isa. 5:1-7), but one that brought forth sour grapes. Jesus, by contrast, was the true vine (Jn. 15:1-8). As Israel (the vine) faded out, Jesus (the True Vine) appeared.

Jesus' testing in the desert for 40 days (Matt. 4:1-11) is also analogous to Israel's testing in the wilderness for 40 years (Exo. 16:35).

The statement in Hosea 11:1 fits this pattern of fulfilment. As Israel in the childhood of becoming a nation was called out of Egypt, so was Christ. Furthermore, Israel's deliverance from bondage and formation into the people of God is a picture of the greater work God will do in Christ. He will initiate a new exodus from bondage and create a new people of God.

Jesus is both the founder and leader of a new people of God and He embodies the true Israel (France, 81).

(3) Thirdly, the verb “fulfill” has a broader meaning than one-to-one correspondence. Not only in Matthew, but elsewhere in the NT, Israel’s history and laws are thought to have a prophetic significance. The Book of Hebrews, for example, clearly says that the OT sacrificial system and the tabernacle were patterns for deeper spiritual truths (see my comments on Hebrews 9).

Therefore, Matthew was not reading something back into the OT which was not there originally, but was bringing out the fuller sense under the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The family’s return from Egypt also sets the stage for their move to Nazareth (2:23).

Herod Kills the Children

2:16 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.

2:17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

**2:18 “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.”**

The appearance of the star had signaled Jesus’ birth (2:2), so when Herod had asked the Magi when the star had appeared (2:7) he was in essence asking when Jesus was born. Their response is not recorded, but the fact that Herod ordered that all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old and under be killed (2:16) leads us to believe that Jesus was up to two years old when this took place. Although this is a horrific event, estimating from the population of the city at that time there were probably only about 12 children killed (Carson, 94).

God even uses evil to fulfil His purposes in messianic history. The history of the people of God is strewn with blood and tears as the rage of man is unfurled against the elect of God. The people of God are still suffering – even today.

Another prophecy is fulfilled in the killing of the children of Bethlehem: **“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”**

Rachel is the ancestress of the tribes of Benjamin and Joseph (which included Ephraim and Manasseh).

Some scholars believe that Rachel was buried near Ramah (1 Sam. 10:2-3). Others believe she was buried in Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19; 48:7; 1 Sam. 10:2-3). However, the meaning behind this prophecy is not dependent upon the place of her tomb.

In order to understand Jeremiah 31:15 a little of Israel’s history needs to be grasped. Israel existed as a united kingdom until around 931_{bc} when it divided after the death of King Solomon. From that time on, there were two kingdoms; the northern kingdom was called Israel and the southern kingdom was called

Judah. Ramah is one of the cities allotted to Benjamin on the boundary between Israel and Judah, about 5 miles north of Jerusalem.

There are two views of Jeremiah 31:15. One view sees Jeremiah 31:15 depicting the mourning that took place when Israel (the northern tribes) fell to Assyria in 722-721bc and the population was taken into exile.

The other view sees Jeremiah 31:15 speaking of the deportation of the southern tribes to Babylon in 587-586bc. Ramah is mentioned because this is where the captives were gathered before they were taken into exile (Jer. 40:1). Rachel's tomb may have been in the same vicinity (1 Sam. 10:2).

In both views, Jeremiah 31:15 is understood to be the beginning of a poem in which Rachel (the idealized mother of the Jews) is weeping from her grave because her children (the exiles) were no more (they were taken away). Rachel cannot be comforted.

The connection between this and the death of the infants in Bethlehem is obscure. The following seems to be the simplest explanation.

The formal connection is between Rachel's mourning and the mourning of the mothers in Bethlehem over the loss of their children. However, it seems much deeper than that. Jeremiah 31 is a messianic passage that is primarily a passage of hope. It speaks of the approach of the Lord's salvation, the coming of the Messiah to reestablish the kingdom of David in the form of a new covenant in which every weary and sorrowful soul shall be fully comforted (Laetsch, Jeremiah, 249, 250).

In the verses after Jeremiah 31:15 God promises to bless His people again. He tells Rachel, "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears . . . they (the exiles) shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country." (Jer. 31:16, 17). "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:31-34)

The tears of the exile that began with Rachel are being fulfilled and will end with the tears of the mothers in Bethlehem for the heir to the Davidic throne has come. He will establish a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34) and turn mourning into joy (Jer. 31:31). (see Blomberg, *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT*, 8-10). The promise to Rachel is coming to pass.

The Return to Nazareth

2:19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

2:20 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."

2:21 And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

2:22 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.
2:23 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.

Once again, an angel appears and gives clear guidance in preserving the child. **“Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel’ . . . and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.”**

Herod died in 4^{BC} and Palestine was divided among three of his sons: Philip, Herod Antipas, and Archelaus. Even though the threat of Herod was now gone, **Archelaus** (who was known for his cruelty) **was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod**, so Joseph feared returning to Bethlehem, going to Galilee instead of Judea. The incompetence of Archelaus eventually became apparent and he was deposed by Rome in 6^{AD}.

Thus, Joseph and Mary settled down in Nazareth where they had lived before (Lk. 1:26-27). Nazareth was a fairly small village of 50-60 acres with a population of about 480 people (Osborne, 102). Benson says, “The country about it, according to Antoninus the martyr, was like a paradise, abounding in wheat and fruits of all kinds. Wine, oil, and honey, of the best kind, were produced there.”

The move to Nazareth also fulfilled prophecy. Verse 23 says **“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 problem is that no prophecy can be found in the OT that supports Matthew’s claim. Numerous explanations have been offered.

One suggestion is that Matthew was referring to a prophecy that was passed down by word of mouth. That is, the prophecy was not recorded, but handed down by tradition.

A number of interpreters have suggested that it could be an allusion to Isaiah 11:1 which is a messianic passage that says, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and **a branch** from his roots shall bear fruit.” A branch from the roots of Jesse (King David’s father) is imagery that suggests that the Messiah would emerge from humble obscurity. Matthew might be making a word play since “branch” in Hebrew (נֶצֶר – netser) sounds a little like “Nazarene” (Ναζωραῖος; *Nazōraios*) in Greek. That is, he may be stirring up messianic images of Isaiah 11.

Another possibility is that calling someone **“a Nazarene”** was an expression of contempt. For example, when Philip wanted to introduce his brother, Nathaniel, to Jesus. Nathanael replied, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn. 1:46). When Matthew says that Jesus was called a Nazarene, he was not speaking literally but referring to the fact that the prophets (plural) had said that Jesus would be despised, and treated with contempt (Ps. 22:6-8, 13; 69:8; Isa 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3, 8; Dan. 9:26). Jesus came from an obscure and unimportant town and *was treated contemptuously* for it (Morris, 49) – just as the prophets had predicted.

It is difficult to imagine how anyone reading Matthew would see the subtleties suggested by the last two interpretations, but whatever the truth is, it is clear that Matthew is not directly quoting any particular OT prophet.

