

Matthew 2:16-18

Introduction

Why does Matthew include this terrible, sad story? Well, this is now the fourth of five “fulfillment” passages (Virgin birth – 1:22-23; Born in Bethlehem – 2:5-6; Called out of Egypt – 2:15; Rachel’s weeping – 2:17-18; Called a Nazarene – 2:23). The first three and the last of these “fulfillments” are all clearly intended to strengthen and encourage Matthew’s Jewish Christian readers by showing them how Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy. The entire OT is one big prophecy of Jesus Christ. But this one (Rachel’s weeping) seems very different. It seems random and arbitrary and almost pointless. And it seems that it has nothing at all to do with Jesus. But this is not the end of our “problems.”

Jeremiah 31:15 – Thus says the LORD: “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.”

In context, Jeremiah is actually describing the lamentation and bitter weeping that happened when Israel went into exile and captivity in Assyria. Once again, the OT prophet describes something that happened in the *past* and now Matthew sees Jeremiah’s words “fulfilled” in something that happened in the *future*. But is this fair to Jeremiah?

Is this just a Christianized version of Jewish Midrash where we can fancifully make the Scriptures say and mean whatever we want them to say and mean? But if it is, it seems like a very pointless Midrash. Why use so many creative juices just to come up with a fulfillment like this?

So what are we supposed to “do” with this story? And especially, what are we supposed to make of this “fulfillment”? Well, I begin with the assumption that as an inspired apostle Matthew is doing good “exegesis.” In other words, he is giving us a model example of how to rightly read and interpret the Old Testament in light of Christ – who is the fulfillment (the telos) of all things. With this assumption, we can then look for clues to show us what Matthew is really trying to teach us in this passage. But first, let’s do a quick review of last week.

Matthew said that God sent Jesus down into Egypt not ultimately because of the danger from Herod, but in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled that says: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Now the prophet Hosea (the one Matthew quotes) was originally talking about *Israel’s past* exodus from Egypt, *not* the *Messiah’s future* “exodus” from Egypt! But as we saw last week, Matthew knows his Old Testament – and two things in particular. First, he knows that in the OT, it was foretold that the Messiah would be the “true Israel”, for he would fulfill Israel’s calling. He would succeed where Israel had failed. Secondly, Matthew knows that in the OT, the salvation the Messiah would bring to Israel was often pictured as a second exodus from Egypt (only this time bigger and better and more wonderful). He knows, in fact, that right in Hosea chapter 11, Hosea not only speaks of Israel’s *past* exodus from Egypt, but he predicts a *future* exodus from Egypt, a future redemption and salvation of God’s people, far greater than the first. And this future exodus from Egypt will include Gentiles from all the nations of the earth (Isaiah 49:5-6; Acts 13:47-48). So in light of the clear teaching of the Old Testament, when the Messiah goes down to Egypt (much like when Israel moved to Egypt) and then comes out of Egypt, it is clearly a sign that He is the true Israel and that it is He who will bring about a second exodus when He redeems His people once again from slavery and bondage to sin. God sent Jesus into Egypt and then brought Him out of

Egypt so that Israel's history might be fulfilled in Christ (the Messiah) – according to what the prophets had already foretold.

We could say that in interpreting the OT, “Hindsight is 20/20.” Some “prophecies” are rather obvious from the very moment that they’re given (even the unbelieving Jews couldn’t miss the fact that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem). Other “prophecies” are initially a little more vague (the prophecy of the virgin birth wasn’t as “obvious”, but it still should have made some people wonder). Then there are prophecies that can only be seen as such in Christian hindsight (hindsight is 20/20). These “prophecies” are not direct predictions (“out of Egypt I called my son”), but according to God’s sovereign plan they still find their goal, end, fulfillment, and telos in Christ. You see, once the fulfillment has come, the whole OT is brought into a *new light*, for the whole OT finds its true meaning and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. We can only see the full beauty of *fulfillment* when we read and interpret the OT in light of the New Testament. And that’s what Matthew is showing us how to do here in chapter two. So now that we’ve reviewed last week, let’s look for clues for this week’s text.

Who is Herod?

Wherever Matthew talks about Herod, he always calls him just plain “Herod”. But when the wise men come looking for him who was *born* king of the Jews, Matthew calls him “Herod the king” (2:1-3). Matthew is highlighting the *contrast* between Herod and Jesus. Herod is only half Jewish (his family converted to Judaism) and his only claim to the throne is that the Emperor of Rome appointed him to the throne. Towards the end of his life (and Jesus was born very near the end of Herod’s life), Herod basically went insane.

He had his own sons and wives (including his “favorite” wife), and others very close to him put to death because he was paranoid of plots to overthrow him.” When Herod the king hears of one who was born king of the Jews, then we’re not surprised at what follows.

Matthew specifically emphasizes that the one born king of the Jews will *shepherd* God’s people Israel (2:6). Herod was no shepherd of God’s people. He was a vicious and violent oppressor of God’s people. And in light of the whole “out of Egypt” theme, we might think of Pharaoh in the time of the Exodus – the Pharaoh who enslaved and oppressed God’s people. In fact, throughout Israel’s long history, it seemed that God’s people were always being oppressed (often due to their own sin), and Herod was just one more in the long line of oppressors. Where was the Messiah who would *shepherd* God’s people? Well, we know what happened next (read 2:7-9, 12-14, 16). In this horrible command of Herod, the oppressor of God’s people, I’m reminded (and no doubt Matthew’s Jewish Christian readers would have been reminded) of the first oppressor of God’s people.

Exodus 1:22 – “Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, ‘Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile’”

Most scholars estimate that in Bethlehem and in the surrounding region, there would have been no more than 20 boys two years of age and under. But obviously, it was still a horrendous thing. And the people groaned under Herod’s oppression just as their forefathers had groaned under Pharaoh’s oppression. Again, the main thing to remember here is that Herod is just the latest in a long line of oppressors who cause God’s people to weep and groan.

What does it mean when Israel weeps and laments?

(Read verses 17-18) It's gut-wrenching. The pain and suffering are overwhelming. In context, Jeremiah is actually describing the lamentation and bitter weeping that was heard when Israel went into exile and captivity in Assyria to live under the cruel oppression of Sennacherib. Matthew knew this. Matthew's Jewish Christian readers knew this. So I have to ask: For Matthew and his Jewish Christian readers, what was the true *significance* of the weeping in Jeremiah? What is the *meaning* of Israel's inconsolable lamentation and bitter weeping? What does it tell us? Well, guess what? Matthew quotes from Jeremiah 31:15 where Israel is weeping over the exile. But what Jeremiah 31 is really about is the second exodus – the future salvation and the greater redemption that God has promised to bring to His people! When Israel weeps in Jeremiah 31, it means that they need a Deliverer. They need a Savior.

When Israel wept and groaned under the oppression of Pharaoh, what did it mean?
It meant that they needed a deliverer. They needed a Savior.

Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-10; 6:6-7 – The people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew... Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt... Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I WILL TAKE YOU TO BE MY PEOPLE, AND I WILL BE YOUR GOD.’”

So what is the meaning of Israel's inconsolable lamentation and bitter weeping here in Matthew? It means that Israel stands in *desperate need* of another and greater redemption than the one when God brought them out of Egypt. What is the meaning of Israel's suffering under yet another oppressor? It's a sign of Israel's *desperate need* for the *fulfillment* of God's salvation promises in the Messiah – the one who would *shepherd* God's people. If the quotation from Hosea (“out of Egypt I called my son”) was a sign of the fact that in Jesus, God was fulfilling His promises of redemption and salvation, then this week in the quotation from Jeremiah, Matthew is showing that Israel's *need* for the Messiah is just as great as it has ever been.

Sin and rebellion... Oppression... Wrath... Exile... Weeping... Lamenting... How God's people need the Messiah – the true Israel who will fulfill their calling, succeeding where they had only failed; the one who will bring about a second and greater exodus from Egypt as He ransoms them from sin and death and opens the way to the true Promised Land. Let's read in Jeremiah 31...

Jeremiah 31

Jeremiah 31:1-25 – “At that time, declares the LORD, I WILL BE THE GOD OF ALL THE CLANS OF ISRAEL, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.” Thus says the LORD: “The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! **Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers...**” For thus says the LORD: “**Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob**, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘**O LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel.**’ Behold, I will bring them from the north country and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. **With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back**, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. “Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’ **For the LORD has ransomed Jacob and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD**, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall be like a watered garden, and **they shall languish no more**. Then shall the young women **rejoice** in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. **I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow...**” Thus says the LORD: “**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.**” Thus says the LORD: “**Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears**, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. **There is hope for your future**, declares the LORD... **I have heard Ephraim grieving, ‘You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored**, for you are the LORD my God.’ Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore **my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him**, declares the LORD. “Set up road markers for yourself; make yourself guideposts; consider well the highway, the road by which you went. Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities... For **I will satisfy the weary soul, and every languishing soul I will replenish...**

In light of Jeremiah, the meaning of Matthew’s fulfillment quotation should be beautifully and abundantly clear! This fulfillment quotation is not only a reminder to the Jewish Christians of their *desperate need* for the Messiah’s redemption, but ultimately of their sure confidence that God has seen their oppression. He has heard their weeping and lamenting, and He has now responded by once again calling His son out of Egypt. The Messiah has come. He is the true Israel. He has fulfilled Israel’s calling where Israel had only failed. And now all those who are in Him can also call themselves the true Israel. They have now experienced the second and greater redemption from slavery to sin.

Jeremiah goes on to say:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 – “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, my

covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: 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.”

The first exodus was accompanied by a covenant (the Mosaic Covenant). The second and greater exodus is accompanied by a new and better covenant. This new covenant brings with it not only a deliverance from sin, but it is what makes possible our final deliverance from all oppression and suffering and weeping and lamentation as we look forward to the Promised Land. One day, *all* of our mourning will be turned into joy. For *all* of our sorrow, God will give us gladness. And so even today, *all* weeping, *all* oppression, *all* suffering, *all* languishing, *all* sorrow – it’s all a reminder of how desperately we needed the Messiah’s redemption and the promise that because that redemption has come, God will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes. And then never again will the sound of weeping be heard in Israel.

Isaiah 25:8 – He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

Isaiah 35:10 – And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 65:19-20 – I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

Revelation 7:16-17 – They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Revelation 21:1-4 – Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Matthew didn’t emphasize the cruel oppression of Herod and the bitter weeping of God’s people in order to be gloomy and morbid. Matthew wanted the Messiah’s coming out of Egypt to be seen in light of the long oppression of God’s people. Matthew wanted his Jewish Christian readers to *rejoice*, knowing that in Christ, the end of all tears and oppression was now close at hand.

Conclusion

(Read verses 17-18) For Matthew, that is by no means the end of the story. Paul puts it this way:

Romans 8:18-25 – For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing

of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

One day, *all* of our mourning (no matter how bitter) will be turned into joy. For *all* of our sorrow (no matter how deep and painful), God will give us gladness. And so even today, *all* weeping, *all* oppression, *all* suffering, *all* languishing, *all* sorrow – it’s all a reminder of how desperately we needed the Messiah’s redemption and the promise that because that redemption has come, God will one day wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Teaching our Children

- Q.** In verse 18 Matthew quotes Jeremiah. (READ Matthew 2:17-18) In Jeremiah’s day, why was Israel weeping?
- A.** Israel was weeping because they had been taken captive by the cruel king of Assyria.
- Q.** How did King Herod treat God’s people (Israel)?
- A.** Herod was very cruel. He oppressed God’s people.
- Q.** Who was the first oppressor of God’s people Israel?
- A.** Pharaoh oppressed God’s people by making them slaves in Egypt.
(For older children, note the connections in the text between Herod and Pharaoh:
1. Matthew has just mentioned the fact that God called His son out of Egypt.
2. The similar attacks on children by Pharaoh and Herod.)
- Q.** Whenever God’s people were oppressed, what did it cause them to do?
- A.** Weep and lament and groan.
- Q.** What did Israel’s weeping and groaning show that they needed most of all?
- A.** Israel needed God’s salvation. They needed God to bring them “out of Egypt” again. (See Scripture under II. B.)
- Q.** When God brings His people out of Egypt the second time, what kind of slavery does He rescue them from first of all?
- A.** God delivers His people from slavery to sin. (See Jeremiah 31:31-34 under III. B.)
- Q.** Now that God has rescued us from slavery to sin, where is He bringing us?
- A.** God is bringing us to the Promised Land – the new earth and the new Jerusalem!
- Q.** What will God’s people never do again once their salvation is complete (once they have come to the Promised Land)?
- A.** They will never weep and lament again. Jesus will be their shepherd (contrast Pharaoh, the king of Assyria, and Herod)
See Jeremiah 31:1-25 (III. A.) **REJOICE!**
See Scriptures under III. C. and Conclusion A. **REJOICE!**
- Q.** Why does Matthew include the story about Herod’s cruelty and oppression and Israel’s weeping?
- A.** Because he wants us to see our desperate need for the Messiah and the salvation that He came to bring. Because the Messiah has come, all such weeping will soon come to an end.