

Childhood of Jesus Matthew 2:13-23

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.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 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.” 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. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: “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.”

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 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.” And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 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. 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. (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- A very large Jewish community lived in Egypt in this period. Perhaps one-third of Alexandria, located in northern Egypt, was Jewish; with a population estimated at about one million, it was one of the empire's largest cities. Alexandria included a well-to-do Jewish element, schooled in Greek thought; but most inhabitants were agrarian peasants, some of the poorest in the empire.
- The Nile made travel easy within Egypt, but the coastal road from Palestine was not the best. Egypt would be even harder to reach from Bethlehem without traveling northward to Jerusalem. Egypt served as a place of refuge in the past (1 Kings 11:40; Jeremiah 26:21).
- In context, Hosea 11:1 refers plainly to the Israelites leaving Egypt in the exodus. Matthew applies this text to Jesus as the One who epitomizes and fulfills Israel's history (Matthew 1:1). Matthew may have borrowed this Israel/Messiah interpretive analogy from Isaiah (Isaiah 42-53).
- Because the only natural route by which the Magi could have returned was through Jerusalem (2:12), Herod knew that they purposely avoided him when they “left for their own country by another way” (Matthew 2:12). King Herod was known for acts like the massacre described here.
- Figuratively, Jeremiah 31:15 refers to the weeping of Rachel, who was buried in Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19). That prophet said she mourned for her descendants, who went into captivity during the Babylonian exile. Like righteous Jeremiah, Jesus was also carried off to Egypt.

- Archelaus, one of Herod's sons, exhibited his father's worst flaws, and was also a cruel ruler; that his mother was a Samaritan surely also failed to commend him to his Jewish subjects. The rule of Archelaus was unstable; ultimately, the Romans deposed him and banished him to Gaul.

- Archaeological evidence in the region of Nazareth indicates that many people had moved there from Judea, which includes Bethlehem. Nazareth was on a major road from the coast to Syria, and quite close to the culturally diverse city of Sepphoris, which was being rebuilt at this time. Though small, Nazareth would not have been isolated from broader cultural currents of antiquity.

Questions:

- + How does the prophecy, "Out of Egypt I called my son," relate to the life and work of Christ? What other Old Testament prophecies relate to Jesus Christ? Why are prophecies important? How might you use prophecies in telling others about Jesus? Who is on your heart now to tell?
- + What does the murderous action of Herod in commanding children to be killed say about him? What does the awareness and inaction of God in allowing children to be killed say about him? If God is all-powerful, then why does he allow horrific things to happen to innocent people?
- + Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod, then to Nazareth to escape Archelaus. How did God use these two wicked kings to serve his divine purposes in the life of Christ? How has God used nasty people and/or nasty circumstances to shape and direct your life?
- + The childhood of Jesus was filled with difficulties and fearful experiences for his parents. How did your parents deal with difficulties and fearful experiences? What did you learn? What would you want your children to learn, while watching you go through hard times?