

## The Feast of the Holy Family



Stained glass window, Sts. Joseph & Paul Catholic Church, Owensboro KY | PD

**The Flight into Egypt** <sup>13</sup> When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him.” <sup>14</sup> Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. <sup>15</sup> He stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

**The Massacre of the Innocents** <sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the magi, he became furious. He ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the magi. <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet:

<sup>18</sup> “A voice was heard in Ramah,  
sobbing and loud lamentation;  
Rachel weeping for her children,  
and she would not be consoled,  
since they were no more.”

**From Egypt to Nazareth** <sup>19</sup> When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt <sup>20</sup> and said, “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> He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. <sup>23</sup> He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazorean.” (Matthew 2:13-23)

### Context

The material in chapter 2 is unique to Matthew. It can be divided into four parts with each of them containing an OT quote, likely added by Matthew into traditional oral narrative material:

- vv. 1-12 - The Visit of the Magi - with a quote from Micah 5:2
- vv. 13-15 - The Escape to Egypt - with a quote from Hosea 11:1
- vv. 16-18 - The Killing of the Innocents - with a quote from Jeremiah 31:15
- vv. 19-23 - The Return from Egypt - with a quote from the prophets echoing Hos 11:1; it should be noted that “*He shall be called a Nazorean*” does not in fact occur anywhere in the OT, nor, as far as we know, in any other contemporary literature.

Our Gospel encompasses the latter three parts above. However, the incident in these verses is “set up” by the star in the first section, the visit of the Magi. If the magi has followed the star, rather than the visit to Jerusalem to consult with King Herod and his advisors, there would be no need for the other three sections. But it was a reasonable action to take, after all, it was their country and their king to be. But the human consequence led directly to the need to escape to Egypt (and return) as well as the massacre of the innocents

As a general theme, life after Christmas is not all that peaceful for the Holy Family. Following the birth there is anger and murder, weeping and wailing, moving and resettling. In the same way, after our Christmas celebrations we are again confronted with the fact that the kingdom has not fully arrived. The “peace on earth” sung by the angels at Jesus' birth (*cf.* Luke), is followed by death and destruction, suffering and evil (in Matthew's account). Followers of Jesus should not be surprised if the same fate befalls them.

The Gospel reading on Holy Family Sunday follows immediately upon Matthew's account of the visit of the Magi and all the intrigue surrounding King Herod's attempt to discern information about “*the newborn king of the Jews.*” (Mt 2:2). But in the larger context, Matthew is also setting a theme for the entire narrative of his gospel account. As Craig Keener notes:

The pagan astrologers worship Jesus; Israel's ruler seeks his death, acting like a pagan king; Jerusalem's religious elite—forerunners of Matthew's readers' opponents—take Jesus for granted. Matthew forces his audience to identify with the pagan Magi rather than with Herod or Jerusalem's religious elite, and hence to recognize God's interest in the Gentile mission. The God who sought servants from the pagan west like the Roman centurion (8:5–13) also sought previously pagan servants “from the east” (2:1; *cf.* Is 2:6) like the Magi. (The Gospel of Matthew; 97-98)

The deadly intent of King Herod leads the Holy Family to seek refuge in Egypt. There are scholars who hold that this is nothing but a literary device in order to have Jesus come out from Egypt, echoing the themes of the great Jewish narrative of the Exodus. Yet there is some evidence that points to something more. Second-century Jewish tradition, perhaps based on Christian claims, mentions Jesus' stay in Egypt. It is not a positive mention; his stay is associated with the sorcery held to be part of Egyptian culture. There are rabbinic allegations that Jesus learned in Egypt the magical arts which enabled him to “lead Israel astray.” This motif is found as early as R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus at the end of the first century A.D., (France, 77) and became a recurrent feature in anti-Christian polemic.

And while Egyptian Christians undoubtedly eagerly developed the tradition of Jesus' stay there, a first-century origin for their tradition is likely. In the first century Egypt boasted a large Jewish population, including perhaps one-third of Alexandria, in this period many other Jews sought refuge there. And the Holy Family became part of the flow of refugees.

Matthew expects all his readers to understand the primacy of Scripture and the centrality of Christ's mission in Scripture; but he expects his more sophisticated readers to catch his allusion to Israel's history as well. It is a way of assuring Matthew's audience that Jesus identifies with his own people's

heritage. Thus there is also a literary narrative in play as it taps into two scriptural references – even if they do not fit neatly together. On the one hand, Jesus is the new Moses, and it was in Egypt that Moses escaped the infanticide of Pharaoh, and from Egypt that as an adult he fled to escape Pharaoh’s anger (Exod 2:11–15), returning eventually to Egypt when “*for all those who sought your life are dead*” (Exod 4:19, echoed by Matthew in 2:20).

But on the other hand Jesus is also the new Israel, God’s “son,” as the quotation from Hos 11:1 will indicate; as patriarchal Israel went down to Egypt and came back to the promised land, so now does Jesus, the new Israel. Is it an exact correspondence? Matthew’s typology here is decidedly loose, not only in that Jesus is seen both as the deliverer and the delivered, but also in that whereas Moses escaped from Egypt and returned to it, Jesus - like Israel - does the opposite. But typology depends on meaningful associations rather than exact correspondences, and in each of these quite different ways the mention of Egypt is sufficient to provide food for thought on the relation between the events God directed in Egypt more than a millennium ago and what the same God is now accomplishing through the new deliverer, who is identified by the prophetic text as his Son. Most significantly, Matthew teaches in this passage that in Jesus the anticipated salvation of God’s people has begun. (*cf.* France 80-81)

But there is also an element of justice that should not be overlooked. Matthew also teaches that Jesus was a refugee (2:13–14). Jesus’ miraculous escape from Herod’s clutches should not lead us to overlook the nature of his deliverance (*cf.*, e.g., 1 Kings 17:2–6). Although travel within Egypt was easy for visitors with means, many Judeans had traditionally regarded refuge in Egypt as a last resort (2 Macc 5:8–9). Jesus and his family survived, but they survived as refugees, abandoning any livelihood Joseph may have developed in Bethlehem and undoubtedly traveling lightly. The passage then foreshadows Jesus’ rejection as an adult: the Son of Man already lacked a place to lay his head (8:20).

### Commentary

***The Flight into Egypt.*** Overall, the passage serves to establish the key themes mentioned previously as it points to the larger events playing out even as God’s plan unfolds out of sight in a faraway land. Having already alerted readers to the nefarious plans of Herod, we are not surprised when again (v.13) the angel appears to Joseph in a dream telling him to take the child Jesus to safety. The very similar wording to that in Mt 1:20 (the dream to Joseph to take Mary into his home) indicates that all continues in God’s careful direction of events by supernatural revelations; the parallel revelation in a dream to the magi (v. 12) has secured time for the family’s escape. The angel’s message begins with exactly the same words as in v.20, “*Rise, take the child and his mother ...*” Joseph’s action exactly matches the angelic instruction, while his setting off at night underlines the urgency of the situation (traveling by night was exceptional and potentially more dangerous). It also demonstrates Joseph’s exemplary obedience, which did not allow him even to delay until daylight. (*cf.* France 82)

***The Massacre of the Innocents.*** God’s word to the magi (v. 12) has bought time for the family’s escape, but has only added frustrated rage to Herod’s ruthless resolve, and his failure to secure a specific identification of the child leads instead to the indiscriminate killing of all male infants in the area. Herod’s action closely resembles the indiscriminate infanticide of Pharaoh. The Jewish reader will most certainly understand the connection and begin to understand Jesus as the “new Moses.”

“The massacre of the Innocents is perhaps the one element of the Matthean infancy narratives most often rejected as legendary. The lack of any independent evidence for so traumatic an event is usually mentioned, and the story is attributed either to the folk-lore motif of the new-born child threatened by the wicked king (and more specifically to the influence of Exodus 1–2 and a deliberate assimilation of Herod to Pharaoh), or to an

imaginative creation out of the Jeremiah text which Matthew goes on to quote. (*cf. Boring, 147*)

“The lack of independent evidence is no more of a problem for this than for virtually every other incident recorded in the gospels, unless it is argued that this event was of such a character and magnitude that Josephus (our only significant source for Jewish history of the period) would be bound to have mentioned it. But you can only include so much. Such slaughter certainly fits Herod’s character. When Herod’s young brother-in-law was becoming too popular, he had a “drowning accident” in what archaeology shows was a rather shallow pool; later, Herod had falsely suspected officials beaten to death. Wrongly suspecting two of his sons of plotting against him, he had them strangled. Likewise, five days before his own death Herod, on his own deathbed, had a more treacherous, Absalom-like son executed. Thus many modern writers repeat the probably apocryphal story that Augustus remarked, “Better to be Herod’s pig than his son.” Nor were Herod’s atrocities limited to contenders for his throne. In a fit of jealous rage (which he later regretted) he had his favorite wife strangled; she turned out to be innocent of the crime of which he had accused her. Fearing his people would not mourn at his death, he reportedly ordered that nobles from throughout the land be executed when he died to ensure mourning on that day. In an era of many, highly placed political murders, the execution of some number of children in a small town would warrant little attention. And we should not assume that Josephus had a full record of all the events in the reign of a king who died forty years before he was born.

“Stories of the rescue of new-born kings from jealous rivals include both Gentile and Jewish examples, but the only one of these which finds any clear echo in Matthew’s story is Pharaoh’s unsuccessful attempt to destroy Moses. It is clear that this scriptural model has been important in Matthew’s telling of the story of Jesus, but not so clear that it would have given rise to this narrative without historical basis. In particular, the precise specification that children “up to two years old” were killed has no basis in the Moses story, which concerns the killing of babies at the time of birth. There is much that obliquely points to an event that has taken place.” (*cf. France 83-84*)

It is not clear what Matthew intended with the reference to Rachel and Ramah (v:18; *cf Jer 31:15*) as the fore shadowing the death of the “Holy Innocents,” since nothing in the OT passage provides any basis for linking it with the story of Jesus. Matthew’s quote of Jeremiah 31:15 pays no attention to the original context. Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin, is weeping for “her children” (Ephraim in v. 18) who have been taken into exile. It is not clear whether Jeremiah refers to the Assyrian deportation or the Babylon exile. However, the LORD comforts her in v. 16 with the promise that “they shall come back from the land of the enemy.” Jeremiah’s message is one of joy and hope, which is not found in Matthew’s reference.

Many interpreters have difficulties in discovering messianic significance in this particular text beyond the mere coincidence of the motif of loss of children. The wording of the Jeremiah passage is not reflected at all in v. 16, which draws its terminology rather from the previous account of Herod and the magi, and the killing of the children, far from being simply a product of this OT text, is integrated into the whole narrative flow of the chapter, being planned in vv. 3–8, predicted in v. 13 and referred back to in v. 20. Like Matthew’s other formula quotations vv. 17–18 function as an editorial comment on a traditional story, not as its source. In other words, if these stories are not the source, then they are commentary on the historical event, one which was sadly not atypical of the later years of the Herod we know from Josephus.

Keener (p. 111) concludes: “The event is thus neither historically documented nor historically implausible.” In any case, the scholarly debate should not obscure the narrative emphasis of Jesus as the new Moses, the One by whom God will save Israel.

**From Egypt to Nazareth.** In words nearly identical to Exodus 4:19 (LXX, Greek version of OT), Joseph is told that “for all those who sought your life are dead.” When Herod died in 4 BC, his territory was divided between his three sons: Archelaus received Judea, Samaria and Idumea; Herod Antipas received Galilee and Perea; and Philip received the region east and north of Lake Galilee.

Perhaps like the Exodus, Joseph is led by God through dreams “into the land of Israel” and then “into the region of Galilee,” but the decision to settle “in the city called Nazareth” seemed to have come from his own volition. Nazareth is never mentioned in pre-Christian Jewish writings, yet archeology indicates that the city has existed from the 7th century BC. It was an obscure city; nothing notable about it.

The “new Moses” can now return to the place in which his work of deliverance will be launched. But that place is not Bethlehem. Judea has become an unsafe place for the new Moses, even after the death of the Herod whose murderous jealousy initially caused his exile. As the story unfolds we shall be reminded repeatedly that the Jerusalem which shared Herod’s alarm in v. 3 will remain hostile territory for the new king of the Jews, and Bethlehem is too close to Jerusalem for comfort. Political wisdom thus dictates Joseph’s relocation to the now independent state of Galilee to the north, but his move is directed not simply by prudence but also by divine guidance (another dream, v. 22), which will ensure that the Davidic Messiah born in Bethlehem will start his public career not as a Judean but as “Jesus of (Galilean) Nazareth.” A lengthy quotation from Isaiah will in due course be deployed to authenticate his Galilean origin (4:12–16), but here in chapter 2 the focus is more specific. Not just Galilee in general but even little Nazareth itself has been chosen by God as the home of the Messiah, and the prophets have duly spoken of the one who “*would be called a Nazorean.*”

There are many word-play explanations that are offered, but that reasoning seems a bit stretched since one requires knowledge of Greek and Hebrew to even possibly begin to make the word-play work. The most promising approach paradoxically takes its cue from the very non-existence of Nazareth in the OT—it is a scriptural non-entity. For someone to be “called a Nazorean,” especially in connection with a messianic claim, was therefore to invite ridicule: the name is in itself a term of dismissal if not of actual abuse. We see precisely this reaction in Nathanael’s response to Philip’s suggestion of a Messiah from Nazareth, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46; cf. John 7:41–42, 52 for Judean scorn for the idea of a Messiah from Galilee). If Nathanael, a native of Cana only a few miles from Nazareth, reacted like that, what must have been the response in Judea, where most people had probably never heard of Nazareth? On this understanding it is not only the word *Nazōraios* which conveys Matthew’s message, but also more specifically the verb “He shall be called:” this is about derogatory name-calling. In 26:71 (the only other occurrence of *Nazōraios* in Matthew) we shall see the term used in just this way by a speaker in Jerusalem. (cf. France 94)

But whatever the origin of this elusive “quotation,” its function is clear, to provide the “QED” towards which the whole argument of chapter 2 has been directed: Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah from Bethlehem.

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## Notes

**Matthew 2:13** *Flee to Egypt:* Egypt was a traditional place of refuge for those fleeing from danger in Palestine (see 1 Kings 11:40; Jer 26:21), but the main reason why the child is to be taken to Egypt is that he may relive the Exodus experience of Israel.

**Matthew 2:15** *might be fulfilled*: The fulfillment citation is taken from Hosea 11:1. Israel, God’s son, was called out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus; Jesus, the Son of God, will similarly be called out of that land in a new exodus. The father-son relationship between God and the nation is set in a higher key. Here the son is not a group adopted as “son of God,” but the child who, as conceived by the holy Spirit, stands in unique relation to God. He is son of David and of Abraham, of Mary and of Joseph, but, above all, of God.

**Matthew 2:16** *ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under*: Christian tradition has inflated the number of babies involved in the “massacre” into several thousands. Estimates of the total population of Bethlehem in the first century are generally under 1,000, which would mean that the number of male children up to two years old at any one time could hardly be more than 20, even allowing for “all its district.” Terrible as such a slaughter would be for the local community, it is not on a scale to match the more spectacular assassinations recorded by Josephus.

**Matthew 2:18** *A voice was heard in Ramah*: Jer 31:15 portrays Rachel, wife of the patriarch Jacob, weeping for her children taken into exile at the time of the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom (722–21 B.C.). Bethlehem was traditionally identified with Ephrath, the place near which Rachel was buried (see Genesis 35:19; 48:7), and the mourning of Rachel is here applied to her lost children of a later age. Ramah: about six miles north of Jerusalem, where one tradition locates Rachel’s tomb (1 Sm 10:2).. The lamentation of Rachel is so great as to be heard at a far distance.

**Matthew 2:20** *For those who sought the child’s life are dead*: Moses, who had fled from Egypt because the Pharaoh sought to kill him (see Exodus 2:15), was told to return there, “for all the men who sought your life are dead” (Exodus 4:19).

**Matthew 2:22** *Archelaus*: With the agreement of the emperor Augustus, Archelaus received half of his father’s kingdom, including Judea, after Herod’s death. He had the title “ethnarch” (i.e., “ruler of a nation”) and reigned from 4 B.C. to A.D. 6.

**Matthew 2:23** *Nazareth...he shall be called a Nazorean*: the tradition of Jesus’ residence in Nazareth was firmly established, and Matthew sees it as being in accordance with the fore-announced plan of God. The town of Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament, and no such prophecy can be found there. The vague expression “through the prophets” may be due to Matthew’s seeing a connection between Nazareth and certain texts in which there are words with a remote similarity to the name of that town. Some such Old Testament texts are Isaiah

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