

## “The End in the Beginning”

Matthew 2:13-23

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### Text Comment

- v.13 God preserved the life of his son in Egypt as, long before, he had preserved the life of Israel there. Here we are introduced to a theme that is going to run through these verses, namely that Jesus is a second Moses. Moses also fled for his life from a king who was trying to kill him. The one who saved his people from their sins is the counterpart to the one who saved Israel from bondage in Egypt – the great redemptive event of the ancient Scriptures. [Hagner, i, 34] It was natural for the holy family to go to Egypt, not only because of its proximity, but because it had already a large Jewish population. Indeed, in Alexandria alone there were some 200,000 Jews, the largest concentration in any city of the empire.
- v.14 The “during the night” indicates how promptly Joseph obeyed and how grave he understood the danger to be.
- v.15 The citation from Hosea 11:1 is not itself a prophecy, but Matthew is noting the correspondence between the history of Israel and the history of her king and **savior**. representative. Both came up from Egypt to the Promised Land. Redemptive history is full of these patterns or this typology by which the Son of God is seen to be the fulfillment of what went before. Jesus is the goal of that history and gathers up all its threads. [Hagner, i, 36]
- v.16 The ruthlessness of Herod’s later years was by this time a proverb. The victims of his paranoia included three of his own sons as well as several large groups of suspected conspirators, in one case with their families. This makes it entirely probable that he would kill a few babies (Bethlehem was a small village not a city) in order to eliminate a potential rival. Such would have been a minor incident in a period of history full of atrocities. To give you a window on the mind of the man consider this: when Herod was himself near death, he left orders that one member of each family in his kingdom should be executed so that the entire nation would really be in mourning. [France, 86-87; Josephus, *Ant.*, 17.181] Here is another a parallel with Israel’s early history. Pharaoh tried to kill the Hebrew infants and Moses was spared.
- v.18 Once again Matthew points out the biblical pattern. As Rachel in her tomb was said in Jeremiah, in a beautiful figure, to weep for the exiles as they were taken from the Promised Land, so here she weeps for the dead and the mourning mothers of Bethlehem.
- v.20 Now, to a Hebrew hearer of this text – Matthew was originally written for a Jewish audience – knowing the Bible as well as they did, they would immediately again notice the biblical pattern. The language of v. 20 is taken from Exodus 4:19 where the Lord commands Moses, after his sojourn in Midian, to return to Egypt because those trying to

kill him were dead. The correspondence is so exact that the plural in Ex. 4:19 is retained here – “those who are trying to take the child’s life...” – even though we would expect the singular, as it was Herod who sought the child’s life.

- v.22 Archelaus was no better than his father; he was noted for his cruelty in an age of cruel men; but he succeeded only to the rule of the southern portion of his father’s kingdom. Galilee was ruled by Archelaus’ half-brother Herod Antipas, a more tolerant man and ruler, and Galilee was, therefore, a safer place.

The narratives of the birth of the Lord Jesus are, both in Matthew and Luke, primarily accounts of events that occurred before and after the birth itself. In Luke we have the announcement Gabriel made to Zechariah concerning the son to be given to him and his wife in their old age, the annunciation to Mary, we have the Magnificat and the Benedictus, and then thereafter we have the angelic visitation of the shepherds, Joseph and Mary’s travel to Bethlehem followed by the visit of the shepherds, and the presentation of Jesus in the temple. The birth itself is understated and reported in very few words: “She gave birth to her firstborn son...” The narrative concentrates of what happened before and after. And it is the same in Matthew. There we read of the angel’s appearance to Joseph, the visit of the Magi, and the paragraph we just read. The birth itself is recorded in a subordinate clause: “Joseph did not know her, *until she had given birth to a son...*”

The significance of the birth, the most important birth in the history of mankind, is communicated not by any elaborate description of the birthing process, but by the announcements of it beforehand made by heavenly messengers and by the unusual circumstances that attended and followed the birth of this particular baby boy. That makes the paragraph we just read, *the finale of the birth narrative*, all the more important. This is part of what we absolutely need to know about the birth of Jesus Christ. So much else is left out, as we noted last Lord’s Day, but not this!

As I have pointed out to you on a number of occasions, over the past thirty years or so a revolution has occurred in the study of the text of the Bible, especially the Old Testament but now also the texts of the Gospels. Informed by a deepening knowledge of ancient near eastern literature, biblical interpreters have discovered to a degree never fully appreciated before how skillfully the Bible was written, and in particular with what literary artistry the biblical *narrative* was written, that is the historical parts of the Bible. We now realize that the authors of the Bible’s historical narrative were theologians who used very sophisticated techniques by which they not only told the story of what happened but wove in, under, around, and through that narrative their theology and their ethics. They wrote history in a way designed to teach God’s people what to believe and how to live. Someone has described the biblical narrative as “preached history.” In this way the biblical narrative becomes theology in flesh and blood, the truth of God and man revealed in an account of the past. The biblical authors accomplished that feat in ways appropriate to an aural culture, that is, to a time when the Word of God was *heard* by many more than read it. They sent signals to their hearers, signals that ancient near eastern ears were attuned to and would appreciate and understand. They did this with a set of literary or compositional techniques. They were craftsmen of prose. Like painters on canvas they produced a text that communicated not only accurate information, but perspective, interpretation,

atmosphere, tone, and color all at once.

One of the arts or techniques they employed was *foreshadowing*. One scholar defines foreshadowing as “the inclusion of material in one part of the narrative that serves primarily to prepare the reader for what is still to come.” [Waltke, *Genesis*, 37] Sometimes such foreshadowing can be a simple sentence, a single piece of information dropped into the narrative, as it were unannounced and unexplained. An example would be the introduction of Sarah, Abraham’s wife, in Genesis 11. There we find the additional comment – the only descriptive comment about any of the women mentioned there – that Sarah was barren, she had no children. Why was that fact mentioned? Why did we need to know that? Because the fact that Abraham and Sarah were childless would prove to be the presupposition of so much of what was to come: God’s promise to make of Abraham a great nation, the long wait for a child to be born, the misstep with Hagar and Ishmael, and all the rest. Sarah was barren, she had no children. *This is the first thing we learn about her because that fact foreshadows what is to come.* In the Christmas narrative such a simple foreshadowing is furnished by Simeon’s remark in Luke 2:34-35 that the baby he was holding in his arms would be a sign that is opposed and a sword that would pierce Mary’s heart. The Lord would prove a figure of controversy and a cause of great sadness. Nothing more is said; no explanation is given. Only as events unfold much later will we understand what Simeon meant. This is the literary technique of foreshadowing.

A more complex example of foreshadowing is found later in Genesis. After Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt but before we read anything about what happened to him there, we have a long digression in Genesis 38 describing Judah’s wickedness, his marriage outside the faith, his utter failure as a father and a father-in-law, his sexual sin, and his stupidity. It is one of the most sordid chapters in the Bible! And it is about Judah, who up to that point, was a figure of no particular importance in the narrative. And then, at the end of the chapter, a single remark of Judah’s, nothing more, that hints, only hints, that he may have come to recognize what a fool and what a sinner he had become. Then Judah disappears from the narrative and the story moves on to tell of Joseph’s life in Egypt and his meteoric rise to the position of the second most powerful man in the most powerful nation on earth. But, so we think, all of that history could have been told without the depressing account of Judah’s sinful life back in Canaan. Why is that dismal story told and why is it put *there*?

The narrator doesn’t tell us why; but later he shows us. As the history of the brothers coming to Egypt for food unfolds, suddenly we find that Judah, Jacob’s fourth son, had assumed the spiritual leadership of the family. It was Judah who, representing them all, repented of the sins they had committed against Joseph years before. And at the climax of the history it was Judah, of all people, who offered his own life for Benjamin’s, the other favorite of Judah’s father, a favoritism that had infuriated the brothers years before. No wonder that Judah’s offer to sacrifice his life for the life of his brother proved to be the spiritual rebirth of Jacob’s spiritually sick and utterly dysfunctional covenant family. We only know how marvelous this is because we were first told how wicked a man Judah was. Later Jacob prophesied that Judah, not Joseph, would be the progenitor of the King of Kings. Why? Because he offered his life for the life of his family. Judah, of all people, became the Christ-figure and the hero of this history, even more than Joseph. Only because of the foreshadowing in Genesis 38 can we appreciate the meaning of this history. Only because we were given a brutally honest account of Judah’s earlier life do we learn

the power of God's grace to transform a sinful man into a righteous and loving man. We needed to know what a wicked man Judah had been to appreciate his later spiritual heroism. *Genesis 38 is a particularly impressive example of the literary technique of foreshadowing.*

Well a similar question presses upon us here. Why this material at the end of Matthew 2? *Why this information and not something else.* Matthew and the Holy Spirit behind him thought we needed to know about the flight to Egypt and the return to Galilee. Nothing much happened in those months, why not tell us something instead about the Holy Family resettling in Nazareth or something about Jesus' early years as a baby and little boy living in Galilee? When confronted with an account like this, we should be asking such questions. Why this? What is the importance of this material? What purpose does it serve?

*Well, we have a more complex case of foreshadowing here as well.* We have here material included in the narrative the purpose of which is solely to prepare us for what is yet to come. And like other instances of foreshadowing in biblical narrative, this is material that, unless we appreciate Matthew's narrative art, we are very likely to read with little thought and quickly pass on to what comes next. You will admit, won't you, that this tail end of the Christmas narrative is the part of the story of Jesus' birth to which as a rule we give the least attention. We don't sing this part of the story in our Christmas carols and hymns. It isn't usually even read during the Advent season. Why is that? Surely it's because 1) it isn't as charming a narrative; there is less here to celebrate; this history is dark and bleak; 2) it is quite Spartan, with few details supplied; the journey from Bethlehem, to Egypt, to Galilee is sketched in a few short sentences; and 3) it seems to us anticlimactic, a few verses to explain how the holy family ended up back in Nazareth. Otherwise we struggle to understand what this information adds to the story of the Lord's birth. So why does the biblical author use some of his valuable space to tell us of the flight to Egypt and the holy family's return to Nazareth? Well we have here too a case of foreshadowing. Here dark shades are drawn around the beautiful, shimmering scene of the advent of the Son of God.

In several ways the text foreshadows the humiliation and the suffering of the Lord Jesus. In other words, the birth narrative in Matthew ends with a look forward to the life of the Man of Sorrows. Take note, for example, of the way this history underscores the Lord's identification with his people, his taking their lot upon himself, his becoming their substitute. We have heard already in chapter 1 that Jesus was coming "to save his people from their sins." But here we learn precisely *how* he would do this: he would take their place and suffer their punishment in their place.

This is the significance of the otherwise puzzling quotation of Hosea 11:1 in v. 15. In Hosea the prophet was speaking of God's love for Israel and his redeeming Israel from bondage. The whole verse reads:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."

Now, when Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 and applies it to the Christ child being in Egypt and returning from there to the Holy Land, it is evident that he is drawing attention to the fact that both Israel and Jesus himself are sons of God: Israel by God's electing love and adoption; Jesus by nature and in the deepest Trinitarian sense of the term Son of God. This shared sonship is the

foundation of the typology encountered often in the Bible that sees Israel's life as an enacted prophecy of Christ's own.

Just as Pharaoh, a cruel king, had tried to destroy Israel, so Herod, another cruel king, was seeking to destroy Jesus. But as God protected his beloved people – his son – in the first case, so he protected his Son in the second. The Messiah is recapitulating the history of God's people. But this historical pattern, this duplication in history is more than simply prophetic or typological, that is, it is more than simply a way of demonstrating that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of OT prophecy. Jesus is here being identified with Israel. His history *is* the history of God's people, He is going the way they went, accepting their lot, even the exile to Egypt.

This is, especially for Matthew's original Jewish readership, a profound way to explain what it was that Jesus came to do. He was going to take upon himself the suffering, the pain, the hardship, and the trial of his people. As Israel suffered in Egypt from a cruel king, so Jesus would suffer the threat of death from another cruel king, suffer exile, and so much more. He was going not only to identify himself with his people, suffer as they had suffered in this world, and in that way become their faithful high priest, able perfectly to sympathize with them in their sorrows and grief. Even more than this, he was going to suffer their fate as sinners in their place, take upon himself the judgment of God which they deserved because of their sin – the Lamb of God who would be slain to get them out of their Egypt, their bondage. All of this is foreshadowed in Jesus, if in his mother's arms, running for his life soon after he was born.

Israel, the church of God, is God's son; but so is Jesus in a still more profound way; and the life of one Son will be the true fulfillment and so the salvation of the life of the other. *All of this is then confirmed and then heightened in Jesus' identification as a Nazarene* in the final verse of the chapter. The term Nazarene means simply somebody who hails from Nazareth.

Matthew does not bother to tell us that Nazareth was Joseph and Mary's home town; he assumed his readers would know that. He is more interested in the significance of Jesus' hailing from there. The quotation, "He shall be called a Nazarene" is in fact nowhere to be found in the OT. However, Matthew's formula for introducing the citation is strikingly different. Here it is prophets not a particular prophet. The ESV puts the last sentence of Matthew 2 in quotes, because it is what the prophets "said." But no particular prophet ever put it precisely in these words. Matthew doesn't say that in this way was fulfilled what a particular prophet said, which is what he says in 2:5, in that case the prophet Micah; nor does he say as in v. 17, that in this way was fulfilled "what the prophet Jeremiah said." No, he says here that in this way what was said by *the prophets* was fulfilled. The implication seems to be that "He shall be called a Nazarene" is a kind of summary of what the prophets as a group said beforehand about the Messiah; that is, it conveys the gist of their expectation.

The obscurity of Nazareth, the unpromising nature of the place – as we said last time, Nazareth was so inconsequential a place that it is mentioned in no writing prior to the New Testament and no other first-century writing after Matthew and Luke – recalls the prophetic expectation that the Messiah would be despised and rejected of men and that he would fail to meet the exalted expectations the people would have for their coming king. In John 1:46 we learn that Nazareth was not thought to be a worthy place of origin for the Messiah. Jesus of Bethlehem would have

cachet, for Bethlehem was associated with the royal house of David. Jesus of Jerusalem would have made sense, because it was the capital of the nation. But Jesus of Nazareth in those days to those ears would sound something like Jesus of Puyallup or Jesus of Enumclaw. [cf. France, 89] In other words, the Lord would live his life in obscurity, incognito. No one would recognize him for who he was, or for what office he held, or for what he came to do. Tucked away in Nazareth, hardly anybody would ever even meet the young fellow. He would not be honored or worshipped as the King he was; more than that he would suffer the humiliation of being taken for the furthest thing from the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He would remain unrecognized. Few would think of him as the Messiah, much less as the Savior of the world.

In speaking of the prophets' prediction that Jesus would be called a Nazarene, Matthew was thinking of such prophecies as that in Isaiah 53:2-3:

“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him; nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men.”

Jesus did not return to Bethlehem or Jerusalem as might have been expected of the King who would sit forever on David's throne. He went instead to Nazareth. Apart from the Gospel history we know nothing about Nazareth. Its chief characteristic was its irrelevance, its insignificance. The Jews in Judea thought of Galilee as Hicksville.

Years later, when Philip ran to Nathaniel and excitedly told him that he had found the one that Moses had written about, and that he was Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel was only expressing a perfectly natural surprise and incredulity when he responded: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” No great king, no Savior of the world could come from a jerkwater town like Nazareth!

And, of course, what was true of his hometown was to be true of his entire life as our Mediator and Substitute. Though he was in truth God the Son, and though he was the long-awaited Messiah, and though he was the King of Kings, he would all his life be either ignored or positively hated, vilified, and rejected by his own people. They would accuse him of being a drunk and a glutton, a servant of the Devil; they would accuse him of consorting with sinners and of being a great sinner himself. They would mock him as an amateur wannabe, as a man out of his depth, as a poseur. Far from recognizing him as the Son of God, many people and the most important among them did not even regard him as a good man. What is more, from early on in his ministry, there would be plots hatched to kill him. Herod's was only the first!

He came from his high throne in heaven to this! Why? Because this humiliation, this rejection, leading ultimately to his crucifixion, was the price fixed by the justice of God to atone for the sins of those for whose salvation he had come into the world.

The price of your redemption and mine was paid in full on the cross, but it was not paid on the cross alone. No, that price began to be paid as soon as Jesus came into the world. God the mighty Maker conceived in a Jewish maiden's womb, born in a cowshed because there was no better accommodation to be found; fleeing to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod, and returning to live and grow up in the most inconsequential village in Galilee, utterly unrecognized for who and

what he was. This ignominy, this plunge of the Son of God to the very bottom of human life, was the price of our eventual rise to the heights of heaven. *Surely then it is not insignificant that the very last words of the Christmas history recorded for us in Luke and Matthew are these:*

“He will be called a Nazarene.”

The Lord Jesus, the Creator of heaven and earth, God himself, was to make himself nothing for us. That is the great theme of this finale of the Christmas history. It is so charming and happy a story for us to tell at this time of year *only because we know how it ends!* We know what it means. But in the history itself it was ignominy and humiliation. All of this is emphasized in this last paragraph and summarized in its last sentence.

I want us to think about this and take this to heart this Christmas Sunday morning. No one wants to be nothing or to be thought nothing. It is our greatest passion in life to have a place in this world, to be somebody. It is why we are so defensive when criticized; why we erect so many walls to protect ourselves from any thought that we don't count; that our lives mean nothing. We can't *bear* to be nothing or to be thought to be nothing. *But this is what Christ Jesus willingly became for us: nothing.* The Son of God would become a mere human being among the faceless multitudes of his own creatures. Later on, when the Lord's followers were called, as he had been called, Nazarenes, the people who used the term meant it as a slur, an insult. They meant to describe the Christians as nothings. If they hated the master, they would despise his servants as well! And that is what is indicated here, in the final sentence of this Christmas history in the Gospel of Matthew. “Nazarene” foreshadowed what his life would be and become. The high God stooped not only to become a man, but the lowest kind of man, a nothing man. *And he did so because nothing else than his becoming nothing would suffice to make something of us.*