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Matthew 2:16 - 2:23



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg delves into the New Testament's Matthew 2, continuing the story of the birth of Jesus. Gregg notes the historicity of Bethlehem as the prophesized birthplace of the Messiah and sheds light on the geographical and historical context of the time period. He also highlights the significance of Joseph's dream, in which God instructs him to take his family to Galilee instead of Judea, and the concept of being "Nazarite" or "separated." Overall, Gregg provides a deep analysis of the biblical text, enriching the listener's understanding of the story of Jesus' birth.

Transcript

Today, we're turning to Matthew chapter 2 and continuing our study in the birth story found there about Jesus. And earlier in the chapter, we have found that the wise men visited Jesus when he was probably one or two years old. And Herod the king, hearing about it, really was nervous when he found out from the wise men that one had been born to be a rival of his.

And so he decided, apparently, to kill the baby, though he did not reveal his intentions. He simply said to the wise men that when they find the baby, come back and report to Herod where they found him. And he said, I would like to go and worship him also.

Now, insofar as worship means to offer a sacrifice, I'm sure he would have liked to sacrifice the baby. But in any case, the wise men were warned by God in a dream not to go back and inform Herod. So they went home a different way, and Herod did not learn of the specific whereabouts of the child.

In the meantime, in verses 13 and 14 of this chapter, an angel appeared to Joseph and said that Mary and the child should be taken out of the country to Egypt. Because he was informed that Herod would try to kill the baby. So Joseph and Mary and the child left by night and escaped to Egypt.

We don't know how long they remained there, but they remained there until Herod died. And so they escaped from what we're about to read in the remainder of this chapter. And that is, of course, Herod's wrath toward any rival as he perceived it.

Now, we are picking up the story here at verse 16. Matthew 2.16 Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry. And he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem, and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

Now, this act of Herod, as I said a couple of sessions ago, is not recorded in secular history. We don't have any other record outside the Bible of Herod killing all the infants in Bethlehem. However, there's nothing unrealistic about it, because what we do know of Herod from history is this is very much in character for him.

He killed two of his own sons and one of his wives, because he suspected that they were after his throne. And he was very jealous over his throne. Now, if he would kill his own two sons and one of his wives in order to retain his throne, he certainly would have no concern about the well-being of other people's children, infants he'd never met, who might stand in the way of him continuing to hold his throne.

And so this act is very much in character from what we know of Herod. In fact, the emperor made a comment about Herod that it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his children, probably because being half-Jewish, Herod would not eat pigs, and therefore not kill them. But he would kill his own sons.

And so this is the kind of man we're talking about when we're talking about Herod. And so he ordered that all the male children from two years old and under should be wiped out. And apparently his order was carried out.

Now, why did he choose two years as a cut-off age? Well, it says there in verse 16, he chose that cut-off point according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Now, what it's referring back to is what it says in verse 7, where it says, And Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them at what time the star appeared. So they had answered him in such a way that when he decided he had to kill all the children in order to make sure he got the right one, that he had to include every child up to two years old.

Apparently the star had appeared a couple of years earlier. And for that reason, he made that the cut-off point for the age of the children who were to be killed. Now we have a claim from Matthew that this fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy.

In verses 17 and 18, Matthew says, Now, this prophecy is quoted from Jeremiah chapter 31 and verse 15. Now, it's interesting that Matthew would apply this prophecy to this particular event. Because the prophecy speaks of Rachel weeping for her children who were killed.

Now, Rachel, of course, was one of the wives of Jacob. And therefore, she was the

ancestress of many of the Jewish people. However, she was not the ancestress of the children of Bethlehem.

The people of Bethlehem were descended from Judah. And Judah was the son of Jacob and Leah, not Jacob and Rachel. Therefore, the people of Bethlehem were not actually biologically related to Rachel at all.

So, why would it speak here of her weeping for her children? And this being fulfilled here in Bethlehem? Well, it simply shows us the rather free manner in which the prophecies can sometimes be understood and should be understood. Remember, Jesus opened the understanding of his apostles so that they might understand the Old Testament scriptures. And therefore, since none less than Jesus himself is responsible for the understanding of the Old Testament that we find among the apostles like Matthew who quotes them, we have to assume that this was in fact what the prophecy was talking about.

However, one might not have deduced it reading simply the passage in Jeremiah. Certainly, no one prior to this event would have read the passage in Jeremiah and predicted, oh, all the infants of Bethlehem are going to be slaughtered. Because there's no mention in the prophecy of the infants of Bethlehem being slaughtered.

There's a mention of Rachel weeping in her grave. Now, this much we know. According to the book of Genesis, when Rachel died, she was buried near Bethlehem because she died near Bethlehem.

Most of Jacob's family were buried elsewhere along with him in Machpelah, which was a cave where Abraham and Sarah were buried and where Isaac and Rebekah were buried. And Jacob eventually was buried and so was Leah. And probably Rachel would have been buried there, but when she died, she was too far away from there.

They couldn't get her body there without it rotting first. And so they buried her in the location where she died, which happened to be near Bethlehem. So near to this town where the slaughter took place was the grave of Rachel.

Now, even though these children were not literally her children or her descendants, yet she was one of the mothers of Israel and these were some of the children of Israel. Israel meaning Jacob. And therefore, in an extended sense, they were like stepchildren to her.

They were children of her husband by another marriage. And so in an extended sense, they could be called her children. But the important thing is that she was buried nearby.

And to say that she was weeping certainly cannot be literal. It should not be thought that Rachel in her grave was literally weeping. She had died 2,000 years earlier and was only dust there in the grave.

But we can see the use of a figure of speech here or of imagery in this passage. Because even to this day, we will speak of somebody turning over in their grave if we're talking about some way in which the events currently happening would greatly offend somebody who once lived and who is now dead. We sometimes say, well, George Washington would be turning over in his grave or the founders of this country or the writers of the Constitution would be turning over in their graves if they could see what abuses were happening today.

That kind of expression is common among us. And we should not be surprised to find a similar kind of expression in the Hebrew Bible. To say that Rachel was weeping in her grave nearby Bethlehem when these children were killed there is a figure of speech.

But it strikes Matthew as the only reasonable fulfillment of this prediction that Rachel would be weeping because of the slaughter of her children. Here's a case where her stepchildren, as it were, children of her husband by another marriage, are indeed slaughtered and in the near proximity to where she was buried. Now, what I'm trying to point out here, and I also pointed this out when we were talking about the passage in verse 15 that is quoted, out of Hosea, out of Egypt I've called my son.

These prophecies that are fulfilled according to Matthew are prophecies that are not fulfilled in what we would normally call a literal manner. We have here, in this quotation of Jeremiah 31, a third instance in this chapter of Matthew quoting some Old Testament passage as fulfilled in Christ's life. The first was Micah 5.2, which spoke of the Messiah being born in Bethlehem.

That was fulfilled literally. It was predicted literally that out of Bethlehem the Messiah would come. But when we talk about out of Egypt I have called my son, a passage from Hosea which Matthew quotes in Matthew 2.15, that is not a literal prophecy.

It is a case of typology. That is, Israel is a type of Christ, and as Israel was called out of Egypt in the infancy of that nation, in the Exodus, so Christ would be called out of Egypt as a child because of his likeness or the connection of Messiah to Israel. There's a sort of a correlation, a parallel, between the early history of Israel and the early personal history of the Messiah.

But that's not like a literal prophecy. That's rather a case of finding a type in the Old Testament that is fulfilled in Christ. And now we have this prophecy about Rachel weeping, and certainly it is far from literal in terms of its fulfillment.

Rachel certainly was not literally weeping in her grave. She was dead, for 2,000 years dead. Furthermore, they weren't literally her children.

But what this shows us is that when we read the Old Testament prophecies, we make a great mistake if we think that they all must be fulfilled in what we call a literal fashion.

There are times in the Old Testament where figures of speech are used, where symbolism is used, and we need to take those things into consideration. Matthew certainly did, and Matthew made no mistake because Jesus was the one who opened his understanding to give him knowledge of the Old Testament passages.

So when we find the apostles themselves, like Matthew, quoting the Old Testament and applying it a certain way, their interpretation is not up for dispute because Christ is the one who opened their understanding. So we can learn a great deal about how the prophets express things and the manner in which they are fulfilled, even in sometimes a surprising or unpredictable manner, by seeing how the apostles understood them, as in this case. Now we continue.

Verse 19, But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Arise, take the young child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young child's life are dead. Then Joseph arose, took the young child and his mother, and they came into the land of Israel. And when they heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there.

And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee, and he came and dwelt in the city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene. Now there's many interesting features to this passage. First of all, Jesus and his parents remained in Egypt until their adversary Herod was dead.

It's interesting that God did not, on this occasion, just keep them safe in some place hiding within Israel. God certainly could do that. God kept David safe when he was being pursued by Saul, even though they were in the same wilderness, and Saul was pursuing him very closely.

And in other ways, God has kept people safe when they're right in the midst of danger. But in this case, apparently to maybe remove the element of stress and fear from Mary and Joseph, God let them leave the country altogether and go into a foreign land. And of course, Matthew indicates that the real significance of that was to actually mimic the early history of Israel, so that the Messiah would indeed come out of Egypt into Israel, as we read of that happening right here.

And that, of course, mimics what happened to the nation of Israel itself in its beginnings. Now, when Herod was dead, he was succeeded by several of his sons. Herod had been appointed as the king over all of Israel, and some of the lands east of Israel, too.

He did not only reign over the nation of Israel, but his domain was broader than that. But when he died, the emperor did not believe that, and that would be Caesar Augustus, Augustus did not believe that Herod's sons had quite his competence. And it was up to

the emperor to appoint a successor to Herod.

And rather than giving one of his sons the rule over the whole region, Caesar divided up Herod's region into three districts and gave leadership over each district to one of his sons. Archelaus is the one who ruled in Judea, which is, of course, where Bethlehem and Jerusalem are, where Jesus was born and the first place that Joseph came back to when he came out of Egypt. And perhaps he would have stayed there permanently, but Archelaus was a person of violent character, like his father, and Joseph, knowing that, was not eager to stay there.

Now, another son of Herod was reigning up north in the country, in Galilee, and that was Herod Antipas. And there was yet another Herod, Philip, who was reigning in another region of Idumea. But up in Galilee, which is where Jesus ended up growing up, there was a different son of Herod, not Archelaus, but Antipas, who was reigning there.

And it was under the watch of Antipas that Jesus grew up and actually conducted his ministry. Much of his ministry was in Galilee years later. And this Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who reigned after the death of Herod, was the same Herod that later killed John the Baptist.

Of course, we're getting ahead of ourselves here. But the point here is that there were a number of sons of Herod who divided up the regions that had been under the one man, their father. And so it was possible to be in one part of Israel under one of these men, but if you're in another part of Israel, you'd be under a different one.

Now, Archelaus was a wicked and violent man, and perhaps Joseph knew something about him. After all, these sons were princes in Israel during the time that Joseph had lived there. And probably most people knew something about Archelaus and Antipas and those men's characters because they would have been well-known.

They were royalty in the country even before they became rulers. And so he did not feel comfortable relocating in the region where Jesus had been born. We might ask why he even considered relocating there.

Joseph, we learn from Luke, was not from Judea anyway. He was from Nazareth in the first place, and so was Mary. They both were raised and lived in Nazareth until the time that Jesus was born, and they had simply gone down to Judea, to Bethlehem, in order to fulfill a mandate that everybody go to their ancestral home to be registered for taxation.

So what would have been a simple and brief visit to Bethlehem became a permanent relocation that lasted probably a year or two for Joseph after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Perhaps because of Jesus being born in Bethlehem, Joseph deduced that that would be where God wanted him to be raised. And so instead of going back to Nazareth immediately after the birth of Jesus, Joseph had stayed in Bethlehem and was still there

sometime later when the Magi came to visit.

But because an angel from the Lord directed him to go to Egypt, he was of course dislodged from Bethlehem, and when he came back from Egypt, he was not sure where to go. And he was rather nervous about going back to Bethlehem because of Archelaus being a ruler over the area. But fortunately, he was directed again by a dream, and in the dream, God told him to go to Galilee.

Now, he did go to Galilee. In fact, he went back to the town of Nazareth, which was his hometown. So although Matthew does not tell us that Mary and Joseph had originated in Nazareth, Luke does, and therefore we know that this is really a return home for Joseph.

And this is when Jesus became a Nazarene. Now, the word Nazarene simply means a person from Nazareth. It should not be thought that Jesus was a Nazarite.

Many times people make this mistake. In Numbers chapter 6, there is the law given that regulates the Nazarite vow. The word Nazarite means one who is separated, and any Jewish person of any of the tribes of Israel, of any part of the country, could take a Nazarite vow.

In fact, the Apostle Paul took a Nazarite vow while he was in Corinth. He wasn't even in Israel, and he was of the tribe of Benjamin, a different tribe altogether than Jesus. But a Nazarite does not tell us anything about a person's location or even his race.

A Nazarite was simply somebody who took a Nazarite vow, and the provisions of that vow were that the person under the vow would not ever cut his hair, would not eat any product of the grapevine, that would include wine and grape juice and raisins and grapes, and would also not come near a dead body, which would mean he wouldn't even attend a funeral of his own family members. Because under the Nazarite vow, he was agreeing to separate himself from these things. So, these three provisions were part of the Nazarite vow.

No hair cutting, no eating anything that's produced from the grapevine, and no contact with any dead bodies. And this was a vow that someone could take for a short period of time or a long period of time. The Apostle Paul took it for a short period of time, though there were people like Samson and John the Baptist and Samuel in the Old Testament who were Nazarites from birth and for their whole life.

So, a Nazarite was just somebody who had a vow of a Nazarite. Now, some people have mistakenly thought that Jesus was a Nazarite, because it says he should be called a Nazarene, and they've mistakenly thought that Nazarene and Nazarite were the same thing. They're very different, and they have very different etymologies.

A Nazarene was simply a person from Nazareth, just like an American is a person from America. A person from Nazareth was called a Nazarene. And a New Yorker is a person

from New York.

So, Jesus was not a Nazarite. He did not take a Nazarite vow. We know that he drank wine, because he said so.

He contrasted himself, in fact, in Matthew chapter 11 with John the Baptist, because John the Baptist was a Nazarite and didn't drink wine. And Jesus pointed out that he, the Son of Man, was not like John the Baptist in that respect. And that's why his critics called him, Jesus, a wine-bibber and a glutton.

He was, of course, not a wino or a glutton, but he did eat at feasts and he did drink wine, and that was the occasion of people saying things like that about him. Now, Jesus, therefore, was not a Nazarite, but he was a Nazarene. That means he lived in Nazareth.

All people who lived in Nazareth are Nazarenes by definition. But the difficulty here is that Matthew says this fulfilled what was written in the prophets, or spoken by the prophets, he shall be called a Nazarene. The difficulty is that there is no passage in the Old Testament that says he shall be called a Nazarene, or even where the word Nazarene appears.

And this seems very strange. Now, Matthew has already surprised us the way he has applied some Old Testament prophecies, but at least he has quoted actual passages from the Old Testament in the previous cases. This is not a quote from any passage in the Old Testament.

But notice, it does not say that he, Matthew does not say he's quoting an Old Testament passage. In all the other times that he quoted, verses 5 and 6, for example, in this chapter, or in verse 15 or in verse 18, he says this is what was spoken by the prophet. But here he says, this is what was spoken by the prophets, plural.

In other words, he's not quoting any particular prophet, but he's summarizing what several of the prophets said by implication. This is not an exact quote, but the prophets of the Old Testament frequently, Isaiah, Zechariah, Jeremiah, they referred to Jesus as the branch. It was a nickname of the Messiah, he'd be the branch.

Well, the word branch in Hebrew is netzer, and the word Nazareth comes from that word netzer. It means the town of the branch. Now, what Matthew is saying is, isn't that interesting? The prophets said that the Messiah would be the branch, and here, by coming from Nazareth, the town of the branch, he fulfills, as it were, the intent of the prophets in saying that.

Here, isn't it interesting that the one who is called the branch by the prophets comes from the town of the branch? It's an interesting use of scripture, but Matthew does some innovative things. We'll have to wait until next time to go further into his narrative, though, and we'll come back and continue our study in the life of Christ in our next

session.