

# God Reveals His Son through an Evil King

Scripture Readings: *Hosea 11:1-2; Jeremiah 31:15-17; Genesis 35:16-20 • Matthew 2:13-23*

Text: **Matthew 2:13-18**

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## Introduction

This day is called “Holy Innocents Day” by the Roman Catholic Church to commemorate the massacre of infants two years and younger in Bethlehem by King Herod after Jesus was born.

During the early and medieval churches, people thought that tens of thousands – even as many as 144,000 – infant boys were massacred. Today, most scholars estimate that only a dozen or two were killed in the small town of Bethlehem, based on a population estimate of about 1,000 residents. The Roman church venerates these children as martyrs, dying not only for Christ, but in his stead, as a kind of reverse sacrifice. Were they really “holy”? Not if they were not elect infants, or if they were not covenant children.

Were they really “innocents”? While we should not dismiss this cruel act by a wicked king, the word “innocents” is not a biblical description of sinful man, whether infants or adults, before a holy God. We know that we all are already sinners from conception, and none can escape sinning: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

This is why it is unlawful to accuse God of injustice when he destroyed all men, women, children and infants during Noah’s flood; or when he destroyed all of Sodom and Gomorrah. Were the children and infants during those events “innocents”? No, not at all.

In today’s text, Matthew portrays the stories of Jesus’ family’s flight from Herod into Egypt and his murder of infants in Bethlehem as the fulfillment of Old Testament types and shadows. From his conception until his death and resurrection, Jesus the divine Son of God came down from heaven and took a human nature as well. Matthew paints the whole life of Jesus as a recapitulation of Israel’s history – he was the new Israel. And this recapitulation includes the events surrounding Herod’s massacre of infants.

In our study of the text, we will see that in Matthew’s gospel, God reveals Jesus as the Son of God and the True Israel through a couple of events surrounding the massacre of infants by the evil King Herod:

1. **Revealed through the New Exodus**
2. **Revealed through Rachel’s Weeping**

## Revealed through the New Exodus

Matthew 2:15 quotes Hosea 11:1:

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

Hosea was remembering God's steadfast love to Israel from the time that they were redeemed by God from slavery in Egypt.

But despite all of God's goodness, Israel rebelled. In verse 2 of Hosea 11, God says to them, *"The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols."* So God exiled them to Assyria and Babylon. Yet, in the end, God's *"compassion grows warm and tender"* (verse 8) and he *"will return them to their homes"* (verse 11).

Clearly then, when Hosea says, *"out of Egypt I called my son,"* he was referring to Israel's exodus from Egypt. This is why some scholars say that Matthew was taking Hosea 11:1 out of context. But Matthew and other New Testament writers were given liberty by the Holy Spirit to use Old Testament scriptures as types and shadows of the coming Messiah.

Matthew's gospel, for example, is an account of the life of Jesus as evidence that he is the Messiah who came to fulfill the promises to Abraham and to be the rightful heir to David's eternal throne. A dozen times in his narrative of the life of Jesus, Matthew says, *"This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet."* Matthew paints a panoramic view of the life of Jesus as the fulfillment of all the expectations regarding Abraham's and David's Son (Matt 1:1) and as *"my son,"* the Son of God (Matt 2:15), the new, true Israel of God. From birth, his life paralleled the events of Israel's exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land:

Herod's massacre takes us back to Pharaoh's order to the Hebrew midwives to kill Hebrew babies. As Moses' life was spared in Egypt, so was baby Jesus' life spared after he escaped to Egypt. After Israel was called out of Egypt, they crossed the sea. After he came back from Egypt, Jesus was baptized in the River. After crossing the sea, Israel was tested by God in the wilderness for 40 years, just as Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness for 40 days after his baptism. Afterwards, they arrived at Mount Sinai where Moses gave them God's Law, just as Jesus gave his disciples the laws of the kingdom of heaven on a mountain.

Jesus, the new Israel, had his own exodus. In fact, this is what he called his life's journey of suffering and sacrifice as he *"spoke of his departure [exodus], which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem"* (Luke 9:31). This pattern of Scriptures – from Old Testament promise to New Testament fulfillment – is an important guide when we read the Bible:

- *First*, the whole Bible has one story and message: God's redemptive plan for mankind through Christ. The coming of Christ is the fulfillment of everything that God planned in the Old Testament, and in the fullness of time, Jesus was born. Jesus himself said in Luke 24: *"Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."*
- *Second*, we are not to read the promises and prophecies in the Old Testament literally when they are interpreted in the New Testament spiritually. The flight to and from Egypt of Jesus' family is just one example of a literal Old Testament event serving as a spiritual type and shadow of a New Testament event.

- *Third*, we are not to separate the one people of God into two kingdoms: one for Israel and the other for the church. The relationship is not of separation, but of promise in Israel and fulfillment in the church.

The life of Jesus is a fulfillment of the type-and-shadow story of Israel's exodus from Egypt, the house of bondage. He was God's Son "called out of Egypt" in a new Exodus to redeem his people from bondage to sin. In the birth of Christ, the old exodus of the old Israel has passed; the new exodus of the new, true Israel was inaugurated.

But there is another story that follows Jesus' departure to Egypt, a very tragic story.

### **Revealed through Rachel's Weeping**

Matthew tells us about Herod's wrath after he realized he was tricked by the wise men from the East. In his usual fury and fit of jealousy for his throne as "King of the Jews," he ordered the massacre of infants in Bethlehem. Again, Matthew tells us that even this was a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy:

*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."*

Was Jeremiah's prophecy really about Herod's massacre of infants? No, it wasn't. Jeremiah's prophecy was referring to the invasion of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The great Temple of Solomon was in flames. Israel's sons were killed or taken captive or exiled. From Jerusalem, the procession of the exiles went through a place called Ramah, five miles to the north. Ramah was a gathering point for them before they marched towards Babylon (Jer 40:1). Ramah is also mentioned in two other places, as the site of God's judgment against Assyria (Isa 10:29) and Judah (Hos 5:8).

Jeremiah used Rachel, the mother of two of Israel's tribes, as a personification of Jewish mothers who mourned the loss of their sons and daughters to the invaders. They were "no more," either dead or exiled, the same words that Jacob used to describe his belief that Joseph and Simeon were both dead (Gen 42:36). We read from Genesis 35 that Rachel died in sorrow in her hard labor when she was delivering her son Benjamin. She and all of Jacob's family were on their way from Bethel south to Bethlehem when she went into labor. Looking at Israel's map, we see the location of all these places from Bethel, where they started: Ramah, 5 miles; Jerusalem, 10 miles; and finally, Bethlehem, 15 miles. Since Rachel was buried about two hours by foot before reaching Bethlehem (Gen 35:16 note, ESV), her burial place must have been in the vicinity of Ramah.

In her sorrow for Israel's dead and exiled children, Rachel refused to be comforted, in contrast to Mary, the mother of Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, the sorrowing Mary found comfort in the house of John the beloved disciple. She found comfort in the company of disciples in Jerusalem, waiting for the Spirit, the Comforter, promised by his Son who has ascended into heaven.

Like Jeremiah, Matthew reinterpreted Rachel's sorrow in Genesis 35:18 as the sorrow of the mothers in Bethlehem over their lost sons. Again, Matthew was inspired by the Spirit of God in interpreting an Old Testament event as having been fulfilled by another event surrounding the birth of Jesus.

We also know that the latter part of Jeremiah 31 is a prophecy about God's new covenant with his people. The old covenant with Israel was passing away, and a new covenant was dawning. Because Rachel does not want to be comforted, Jeremiah tells her to *"Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work... there is hope for your future"* (Jer 31:16). Why must Rachel stop weeping for her children? Because God promises her in a new covenant, *"there is hope for your future... and they shall come back from the land of the enemy"* (Jer 31:17).

God fulfilled this promise of a new covenant by bringing a remnant of Israel back from the exile. This remnant whom God preserved came from those Jews who survived the wicked plan of evil men to kill all Jews during the time of Queen Esther. This remnant brought forth a Child, the Son of God, who would lead his people out of slavery of sin. Like Moses, this newborn Child was preserved by God by sending him back to Egypt, the ancient house of slavery.

Today, God's elect children are being redeemed from slavery to sin by Christ, the Son of God who knew no sin but suffered and died for all his brethren who are enslaved by sin.

## **Conclusion**

These two events in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus were written to give you joy and encouragement when sorrows, afflictions and persecutions come your way.

How do these stories encourage you? By teaching you that God is in sovereign control of everything, both good and evil. He turned Pharaoh's wicked intentions into good by preserving a Redeemer who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He turned Herod's evil plans into good by preserving a Redeemer who would lead his people out of slavery from sin and death. He can turn every evil scheme by Satan into our good. God works all things for the good of those who are called according to his purpose, you who are God's children called out of the house of slavery of sin.

This Christmas season, when you hear of the massacre of the "innocents," do not mourn. Do not be like Rachel who refused to be comforted. But rejoice! Because through this evil done on "innocent" children, God preserved Jesus, the Son of God, who would save you from your sin.

This coming year, when sorrows, afflictions and persecutions come to you, do not be like Rachel who refused to be comforted. But rejoice! Because through the exodus of your Redeemer, you can persevere through your own journey in the wilderness of your life.

And when you remember the sorrow of the women of Jerusalem when Christ was beaten, scourged and crucified on the cross, be comforted. Rejoice! Because through his exodus and death at the hands of wicked people, and the weeping of the mothers of Bethlehem, the true Israel – Jesus the Son of God – was revealed to you. Salvation has come upon you. Your own

exodus to the promised heavenly city is assured, and your night of weeping is turned into joy in the morning. AMEN.