

Introductory

In TLH, this text is appointed for the Sunday after New Year. It is also the appointed gospel text for Christmas 1A in LW. As was the case in TLH and LW, the visit of the Magi is appointed for Epiphany, A, B, and C series in LSB. Matthew 2:13-18 is the text appointed in LSB to be read on Holy Innocents, observed on December 28.

Paul Maier's book, *First Christmas*, is a very good, very readable articulation of the times and places of the Nativity. I would highly recommend that book, and also *First Easter* and *First Christians* to pastors and to laymen, and it's very reasonable at Amazon. His fictional *A Skeleton in God's Closet* is more expensive and just ok.

Chronologically speaking, the Visit of the Magi and the subsequent Flight into Egypt take place a year or more after the birth of Jesus. Lectionary-wise, the Visit and the Flight are out of order. Historically, the Visit comes before the Flight, but in the lectionary the Visit comes after the Flight, which is two weeks from now on Epiphany Sunday.

A pastor ought to have a handle on the Herodian Dynasty that ruled in Palestine before, during, and after the time of Jesus. I have been using *Unger's Bible Dictionary* since I bought it during seminary and have gotten a lot of use out of it over the years. It starts at about \$25 on Amazon – cheaper as Kindle – but is less expensive at ebay.

Search “Herod” on WIK, and you can click on each of them and learn more about them. Several Herods who are mentioned in the NT, including this one, who is called “Herod the King” by Matthew. He is Herod the Great, and he ruled from 74 – 4 B.C. Herod the Great is the one who is responsible for the huge and magnificent rebuilding of Temple.

He is also thought to be responsible for the killing of infants. He was, in fact, the ruler before Herod Archelaus, who Matthew cites as his successor. The Herod family was generally not nice, but this one was particularly nasty. Perhaps most shocking, he had several members of his own family put to death, including a wife and several children.

While The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents may seem to modern man a little bit over the top (some “Bible Scholars” question whether it really happened, but then they are the kinds of “Bible Scholars” who question whether anything ever really happened), such violence was all too common in ancient times, especially if a crown is involved.

In fact, the true scholars of the Bible, who think that this really happened, are agreed that such a thing would have been totally in character with the kind of person that Herod the Great was. That the Holy Family would flee to Egypt and find a temporary home there would have been a common occurrence in that time and place.

The Diaspora was well underway, and there were Jewish settlements all around the Mediterranean. They would have been able to make themselves right at home in any of these places, but the angel commands them go to Egypt, so Egypt it is. Their stay would have been fairly short, perhaps as little as a few months to a few years.

Textual Notes

13. The Magi have left the building, and “Ἀναχωρησάντων δὲ αὐτῶν, ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος κυρίου φαίνεται κατ’ ὄναρ τῷ Ἰωσήφ – After they departed, see, and angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph.” The angel has made several appearances to several people, including Joseph, and will appear once more (19), and then no more.

The appearance of an angel of the Lord is not a common occurrence in the NT, but it *is* a common occurrence at the time of the nativity of Jesus. As he had earlier (1:20), the angel speaks to Joseph while he is sleeping. The angel tells Joseph, the head of the Holy Family, to leave, taking “τὸ παιδίον καὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ - the child and His mother.”

Mary is called the mother of Jesus, but Joseph is not called his father. This is consistent throughout the NT. Add this refusal to call Joseph that to the many and various ways Matthew found in the first chapter to tell us the God was the Father, and the Bible is very clear about the Person of Jesus. He is the unique God-man, and He alone can save us.

Jesus is called παιδίον, the general word for child, not βρέφος, the word for infant. Grammatically he could be an infant, but he could also be a twelve-year-old. Probably he was at that time between the ages of one and two. Using the imperative singular mode, the angel tells Joseph, “φεῦγε εἰς Αἴγυπτον – flee into Egypt” and stay put.

The dictionary definition for the word “flee” is “to run away from a place or situation of danger,” and that’s a good translation. It’s a common word in the NT, making twenty-nine appearances in all, and there is a lot from which to flee in life, and discretion is the better part of valor. Jesus Himself several times flees from danger, and that’s okay.

Not all time is the same, and the reading from Galatians talks of the timing of the coming of Jesus, and He says “my hour has not yet come” several times before He announces that His hour has come. Much as Judah was protected by God so that they could fulfill the purpose of bringing forth the Christ, the Christ will be protected, until His hour arrives.

The angel doesn’t require Joseph to blindly spirit his family off to a distant land but tells him why; “μέλλει γὰρ Ἡρώδης ζητεῖν τὸ παιδίον τοῦ ἀπολέσαι αὐτό – Herod is about to seek the child, to kill Him.” KJV and others say that Herod wants to “destroy” the child, and that’s a good alternative translation, and both it and “kill” bring the same result.

The angel further tells Joseph that he will come back and tell him when the coast is clear. We are reminded of how God told Abraham to leave everything familiar to follow God to

a place that – I’ll show you later. Abraham’s doing that set into motion a series of events that would lead to the Exodus and the establishment of Israel “out of Egypt.”

14. It’s not Joseph’s first rodeo with an angel, and no dialogue is recorded, no follow up questions from him. Joseph took “τὸ παιδίον καὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ - the child and His mother” and need we say more, “νυκτὸς καὶ ἀνεχώρησεν εἰς Αἴγυπτον – at night and escaped into Egypt.” The verb here translated “escape” is a different word from “flee.”

Both verbs have the subject fleeing to escape danger, and the second is a compound with “making room” at its root, and here the meaning seems to be making preparations for the trip. Rather than running off half-cocked, Joseph gets his affairs in order, planning the journey as would be expected, and Matthew tells us they left under cover of darkness.

Why Egypt? First and foremost, it was out of Herod’s jurisdiction. There was a thriving Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt, and the Holy Family would have found like-minded souls, and that’ always swell, especially when you are just starting your family. Joseph would have been able to get work building things, providing for the family.

The Jewish Encyclopedia (www.jewishencyclopedia.com) quotes Josephus as saying that a Jewish “quarter” had been established by Alexander when he founded the city in 332 B.C., and that the Jews had been given equal political rights that were not taken away by the Romans when they came to rule. They would also have had access to synagogue.

15. And to fulfill an OT messianic prophecy (Hosea 11:1). Joseph did as the angel commanded, “καὶ ἦν ἐκεῖ ἕως τῆς τελευτῆς Ἡρώδου – and he was there until the death of Herod” and the ascension of yet another Herod. It was Herod the Great (Herod I) who ordered the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, and from whom the Holy Family fled.

Why Egypt? Egypt “ἵνα πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν ὑπὸ κυρίου διὰ τοῦ προφήτου – in order to fulfill the word from the Lord through the prophet.” Matthew is very clear that a human prophet (Hosea) was doing the writing, but what he said was from God. The verb means to “fill up” or “complete” something that otherwise had been left incomplete.

It’s a common word, commonly used by Matthew and the Evangelists to proclaim Jesus as the completion of things that in OT times were incomplete. When Hosea, speaking for God, wrote what he wrote, he was talking about the Exodus, but that wasn’t the complete picture. The fullness comes with the Christ, who will complete the incomplete.

Hosea says “Ἐξ Αἰγύπτου ἐκάλεσα τὸν υἱόν μου – out of Egypt I have called My Son.” Completing the incomplete; the Exodus was a thing, God saving His people from slavery and destroying their enslaver. The Passover, The Red Sea, Moses, et al were all things as well, and the life, death, and resurrection of Messiah is the completion of all those things.

16. We are all familiar with the Magi, who are left out of this pericope, and how they ran interference for the child, “Τότε Ἡρώδης ἰδὼν ὅτι ἐνεπαίχθη ὑπὸ τῶν μάγων – then

Herod, seeing that he had been tricked by the Magi.” The word “tricked” occurs thirteen times in the NT. It includes various degrees of outwitting another, including “mockery.”

I call them the “Magi” because that’s what the NT calls them, and that’s what they are. I avoid “wise men” because the NT does. Words mean something, and the Magi are a specific group of men with specific beliefs. A lot of those beliefs are questionable, and by no stretch of the imagination are we to think of astrologers as “wise men.”

Herod did not like being played, and “ἐθυμώθη λίαν – exceedingly enraged.” The verb is a hapax logomena (it only occurs once) in the NT, but its cognate noun makes thirteen NT appearances, and it means “to be hot.” The verb is passive, and the trickery of the Magi is the cause for Herod being exceedingly hot under the collar, burning with rage.

His rage caused him to issue and order that would “ἀνεῖλεν – put to death” or “execute” all male children born around the time and place of the birth of Jesus, information he had gleaned from the Magi. Paul Maier opines (*The First Christmas*) that the number was about twenty, and it could have been worse, but twenty souls are twenty souls.

There was a time when the wonton slaughter of small children raised eyebrows in our culture, but now not so much. We don’t do “Life Sunday” per se, but we do pray for the unborn et al, and on this Sunday, I may talk about what slaughtering innocent living children says about a society; theirs and ours, and the some of the killers boast of it.

When I ask my granddaughter how old she is, she will say that she is thirteen. She turned thirteen last summer. If she were a Jewish granddaughter living in Palestine at the time of Jesus, she would have said that she is five years old. It’s simply a different way to look at and to articulate age. In our time and place we count age from your last birthday.

In that time and place they counted it from the upcoming birthday, so when it says that Herod ordered children under the age of two to be executed, he’s talking about children under one year (in our way of counting) of age. Paul Maier also talks about that in his book, which is a very good read, and which is now available in a children’s version.

Their having to sneak around like they did leads us to believe that the full resources of Herod’s government were being employed to deal with the problem child. Matthew’s inclusion of that information leads us to believe that this child hunt was a big deal. It shows just how badly Herod wanted the would be contender for his throne to be snuffed.

17 – 18. The Slaughter of the Innocents is said by Matthew to have occurred as the fulfillment of a prophecy from Jeremiah heralding the restoration of Israel, and it is. Rachel is the mother of Ephraim and Manasseh, in the north. They were included in the Assyrian Genocide (722 B.C.), and of those descendants Jeremiah says, “they are not.”

19. The Holy Family was not in Egypt for very long. Herod the Great died in 4 B.C, and one last time “ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος Κυρίου φαίνεται κατ’ ὄναρ τῷ Ἰωσήφ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ - look, an

angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph in Egypt” just like he said he would. Depending on what timeline you use, they were there for a few months to a few years.

20. The angel instructs him to “παράλαβε τὸ παιδίον καὶ τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ πορεύου εἰς γῆν Ἰσραήλ – take the child and His mother and journey into Israel.” Again, Mary is called the mother, and Joseph is not called the father, and this time there is no fleeing or escaping, but only a leisurely and not dangerous – the common word for travelling.

The Angel’s calling the land “Israel” is unusual, for Israel proper no longer existed. But he’s not talking about political boundary lines, but a geographical area, the “land” (γῆν) of Israel, just like Hosea had said. In addition, Jesus several times talks about how He has come for “Israel” and “the lost sheep of Israel,” people the Assyrians exterminated.

In what must be seen as an ironic twist, “τεθνήκασιν γὰρ οἱ ζητοῦντες τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ παιδίου – those seeking the life of the child have died.” The verb leads the sentence and is in the perfect tense; once you are dead you stay dead. It’s plural, meaning Herod is dead and so are others. Perhaps the hunting and would be murdering soldiers died too.

Maier, who knows his Herods, says of the return,

When Joseph and Mary returned to their homeland, an unhappy surprise awaited them. Herod was indeed dead, but his son Archelaus ruled Judea as his successor, and he had begun his reign with a massacre of three thousand Jews who had rebelled against him in the Temple at Jerusalem. Better to return home to Galilee, they decided, where a milder son of Herod named Antipas had been appointed tetrarch, with the kind permission of the Roman emperor Augustus. (*First Christmas*, p. 98)

21. Matthew repeats almost word for word the angel’s instruction to Joseph, indicating that Joseph followed those instructions to a tee. It appears that at this point the Holy Family is headed in the general direction of “Israel” a nation that no longer exists, but still a geographically destination. Their destination is about to become very specific.

22. Joseph is in possession of a brain and is aware of the political situation in Palestine; He heard that Archelaus was now ruling in Judea, and he also knew his Herods and what Paul Maier knows, and “ἐφοβήθη ἐκεῖ ἀπελθεῖν – he was afraid to go there.” Bengel says; “Anxious about the child, fearful lest Archelaus should emulate his father’s hatred

The angel also apparently knew of the political circumstances of Palestine, and one last time comes to Joseph and tells him to take the family to Nazareth; “χρηματισθεὶς δὲ κατ’ ὄναρ ἀνεχώρησεν εἰς τὰ μέρη τῆς Γαλιλαίας – having been warned in a dream, he fled to the region of Galilee.” The verb is the same used earlier for fleeing from danger.

Why Nazareth? Again, the safety of the child is foremost in the mind of Joseph, Matthew indicates. Today the entire Christian world knows about Nazareth. If not for Jesus, nobody would know about Nazareth. It would have been a good place to raise in relative anonymity a child who was very special and must have stuck out like a sore thumb.

Go ahead in your preaching and compare it to a small, inconsequential, out of the way town near you. I may talk about Sherrard, where I live, or Milan, my hometown, but don't say it in such a way that the hearer is needlessly offended. Sherrard is a town where the road ends, and if you are there, you are probably not just passing through.

Oh, and we find out later that there was a synagogue in Nazareth. In fact, Nazareth seems to have been a very "Jewish" area in the not-so-jewish region of Galilee. There are likewise in our country Lutheran pockets in non-Lutheran areas. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* says Nazareth was "inhabited by Jews only" until the days of Constantine."

The idea that a town, no matter how small, would be inhabited by people of only one religion is a concept unfamiliar to us. My first call was to a town in southeast Wisconsin. The population of the town was 250, and the membership of the LCMS congregation was 350, and the locals spoke fondly of the day when only Lutherans lived in town.

23. For those reasons they went to live in Nazareth, and also "ὅπως πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ τῶν προφητῶν ὅτι Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται – so that it might be completed the word through the prophet, that 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'" The quote is from Isaiah 11:1, a messianic prophecy about a "branch – יִצְחָק" that will spring from the stump of Jesse.

Law/Gospel

Nomad/Home – The Holy Family was unsettled for a time, first the trip to Bethlehem, then the Flight to Egypt, then to Nazareth, where they were able to settle in and Mary and Joseph raise their family. In the same way, and for often similar reasons, Christians are unsettled, geographically and otherwise. We find our peace and settlement in the unchanging (or changing a little bit) Divine Service, and we look forward to the final settling in our final heavenly home.

Vulnerable/Protected – Like the Holy Family and the Holy Innocents, Christians are often vulnerable to those who would harm them. Satan uses people like Herod in his quest to destroy the messianic seed, but the Father sends a messenger to protect the Son, Who is the Messianic seed. Satan was unable to do what he wanted to do. In God's time Jesus was born, died, resurrected, and ascended to the place where He is no longer vulnerable, but those who follow Him are. In the same way that the Father protected the Son, our Heavenly Father protects us. That does not mean that we won't die. It does mean that we will not die eternally, and it means that "the gates of hell" will not prevail over the Bride of Christ.

Weeping/Rejoicing – This life is fraught with much weeping, as the mothers of the Holy Innocents wept for their babies. In heaven there will be no reaping, but only rejoicing. Knowing this, Christians can start their rejoicing now.

In Egypt/Out of Egypt – When the Holy Family travel to Egypt, they know that it is only temporary. Egypt is not home. Egypt is a place to which you go and wait until it's time to go home. The Holy Land is home, and the "New Jerusalem" is the home of Christians, who wait for now in these temporary homes. But don't allegorize.

Sermon Titles

Massacre at Bethlehem

Why is Herod Killing the Babies?

About the Herods

Hymns

Ok, now it's time to open the gifts and to sing the Christmas hymns

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