

Single Meaning Intertextuality in Matthew 2 and the Sub-Christian Hermeneutics Accusation

I. Introduction

In an influential book on homiletics, Bryan Chappel made a hermeneutical statement that deserves attention: “A message that merely advocates morality and compassion remains sub-Christian even if the preacher can prove that the Bible demands such behaviors” he continues, “Christian preachers often do not recognize this counter-gospel impact of their preaching because they are simply recounting a behavior clearly specified in the portion of the text in front of them.”¹ While the dispensationalist would likely agree that many Bible teachers tend to abandon the plain meaning of Scriptures in favor of moralistic gleanings, Chappel’s so-called Christ-Centered Preaching is vulnerable to the same pitfalls that it speaks against. The Christocentric hermeneutic forces doctrines which are not necessarily false doctrines, but they are doctrines which are not necessarily taught in the passages being expounded. However, if it can be shown that the biblical authors did not use the hermeneutics that Chappel prescribes, then either the biblical authors were sub-Christian or the Christocentric method should be abandoned.

More to the point, if the apostles used a consistent grammatical-historical hermeneutic, then so should we. One facet of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic is the principle of single meaning, which says that any given biblical passage has only one proper meaning, that this meaning was set by the human author as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that this meaning is fixed and unchangeable. There are widespread misconceptions that the Bible does not prescribe a plain reading of itself and so the Christian is to read the Bible for some other sense than the plain sense. This misconception is leading people away from dispensationalism and the principle of single meaning is often at the forefront of the confusion.

For example, Stan Newton is a graduate from Moody Bible Institute who has written a handful of books against dispensationalism. He writes that “for several generations dispensational theology has made the prophecies of the Old Testament void, by stealing them from the true people of the kingdom – the church; and assigning them to a future age – the 1,000-year millennium.”² He develops what he calls *an apostolic hermeneutic*, in which “Our beginning point in a Christocentric method of interpretation is that we start our exegesis through the revelation of Jesus and his kingdom, as recorded in the New Testament.”³ Newton’s contention is not that the church would be evident by reading the Old Testament alone, but rather that information in the New Testament must be read into the Old to make it about the church. Dispensationalists adhere to the plain meaning of the Old Testament, seeing God keep His pr⁴

¹ Bryan Chappel, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 464–465.

² Stan Newton, *Our Rich Root: Kingdom Promises for the Kingdom Age* (Ramona, CA: Vision Publishing, 2019), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

omises to whomever He makes promises to and according to Newton “Nothing has robbed the church more than this doctrine.”

Why do dispensationalists hold to a self-interpreting view of Scripture? Some may say that “Dispensationalism arose in part due to a concern about apparently unfulfilled biblical prophecies,” specifically “the worry that unfulfilled prophecy might be seen as false prophecy, or worse, that unfulfilled prophecy might make God appear to not be a keeper of his word.”⁵ Others would say, for example, that “It was one thing for believers to claim that the Holy Spirit could guide devotional Bible readers to affective insights. But it was quite another to believe the Holy Spirit could lead the devout in *scientific* readings of the text,” that many 19th-century Protestants “relied explicitly on the belief that the Bible was a self-interpreting book, with themes throughout linked by the work of the Holy Spirit,” and that the “most influential of these new approaches was conversational and expository Bible readings, developed in the small communities of the Brethren in Britain and popularized in America through a series of itinerant Brethren evangelists.”⁶ If the accusation is that dispensationalism is the normative result of the doctrines of inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility, and perspicuity, then we are guilty as charged!

The narrative of the massacre of the innocents in Matthew 2 is an important text for the dispute over intertextuality. Kim Riddlebarger is an amillennialist who comes from a dispensationalist background and wrote a book “to humbly attempt to point out” the errors of dispensationalism and provide what he considers “a more biblical way to understand the Bible’s teaching on the coming of the Lord and the millennial age.”⁷ Regarding Matthew’s use of Hosea (Matt. 2:15 cf. Hos. 11:1), Riddlebarger writes:

The prophet Hosea quoted God as saying, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (11:1). But Matthew told us that Hosea’s prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus’s parents took him to Egypt for a time as a baby to protect him from Herod’s “slaughter of the innocents” (Matt. 2:13–18). Thus, Matthew, not the “spiritualizing amillennarian” centuries later, took a passage from Hosea that referred to Israel and told his readers that it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.⁸

From a postmillennialist perspective, Douglas Wilson writes similarly:

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 96–97.

⁶ B. M. Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 100.

⁷ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 22.

⁸ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 84.

Consider the prophecy of Hosea 11:1. According to Matthew 2:15, this refers to the flight into Egypt by Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. But in Hosea, the meaning appears to be a reference to the Exodus from Egypt under Moses. Unless we interpret it symbolically, *as Matthew does*, we cannot apply it to Jesus Christ.⁹

Did Matthew adhere to the same hermeneutical principles as modern day dispensationalists or did he do something else? A lot of misconceptions about dispensationalism are depending on Matthew, so this passage and the passages that are alluded to within should be studied carefully.

II. Overview

Everything boils down to hermeneutics. Dispensationalism results from a consistent application of grammatical-historical hermeneutics through Scripture. Alternative systems always abandon grammatical-historicism at key points. The debate is not so much what the results of the hermeneutics are, but rather, which hermeneutical process is proper. The focal point of the hermeneutics debate deals with which hermeneutical process the biblical authors used: whichever hermeneutic the authors used is the same one that the readers should be using today. The majority of Old Testament (OT) quotations in the New Testament (NT) are undisputed as grammatical-historical applications, but there are a handful of difficult texts that cause theologians to drift from the principles of plain meaning. Among these difficult texts are the OT passages that are cited in Matthew 2. This paper will demonstrate that Matthew applies a consistent and exclusive grammatical-historical hermeneutic to the passages that he cites in the narrative of the massacre of the innocents (Matt. 2:1–23).

Matthew 2:1–13 quotes three OT prophecies: Micah 5:2 (Matt. 2:6), Hosea 11:1 (Matt. 2:15), and Jeremiah 31:15 (Matt. 2:18). If understood contextually, these OT passages are being applied in a single-meaning/multiple implications, grammatical-historical sense. The wise men saw the star, which was affiliated with the star and scepter of Balaam's prophecy (Num. 24:17). This rising scepter motif comes out again in Micah 5:2, which is cited in Matthew 2:6. Balaam also prophesied that the future King would come from Egypt (Num. 24:8), which Hosea develops (Hos. 11:1) and Matthew cites as being fulfilled when the Messiah comes from Egypt (Matt. 2:15). Jeremiah 31:15 is a statement of national trauma that will continue until the establishment of the Messianic kingdom, so when Matthew applies it to the massacre (Matt. 2:18), he is appealing to an ongoing situation that causes tragedies that include infanticide. This is only one difficult chapter among a handful of others, but if the massacre of the innocents can be understood for its exclusively grammatical-historical sense, then perhaps the same hermeneutical framework can be applied elsewhere as well.

⁹ Douglas Wilson, "Primer on Eschatology 2," *Blog & Mablog*, July 29, 2024, <https://dougwils.com/the-church/s8-expository/primer-on-eschatology-2.html>.

III. Recent contributions to biblical intertextuality

Several contributions to intertextual studies have emerged in recent years that could contribute to a positive development of dispensationalist approaches to intertextuality. Steven Sullivan, Abner Chou, Michael Vlach, and Jillian Ross have published some volumes between the years 2017 and 2023 that are worth noting for aspects that are worth taking to the intertextuality of the massacre of the innocents.

A. Sullivan's Dodd/Hays principle of total context (2017)

Steven Sullivan wrote his dissertation on the Isaianic New Exodus in Romans 9–11 at the University of Wales Trinity St. David. Lampion Press published that dissertation as the book, *The Isaianic New Exodus in Romans 9–11*. The early chapters of *The Isaianic New Exodus in Romans 9–11* discuss different approaches to intertextuality, but mostly as related to Romans. In chapter 3, Sullivan develops his methodology of intertextual studies. He emphasizes the total context of the OT passage that is being quoted. He relies on C.H. Dodd and Richard B. Hays to the extent of calling his view “the Dodd/Hays principle of total context.” There is plenty to criticize in Dodd’s and Hays’ approach to Scripture, but Sullivan’s development of total context—especially when put on a conservative and dispensational framework—is beneficial to studies in intertextuality outside of Romans. In Sullivan’s words:

One of the important points made by C.H. Dodd and adopted in this book is his conclusion that a quotation from the Old Testament most often becomes a pointer or “text plot” to the broader context, which means its use in the New Testament presupposes an awareness of the Original Old Testament context... Richard B. Hays has developed further the concept of the total context through his studies of intertextuality... According to Hays, this rhetorical device should drive us back to examine the wider context to find the intertextual connections with the echo... Dodd/Hays total context is not the complete answer to this discussion, but it becomes an important and foundational principle in the investigation of the New Testament quotations.¹⁰

This Dodd/Hays principle of total context carries over to Matthew’s use of the Old Testament. When Matthew cites, for example, Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15, he does not write out the entire chapter; indeed, he does not even write out the entire verse. Instead, he wrote “Out of Egypt did I call my son,” which is enough text that the original audience would know what he was referencing. Then the responsibility fell on the audience to understand what Hosea was talking about and likewise any intertextual clues within Hosea. As will be seen, Hosea actually

¹⁰ Steven Sullivan, *The Isaianic New Exodus in Romans 9-11: A Biblical and Theological Study of Paul's Use of Isaiah in Romans* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2017), 47, 48, 102.

integrated some material from Balaam into his prophecy which also must be understood for its total context.

B. Chou's hermeneutic of obedience (2018)

Abner Chou is the president of The Master's Seminary, where he has taught for several years. He has made positive contributions to the grammatical-historical approach to intertextuality. In *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, Chou demonstrates that proper Christian hermeneutics is the same as the hermeneutics that is built into the OT and NT. Some alternatives often take a lower view of Scripture, typically with an elevated view of modern interpreters. Chou starts with a high view of Scripture and recognizes that the biblical authors wrote inerrant text under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As such, their hermeneutical method is also inerrant:

My mission is to vindicate the prophets and apostles and to use them to help shape our own understanding of God's Word. They are not hermeneutical ignoramuses who have abused the Scripture. We do not know better than them. Rather, being moved by the Holy Spirit, they were brilliant—and we ought to humbly follow them. Their faithful hermeneutic provides us the certainty that the way we were traditionally taught to interpret the Bible is the method the Bible upholds. Literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics is not a modern formulation but how the biblical writers read the Scriptures. The Christian hermeneutic follows the prophets and apostles, and is thereby a hermeneutic of obedience.¹¹

This hermeneutic of obedience fits well on Sullivan's framework of Dodd/Hays total context. Dodd and Hays both had lower views of Scripture than were appropriate, but when their principle of total context is applied to Chou's submission to the text (and, more importantly, the Author of the text), the result maintains proper glory to God.

C. Vlach's concept of Single Meaning-Multiple Significances (2021)

Michael Vlach has taught theology at The Master's Seminary, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, and Shepherds Theological Seminary. Vlach's book on intertextuality is probably the best and most current resource that we have from our perspective. He analyzes several alternatives to grammatical-historicism, many of which see the New Testament authors as changing or adding to the meaning of the Old Testament texts. Vlach calls his perspective "single meaning/multiple implications" or "consistent contextual," which he summarizes:

According to this approach, each OT passage has a single meaning, which is the human author's meaning under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And when a NT

¹¹ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2018), 23.

writer quotes an OT text, he does so contextually—in accord with the intended meaning of the OT author. This could take place through explaining the *meaning* of an OT passage or offering an *implication* consistent with the meaning.¹²

Vlach’s approach takes a holistic grammatical-historical approach to intertextuality that considers inspiration and context. A key note is that while every text only has one interpretation, there can still be multiple implications to any given text. This concept is particularly helpful in Matthew’s use of Jeremiah 31:5, where Jeremiah describes an ongoing situation that will carry implications through the ages until the Second Coming.

D. Ross’s approach to literary allusion (2023)

Jillian Ross is associate professor of biblical studies at Liberty University. Her book on allusion in Judges is written in three parts: part 1 is on methodology, part 2 is on allusion in Judges, and part 3 is on poetics. Part 1 discusses the issues at play and provides the following definition:

A literary allusion is a literary device with an *indirect reference* utilized by an author in such a way that textual markers are placed into the alluding text in order to activate meaning in a precursor so that the rhetorical relationship between the two contexts can be determined and the meaning resulting from the graft into the alluding text can be comprehended.¹³

In Ross’s context, the Book of Judges receives the most attention and the results are edifying in their own right as she demonstrates how Judges alludes to the Pentateuch (especially Deuteronomy), thus illustrating the author’s point that the people heeded not Scripture which had already been revealed. The concepts that Ross develops and applies in Judges may also be applied to the massacre of the innocents. As will be seen below, Balaam is allusive to Jacob and Hosea is allusive to both Balaam and Jacob; these intentional allusions parallel much of what Ross proves in her work.

E. Conclusion: A contextual, single meaning/multiple implications hermeneutic of obedience that seeks intentional allusions

The biblical authors were grammatical-historicists and the modern student of the Bible should follow suit. Whenever an OT passage occurs in the NT, the original text should be taken for its exclusively grammatical-historical sense within its total context. The exclusivity of the

¹² Michael Vlach, *The Old in the New: Understanding How the New Testament Authors Quoted the Old Testament* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2021), 5.

¹³ Jillian Ross, *A People Heeds Not Scripture: Allusion in Judges* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 17.

grammatical-historical interpretation means that there will only be one single meaning to the text, while still accepting the possibility of multiple implications.

IV. Intertextuality in Matthew 2:1–2

Matthew provides the setting for the massacre of the innocents:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, wise men came from the east to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who was born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” (Matt. 2:1–2).¹⁴

To a reader who is unfamiliar with the OT, such a conversation may seem out of place. Why are these wise men looking for a star? What does that star have to do with the King of the Jews? Matthew does not say, but the answers could be in the OT, which Matthew assumes his audience is familiar with. Two passages that are relevant to the wise men’s inquiry are Daniel 9:24–27, whence is derived the timing of the Messiah, and Numbers 24:17, whence is derived the connection of a star to the King of the Jews.

A. Timing in Daniel 9:24–27

Daniel gives a prophecy that lays out a timeline for the death of Messiah:

²⁴ “Seventy weeks have been determined for your people and upon your holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make atonement for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy *Place*.

²⁵ “Know therefore and understand that from the going forth of the command to restore and to rebuild Jerusalem until the Prince Messiah shall be seven weeks, and sixty-two weeks. It shall be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of trouble. ²⁶ After the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the troops of the prince who shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall come with a flood. And until the end of the war desolations are determined. ²⁷ And he shall make a firm covenant with many for one week. But in the middle of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the offering to cease. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed destruction is poured out on the desolator.” (Dan. 9:24–27)

This prophecy of seventy weeks establishes a timeline by which the “Messiah shall be cut off” 483 civil years after “the going forth of the command to restore and to rebuild Jerusalem.”

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations come from the Modern English Version.

Artaxerxes issued that command in his 20th year (Neh. 2:1–8), so that is when the countdown to the Messiah’s death began, but the OT did not say how old the Messiah would be when He died. For the first 350 years, Israel would have known that the Messiah was not yet born, lest He be over 133 years old when He died, but as the years drew closer, the Messianic anticipation would have heightened as they wondered if the Messiah would die at 100 years old, or 80, or 50, until finally when the time was right for the Messiah to be 33 years old at His death, God announced His birth by putting a star out. Daniel’s seventy weeks explains the timing of the wise men, but to understand the star, we must go further back to the prophecy of Balaam.

B. The star in Numbers 24:17

Balaam’s motif enters the massacre narrative when the magis affiliate the star with a king (Num. 24:17; Matt. 2:2). This affiliation comes from Balaam’s fourth prophecy, which includes:

¹⁷ “I will see him, but not now;
 I will behold him, but not near;
 a star will come out of Jacob,
 and a scepter will rise out of Israel,
 and will crush the borderlands of Moab,
 and destroy all the children of Sheth.
¹⁸ Edom will be a possession,
 and Seir, a possession of its enemies,
 while Israel does valiantly.
¹⁹ One out of Jacob shall have dominion,
 and destroy the survivors of the city.” (Num. 24:17–19)

Numbers 24:17 associates the star and scepter: “a star will come out of Jacob, and a scepter will rise out of Israel.” Arnold Fruchtenbaum writes about the Jewish understanding of the relationship between the star and the birth of the Messiah:

In rabbinic writings, Balaam’s prophecy about the star was recognized to be messianic... Thus, the star as a symbol of the Messiah was a connection the Jews would have made... Just as God interacted with Balaam in the Hebrew Scriptures, He made sure that these Babylonian astrologers would have knowledge of the star and its import...¹⁵

Modern dispensationalists are not the first and only¹⁶ ones who see the connection from the wise men to Balaam; indeed, the connection is made throughout patristic literature including the w

¹⁵ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah from a Messianic Jewish Perspective* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2016), vol. 1, 450, 451.

¹⁶ For nondispensationalist agreement, see for example, Tobias Nicklas “Balaam and the Star of the Magi” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*. van Kooten, George H. and van Ruiten, Jacques, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 233–246.

orks of Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Diodore of Tarsus, Ambrosius of Milan, Jerome, and John of Damascus.¹⁷

Daniel’s prophecy gave the timing for the Messiah’s death, so around the time of the Messiah’s birth, the wise men were looking for the star in accordance with Balaam’s prophecy. The wise men are often presumed to be Pagan astrologers, but this need not be the case. God put the stars in the sky for man’s benefit, so that he would use them as “signs to indicate seasons, and days, and years” (Gen. 1:14b). The wise men could have been observing the sky for time-measuring purposes and seen this special star that could move and lead people (Matt. 2:19). Then the wise men could have made the connection between the timing of Daniel and the prophecy of Balaam, which affiliated the star with the scepter.

The star led the wise men to Jerusalem as a stop on the way to Bethlehem. When they arrived, they asked, “Where is He who was born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him” (Matt. 2:2). That the wise men want to worship the King of the Jews indicates that they anticipated His deity. Perhaps they derived the deity of the Messiah from Balaam’s prophecy, as John Metzger puts it:

What the reader may be looking at here in Numbers 24:17 is a veiled statement of the God/man. The man is visible in the term “scepter” who as an earthly king will use his power to subdue the earth. The term “star” may picture His heavenly origin.¹⁸

If the wise men did not derive Christ’s deity from Balaam’s prophecy, then they could have gotten it from elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures.

C. Balaam’s use of Genesis 49:8–12

Balaam’s reference to the scepter is intertextual to Jacob’s blessing of Judah:

Genesis 49:8–10	Numbers 24:17
<p>⁸ “Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; Your father’s children shall bow down before you. ⁹ Judah is a lion’s whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him? ¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.</p>	<p>¹⁷ “I will see him, but not now; I will behold him, but not near; a star will come out of Jacob, and a scepter will rise out of Israel, and will crush the borderlands of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.</p>

¹⁷ John Leemans, “‘To Bless With A Mouth Bent On Cursing’: Patristic Interpretations of Balaam (Num 24:17)” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam*, 287–299.

¹⁸ John Metzger, *Discovering the Mystery of the Unity of God* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2010), 388.

The scepter motif in Jacob's blessing (Gen. 49:10) returns in Balaam's prophecy of the star and scepter (Num. 24:17) and so does the lion motif (Gen. 49:9), as will be seen in Hosea's intertextuality with Balaam, so more attention will be given in the commentary there.

V. Intertextuality in Matthew 2:3–12

The massacre of the innocents narrative develops further:

³ When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where Christ should be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are no longer least among the princes of Judah;
for out of you shall come a Governor,
who will shepherd My people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod, when he had privately called the wise men, carefully inquired of them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word again, so that I may come and worship Him also."

⁹ When they heard the king, they departed. And the star which they saw in the east went before them until it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with great excitement. ¹¹ And when they came into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary, His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² But being warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route. (Matt. 2:3–12)

The wise men asked where the King of the Jews was and the scholars answered that He would be in Bethlehem according to Micah 5:1–4. The application of Micah here is undisputed as a grammatical-historical interpretation of the OT in the NT. As such, this may be the easiest quote in Matthew 2 to deal with and it should serve as an example for the quotes to come.

The fact that this is an easy text brings the temptation to read too quickly and neglect some intertextual aspects of Micah. In the total context of Micah, the prophet is appealing to two passages of Torah that have already come into this discussion: Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49:8–12 (cf. Mic. 5:3) and Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 23:18–24; 24:3–9 (cf. Mic. 6:4–5).

A. The shepherd of Bethlehem in Micah 5:1–4

Matthew's quotation from Micah integrates the beginning of Micah 4:2 with the beginning of Micah 4:4:

Micah 5:1-4	Matthew 2:6
<p>¹ Now gather yourself in troops, O daughter of troops; he has laid siege against us. With a rod they will strike the judge of Israel on the cheek.</p> <p>² But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, although you are small among the tribes of Judah, from you will come forth for Me one who will be ruler over Israel. His origins are from of old, from ancient days.</p> <p>³ Therefore He will give them up, until the time when she who is in labor has given birth, and the rest of his brothers will return to the children of Israel.</p> <p>⁴ He will stand and shepherd in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God; then they will live securely, because now He will be great until the ends of the earth;</p>	<p>⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are no longer least among the princes of Judah; for out of you shall come a Governor,</p> <p>who will shepherd My people Israel.’”</p>

One would think that Matthew could have finished the line from Micah 5:2, “one who will be ruler over Israel,” but instead they skipped a few thoughts integrated the shepherding role from Micah 5:4a. The passage when taken as a whole shows not only the Messiah’s birth (which is the answer to the wise men’s question), but also contributes to Matthew’s fundamental argument that he is making in the book, which is why the Messiah did not establish the Messianic kingdom.

Micah 5:3 begins: “Therefore He will give them up, until the time when she who is in labor has given birth.” This birth imagery is descriptive of the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul would later pick up on the labor imagery when describing the coming 7-year tribulation (Jer. 30:6-7; Matt. 24:8; 1 Thess. 5:3). For Micah’s purposes, he is describing Israel’s history that will be troublesome until the Messianic Kingdom comes. In his immediate situation, he was foretelling the conquest of the Northern Kingdom (Mic. 1:2-16), but Israel would not truly be at peace until “the rest of his brothers will return to the children of Israel” (Mic. 5:3b), which is another phrase that integrates Jacob’s blessing of Judah.

B. Micah’s use of Jacob’s blessing (Mic. 5:3b; Gen. 49:8)

Jacob’s blessing of Judah begins, “Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons will bow down before you” (Gen. 49:8). The blessing on Judah includes a prophecy of when Judah will rule over the other tribes. There was an ongoing sense in which the throne was to be occupied by Davidic lineage, but ultimately Israel was looking forward to when Shiloh came. Micah’s reference to “the time when... the rest of his brothers will return to the children of Israel” (Mic. 5:3) goes back to Jacob’s blessing of Judah which will come to fruition in the Messianic kingdom but in the meantime, “until the time... He will stand and shepherd” (Mic. 5:3-4a). This prophecy will be fulfilled in the Messianic kingdom, so the scholars in Matthew 2:4 recognized that this was the Messiah’s star.

C. Biblical reasoning for gold, frankincense, and myrrh

The narrative of Matthew 2:3–12 raises another question: Why did the wise men bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Irenaeus answers well:

Therefore there is one and the same God, who was proclaimed by the prophets and announced by the Gospel; and His Son, who was of the fruit of David's body, that is, of the virgin of [the house of] David, and Emmanuel; whose star also Balaam thus prophesied: "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a leader shall rise in Israel." But Matthew says that the Magi, coming from the east, exclaimed "For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him;" and that, having been led by the star into the house of Jacob to Emmanuel, they showed, by these gifts which they offered, who it was that was worshipped; *myrrh*, because it was He who should die and be buried for the mortal human race; *gold*, because He was a King, "of whose kingdom is no end;" and *frankincense*, because He was God, who also "was made known in Judea," and was "declared to those who sought Him not."¹⁹

Not only does Irenaeus make the connection of the star to Balaam, but he also extrapolated that the magi knew about the Messiah's death, kingship, and deity. These three points would have been evident throughout the OT, so the wise men certainly had a thorough understanding of the Scriptures.

The wise men likely knew what Micah wrote, which raises yet another question: Why did they not go straight to Jerusalem? First, they knew the timing of the Messiah's death, so while they understood that the star pointed to Him, they may not have been certain that the star pointed to Him at His birth. Second, the star led them to Jerusalem, probably because God wanted to stir the community of priests and scribes, so the wise men could have asked for this reason. Third, the OT says that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem, but it also says that He will come from Egypt. That the Messiah comes from Egypt is often brushed aside as a NT truth, but it is first revealed by none other than Balaam.

VI. Intertextuality in Matthew 2:13–15

The narrative continues:

¹³ Now when they departed, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and escape to Egypt, and

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.9.2. Translation from volume 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 vols. 1885–1887. Repr., Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994.

stay there until I bring you word. For Herod will seek the young Child to kill Him.”

¹⁴ When he rose, he took the young Child and His mother by night, and departed into Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod, to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called My Son.” (Matt. 2:13–15)

This passage is frequently used to defend hermeneutical approaches that see the NT authors changing or adding to the meaning of OT texts, but if Matthew was changing or adding a new meaning to Israel’s national exodus, then Hosea would seem to be an odd text to use. As Chou points out, “if Matthew was just making an arbitrary forced connection with Exodus, why not choose a more obvious text from that book? Citing Exodus 4:22 would have even provided the concepts of sonship and the Exodus.”²⁰ However, if we accept that Hosea was integrating information that came from Numbers, then Matthew’s application of Hosea makes sense.

I propose that Hosea refers to God calling the individual Messiah from Egypt and that Matthew maintained this single meaning. Vlach summarizes this view:

In these verses [Num. 23:22; 24:8] both Israel and Israel’s King are said to be brought out of Egypt. Thus, even before Hosea wrote Hosea 11:1, Numbers 23 and 24 connected *Israel* as a whole who came out of Egypt with the *King of Israel* who also would come out of Egypt. Hosea likely knew this when he wrote Hosea 11:1. If so, while he primarily had the historical exodus event in mind, he also may have had the coming King of Israel in mind.²¹

Matthew relies on Hosea who relies on Balaam, and as already seen, Balaam relies on Jacob.

In Balaam’s broader context, he is being told to curse national Israel, but when he opens his mouth, he blesses national Israel. Balaam’s second and third oracles (Num. 23:18–24; 24:3–9) conclude with statements about national Israel that integrate the lion imagery. The third oracle even combines the bowing lion wording from Jacob’s blessing (Gen. 49:9b) with the blessing from the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:3a).

Returning to Balaam’s oracles and Jacob’s blessing, both Balaam and Jacob develop the nation of Israel and the individual Messiah. These texts are provided side-by-side with relevant words being bold, colored, and with potential underlines: words related to the nation of Israel are **boldface blue**; words related to the individual Messiah are **boldface red**; lion imagery is single underlined (blue about the nation and red about the Messiah); and departures from Egypt are

²⁰ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 135.

²¹ Michael Vlach, *The Old in the New*, 141.

double underlined (blue about [Israel's national exodus from Egypt](#) and red about [a future King of Israel who will come from Egypt](#)):

Genesis 49:8–12	Numbers 23:18–24	Numbers 24:3–9	Hosea 11:1–11
<p>⁸“Judah, you <i>are</i> he whom your brothers shall praise; Your hand <i>shall be</i> on the neck of your enemies; Your father’s children shall bow down before you. ⁹Judah is a lion’s whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him? ¹⁰The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people. ¹¹Binding his donkey to the vine, And his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, He washed his garments in wine, And his clothes in the blood of grapes. ¹²His eyes <i>are</i> darker than wine, And his teeth whiter than milk.</p>	<p>¹⁸Then he took up his oracle and said: “Rise up, Balak, and hear! Listen to me, son of Zippor! ¹⁹“God <i>is</i> not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? ²⁰Behold, I have received <i>a command</i> to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it. ²¹“He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The Lord his God <i>is</i> with him, And the shout of a King <i>is</i> among them. ²²God brings them out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox. ²³“For <i>there is</i> no sorcery against Jacob, Nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob And of Israel, ‘Oh, what God has done!’ ²⁴Look, a people rises like a lioness, And lifts itself up like a lion; It shall not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of the slain.”</p>	<p>³Then he took up his oracle and said: “‘The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, The utterance of the man whose eyes are opened, ⁴The utterance of him who hears the words of God, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Who falls down, with eyes wide open: ⁵“How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel! ⁶Like valleys that stretch out, Like gardens by the riverside, Like aloes planted by the Lord, Like cedars beside the waters. ⁷He shall pour water from his buckets, And his seed <i>shall be</i> in many waters. “His king shall be higher than Agag, And his kingdom shall be exalted. ⁸“God brings him out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox; He shall consume the nations, his enemies; He shall break their bones And pierce <i>them</i> with his arrows. ⁹‘He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him?’ “Blessed <i>is</i> he who blesses you, And cursed <i>is</i> he who curses you.”</p>	<p>¹“When Israel was a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son. ²<i>As</i> they called them, So they went from them; They sacrificed to the Baals, And burned incense to carved images. ³“I taught Ephraim to walk, Taking them by their arms; But they did not know that I healed them. ⁴I drew them with gentle cords, With bands of love, And I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped <i>and</i> fed them. ⁵“He shall not return to the land of Egypt; But the Assyrian shall be his king, Because they refused to repent. ⁶And the sword shall slash in his cities, Devour his districts, And consume <i>them</i>, Because of their own counsels. ⁷My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, None at all exalt <i>Him</i>. ⁸“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. ⁹I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I <i>am</i> God, and not man, The Holy One in your midst; And I will not come with terror. ¹⁰“They shall walk after the Lord. He will roar like a lion. When He roars, Then His sons shall come trembling from the west; ¹¹They shall come trembling like a bird from Egypt, Like a dove from the land of Assyria. And I will let them dwell in their houses,” Says the Lord.</p>

Since the meaning of Hosea picks up the meaning of Balaam, Matthew could write the short tag, “Out of Egypt I have called My Son” and his original Jewish audience could connect the dots to Balaam and Jacob.

A. Total context of Hosea 11:1

Hosea 11:1 marks a turning point in the book of Hosea. As Charles Feinberg puts it:

In the first ten chapters of the prophecy of Hosea the emphasis has been on the disobedience of God's people and the inevitable judgment as a consequence, although there are not lacking passages that speak with detail of the blessings and glories that await a repentant and believing remnant in Israel in the days to come. The dominant note and chord in the last four chapters of the book is the love of God.²²

How appropriate for this turn to God's love to begin with the statement, "When Israel *was* a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1). Accepting the view presented here, Hosea is talking about Israel's past as "a child" and future, that a coming Messiah is God's "Son" who will come "out of Egypt."

Keener rejects the dispensational approach offered in this paper, but he makes an interesting statement:

In context, Hosea plainly refers to God delivering Israel from Egypt (the verse's first line reads, "When Israel was just a child, I loved him"), whereas Matthew applies the text to Jesus. Yet Matthew appears to know the verse better than we assume: instead of depending on the common LXX version of Hosea here ("his children"), he offers his own more precise translation from the Hebrew ("my son")... The apparent problem arises because we assume that Matthew was reading Hos 11:1 exclusively as an express messianic prophecy, when in fact Matthew's own context suggests that he was making instead an analogy.²³

Keener's observation that Matthew uses the singular *son* is not remarkable. While Origen's recension of the Septuagint had *his children*, it was treated as a singular *son* by Aquila of Sinope, Symmachus the Ebionite, and Theodotion.²⁴ It is actually the treatment of *son* as plural in Hosea 11:1 that would be unanticipated, but at any rate, Matthew corrects Origen's source with the singular.

More to the point, I am challenging here the notion that Hosea refers to God delivering national Israel from Egypt. Hosea made a Messianic prophecy, not a historical statement about

²² Charles Feinberg, *Hosea: God's Love for Israel* (New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, Inc., 1973), 88.

²³ Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost*, ProQuest Ebook Central version (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), §209.

²⁴ Field reconstructs Origen's hexapla to include: A. καὶ ἀπὸ Αἰγύπτου ἐκάλεσα τὸν υἱὸν μου. Σ. Θ. ἐξ Αἰγύπτου κέκληται υἱός μου. Ο. καὶ ἐξ Αἰγύπτου μετακάλεσα τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ. Θ. ἐκάλεσα αὐτὸν υἱὸν μου. Fridericus Field, ed. *Origenis Hexaplorum* (London: Oxford University Press, 1875), Tomus II: Jobus – Malachias, 957.

the Exodus, so Matthew did not diverge from grammatical-historicism by treating Hosea as a Messianic prophecy.

B. Hosea's use of Balaam's Messiah from Egypt (Hos. 11:1–11; Num. 23:18–24; 24:3–9)

The total context of Balaam's prophecy includes the Messiah's future exodus from Egypt, which Hosea develops and Matthew quotes, so, conveniently, Balaam's prophecy comes into Matthew's intertextuality again.

Balaam mentions Egypt twice: once in his second prophecy (Num. 23:22) and once in his third prophecy (Num. 24:8). The wording is almost identical, but the difference is key:

Numbers 23:22	Numbers 24:8a
אֵל מוֹצִיאָם מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּתוֹעַפֶת רֶאֱם לְךָ:	אֵל מוֹצִיאָן מִמִּצְרַיִם כְּתוֹעַפֶת רֶאֱם לְךָ...
God brings them out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox.	"God brings him out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox;...

In both cases, God is being compared to a wild ox for His strength and in both cases, a Hiphil participle of *yâtsâ*' (אָצַף) occurs, which is translated *brings them/him* but the tense could be vaguer as the participle could be more woodenly translated as *the bringer of them/him*. In the second oracle, God is called the bringer of *them*, that is, Israel when He brought them out of Egypt in the past. In the third oracle, God is the bringer of *Him*, which refers to the previous two lines: "His king shall be higher than Agag, And his kingdom shall be exalted" (Num. 24:7b). The second oracle refers to the past delivery of national Israel from Egypt and the third oracle refers to the future deliverance of the individual King Messiah from Egypt!

The NKJV can be modified to fit the English tenses:

Numbers 23:21–24	Numbers 24:7–9
<p>²¹ "He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The Lord his God <i>is</i> with him, And the shout of a King <i>is</i> among them. <u>²² God who brought them out of Egypt;</u> He has strength like a wild ox. ²³ "For <i>there is</i> no sorcery against Jacob, Nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob And of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done!' <u>²⁴ Look, a people rises like a lioness,</u> <u>And lifts itself up like a lion;</u> <u>It shall not lie down until it devours the prey,</u> <u>And drinks the blood of the slain."</u></p>	<p>⁷ He shall pour water from his buckets, And his seed <i>shall be</i> in many waters. <u>"His king shall be higher than Agag,</u> <u>And his kingdom shall be exalted.</u> <u>⁸ "God who shall bring Him out of Egypt;</u> He has strength like a wild ox; He shall consume the nations, His enemies; He shall break their bones And pierce <i>them</i> with his arrows. <u>⁹ "He bows down, he lies down as a lion;</u> <u>And as a lion, who shall rouse him?"</u> "Blessed <i>is</i> he who blesses you, And cursed <i>is</i> he who curses you."</p>

In the second oracle, Balaam talks about national Israel and mentions her deliverance from Egypt. The third oracle builds on the second, using the same device of comparing God to the ox. In Balaam's total context, he is blessing national Israel before Balak. The Abrahamic Covenant

is the basis for Israel's blessing and the coming Messiah is part of the Abrahamic Covenant, so it is appropriate to bring the Messiah into the discussion as well as the Abrahamic Covenant itself.

C. Conclusion: The individual Messiah will come from Egypt

Balaam said that the Messiah would come from Egypt. Hosea said that the Messiah would come from Egypt. Matthew said that the Messiah has already come from Egypt. It turns out that Matthew 2:15 is not actually a proof-text *against*, but rather *for* the contextual, single meaning/multiple implications hermeneutic of obedience. When our brothers who hold to Christocentric hermeneutics try to push a Christological meaning into Matthew 2:15, they are forcing Jesus into a text where He is already present and they miss Christ in the prophecies of Balaam and Hosea where He is also present.

VII. Intertextuality in Matthew 2:16–18

The narrative continues:

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. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning,
Rachel weeping *for* her children,
Refusing to be comforted,
Because they are no more.” (Matt. 2:16–18)

In this passage, a terrible thing happens in Israel and Matthew writes that it fulfills what Jeremiah wrote. In short, Jeremiah describes Israel's condition as it will exist until the Second Coming. The condition is one of constant antagonism against Israel and any time Israel goes through a national trauma,²⁵ it aligns with that which Jeremiah described.

A. Implementation language and continuous trouble

²⁵ National trauma as a motif is evident even among non-dispensationalist interpreters. For example, Doan and Mastnjak write on national trauma from a leftist perspective that tries to read Jeremiah 31:15 alongside the *Witness Blanket*, which is a piece of art in Canada that is irrelevant to the paper at hand. The Canadian contextualization aside, they make a good case for national trauma in Jeremiah's use of Rachel. See Sébastien Doane and Sébastien Doane, “Echoes of Rachel's Weeping,” in *Biblical Interpretation* 27 (2019): 413–435.

Some points of clarification need to be made about the nature of the verb *plēroō* (πληρόω), which is commonly translated *to fulfill*. Fulfill verbiage does not always refer to prophecy²⁶ and when it does refer to prophecy, it does not necessarily refer to the completion of a foretold event. To be clear, a single prophecy will not be completed more than once. There is a legitimate law of double reference which correctly says that two events may occur side-by-side in an OT passage (e.g. Zech. 9:9–10) and an illegitimate law of double fulfillment, which incorrectly says that one single prophecy may be completed two times.

Sometimes the prophets foretell long periods. When an event within the period occurs, it does not finish the period, but it does implement an aspect of the period. For example, Jeremiah tells of the time of Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7) and John tells of the fourth bowl judgment (Rev. 16:8–9), but when the fourth bowl comes, it does not complete the time of Jacob's trouble, but is only an implementation of an event from within the tribulation which will end at a later time as foretold.

So it is with Matthew's use of Jeremiah. The time from Jeremiah to the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom is a long period in which Israel will suffer many national traumas. The massacre of the innocents is one such trauma, so it implements Jeremiah's concept without finishing the period. This is what Matthew means with the word *fulfill* here.

B. Total context of Jeremiah 31:15

Matthew records the slaughter of children in Bethlehem, so what do Ramah and Rachel have to do with it? Bethlehem is in Judah and Judah was Leah's son, not Rachel's (Gen. 29:35). There are several cities named Ramah in the Bible, but in Jeremiah's context, this is Ramah in Ephraim, who is Joseph's son, who is Rachel's son, not Leah's. Ramah can be traced as the location where Rachel was buried (Gen. 35:19), which was near Bethlehem and on the border between Benjamin and Ephraim (Josh. 18:25; Judg. 4:5). So, when Jeremiah metaphorically depicts Rachel as crying, she does so from her grave in Ramah.

Rachel's crying is reminiscent of her death when she cried out in labor (Gen. 35:16–20). The pangs of childbirth are a recurring motif in Scripture that refer to the tribulations leading up to the Messianic kingdom as mentioned earlier. Toussaint sees the Ramah-Bethlehem connection as typological fulfillment,²⁷ but if the situation is ongoing, then we may go a bit further in saying that the massacre is not so much an antitype, but one instance in a pattern of ongoing national trauma.

As the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were torn asunder, Ramah would have been the seams where they fell apart. In Jeremiah, God gives words of comfort: "Thus says the Lord:

²⁶ Christopher Cone brings out some examples in Christopher Cone, "Parallelism Of Foreshadowing And Fulfillment," in *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 23:1 (Spring 2019): 42–46.

²⁷ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study in Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1980), 56.

‘Refrain your voice from weeping... There is hope in your future, says the Lord, That your children shall come back to their own border’” (Jer. 31:16–17). The fulfillment of this return to the borders will ultimately be fulfilled in the Messianic Kingdom (hence the context for the New Covenant in the same chapter). So long as Israel is not in the borders, it could be said that Rachel is crying out.

This is not only the opinion of dispensationalists. Mary Chilton Callaway has written on the history of Jeremiah’s interpretation and she summarizes the Jewish perspectives on Jeremiah 31:15–17:

Jewish tradition expands each aspect of Jeremiah’s haunting image. Ramah has two meanings in Hebrew, and Targum elaborates both. In the first, its literal meaning “high” is explained as “the height of the world,” which is a rabbinic title for God. The people’s weeping, personified in Rachel, therefore ascends to the ears of God. The second is the place name, and Jewish tradition favors the northern location, for God hears “the house of Israel who weep and lament after Jeremiah the prophet, when Nebuzaradan sent him from Ramah... and those who weep for the bitterness of Jerusalem, as she weeps for her children... because they have gone into exile” (Hayward 1987: 131–132). Rachel’s weeping teaches that God hears Israel’s weeping in every exile in every era. This tradition of contemporary consolation is preserved in Rashi’s commentary on Jeremiah and in Jewish teaching. *Genesis Rabbah* explains that Rachel wept as the exiles were led past her tomb on the way to Babylon. For centuries Jews in synagogue on the second day of Rosh HaShanah have linked Rachel’s weeping with God’s command that Abraham offer up Isaac as a sacrifice, because these verses of Jeremiah are the Haftarah to the Torah reading of Gen 22. The story of the binding of Isaac has been linked with Jewish suffering since the early Middle Ages, and through this connection Rachel weeps for Jewish martyrs in every era.²⁸

Herod would not have gotten away with the murder of Bethlehem’s children if Messiah was ruling with an iron scepter. Jeremiah depicts Rachel crying out as Israel is torn apart and she will continue weeping until the Messiah establishes His kingdom, so Matthew took the opportunity to integrate Jeremiah’s passage into his narrative.

C. Conclusion: Jeremiah 31 and national trauma

Jeremiah looks forward to the day when the Messianic kingdom comes and the New Covenant is enacted. In the meantime, Israel is scattered. Anti-semitism is the norm during this evil age and whenever there is an attack on Israel, it is as if Rachel cries out from the borderland.

²⁸ Mary Chilton Callaway, *Jeremiah through the Centuries* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 249.

Such was the situation in Matthew 2. The borders were not yet as God laid out for Abraham, the Messiah was not ruling, so Herod could get away with murder.

VIII. Intertextuality in Matthew 2:19–23

The narrative concludes:

¹⁹ But when Herod was dead, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child’s life are dead.”

²¹ And he rose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus reigned in Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Nevertheless, being warned by God in a dream, he withdrew to the region of Galilee. ²³ And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” (Matt. 2:19–23)

The application of “what was spoken by the prophets” in Matthew 2:23 is difficult as there is no direct quote given nor are the prophets named. This is not only problematic for interpreters who hold to the exclusivity of grammatical-historical hermeneutics. Even those who hold to a Christocentric hermeneutic must struggle as there is no direct quote from the Hebrew Scriptures given to ascribe a secondary meaning to. Several acceptable explanations have been offered, but the one taken here is that Jesus’ Nazarene heritage contributed to the prophecies of Him being despised by men.

A. Silence, Samson’s antitype, or the Messianic Branch?

One proposition is that Matthew is appealing to something that prophets said, but that was not recorded in Scripture. This proposal is not entirely without Biblical precedent. Jude quoted Enoch’s prophecy which was not recorded in the Bible earlier (Jude 14–15). Enoch was seventh from Adam, so the prophecy would have survived the travesties of Noah’s flood, the apostasy of the divided kingdom, and the Babylonian exile. It would not be unreasonable for prophets to have announced that the Messiah would come from Nazareth and for this message to be known through Matthew’s day without being written down in previous revelation. A problem with this view is that apparently, the Jews were not expecting the Messiah to come from Nazareth as they should have if multiple prophets had foretold so (John 1:46). Then again, there were other basic Messianic concepts that first-century Israelites sometimes mistook (Matt. 16:21–23).

A second proposition is to identify Jesus with Samson.²⁹ The Angel of the Lord said about Samson, “the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines” (Judg. 13:5b). Samson did not fully deliver Israel in the sense that Messiah eventually will, so it could be said that Messiah will finish that which Samson started. However, this connection does not fit well in Matthew 2:23. The connection relies on equating Ναζωραῖος of Matthew 2:23 with the reading in LXX A, which has ναζιραῖος (*naziraios*) for נָזִיר “Nazarite” in Judges 13:5, 7; 16:17, while LXX B has ναζὶρ (*nazir*) or even ἅγιος (*hagios*, lit. “holy one”).³⁰ The shift from ω to ι could also be problematic, though it seems “Nazarite” could have flexible spellings.³¹ Linguistic difficulties aside, if Jesus was to be called a Nazirite in the completion of Samson’s work, then being born in Nazareth would not suffice. Jesus was a Nazarene, not a Nazirite. The Nazarites were forbidden from drinking wine (Num. 6:3), but Jesus drank wine and was even slandered for doing so (Matt. 11:19).

A third proposal is that *Nazarene* is linked to the Hebrew word for *branch*. It is possible that the etymology of Ναζαρέτ (*Nazaret*) “Nazareth” is related to נֶצֶר (Heb. *nêtsar* “branch”). Nazareth does not occur in the Hebrew Scriptures and not much is known about its founding. Perhaps when the town was named, it was known that the Messianic Branch would come from Nazareth. Alternatively, it is possible that since students of Isaiah knew that the Messiah was called a Branch (Isa. 11:1), when Jesus was called a Nazarene it was seen as a fulfilment of being called a Branch; however, the Messiah elsewhere is called a Branch using the Hebrew word צֶמַח (*tsemach* e.g. Jer. 23:5; Zech. 6:12), which does not sound like *Nazareth*. A similar approach is to draw a connection not to נֶצֶר “branch” but to נָזִיר (*nâzîyr*) “separate” or “holy.”

B. Another proposal

Any of the previous three proposals could fit on a grammatical-historical framework, but a fourth option taken here is that Jesus was despised for being from Nazareth, which is an implementation of the prophecies of the despised Messiah. Many prophets depict the Messiah as lowly and suffering (e.g. Ps. 22:6; Isa. 53:3; Zech. 9:9) and the response of Jesus’ contemporaries was to stigmatize Him for being a Galilean—a Nazarene, no less—hence Nathaniel’s question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46b). Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi (c. 135–170 A.D.) was famous for his role as intermediary between the Jews and Romans had a low opinion of Gallilean diplomacy, saying, “The people of Gallilee were

²⁹ Benjamin J M. Johnson, “A Nazorean and a Nazirite: Jesus and Samson in Matthew 1-2” *The Expository times* 126, no. 12 (2015): 586–592.

³⁰ Maarten J. J. Menken, “The Sources of the Old Testament Quotation in Matthew 2:23” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 3 (Fall, 2001): 458–459.

³¹ The word Ναζωραῖος only occurs here and in Acts 24:5 while the form Ναζαρηνός occurs six times (Mark 1:24; 10:47; 14:67; 16:6; Luke 4:34; 24:19).

quarrelsome.”³² It was said that Gallileans’ knowledge of Torah was not long-lasting.³³ Apparently, Galileans had recognizable accents (Matt. 26:73; Luke 22:59) as they did not pronounce gutturals like others. The Babylonian Talmud has:

The sons of Judah are precise in their language... The sons of Galilee, who are not precise in their language; what is the meaning of this? As it was taught, a son of Galilee who would walk and say to someone, “Who has an *amar* [’*āmar* אָמַר] for sale? Who has an *amar* for sale?” They said to him, “Stupid Galilean, [do you mean] a donkey [*chāmar* חָמַר] to ride, or wine [*chāmar* חָמַר] to drink? Wool [’*āmar* אָמַר] to wear or a lamb [’*īymmar* אֵימַר] to slaughter?”³⁴

Galileans were known as stupid and quarrelsome, so they were looked down upon. Jesus was neither stupid nor quarrelsome, but people still allowed their low opinions of Galilee to influence their opinion of Jesus of Nazareth.

The structure of the sentence is unique. Consider the Greek of Matthew 2:23 as it is translated by the NKJV and NIV:

καὶ ἐλθὼν κατώκησεν εἰς πόλιν λεγομένην Ναζαρέτ, ὅπως πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ τῶν προφητῶν· ὅτι Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται.

And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” (NKJV)

and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene. (NIV)

Matthew cites a plurality of prophets instead of an individual³⁵ and uses the conjunction ὅτι rather than the participle λέγοντος (*legontos*). R.T. France explains why this formula is different:

The quotation-formula differs from all Matthew’s other formulae in two respects: instead of a single prophet (named or anonymous) he speaks here of “the prophets,” and the participle *legontos* (“who said”) which leads into all the other quotations is here missing; in its place is *hoti* (“that”) which sometimes functions as the equivalent of our inverted commas, but can also indicate not so much a direct quotation as a paraphrase or summary of what was said. These two distinctive features together suggest strongly that what Matthew is here providing

³² אָנְשֵׁי גָלִיל קִטְרָגִין הָיוּ *b. Nedarim* 48a.5.

³³ *B. Eruvin* 53a

³⁴ בְּנֵי גָלִיל הָלְאָ דְיִקִּי לִישְׁנָא מֵאִי הִיא? (דְּתַנְיָא) דְּהָהוּא בַר גְּלִילָא [דְּתַנְיָא קְאָזְנִיל] נְאֻמַּר לְהוּ: “אָמַר לְמֵאן, אָמַר לְמֵאן?” אָמְרוּ לֵיהּ: גְּלִילָאָה שׁוּטָה, *b. Eruvin* 53b.5a, 6.

³⁵ The uses of πληρόω that have prophets in the plural as the provider of content for fulfillment are few (cf. Matt. 2:23; 26:56; Luke 24:44; Acts 3:18; 13:27).

is not a quotation of a specific passage but rather a theme of prophecy (as in 26:56, where again plural “prophets” are mentioned, and no particular passage is cited).³⁶

The ὅτι clause is often interpreted as in the NKJV as presenting a quote by the prophets. Another possibility is that the ὅτι (*hoti*) clause does not introduce what the prophets said, but explains further that it fulfilled what was said. Menken explains the two views (then goes on to defend the second):

It is not immediately evident whether or not the conjunction ὅτι belongs to the quotation. One can read it as recitative, in which case it introduces a quotation that is made up of two words: Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται, “he will be called a Nazorean.” One can also read it as a causal conjunction, in which case the quotation is made up of three words: ὅτι Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται, “for he will be called a Nazorean.”³⁷

The view in this paper is a slight variation of Menken’s interpretation. The prophets did not say “He shall be called a Nazarene,” but by being called a Nazarene, something that the prophets said was being implemented. The prophets said that the Messiah would be despised by men and since Nazarenes are despised by men, the Messiah was despised (and still is despised) for being a Nazarene in addition to all of the other reasons that He was despised. Matthew uses the future tense, “[for] He shall be called” (κληθήσεται *klēthēsetai*), and even today Jesus is referred to as the Nazarene by His opponents. Throughout Rabbinic literature, He is referred to as ישוע הנוצרי (*yēshūa’ hannōtsrīy*). In Arabic-speaking cultures, one of the words for Christian is *Nasrānī* (نصراني), which comes from *Nazarene*. The terrorist group ISIS would sometimes write the Arabic letter ن on Christians’ property to mark them for oppression. Jesus’ humble Nazarene heritage will likely continue to be invoked negatively by His opponents through the tribulation, but positively by His friends through eternity.

IX. Conclusion

Caesar Augustus is often cited as having said, “I would rather be Herod’s pig than his son.” Herod was a sadistic murderer. Matthew records his massacre of the innocents and in doing so he left a goldmine of intertextual studies for his readers. It is common to hear accusations that Matthew was ignorant of the OT, or that he somehow changed the meaning of the OT, but upon closer examination, he was actually using a plain grammatical-historical hermeneutical method with the texts that he quoted.

³⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 138.

³⁷ Maarten J. J. Menken, “The Sources of the Old Testament Quotation in Matthew 2:23,” 453.

Some further areas to explore include Hosea's use of Ephraim's child imagery in Hosea 11:3–11 as well as his usage of Egypt in the same passage. Are Hosea, Jeremiah, and Balaam having another conversation there? Amos can be read as a companion volume to Hosea; are there any gleanings in Amos that could contribute further to the OT background of the massacre of the innocents? Micah uses Jacob's blessing and Balaam uses Jacob's blessing, but what is more, Micah uses Balaam (Mic. 6:4–5). Could Micah be contributing more to Matthew 2 than we think?

There has never been a better time to be a dispensationalist! There is much more to explore in the field of intertextuality and excellent discussions are already occurring in academic literature among us. Hopefully, this chapter will contribute positively to the complex topic of intertextuality in the massacre of the innocents narrative.

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