

Matthew 2:13-23

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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It is difficult to be confident of the actual historicity of the events recorded in Matthew and Luke about the birth of Jesus.

Like our own family stories, they are recalled by second and third generations as a way of informing responses to questions of their identity: Who are we? How did we get to be here? Who were our ancestors and how were their lives formed? What events in their lives resulted in us being the people we have become? What honour and mandate have we inherited from our ancestors? What honour and mandate must we bestow on our descendants?

And so, whatever actually happened at the birth of Jesus is recalled and retold **NOT** to answer **OUR** questions about historical accuracy and scientific factuality. Memories of those events were intuitively and naively selected and recast into a story that will inform, shape, guide and warn the adopted descendants of Jesus (i.e., his followers) as they too seek to embody the love of God in a dangerous world.

Matthew first addresses these questions of identity and purpose by tracing the ancestry of Jesus as a descendant of King David - and therefore a rightful inheritor of God's promise that a descendant of David would reign on the throne of Israel forever. (2 Samuel 7:12-16)

Secondly, Matthew reports how events were guided by messages, events, and interventions from the heavens:

- the conceiving in Mary of a child of the Holy Spirit.
- Joseph's 3 dreams:
 - Matthew 1:20 - not to divorce Mary;
 - Matthew 2:13 - the warning to flee to Egypt; and
 - Matthew 2:19 - the return to Nazareth.
- the star (likely a comet) seen by the wise men from the East, Matthew 2:2.
- the wise men's dream, Matthew 2:12 - warning not to return to Herod.

And thirdly, Matthew reports how events took place to fulfill what had been spoken in Scriptures:

- Matthew 1:23 - a virgin shall conceive - in fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14
- Matthew 2:6 - born in Bethlehem - in fulfillment of Micah 5:2
- Matthew 2:15 - out of Egypt - in fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 and/or Exodus 4:22
- Matthew 2:18 - the slaughter of boys age 2 and under - in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15
- Matthew 2:23 - the return to Nazareth - In fulfillment of Isaiah 11:1

And so it is possible to come to this text and read over it as all merely part of a divine plan; and fail to be stopped by the enormity of the human suffering and tragedy it reports.

Here we are - reading the story of the birth of the one named "Jesus," "for he will save his people from their sins" - and one of the first things that happens is that innocent children are slaughtered because of his birth.

Clearly then, the "fulfillment" of scripture in Matthew is **NOT** to be understood as a termination of the ways of the world. The birth of Jesus does not put an end to human tragedy.

Instead, Matthew wants us to trust that the birth of Jesus demonstrates:

- that there really is a God;
- that God can be trusted to fulfill promises made in the past;

- that God is love and the power of God is only the power of love;
- that God does **NOT** use coercion or violence;
- that the rulers of this world can and do use coercion and violence;
- that the most innocent and vulnerable are often the victims of the rulers of this world;
- that the rulers of this world die;
- that God can and does heal and reconcile - in Paradise - even the worst coercion and violence;
- that God can and does protect, guide, warn, and keep alive from generation to generation this alternative "Jesus" vision of what is really real.

My friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Brian Thorpe, preached an excellent sermon, "Christmas Interrupted," on this text at Ryerson United Church, Vancouver, BC, www.RyersonUnited.ca. He has given me permission to post a copy of it [here](#).

David Ewart,
www.holytextures.com