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Herod Gave Orders to Kill all the Boys in Bethlehem Two Years Old and Under

Matthew 2: 13-18

Herod gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under DIG: What kind of a king was Herod? What does his response of fear and anger show about his view of the Messiah? What is Matthew's point in emphasizing God's loving protection and care of His Son? How was God orchestrating events and starting His plan of salvation through the fulfillment of Hosea and Jeremiah's prophecies?

REFLECT: When, like Herod, have you felt threatened by the lordship of Christ when He wanted you to turn over to Him something you thought was yours? Your finances? A future husband or wife? Your spouse? A child? A job? How do you react in those times? How do you react when threatened by the world? From Joseph's responsiveness, what do you learn about faith and obedience?

When the magi came, there was no doubt they were a source of great encouragement and assurance to both **Joseph** and **Mary**, confirming the incredible message of the angels to them (**Mt 1:20-23** and **Luke 1:26-38**), to Zechariah (**Luke 1:11-20**), and to the shepherds (**Luke 2:8-14**). It also confirmed the testimonies of Elizabeth (**Luke 1:39-45**), and of Simeon and Anna (**Luke 2:25-38**) about **the child** to whom **Mary** gave birth. Even the **magi** from far off Babylon had been told the news of **God** and came to worship **Yeshua** and give **Him** gifts.



But, the rejoicing didn't last very long. The first conflict in the story begins as **Herod**, the illegitimate king of the Jews, sought to kill **Yeshua**, the legitimate **King of the Jews**.¹⁶⁴ No sooner had **the magi gone**, than **an angel of ADONAI appeared to Yosef in a dream**, giving **him** a warning from **God**. This was the second of **Joseph's** four dreams (**Matthew 1:20, 2:13, 2:19 and 2:22**). **Get up, He said: take the child and His mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child in order to kill Him (Matthew 2:13).**

Herod's rule was brutal because **his** kingdom was different than any other under Rome's iron fist. The Jewish value system and the Roman value system were diametrically opposed. The Jews worshiped the one, true **God**, while Rome worshiped many pagan deities.

Herod was in the middle of that mess. But the Romans didn't care. They would hold **him** responsible for any problems caused by an alleged new king of the Jews. They would not tolerate a ruler that they themselves had not chosen. Rome didn't tolerate any threat. And if the followers of that new "king" stirred up a rebellion, there was no doubt that Rome would immediately step in to brutally crush it. No, it would be better if **Herod** handled it himself.¹⁶⁵

Now **just as the magi** had been warned by **the LORD** to disobey **Herod**, **Joseph** was warned by **Ha'Shem** to flee the murderous **king**.¹⁶⁶ When danger threatened, **Yosef** dropped everything that **he** was doing, shut down **his** carpenter's shop, and relocated to another country to insure the safety of **his** family. **He loved his wife as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25).** No one will ever know how much it cost **him**.

So, immediately Yosef got up in the middle of **the night (Matthew 2:14a)**. **He** understood the urgency of the situation. Even though traveling at **night** was potentially

more dangerous, **Joseph** demonstrated exceptional faith and obedience that did not allow **him** even to delay until daylight. While Rome controlled territory as far north as Gaza, even the nearest parts of **Egypt** proper, the city of Pelusium and the eastern branches of the Nile delta would be at least 75 miles from Bethlehem, and another 100 miles or so would be necessary to get **to Egypt** and safely removed from **Herod's** power. Traveling with a **child** made the trip even slower than usual and more difficult. Consequently, they would probably be traveling for more than a week.¹⁶⁷

Under cover of darkness, **Joseph took the child and His mother and left for Egypt (Matthew 2:14b)**. **He** told no one that **they** were leaving or in which direction **they** would travel. **Mary** mounted the donkey and held fast to **her Child**. **Yosef** yanked the halter strap and started the long plod along the white-stoned road south **to Egypt**. It stands to reason that during the long trip **Joseph** had plenty of time to think. It probably seemed strange to **him** that anyone would want to hurt a **child**. Any **child**. It seemed even stranger that **ADONAI** was keeping this one a secret. Before, it seemed that beside themselves, the only ones who knew this **child** was **the Son of God** were the Jewish shepherds and the Gentile **magi**. But, **the king** of all Judea, **Herod** the Great, had heard about **Him**, and **his** reaction, according to the **angel**, was to plot to murder **Him**. They were in flight to spare **the One** who had come to save the souls of all mankind. Why? **Joseph** just didn't understand.¹⁶⁸

According to **Mattityahu**, all of these events had a purpose in the sovereign plan of **God**. **They stayed there until the death of Herod**. **Matthew's** account is extremely brief and basic. **He** tells us nothing of the journey, except that it began at **night**. **He** gives us no details about where the family lived in **Egypt**, or how **their** time was spent although there has been much speculation. Some ancient writers, thinking they could improve the biblical account, came up with stories about the **Child Messiah** healing a demon-possessed youth by placing **strips** of burial **cloths** on the afflicted child's head, of causing robbers to run away into the desert, and of causing idols to disintegrate as **He** merely walked by them. Others, like the second-century pagan philosopher Celsus, tried to discredit **Christ** by claiming that **He** spent **His** childhood and early adult years in **Egypt** learning about the occult, for which **Egypt** was famous. Like many of **His** Jewish opponents, Celsus argued that **Jesus** then returned to the Promised Land to impress people with signs and miracles to trick them into thinking that **He** was indeed **the Meshiach**.¹⁶⁹

The typology between Moses the deliverer and **Jesus the Messiah** continues to be seen in **Matthew**. As if to retrace the steps of the **Exodus**, **Yeshua** left **Egypt** for the Land that **God** had promised to Israel. **So was fulfilled what ADONAI had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called My Son" (Mattityahu 2:15)**. Indeed, **the Holy**

One would be the Isra'el that **the LORD** had longed to call **His Son**. But, Isra'el would choose to worship false gods and suffer repeated invasions until finally exiled from the Promised Land to Babylon. When restored to their homeland, they worshiped **ADONAI** outwardly, while worshiping wealth in their hearts. To judge that sin, **Ha'Shem** withdrew **His** protection, gave them over to corrupt leaders, and stopped talking to them. Then by the time of **Herod**, four hundred years later, the religious leaders of Isra'el had erected a new idol to stand alongside that of wealth: their own self-righteousness.¹⁷⁰

There are four ways that the New Covenant quotes the TaNaKh and two of them are found in this file. The second way is a literal prophecy and the fulfillment as a type. **Matthew** declares that **Yeshua's** stopover in **Egypt** fulfills **Hosea's** prophecy: **Out of Egypt I called My son**, comes from **Hosea 11:1**. The context is the exodus, where **ADONAI** says: **Let My Son go (Exodus 4:2)**. So, the literal meaning of **Hosea 11:1** was that Isra'el came **out of Egypt**. But, this also becomes a type of a future event when **Jesus**, a more perfect **Son of God**, a more unique **Son of God**, would also come **out of Egypt**.¹⁷¹ **Mattityahu's** ability to quote Scripture accurately (here **he** ignores what was probably the most common Septuagint translation - **His** children - and translates the Hebrew directly) suggests the he and the Jewish community knew the context very well.¹⁷²

Because the Jews do not believe in the Trinity, or believe that Yeshua was the Meshiach, the rabbis teach that when Jesus was down in Egypt He made cuts in His skin and inside these cuts He inserted the four-letter word for God, or YHWH. They say that because Yeshua was not God and could not do miracles by Himself, by this cunning means His miracles were accomplished.

The king's palace was a place of splendid courtyards and many oil lamps on the west side of Jerusalem, about three hundred yards from a place called Golgotha, or Calvary. Men of importance were rushing, on this night, in and out of the palace. **When Herod realized that the magi had outwitted him, he was furious (Matthew 2:16a)**. Yes! **They** tricked **him**! More than likely **he** arose from **his** throne, a man with deep-set eyes like caves in a forest, and **his** gray beard parted as **he** spat out words. Many would pay for the trick that had been played on **him**. Many would die. **His** attendants trembled because if the lives of **his** loved ones could be sacrificed at a whim, **their** lives were less than worthless.

The king was seventy years old and very ill. **He** suffered from lung disease, kidney problems, worms, a heart condition, sexually transmitted diseases, and a horrible version of gangrene that had caused **his** genitals to rot, turn black, and become infested with maggots. Yet, **his** rage enslaved **him** and **he** lashed out at everything and everyone. **Herod's** newest

threat, though it came from a mere infant, seemed to **him** to be the most dangerous of all.¹⁷³



No one was going to make a fool out of **him**! Those **magi** had no intention of keeping **their** promise to return to **him** with news of the newborn **Messiah**. “The census,” **he** roared. That would provide a solution to the problem of the make-believe **Savior**. “The census!” It would have the names of all the families who had children. If the **magi** could see the light in the sky, why couldn’t **his** councilors see it? Could they be in league with the little majesty that wanted **his** throne? **He** was extremely paranoid. Now **he** believed that there was a **two** year **old** out there somewhere **conspiring** to depose **him**! **And he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the magi (Matthew 2:16b). Herod’s** slaughter of helpless **boys** resembled the infanticide of Pharaoh, as the “new” Moses motif of **Christ’s** birth continues to develop.¹⁷⁴ From this verse we know that **Jesus** was about **two years old** at that time.

It was the shepherds that worshiped the baby **Yeshua**, and it was **the magi** that **presented their treasures of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh (Mt 2:11). Joseph** and **Miryam** used these gifts to finance their **escape to Egypt**. Although **they** had been poverty stricken, the **gold, frankincense and myrrh**, gave **them** the means to travel and live in **Egypt** as long as they needed to. Then **they** would return to Nazareth after **Herod’s** death.

Some have said this massacre never happened, while others have exaggerated the number of **children** murdered. This slaughter of male **children** is mentioned only here in the Bible. Even the famous Jewish historian Josephus did not mention it. But, it is not surprising that he and other historians overlooked the death of a few Hebrew **children** in an insignificant village, for **Herod** had committed many more monstrous crimes than that. However, some have inflated the number of **children** slaughtered. **There is a tradition that says fourteen thousand were slain.** But estimates of the total population of **Bethlehem** in the first century are generally under a thousand, which would mean that the number of male **children** up to **two years old** at any one time could hardly be more than twenty.

Catastrophic as it was for the local community and the individual families, it was not on a scale to match the more spectacular assassinations recorded by Josephus.¹⁷⁵



Herod cannot see **Beit-Lechem** from **his** palace, a mere five miles away. **He** cannot see the blood flowing in the streets or hear the wailing of the terrified **children** and **their** parents. **He** believes **he** is doing what must be done.¹⁷⁶ **A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more (Matthew 2:18).** This event too was said to be the fulfillment of a prophecy. Originally, **Jeremiah 31:15** referred to the **weeping** of the nation as a result of the death of **children** at the time of the Babylonian Captivity in 586 BC. But, the parallel to **Herod's** slaughter was obvious, for again **children** were being murdered at the hands of Gentiles. Also, **Rachael's** tomb was near **Bethlehem**, and **she** was considered by many to be the mother of the nation of Isra'el. That is why **she** is seen **weeping** over these **children** who were cut to pieces by **Herod**.¹⁷⁷

A third way that the B'rit Chadashah quotes the TaNaKh is a literal prophecy and the fulfillment as an application. **Matthew** quoted **Jeremiah 31:15** when he wrote: **Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled (Mattityahu 2:17).** The context is the Babylonian captivity from Jerusalem. As the captives went north, they went by **Ramah** where **Rachel**, the symbol of Jewish motherhood, was buried. Thus, the Jewish mothers came out of **Ramah weeping** for sons they would never see again. Here, in the slaughter of the little boys, the event in the TaNaKh is applied to the New Covenant event. The application is seen in the fact that the Jewish mothers were once again **weeping** for sons they will never see again **(Matthew 2:18)**.¹⁷⁸

The response of **Herod** to **the child Yeshua** stands intentionally in sharp contrast with that of **the magi** in the preceding file. "Surely the so-called **Messiah** was among the many who died," **Herod** surely thought. There was no chance that any **child** had escaped the

slaughter. There was **weeping and great mourning** all over the Land and **Herod** was well pleased.¹⁷⁹ But, just as Satan and Pharaoh were unsuccessful in their attempt to destroy Moshe, Satan and **Herod** were also unsuccessful in their attempt to destroy **the Meshiach**.

It seems astonishing that **Miryam, Yosef**, the shepherds, and **the magi** all did exactly as **they** had been told. **Mary** yielded **herself** to **God**; **Joseph** took **her** home as **his** wife; the shepherds went to Bethlehem to find **the baby** in a manger; and **the magi** followed the Sh'khinah glory. With no idea of the outcome, they all took the next step by faith in **ADONAI**. Amazing!

How is it with you? Will you trust **God** and follow **His** leading even when you face uncertainty and overwhelming circumstances? When you and I **obey the Lord**, the outcome is truly amazing! That does not mean that everything will turn out pleasant. It didn't for **Messiah's** apostles. And, it may be that the fruit of obedience will not be seen in this life, but in the next. But, as **God** said: **Now if you obey Me fully . . . then you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests . . . a royal priesthood, a chosen people a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light (Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 28:1-14; First Peter 2:9-10)**. Could anything be better than that?