

Out of Egypt
[Matthew 2:13-23](#)

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This is the year of Matthew in the three-year lectionary rotation. Matthew's writing draws heavily from Jewish tradition. Matthew's point is that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures, from the lineage of Abraham and David. And Matthew depicts Jesus as the favorite leader: Moses. More than any other figure in the Jewish Scriptures, Moses is the most adored teacher and prophet. Moses appears in the beginning of the Old Testament in the Torah, the first 5 books. And, like the Torah, the Book of Matthew is organized in 5 parts. Moses receives The Ten Commandments from the mountain, and in Matthew, Jesus comes to fulfill the law and he gives his major teachings from a mountain, in his Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew quotes from the Old Testament in our passage today: "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Hosea 11:1). Did Joseph really take the family and go to Egypt? It was kind of out of his way (back to Nazareth). But the author wants us to think of Jesus as Moses, and so he tells the story of the angel urging Joseph to take Mary and the baby and go to Egypt—that's where Moses was born—remember he was floating in a basket in the Nile and the Pharaoh's daughter found him? Moses was saved from death by floating in the river, much as Jesus was saved from death by being swept off to Egypt. And, of course, later, God called Moses to "let my people go," and then he led the people in the Exodus out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, to Mount Sinai, and eventually they arrived at the Promised Land. The Exodus is the big story of the Old Testament, a story of liberation from oppression, a story of God's providence, mid trials and hardships. To link Jesus with Moses is to raise him to the highest honor.

And this is what the writer of Matthew's Gospel wanted to do. He wanted to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, which in Greek is the "Christ," or "the anointed one." And why was this so important? Because he believed that Jesus had come to liberate the people in their time, at the end of the first century. We believe that Matthew was written after the fall of Jerusalem that happened at the end of the Jewish-Roman War in 70 C.E. The date of authorship is estimated to be at least twenty years later and possibly as late as 135 C.E. Much of Matthew is copied from the Gospel of Mark, and much is from another source called the "Q source," Q for *Quelle* (German for "source"). But some parts are uniquely "Matthew," such as this passage about the flight to Egypt. The Jewish people—some of whom were Christ followers—yearned for liberation from the Romans. Jesus had already died when Matthew wrote the Gospel, and Matthew wanted to show that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was like Moses—larger than life, and even in death, Jesus lives on to bring peace and liberation to the people. He could be a leader like Moses for all time.

Our text today completes Matthew's version of the Christmas story—with King Herod, Joseph's dreams, and the flight to Egypt. The story is only written this way in Matthew. So, not only is this story very Jewish, it is also very political. Historically,

Herod was a hated, despotic ruler. He certainly could have murdered innocent babies out of jealousy. We know from the historian, Josephus, that there was a forced mass movement of people just before Herod's death. The belief is that King Herod wanted the people to mourn when he died and not to celebrate, so he made them miserable (<http://www.josephus.org/ntparallels.htm#KingHerod>). This historical event could have influenced the writing in Matthew and the story we call today "the slaughter of the innocents" and "the flight to Egypt."

Matthew reminds the reader that this slaughter caused weeping, like when Rachel wept over her children, the Israelite people in exile (Jer. 31:15).

This story in Matthew carries with it a number of themes that we can relate to today. Many believe the Gospel was written in Syria.—Well, think what is happening in Syria today. Mothers are weeping over their lost children. People are being murdered and displaced. It is certainly "a slaughter of the innocents." War and genocide are realities still today. And the world weeps.

The death of a child is one of the greatest personal situations of sadness. Some of you have lost a child, as I have. It is the sadness that is unthinkable. The grief does not go away. It resurfaces on anniversaries and at holidays. Some of you have experienced a death in your family this past year, and you know that sadness can overshadow a holiday time.

At first, the experience of death is very personal and private. But then some months into grieving, people often realize that the experience of death is universal. Matthew does not name Jesus in this text; he is simply "the child." He does not name Mary: she is simply "the mother." Perhaps Matthew appeals to all mothers and all children, as Rachel was weeping for her children and she "refused to be consoled because they [were] no more" (Jer. 31:15).

But Matthew brings to this situation of great sadness the hope of liberation. For God saves Jesus and leads him out of Egypt—like the ancient Israelites whom God once led out of Egypt under Moses. Jesus returns to Galilee where he will grow up and teach around the lakeside. His message will be that even in great sadness there is still hope.

As we contemplate the New Year, perhaps this is a promise to hang onto: that even in our struggles, our worries, and our shortcomings, there is hope. That even in our country where there is tension and in our world where there is violence, there also is hope. The story of Jesus' birth in Matthew is not all rosy. Life is not all rosy. There is strife and unfairness and sadness. But there is always hope. We too will be led out of Egypt, out of slavery, out from under our burdens, and out of fear. Thanks be to God.