

Matthew 2:1-18

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. 17 Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

Refugee by Malcolm Guite

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.

Herod was a cruel man. This story makes it obvious, but his cruelty extends far beyond this moment. He was culturally and perhaps religiously Jewish, but was politically aligned with Rome. This meant he was perfect for governing Judea – the Jews could worship freely, and in fact were supported by Herod and his government to remodel and expand the temple without discontinuing worship, and Herod kept people generally happy by investing in civil infrastructure. Among other things, he led building projects related to the water supply, improving people's lives.

All of these were good things, to be sure, but it almost served as a beard - as a cover - for the paranoia, fear, and insecurity that grew throughout his reign. He was so afraid of losing his grip on power, he executed his own sons, his own heirs. He executed his beloved wife, and other members of his extended family – perhaps at the command or suggestion of his sister, who perhaps saw his insecurity most closely, and manipulated him for her own benefit.

And so this episode surprises no one – a massacre of young children who Herod saw as possibly, maybe one day threatening his power? Yeah! He executed his own children, why would he see other people's kids as precious or worth protecting?

But historians and other scholars are of almost one mind – this massacre of innocents, this genocidal act that punctuates Christ's birth narrative, almost certainly did not happen.

Josephus was a 1st-century Jewish historian who chronicled in extraordinary detail the political and social turbulence of Roman Judea.⁶ And, though recounting much of Herod's cruelty, he didn't mention this episode; this massacre.

It begs a lot of questions. Why did Matthew include this story if it didn't happen? Why did those who put the Bible together, approving texts for canonization, include Matthew? And if it isn't historically factual, and everyone agrees on this, what else is it trying to communicate? And before you throw out the whole Bible with the bath water, we have some tools in our toolbox to sort through these questions.

There is one way of interpreting scripture that I think is critical in helping us interpret this story. It's called an 'Archetypal' reading of scripture, or 'typology.'

Archetype Magazine says this: **An archetype is a recurrent motif, a “first” form, or a set pattern of behaviour.**

We observe archetypes in every character of our personal dreams, the stories we read, the films we watch, the art we admire, and the collective myths we share.

Examples of common character archetypes include The Mother, The Father, The Child, The Shadow, The Persona, The Magician, The Hero, and The Trickster, among others. Each character acts out certain patterns of behaviour that we have become attuned to over time.

“The archetypes,” says Jungian psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz, “are inherited dispositions, which cause us to react in a typical way to basic human problems, inner or outer.”

Archetypes help us make sense of our inner world and emotional life. Through archetypes, we are able to understand more about who we are and what drives us.¹

Stories are made interesting by people acting in line with their archetype, as well as by abandoning or betraying those archetypes, surprising us.

When we do an Archetypal reading of scripture, we are looking for these motifs, these set patterns which are like a signet ring – a type that gets reproduced over and over again. “Typology suffuses ancient thinking,” claims John Hamer.² The Greek and Roman gods are all archetypes – fathers, mothers, lovers, rulers, jesters... And the stories told about the gods, and every other ancient story, are a mirror of the human experience.

It seems clear to me that this, the epiphany story, is an archetypal story. The word fulfillment is used at least twice, and there are callbacks to the story of the Exodus, quotations from Hosea and Jeremiah. It seems clear that Matthew is trying to get you to remember, to connect to this story, a much older story.

¹ <https://archetypemag.com/what-is-an-archetype/>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg-UFrZlt_M

And so, we look for archetypes. The call for all boys under two to be massacred should remind us of the Exodus story, of Moses' birth story, where Pharaoh orders all newborn boys be killed at their births – a policy that Moses is miraculously spared from by midwives who lie. So, we are to think, from this reference, that Jesus, also spared from a massacre of innocent children, is a type of Moses – perhaps he too will be a liberator, a leader, one who stands up to oppressive forces and demands they let his people go. Moses and Jesus are cut from the same cloth.

And if this is true then Herod is a type of Pharaoh. A tyrannical ruler whose cruelty stomps its boots on the necks of the most vulnerable – the children, the mothers about to give birth, the politically powerless, the people living in rural communities, the poor.

The Magi are the same 'type' as the midwives, then – protecting strangers; tricksters who smartly defy and resist the tyrant with nonviolence.

This massacre is LIKE the conquering war that the Babylonians completed in Judah, recounted in the book of Jeremiah and quoted here:

**"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."**

What Matthew is doing here with this way of writing, is making the argument that "scripture originally applied to Israel can be truthfully applied

to Israel's Messiah who gathers up Israel's vocation in himself... the child is preserved because God's design is at work." Just as God's people continued to be preserved over the course of their history, even if just a remnant, it was because God's design was at work – God was at work in and through these people, and continues to be in the person of Jesus.

When we read this way, we, then, can make similar arguments as we draw the bible into helping us read and understand our own world. These are not just characters – they're types we see, patterns we recognize, stories we tell because they are TRUE in an essential way. These are human stories.

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Who comes to mind when I describe this type: a tyrant who is so hungry for power he commits acts of terror to keep it. He rouses violence in vulnerable, out of the way places, because that's all he's ever done, even in his personal life. His official acts of violence, as a government official, force people to become refugees.

I'm guessing a name or two come to mind for you, from current and historical events. I know they do for me.

And so when we read these stories from our scripture, that maybe have little historical factuality, it's important to ask if they are still TRUE. Perhaps Herod didn't commit this massacre in this town. But Herods in every time and place have been committing massacres like this one!

When we read this story, this way, about the holy family, a family central to the plan for our salvation, being made refugees by the violent acts of a tyrant, we then are to see every refugee – every person who fits this type – in the same category, as part of the same pattern, as the holy family. We are to relate to them the same way – every refugee family as holding the possibility of redeeming humanity in some way, as worthy of sharing our resources, as worthy of protection, of refuge.

One of our community partners: world relief, features information about 4 of the greatest crises forcing people to flee from their home countries. One of those crises is taking place in Venezuela. [65% of the world's refugees are from just four countries: Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine and Afghanistan. People are displaced from their homes for myriad reasons — persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and climate-related factors to name a few.](#)

This weekend, the actions of our government have already sent shockwaves around the world. And the promise ongoing occupation of Venezuela will absolutely, 100% create more refugees, many of whom will someday soon stand at our border, where we will not let them in. Holy families are fleeing just like the one in our sacred story. Who will we be in their story?

John Hamer says, “We are called to pattern our lives after the archetype of Christ,”³ not the archetype of Herods/Pharaohs.

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg-UFrZlt_M

The archetype of mother and child – we've been doing this so that you can have regular epiphanies... so that you will recognize when you see them in the news and in your neighborhoods 'Mother and Child' – these types of people who are vulnerable, and preyed upon, and policed, and put in dangerous, precarious positions - so that you can recognize them and find your place in the story.

The Bible is not a history book. There is history recounted within its pages. Yes. This is a whole library – this is a collection of books. What we read today is not a history, but a gospel. It is a story of good news. It contains within it a message that reminds us that acts of nonviolent resistance and noncompliance with tyrants crumbles their power. It tells of the good news that there are types of people more powerful than raging war-mongers. And each one of us, all of us together, can work together to pattern ourselves after those seeking peace, those who have come to realize that Christ has come for liberation, equity, freedom, peace, and mutuality, can conspire together to redeem and restore our world to the wholeness that God has dreamed of since the beginning.

Pattern yourself after the Magi: read the signs. Keep your eyes open and look for hope. Keep the resources for violence and rage and genocide away from tyrants. Start walking a different way.

Pattern yourself after Joseph: listen to the dreams God sends you. Protect the vulnerable in your sphere of influence. Don't stop listening for God in your dreams.

Pattern yourself after Mary: know that protecting children, nurturing those in our care is an act of resistance to imperial power. Never underestimate that the power you have to cultivate and keep life is so dangerous to the fragile power of demagogues.

My friends, pattern yourself after Christ: Let justice reign.

