

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER THREE

MATTHEW 2:5, 15, 17, 23

THE second chapter of the Gospel is at once historic and prophetic.

All the stories gather round four prophecies, and indicate the fulfillment of their deepest intention in history.

The first prophecy is from Micah:

“But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be Ruler in Israel” (Micah 5:2).

The second is from Hosea:

“I . . . called my Son out of Egypt” (Hosea 11:1).

The third is from Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not” (Jeremiah 31:15).

The fourth is a truth uttered by many of the prophets in some form:

“He shall be called a Nazarene” (Matthew 2:23).

Thus the chapter shows us that the coming of the King was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the past. But that is only one of the values that we find in this chapter. It becomes in itself a prophecy not directly or intentionally, but incidentally, and yet by no means less powerfully.

The whole chapter is a prophecy indicating the line of the new history; revealing as in a flash the condition of things which will obtain around this King through all the period following: His first advent, until His second advent. It is a microcosm of the Christian age, revealing principles that abide unto this hour.

- First, then, we will consider the fulfillment of the prophecies of the past in the coming of Jesus;
- Secondly we will attempt to notice how a new prophecy is articulated in these stories.

Now the Bible student, finding in the New Testament a reference to the Old, must always take time to turn to such a reference. If we take these prophecies simply as they are uttered here, we cannot appreciate all their value. We must see them in their relation to context.

Turn first to the prophecy of Micah. In ch. 5:2, we find this prophecy which Matthew first quotes: **“But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be Ruler in Israel.”**

Let us consider the circumstances under which these words were uttered; and remember the great burden of this prophecy. It centers round the subject of authority. Every one of these old prophets had a burden and a message. They had many burdens, and yet in every single prophecy you will find that the many burdens are included in some one great conception of truth. Micah's is the message of authority. He thundered denunciations against the false rulers of his own time, and looking on down the centuries, saw the revelation of the coming of the true King. It is the voice of the prophet of order, of authority; the voice of the prophet who uttered the sob of the nation for the King, and fore-announced His coming. Now we go back to our story.

Jesus, Child of the virgin, is born, not at Nazareth, but at Bethlehem; born there through the decree of the Roman Emperor, under whose yoke the chosen people are serving at the moment; born there because His parents were going up to the taxing which had been ordered by the Imperial decree. For that reason the people of Nazareth were in Bethlehem, and out of Bethlehem Jesus comes - little Bethlehem, from which no one would look for a governor or a ruler, or expect a great man to arise.

Thou art little to be among the thousands of Judah, but out of thee shall come a Governor, a Ruler. And Matthew, who by this time has learned the character of Jesus, takes liberties with the text of the old prophecy, and says more than Micah said; adds to the prophecy of Micah a tender touch which explains the character of the Ruler. Matthew has seen a little more deeply into the nature of the Ruler, and says that He shall be a Shepherd.

Now notice the actual facts surrounding that prophecy which was here fulfilled. Two forces are represented. Homage is rendered to the Ruler as to kings; hatred is manifested against Him. Standing in opposition and contrast to each other, are the Wise Men with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh; and Herod with the hatred of his lust and blood-thirstiness.

So, as out of Bethlehem there comes the Ruler, the Shepherd, the Governor, the King, Who is yet to occupy the throne and hold the sceptre, there are those who welcome Him, and those who hate Him.

There are those who take the long journey, following the guiding star, to lay at the feet of the new King even though He came in lowliness in little Bethlehem their gold and frankincense and myrrh; and there are those who are stupid, blind, and untouched, and moved wholly to destroy Him. So He comes; and concerning the coming of the King the prophet spoke long before. Homage and hatred are revealed side by side.

Pass to the second of these prophecies. Again we must go back to the prophecy of Hosea. In ch. 11:1 are the words from which Matthew is quoting **“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.”** It is perfectly evident that the reference here is to Israel as a nation.

Let us see the whole scope of this prophecy of Hosea. The message of Hosea is one concerning the decadence and failure of Israel to fulfil its first intention.

The subject-matter of Hosea’s prophecy is that of spiritual harlotry as the worst of all sin. Hosea spoke of the condition of affairs, the worst that ever existed in the history of the nation, and he spoke to the people out of the strangest and most tragic of circumstances; experiences in his domestic life through which God had brought him into sympathy with Himself. When Hosea’s heart was broken; when he had seen the fair ideal of his dreams wrecked before his eyes; when he had suffered that worst agony that ever comes to the human heart, the agony that follows upon the infidelity of husband or wife; then God said to him in effect: Now, Hosea, you know what I am feeling about Israel, for Israel has played the harlot against Me. Around that tragic training of the prophet lies the great message he bore.

There are three cycles in the prophecy of Hosea.

- In the first cycle, the prophet dealt with pollution and its cause;
- In the second cycle, with pollution and its punishment;
- At the beginning of the third cycle the prophet sang the love song of the Lord.

Take the whole love song and analyze it, and there are again three great movements:

- First the prophet sang the song of the present condition of the people in the light of God’s past love;
- Then he sang the song of the present condition of the people in the light of God’s present love;
- Finally he sang the song of the present condition of the people in the light of the love of God which is yet to come.

In ch. 11:1-4 God is singing, through the prophet, of the way He loved Israel as of old:

“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt . . .”

Out of the midst of that love song, Matthew made a quotation, applying it to Jesus CHRIST; and at first it appears almost strange. **“Out of Egypt have I called my son.”**

What does it mean?

When God is telling the story of His love to Israel, He says to them: I loved you, and brought you out of Egypt. Egypt to you was a place of oppression, the place of slavery; but I brought you out. There was a great exodus, and I led the exodus out of Egypt. What has happened to these people? They have been scattered.

The message of Hosea was heard for a little, and then forgotten. The movement of degeneration went on until Jeremiah thundered denunciations against the nation; until finally the last prophet, Malachi, spoke. Then no prophetic voice sounded for four hundred years.

Now, four hundred years after the voice of prophecy and the last vision, a Child is born, the Child upon Whom all the hopes of God should rest, and therefore the hopes of men. The Child immediately shares the result of the sin of His own people.

The man who occupied the throne when the Child was born was not an Israelite but an Edomite. Herod was outside the Covenant, and he was on the throne. The sin of Israel was that of making alliances with outside powers. By His coming, the true worship, and the worship of the false, are brought to light. Herod, the corrupt in his degradation, sat upon the throne, expressing in the very fact of his kingship everything that was unlike the purpose of God. He drove the chosen King down into Egypt, the place of oppression and sin. But the chosen King was not to stay in Egypt **“Out of Egypt have I called my son.”**

It was a statement having historic value when Hosea sang it, but it had a prophetic value also; and now that at last the fruition of Israel, the fruitage of Hebraism, is to be found in the Person of this One, we see this historic Child, driven by the corruption of Israel into Egypt.

As of old God loved Israel when a child, the child nation, and brought it out of Egypt; so His love centers still upon the King Who is yet to build a city and establish a nation; and as He also shall come out of Egypt, and coming out shall lead the exodus, so, with others following, a great ideal shall be realized.

It is a simple historical fact. Herod was mad with rage, and the angel warned Joseph and Mary, and they took the little Child and hurried into Egypt. But heaven watched and saw all Israel driven into Egypt in the Person of that little Child. Matthew says that He was to come back again. He had only gone there that He might be afflicted in all their affliction, that He might enter into their sorrows. And as of old it was written, **“Out of Egypt have I called my son,”** so again shall the King come out of Egypt; only a little Child, but leading a great and glorious exodus.

Take the next prophecy, Jeremiah 31:15:

“Thus saith the Lord; a voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not

Such is the part of Jeremiah’s prophecy that Matthew quoted.

What were the circumstances under which Jeremiah uttered his prophecy? We will go over its content that we may see the connection between it and the birth of the King.

The prophesying of Jeremiah was in some senses the most tragic of all. Jeremiah uttered the doom of a dying nation, and as every man of God does when he utters a doom, uttered it in tears.

Presently Another shall come greater than Jeremiah; One Who will say everything in more fiery words; Who shall stand upon the slopes of Olivet, and look at the city smitten with the glow and glory of the setting sun; and as He sees it He shall say, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.”** And as He shall say it, the very tears of God will rain down His cheeks.

Jeremiah was the forerunner of Jesus, centuries before in this matter. It is a terrible and awful story, that of his prophesying, and suffering, and tears. But in Jeremiah, as in every other prophecy, there was a gleam of the glory of hope. How great were these Hebrew prophets - so cloudy, so rough, so stormy; but on every storm-cloud there is a rainbow, and the promise of deliverance.

Reading the prophecy of Jeremiah, we find that, beginning with chapter 30 and ending with chapter 33, there are four chapters in the heart of the book, full of consolation, full of comfort, full of joy; and these are the chapters in which Jeremiah went a little higher than the cloud-land in which he spoke, and saw the dawning of another morning far off, the coming of the Branch, and the Deliverer.

Now the prophecy that Matthew quotes is in the Book of consolation, but we seldom read it as though it had consolation in it. Rachel was weeping for her children and would not be comforted because they are not. Surely this should not be in the book of consolation! Let us read the context of the passage in Jeremiah. We have heard the plaintive wailing, the weeping of Rachel, the mother, because her children were gone; but **“Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope in thine end, saith the LORD, that thy children shall come again to their own border.”**

Now we begin to understand why this prophecy is so placed, when we see the sequence of it all. Yes, there was weeping when Jesus was driven out. How many suffered death in Bethlehem, we do not know; but there were mothers weeping, and Matthew heard of it, and said, It is the wail of the Mother Rachel, Mother of us all.

Then, said Matthew, was fulfilled the old prophecy of Jeremiah. Matthew did not quote the entire prophecy, but only that part dealing with the weeping. Surely, though, he meant to refer us to the context of the quotation.

- The first prophecy quoted in the second chapter mentioned the Coming of the King.
- The second prophecy concerned His leading of an Exodus from Egypt.
- The third prophecy was that Rachel should have her tears dried and her weeping should cease.

The King has come, as Micah foretold; the Exodus has come, as Hosea prophesied; and Rachel's weeping shall cease, as Jeremiah foretold.

There is a triumphant march and a great sequence through this collection of the prophetic words, which leads us to the last of these prophecies, the general word that **“He shall be called a Nazarene.”**

What is the meaning here of this word Nazarene? It is a term of contempt. We must first get back into the historic setting, and understand the story as Matthew wrote it, and as the men of the day understood it. To have lived then, and to have said that a man was a Nazarene, would have been to use a term of contempt. Nothing decisive can be said as to the root origin or real meaning of the word Nazareth.

There are two interpretations one meaning *a sprout, a branch*; the other meaning *a protectress, or a guard*. Probably the name Nazareth came from the old Hebrew “*Netzer*,” which means *a sprout*, and so was something to be held in contempt.

A tree is cut off, hewn down and left. One morning the passer-by sees just one green sprout coming up from the stump; “*netzer*.” It is of no use. The tree is gone. And so this little town, high up off the main roads at the foot of the mountains; along which the great merchants of Greece came; along which Roman legions marched; and the priests passed; was held in contempt. There were great movements down in the valley, but Nazareth was so much out of reach as never to be affected by them. And there is that thought in the quotation, **“He shall be called a Nazarene;”** a Man belonging to the city that is not worth naming; a Man off the highways of life, knowing nothing of the great movements of the world; a Nazarene.

In Isaiah 11:1 we read, **“And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.”**

It is the Hebrew word “*netzer*,” the same word as that from which Nazareth is probably derived. The figure is that of a green tree cut down.

Isaiah has foretold this cutting down, the destruction of the nation, of the country, of its city; but he says there shall come forth a shoot, just a little sprout that nobody will think to be of value; something that everyone will despise: and **“The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord.”**

The prophecy declared that when Messiah comes He shall be despised, counted nothing worth, just a branch, a sprout.

Go on through the prophecy and you will find out more about the Branch.

Then in the prophecy of Jeremiah, 33:15, we read: **“In those days, and at that tune, will I cause a Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David; and He shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”** The branch, the sprout, the thing held in contempt, shall count; a thing despised shall have dominion. When will the world learn its lessons? When will the world come to see that though He is the Nazarene of men, counted nothing worth, He is God’s Imperial One in the race?

- Micah said the King should come through Bethlehem; and He came.
- Hosea said through Egypt He should come, living through all oppression; and from Egypt He came.
- Jeremiah said Rachel should weep, but that He should Himself stop her weeping, for her captives would be brought back.
- And finally the prophets said He would be a Nazarene, a sprout; He would dwell in Nazareth.

But the Sprout became a Branch, Spirit-clothed, and flaming with the majesty of God.

The whole chapter is microcosmic. It is a picture for all time, until He come again. It indicates the treatment Christ will receive at the hands of the world through the centuries, until He come the second time. Through every century the critics of that chapter have been manifest. Take these four prophecies, and what have you?

- Homage and Hatred.
- Exile and Exodus.
- Sorrow and Song.
- Meanness and Majesty.

Where is the King to-day?

Hated, but, thank God we bring our gold, frankincense, and myrrh, to lay at His blessed feet.

Where is the King?

Exiled from hearts and homes and lives; but, thank God, He is leading an exodus of men and women.

What is the result of His presence in this world?

Sorrow. Rachel still weeps for her children; the suffering saints are all here; but there is a song that rises high above the dirge of sorrow.

How is He accounted of men to-day?

Men are still saying, “**Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?**” only they are now talking in past tenses and saying Christianity is worn out; it has had its day. But that is not all. We are crowning Him, we are lifting high above the conflict the song that tells He is King of kings, and Lord of lords.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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