Herod as Pharaoh? Jesus as David?
Matthew's "Political" Reading of the Prophets in the Infancy Narratives

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In this paper I am interested in exploring how Matthew 1–2 draws on the Old Testament, with a focus on two of the Old Testament texts quoted in chapter 2.[1]

As an Old Testament scholar, I am somewhat suspicious of Richard Hays's use of the phrase "reading backwards" to describe how this works, despite his brilliant work on this topic, first in Paul, then in the Gospels. I am not convinced that "reading backwards" is the most helpful way of thinking about matters. The problem with "reading backwards" is that it often implies that once we have the New Testament, we can then go back to the Old and see that it really meant *more* than it actually said, or possibly that the Old Testament text now has a *new meaning*, which we have only now been able to figure out with the perspective of hindsight. As an Old Testament scholar, I have a vested interest in the integrity of the Old Testament texts in their original literary and historical contexts.

In contrast to the idea of "reading backwards," I think we should "read forwards" *from* the Old Testament *to* the New, such that the Old Testament texts do not change in *their* meaning, but

[1] This paper is part of a larger project on the use of Old Testament quotations in Matthew 1–2, which addresses both the hermeneutic involved and the substance of Matthew's theological intent in using these texts. This paper has a slightly different title from that listed in the IBR program, primarily because I am not able to address everything I had planned, given my allotted time. Since I have omitted an extended analysis of Matthew's use of Jeremiah 31:15, which references the Babylonian exile, I've adjusted the title (taking out the reference to Nebuchadnezzar) to fit the content of the paper.

that the texts and events of the New Testament *gain* an immense depth of meaning by being read in light of the patterns of Israel's ancient story. I actually think that this is (mostly) what Hays does; and he even makes some comments that the correspondence between the Testaments flows both ways.

When it comes to Matthew's infancy narratives, in particular, I have noticed a fundamental disjunction between the way these chapters are typically read and the nature of the prophetic texts that they cite. As one who studies and teaches the Prophets, I am aware of how these ancient writings bring allegiance to YHWH into association with Israel's socio-political life. Yet the Matthean infancy narratives are popularly read as a set of "feel-good" stories for the Christmas season, with no significant connection to the concrete social world of ancient Israel. Even in New Testament commentaries, which address Matthew's use of Old Testament quotations, the political questions tend to be suppressed or ignored.

My first foray into a "political" reading of Matthew's infancy narrative was a short article I wrote some years back, which focused on the slaughter in Bethlehem, called "Let's Put Herod Back into Christmas" (https://jrichardmiddleton.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/middleton-lets-put-herod-back-into-christmas.pdf). Here I want to explore further Matthew's "political" reading of the Prophets in the infancy narratives ("political," of course, does not refer to partisan politics). Although this paper may intersect with recent work in empire studies, my focus will not be on the Roman empire as context, but rather the socio-political situation *within* Israel.

Depending how we count them, there are four, possibly five (or even six) Old Testament passages that Matthew cites in the first two chapters. There are four places where he uses a fulfillment formula (this happened to fulfill what was spoken by "the prophet" and he cites texts in Isaiah, Hosea, and Jeremiah, the last by name). There is one reference (a quote from Micah) cited

by the chief priests and scribes, with no fulfillment formula from Matthew; though Matthew ends this quote by splicing in a line from 2 Samuel 5, which, if counted separately, would be the sixth text.

Place Name	**Fulfillment Formula**	**Matthew**	**Old Testament Texts Cited**	
X	✓	1:23	**Isaiah 7:14**	
Bethlehem	X	2:6	**Micah 5:2 (= 5:1 MT/LXX)**	**+ 2 Samuel 5:2**
Egypt	✓	2:15	**Hosea 11:1**	
Ramah	✓	2:18	**Jeremiah 31:15 (= 38:5 LXX)**	
Nazareth	✓	2:23	**"the prophets" (?)**	

Interestingly, in four cases (including the Micah quote) a geographical place name is associated with the Old Testament reference—Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah, and Nazareth (these are all in chapter 2; the exception is the Emmanuel reference in chapter 1). And one of the four fulfillment formulas (at the end of chapter 2, in connection with Jesus being a Nazarene) simply references "the prophets"; and there is no single, clear Old Testament text that commentators can agree on as the source for this idea (though there are a number of educated guesses).

Given our time constraints, I am going to focus on only two of these texts—Matthew's use of *Hosea 11* and *Micah 5* (with the *2 Samuel 5* text spliced in). If I had time I would address also the Isaiah and Jeremiah texts, since they give further confirmation of my overall thesis. I'll conclude with some reflections on the implications of my study for a "political" reading the New Testament.

The Use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15

Even though it comes after the Micah 5 quote, I will start with Hosea 11:1, since it was Matthew's use of this text that first drew me into this subject. The text reads simply: "When Israel was a child I loved him, / and out of Egypt I called my son."

This is part of a prophetic oracle in which God expresses his compassion for Israel despite their sin. The context of the oracle is Hosea 9–12, which addresses the coming Assyrian exile and the promise of return.

Matthew quotes the second part of the poetic couplet in connection with the flight of the holy family to Egypt to escape Herod, who was seeking the life of the child.

> [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*." (Matt 2:11-15)

A Trivial Typology—Jesus as Israel?

At first blush, this seems like a strange use of the Old Testament; the quote seems to be somewhat arbitrary, taken out of context. Most interpreters get around this arbitrariness by claiming that Matthew is drawing a simple typological correspondence between Israel and Jesus:

> **As** God called his "son" *Israel* from Egypt in ancient times, **so** God later called his "son" *Jesus* from Egypt.

There are a number of problems with this interpretation. At the very least, it seems to be a very trivial typology. Okay, both Israel and Jesus are called God's "son" (so Jesus can be understood as the representative of Israel) and both left Egypt in response to God's call. That's it?

But there's another problem, beyond triviality. Israel fled from *bondage and oppression* in Egypt, whereas God called Jesus from the *safety* of Egypt, where his family had fled to escape Herod. So this wouldn't be a typology in the sense of a comparison; it is more of a contrast.

And there is a further problem: the quote seems out of place. The fulfillment formula is given *not* when Jesus *returns* from Egypt in verses 19-20 (which would fit "out of Egypt I called my son"), but when he *goes into* Egypt (a number of verses before the return). This is the problem

that first confronted me as I studied Matthew's use of the Old Testament in the infancy narratives. The proposed (simple!) typology doesn't really work. Something *more* seems to be going on here.

A More Nuanced Typology—Israel as Egypt?

This should prod us to dig deeper, to reflect more intentionally about why Matthew would use this quote from Hosea*, at this point* in the narrative. What typology does he really intend? In particular, why does Matthew use this Hosea text about ancient Israel *leaving Egypt* to reference the *departure <u>to Egypt</u>* in the case of Jesus?

Could *this* be the typology Matthew intends?

<u>As</u> God called his "son" Israel from a situation of dire threat *in Egypt*, **<u>so</u>** God later (by an angel) called his "son" Jesus from the threat of death *<u>in Israel</u>*.

But how can *Israel* be parallel to *Egypt*? Especially when the holy family flees to (literal) Egypt? Has Israel now *become* Egypt? Is that within the realm of possibility?

To answer this question, let's compare what Revelation 18 says about "Babylon the Great" (a phrase used in verse 2) with a text in Matthew about Jerusalem. Revelation 18 goes on to describe Babylon as the city in which "was found the blood of prophets and of saints, / and of all who have been slaughtered on earth" (18:24). That use of "all" suggests a symbolic meaning for "Babylon."

Compare this with Jesus's lament in Matthew 23: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Matt 23:37a) So, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jerusalem is described in a manner similar to "Babylon" in Revelation—as a city that kills the prophets.

Besides the phrase "Babylon the Great" (in Rev 18:2), Babylon is called "the great city" in Revelation 17:18. The phrase "the great city" appears also in Revelation 11, in connection to the

death of the two witnesses (11:2), who are functionally equivalent to the prophets that Babylon kills. The interesting point is that "their dead bodies will lie in the street of *the great city* that is prophetically called *Sodom* and *Egypt*" (Rev 11:8a). So Babylon = Sodom = Egypt, in some symbolical sense.

But then comes the kicker: "*where also their Lord was crucified*" (Revelation 11:8b). So Babylon, Sodom, and Egypt are symbolic names for none other than *Jerusalem*! The names are appropriate because these are all places of oppression and slaughter.

But what about Hosea? Hosea twice (in 9:3 and 11:5) mentions that Israel will go into Assyrian exile and in both cases this is treated as parallel to *returning to Egypt* (from which they had been called, according to 11:1). In Hosea 11:5 (just a few verses after the line Matthew quotes), YHWH proclaims: "They shall return to the land of Egypt, / and Assyria shall be their king, / because they have refused to return to me."

It's possible that this returning to Egypt is a reference to the Assyrian policy of settling captive peoples in foreign lands (so some of the exiles might be settled in Egypt). But it might well be a *symbolic* use of "Egypt." Perhaps the coming Assyrian captivity is being compared to the Egyptian bondage of old.

But the symbolism could also be *ethical*.

The Torah for the king in Deuteronomy 17:14–20 states that the king "must not . . . *return the people to Egypt* . . . , since the LORD has said to you, '*You must never return that way again*'" (Deut 17:16). As the context of Deuteronomy 17 suggests, the point here is that Israel (and *the king*, in particular) is not to follow Egyptian ways. Here, *returning to Egypt* is an *ethical*, rather than a mere geographical, journey.

A Further Level of Typology—Herod as Pharaoh?

This suggests a further level of typology, namely, between *Herod* and *Pharaoh*, where the comparison precisely *is* ethical. Herod is like the Egyptian Pharaoh, the infamous killer of Israelite babies in the Moses story. According Exodus 1, the Pharaoh first instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill all Hebrew boys as they were being born (Exod 1:16). And when they concocted the brilliant excuse that the Hebrew women were so vigorous that they gave birth before the midwives could arrive, Pharaoh issues a general command to his own people: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile" (Exod 1:22).

This story would surely echo in the minds of Jewish readers of the infancy narratives, as Matthew explains: "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, 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 wise men" (Matt 2:16).

If anything, this Jewish (or quasi-Jewish) "Pharaoh" *outdoes* his Egyptian counterpart in killing not just boys, but *all children*; and not just those newly born, but *all those under two*; and not children of a foreign nation, but *children of his own people*.

And if we want confirmation of the typology of *Israel as Egypt* and *Herod as Pharaoh*, we need only turn to Matthew's account of the return of the holy family from Egypt, which is eerily parallel to the account of Moses's return *to Egypt*, after he had fled as an adult. "The LORD said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt; *for all those who were seeking your life are dead*'" (Exod 4:19). Note what Matthew says:

> [19] When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, [20] "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, *for those who were seeking the child's life are dead*." (Matt 2:19-20)

I don't think there is any doubt of the typology here. Matthew is not quoting Hosea 11:1 to make a trivial comparison between *Israel* and *Jesus*, both of whom are God's "son," and both of whom travel from Egypt.

If anything, Matthew is comparing Moses and Jesus. In particular, Matthew is drawing upon a whole network of intertextual allusions to make the significant point that *Israel* has now become as inhospitable as *Egypt* was in olden times for God's chosen leader—so much so that literal Egypt is the safe haven.

And the reigning "king of the Jews," *Herod the Great*, has replicated (perhaps surpassed) *Pharaoh* of olden times in his murderous intent—toward his own people—because of his fear of the newborn "king of the Jews" that the Magi are seeking.

If I had time to examine the quotations from Isaiah 7 and Jeremiah 31, I would show that the parallels run even deeper, that Herod is also like *King Ahaz* of Judah and *Nebuchadnezzar* of Babylon (hence the original title of my paper: Herod as Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar).

So Matthew's use of quotations from the Prophets (including Hosea 11:1) signals a moral indictment of Israel, especially of Israel's leaders, at a time of significant transition, when a new king is coming on the scene. This indictment constitutes a subversive, and quite radical critique of the political leadership of Judah, at the time of Jesus's birth.

Jesus as the "Son of David" in Matthew

But besides critiquing Israel's current leadership, Matthew will go on in his Gospel to portray Jesus as a different kind of leader, one who enhances, rather than destroys life. That Jesus is a replacement for Herod is part of Matthew's well-known identification of Jesus as the "Son of David"—thus, Israel's rightful king.

This is clear from the very first verse of the Gospel, which names Jesus "son of David": "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, *the son of David*, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1). It shows up also the account of his healing of two blind men, just outside Jericho (Matt 20:29–34). They call out to him, naming him "Son of David."

> [30] There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, *Son of David*!" [31] The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, "Have mercy on us, Lord, *Son of David*!" (Matt 20:30–31)

Then there is the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As many have noted, it is only in Matthew's account that the crowds acclaim Jesus as the Son of David.

> The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,
> "Hosanna to *the Son of David*!
> Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
> Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matt 21:9)

In the very next chapter the Pharisees admit to Jesus that the Messiah will be David's son.

> [41] Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: [42] "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "*The son of David*." (Matt 22:41-42)

But, as Jesus argues (through his citation of Psalm 110), there is a fundamental distinction between the Messiah and David, since David calls him "Lord."

> [43] He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him *Lord*, saying,
> [44] 'The Lord [YHWH] said to my *Lord* [Messiah],
> "Sit at my right hand,
> until I put your enemies under your feet"'?
> [45] If David thus calls him *Lord*, how can he be his son?"
> [46] No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (Matt 22:43-46)

Granted that it is a distinctive theme of Matthew's Gospel that Jesus is identified as the "son of David." But this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees affirms that the Messiah is greater than David. But in what sense greater?

The Use of Micah 5:2 [MT/LXX 5:1] and 2 Samuel 5:2 in Matthew 2:6

One answer to that question arises from a closer look at Matthew's quotation of Micah 5, which, together with the addition of a line from 2 Samuel 5, gives a particular nuance to the sort of "Davidic" figure Jesus is.

After Herod is visited by the Magi, who inquire where the new "king of the Jews" will be born, Herod is afraid (given that he is current "king of the Jews") and he consults the chief priests and scribes about where the Messiah would 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.'" (Matt 2:5–6)

The first three lines of this quote (in verse 6) are from Micah 5:2 (at least, in English translations); it is 5:1 in both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint.

Although there are some variations between the wording of the Hebrew (MT) and the Greek (LXX), the main point is clear—a leader will come from Bethlehem (the town of David's birth) to rule God's people. In its original context, Micah's primary point is that God's chosen ruler to come will (like David of old) hail from a small, rural town, and not from the corrupt capital city of Jerusalem—a point that is relevant also for Matthew, in his contrast between Herod and Jesus.

So Jesus will be *like David* in being born in Bethlehem. So far, so good. But there is a complication.

I wish I had time to go into all the fascinating variants between the quotation in Matthew 2 and both the MT and the LXX of Micah 5 (including the change from "clans" in the MT to Matthew's "rulers," based on how the Hebrew word is pointed). But there is one significant

change Matthew makes that stands out above all the rest; the last line of his quote is not from Micah 5 at all. It is from 2 Samuel 5. Matthew has replaced the last line of the Micah quote with a bit of 2 Samuel 5:2, where the elders of Israel address David as the shepherd of Israel.

Matthew 2:6 (NRSV)	MT (NRSV)	LXX (NETS)
'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers (*en hegemosin*) of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler (*hegemōn*) who is to shepherd my people Israel.'	But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of (*be'alphei*) Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule (*moshel*) in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Mic 5:2)	But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler (*archonta*) in Israel, and his goings forth are from of old, from days of yore. (Mic 5:2)
	The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler (*nagid*) over Israel." (2 Sam 5:2 [MT 5:1])	The Lord said to you, You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will be a leader (*hēgoumenon*) for my people Israel. (2 Sam 5:2 [LXX 5:1])

Indeed, it is probably because of the LXX of 2 Samuel 5 that Matthew uses the word *hegemōn* for the "ruler" who will come from Bethlehem, instead of *archonta*, as in the LXX of Micah 5.

Now the question is: What is the significance of Matthew's splicing in the line from 2 Samuel 5—beyond signaling a "Davidic," Messianic role for Jesus? *Why* does Matthew change (or add to) the Micah quote?

The Shared Context of Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2

First of all, let us note that Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2 occur in literary contexts that share certain themes.

The context for Micah 5:2 is Micah chapters 4–5, which speak of a siege on Jerusalem (resulting in their going into exile and later return). The siege is mentioned just one verse before the verse Matthew quotes about the ruler coming from Bethlehem.

> Now you are walled around with a wall
> siege is laid against us;
> with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel
> upon the cheek. (Mic 5:1)

Perhaps it is this siege of Jerusalem that leads Matthew to insert the line from 2 Samuel 5:2, since what soon follows that line is the account (in verses 6-10) of David's siege and capture of Jebus, which he renames Jerusalem, "the city of David." So the siege of Jerusalem is a shared theme of the two texts that Matthew splices together.

> The king and his men marched to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, "*You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back*"—thinking, "David cannot come in here." Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion, which is now the city of David. (2 Sam 5:6–7)

Note the Jebusites' taunt of David, using the phrase "the blind and the lame," which leads to David's response a couple of verses later. "David had said on that day [the day he captured Jebus], 'Whoever would strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft *to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates*.'" (2 Sam 5:8a) And the narrator concludes this with an aetiological saying about the temple. "Therefore it is said, '*The blind and the lame shall not come into the house*'" (2 Sam 5:8b).

This is not a particularly positive picture of David. But anyone who reads 1–2 Samuel carefully will be disabused of their picture of an "ideal" David in those narratives.

Interestingly, the literary context of the Micah 5 quote, in addressing the return from exile, also mentions the lame being brought to Jerusalem (Mount Zion).

> [6] In that day, says the LORD,
> I will assemble *the lame*
> and gather those who have been driven away,
> and those whom I have afflicted.
> [7] *The lame* I will make the remnant,
> and those who were cast off, a strong nation;
> and *the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion*
> now and forevermore. (Mic 4:6–7)

The literary context of the Jeremiah 31 text (which Matthew quotes about the slaughter in Bethlehem) also speaks of the return from exile. In fact, Jeremiah 31 references *both* the blind *and* the lame—as outcasts of Israel—returning to Jerusalem after exile.

> See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
> and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
> among them *the blind and the lame*,
> those with child and those in labor, together;
> a great company, *they shall return here*. (Jer 31:8)

And, in light of the 2 Samuel 5 reference to David being the shepherd of Israel, it may be significant that Jeremiah 31 tells us that *God* will shepherd the exiles home.

> Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,
> and declare it in the coastlands far away;
> say, "*He who scattered Israel will gather him*,
> *and will keep him as a shepherd a flock*." (Jer 31:10)

So, when Matthew quotes these prophetic texts, he is aware of their larger contexts; he practices what Richard Hays calls *metalepsis*, alluding to these larger contexts by his use of selected Old Testament quotations.

But how does Matthew apply this web of intertextual allusions to the comparison between Jesus and David?

On the one hand, Matthew has built up the picture of Jesus as the "Son of David" by the way he opens his Gospel, by the blind men naming Jesus "Son of David," and by the crowds calling him "Son of David" at the triumphal entry (among other references).

On the other hand, the context of the quotes from Micah 5 and Jeremiah 31 speak of God bringing the outcasts of Israel (including the blind and the lame) home to Jerusalem; and the context of the 2 Samuel 5 quote has David "hating" the blind and the lame, and the text announces that they are therefore excluded from the Jerusalem temple.

This leads up to the events Matthew records *after* Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Having just been acclaimed "Son of David," Jesus enters the temple and drives out the moneychangers (Matt 21:12–13).

The next thing that happens is that the outcasts of Israel (the blind and the lame) come to him for healing—in the temple (the very place where David excluded them). "*The blind and the lame* came to him in the temple, and he cured them." (Matt 21:14)

So, beyond the contrast between Jesus and *Herod* (who is aligned with Pharaoh as a destroyer of Israel's little ones), Matthew seems to be making the point that Jesus is different also from *David* (not the "ideal" David we are so familiar with, but the David of the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel, who is a much more self-serving figure that we usually picture).

And this is signaled even in the infancy narratives, which—contrary to a sentimental reading for the Christmas season—are politically astute *Advent* texts, anticipating the coming of YHWH's ruler who will overturn the assumptions about power and privilege among God's people. This new David will gather the outcasts, those sloughed off by the power establishment of Israel, and bring them God's healing and restoration.

Perhaps, if we followed Matthew's use of the Old Testament, "reading forwards" from these ancient prophetic texts to the New Testament, we might be prodded to move beyond a pious spiritualizing of Scripture. Indeed, Matthew's reading of the Old Testament (even in the infancy narratives) might open our eyes to the real life ("political") implications of the Kingdom of the Messiah—especially for the people who claim to follow this Messiah as *Kurios* or Lord.