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Rachel's Cry for Her Children: Matthew's Treatment of the Infanticide by Herod

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THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW contains a brief report of a massacre of the infants in Bethlehem that was ordered by King Herod and carried out by his soldiers right after the birth of Jesus (Matt 2:16-18). The question of the historicity of this account has been a matter of scholarly debate for various reasons.[1] It has often been pointed out that there is no corroborating account elsewhere of the massive infanticide in Bethlehem.[2] The fact that Josephus, who narrates many other atrocities by Herod, does not mention this event certainly adds weight to the argument against its historicity.[3] The historicity of this account, however, is not an immedi-

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[1] For an argument for historicity, see R. T. France, "Herod and the Children of Bethlehem," *NovT* 21 (1979) 98-120; and also idem, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 82-85. For an argument against historicity, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1988) 1:264-65.

[2] France (*Matthew,* 114) challenges the accuracy of the term "massacre," because he believes it was often regarded as an obstacle to the credibility of this account. Citing Pierre Bonnard, he estimates that the population of Bethlehem during the time of Herod would have been around one thousand, which leads him to a rough calculation that not more than twenty infant boys would have been born in the two-year time span. See Pierre Bonnard, *L'évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (CNT 1; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1963) 29. Bonnard himself uses the phrase "massacre des enfants" on p. 30. ℟ is true that a smaller number of victims might have increased the chance for the incident to be overlooked by historians, but it would not necessarily have diminished the significance of the act itself, which would still have merited a remark by competent historians.

[3] For a thorough survey of passages pertaining to Herod in Josephus, see Jan Willem van Henten, "Matthew 2:16 and Josephus' Portrayals of Herod," in *Jesus, Paul, and Early Christi-*

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ate concern of this article. What is important here is that there is no doubt that Matthew himself, whether rightly or wrongly, presents this report in his Gospel as an actual historical event.[4] Even though Matthew does not provide a direct interpretive comment for this event, I believe that the evangelist intends to present this story as an exposé of an extreme form of injustice by way of abuse of power by a vassal king appointed by the Roman emperor. This event was solely for Herod's self-preservation and entailed a huge sacrifice on the part of ordinary innocent people. The pericope also includes a citation of a poetic verse from Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children (Jer 31:15; Matt 2:18).[5] This citation has an evocative power emanating from the multiple layers of the biblical tradition embedded in it regarding the oppression of great foreign empires and the suffering of colonized people. By examining how Matthew invites readers to appreciate the meaning of Rachel's crying through the overlapping images generated by the citation, I will show how the account of a tragic massacre itself, through both intertextuality and intratextual allusions, could be a form of criticism, however implicit it may be, of the abuse of imperial power.

I. Herod's Plot to Kill Jesus and the Ensuing Infanticide

The pericope of the infanticide in Bethlehem (Matt 2:16-18) is placed at the end of the birth narrative of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (chaps.1–2), which has been recognized by many scholars as a carefully composed, self-contained two-part narrative unit, whether one locates the demarcation line at the end of 1:17 or 1:25.[6] It is interesting that the whole section of the birth narrative begins with the genealogy of Jesus as the legitimate heir to the royal Davidic line (1:1-16), and then all of a sudden 2:1 situates the birth of Jesus "in the days of Herod the king" (ἐν ἡμέραις Ἡρῴδου τοῦ βασιλέως). On a superficial reading, this may be simply a statement of the fact that Herod was the king of all of Palestine at that time, which would have been no news to the intended audience of

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anity: Studies in Honour of Henk Jan de Jonge (ed. Rieuwerd Buitenwerf, Harm W. Hollander, and Johannes Tromp; NovTSup 130; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008) 101-22, esp. 108-14. Here van Henten points out the difference between the *Jewish War* and the *Jewish Antiquities* with regard to the portrayal of Herod. In the *Jewish Antiquities,* Josephus became much more explicit and elaborate in his depiction of Herod as a wicked tyrant than he was in the *Jewish War*.

[4] In this article I use the name "Matthew" to refer to the anonymous author of the text that came to be known as the Gospel of Matthew. Since Matthew is a masculine name, for the sake of convenience I use the third person singular masculine personal pronoun to refer to this anonymous author, without prejudicing the question of the unknown author's real gender.

[5] Matthew is the only NT writer who mentions Jeremiah (Matt 2:17; 16:14; 27:9) or Rachel (2:18).

[6] See, e.g., Krister Stendahl, "Quis et Unde? An Analysis of Matthew 1-2," in *The Interpretation of Matthew* (ed. Graham Stanton; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: Clark, 1995) 69-80.

Matthew, probably living in a Diaspora Jewish community, possibly in Syria.[7] In Matthew's time, Syria also was a Roman province; similarly, Judea was under Roman governorship (since 44 C.E.), and Galilee was a Roman client kingdom under King Agripa II (56–95 C.E.). In the literary context of the Matthean birth narrative, with the royal Davidic line at its beginning, a reference to the fact that someone like Herod, who not only came from outside the royal dynastic line but was also from a gentile father of Idumean descent (Josephus *A.J.* 14.16.4 §491),[8] was sitting on the Israelite throne would immediately remind the intended audience of the Gospel that things were not as they should be.[9] In other words, Matthew's literary arrangement of the genealogy of Jesus immediately followed by the Herod episodes could be interpreted as an implicit criticism revealing the illegitimacy of Herod as the vassal king of the Roman Empire, which could be appreciated by some, if not all, readers of the Gospel. There is no way to assess the accuracy of Josephus's account of how Herod bribed Antony in Rome with a lot of money (πολλοῖς χρήμασι) in order to have his political opponent Antigonus slain and to have himself eventually appointed tetrarch of Galilee (Josephus *A.J.* 14.16.4 §490).[10] Even if this account is accurate, we still do not know whether this was widely known to ordinary Jewish people in the Diaspora such as Matthew's Jewish Christian community. But if some of the readers of Matthew's Gospel were aware that Herod became king through an act of bribery, the episodes in Matt 2:1-23 could be a painful reminder for them that a corrupt and illegitimate dynasty was ruling the land of Israel from before the time of Jesus into the time of the composition of the Gospel.

In the narrative world of Matthew, the indiscriminate infanticide in Bethlehem was caused by a visit of the magi (μάγοι) from the East to Jerusalem to pay homage to the newly born king of the Jews (ὁ τεχθεὶς βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων). In the short space between v. 1 and v. 2, two kings are mentioned: one is the sitting

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[7] The provenance of the Gospel of Matthew cannot be identified. Taking cues from internal indicators, however, various places have been suggested as the location of the Matthean community, for example, Palestine, Alexandria, Pella, Edessa, Syria, and Antioch. For a survey of these theories, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:138-47. In view of Matthew's redactional change of Galilee in Mark 1:28 to Syria in Matt 4:24, I consider Syria the most promising candidate for the location of Matthew and his community.

[8] Josephus here characterizes Herod as coming from an ordinary family and from a common tribe subject to kings (οἰκίας ὄντα δημοτικῆς καὶ γένους ἰδιωτικοῦ καὶ ὑπακούοντος τοῖς βασιλεῦσιν).

[9] See Dorothy Weaver, "Power and Powerlessness: Matthew's Use of Irony in the Portrayal of Political Leaders," in *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (1992) 454-66, hero 456: "With this abrupt and pointed juxtaposition of 'Herod the king [over Judea]' and 'Jesus . . . the king of the Jews' the narrator puts the reader formally on notice that the 'fact' of Herod's 'kingship' cannot be trusted as ultimate truth."

[10] It is only later that Herod was eventually declared king (βασιλεύς) of the Jews by the Roman Senate (Josephus *A.J.* 14.14.4 §385).

king Herod (2:1), who is illegitimate, and the other is Jesus, who was introduced already in the previous chapter as the legitimate heir to the Davidic throne (2:2). By having the magi call Jesus king (βασιλεύς), Matthew sets up a tension in the narrative. By using this royal title for Jesus, Matthew provides the audience with a subtle suggestion that something might happen to the Davidic genealogy so that the period of nonruling descendants of David from Salathiel (1:12) to Joseph would come to an end and Jesus, as the last heir listed in the genealogy, would assume the kingship in the royal Davidic line. Certainly there would have been more than one way to interpret this projection, but for Herod this reference by the magi to a king of the Jews was sufficient to warrant immediate precautionary action.

The magi claim that they saw "his star" (αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρα) in the East and followed it to Jerusalem. Heavenly portents regarding the birth of a future king were frequently attested in antiquity, and it is natural that such a sign—unless it is for the sitting king's own child—would pose an immediate threat to the incumbent dynasty. Therefore, in many ancient myths and histories, the motif of a heavenly portent of a future king and that of the persecution or assassination of the infant designated as the future king are closely intertwined.[11] For example, Suetonius reports that, according to Julius Marathus, a few months before Augustus was born, a portent appeared in Rome that warned that nature was pregnant with a king for the Roman people (*regem populo Romano naturam parturire*). Then the senate decreed that no male infant born that year should be reared (Suetonius *August.* 94.3).[12] Even though the decree was not actually filed in the treasury (*aerarium*), which was required for a proposed decree to be effective, it shows what an individual or a political entity would be willing to do in order to avoid any form of usurpation of power, even sacrificing many innocent lives.

Suetonius has another example of a ruler who sacrificed lives for his own preservation. During the reign of Nero, a comet (*stella crinita*) appeared in the night sky for several days, which was taken to be an omen of the death of a person of supreme importance. Following the advice of his astrologer, Balbillus, Nero was determined to kill a great many of the nobility in order to avert the heavenly portent, which he obviously believed to be against himself. The massacre was executed in the form of punishment for two alleged plots against his life. Suetonius adds that all the children of the massacred nobles were banished from Rome and eventually starved to death or were poisoned (Suetonius *Nero* 36).[13] This

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[11] For a list of examples of such legends, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (3 vols.; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001–7) 1:76-78.

[12] The exact meaning of *ne quis illo anno genitus educaretur* in this passage is unclear; it may or may not actually refer to infanticide.

[13] After this, Suetonius continues that Nero showed no discrimination or moderation, killing whomever he wished (Suetonius *Nero* 37) and that when he died, there was great public rejoicing in the city (*Nero* 57).

passage is important because it shows that even aristocratic people could fall victim to the misuse of power by an absolute ruler. Herod's scheme in Matt 2:7 and 16 is in line with such an ethos of the ruling elites in an empire like Rome (even though the particular episode about the birth of Augustus mentioned by Suetonius happened during the Roman Republic, shortly before it technically became an empire). Simply by stating what Herod did, Matthew portrays him as possessing authority over lives of his subjects and exercising it at will in a destructive way to eliminate any perceived threat[14] and to prevent any future plots by instilling terror in his subjects.[15] In Matthew's account, however, this plot of Herod to kill Jesus was thwarted by God's intervention through dream visions to the magi (v. 12) and to Joseph (v. 13), which resulted in the flight of Jesus' family to Egypt.

In the narrative world of Matthew, Herod did not know about this flight of Jesus' family to Egypt. He only knew that he had been fooled (ἐνεπαίχθη) by the magi. He was exceedingly enraged (ἐθυμώθη λίαν) and sent (his soldiers) and killed (ἀνεῖλεν)[16] all the children in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under according to the time that he had learned from the magi (v. 16). It is important to observe Matthew's succinct way of telling this incident. There is nothing between Herod's rage and his action to kill. The former directly causes the latter;[17] there is no legal proceeding that endorses the massacre. In that context, one of Josephus's criticisms of Herod is that he executed people without a trial or the sanction of the Sanhedrin, which is a reason for Josephus's characterization of Herod as a tyrant (*A.J.* 14.9.2-5 §§158-84).[18] Especially important is

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[14] David Bauer, "The Kingship of Jesus in the Matthean Infancy Narrative: A Literary Analysis," *CBQ* 57 (1995) 306-23. Here Bauer raises a question: "Does the kingship of Jesus *actually* present a danger to the rule of Herod, or is such a threat simply a matter of Herod's anxious imagination?" (p. 314; italics his). Then he answers the question negatively because he believes that the Matthean Jesus rejected all political aspirations and refused to understand his kingship in political terms. Yet the sharp distinction between what is political and what is religious does not do justice to the realities of antiquity in general and especially in the Greco-Roman world during the Hellenistic era. See Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) 20: "It is crucial for twenty-first century readers to realize that in the Roman world there was no separation between the religious and political spheres. Religion was not a private matter for individuals. Religion was a civic and public practice, visible to and observed by others."

[15] Daniel Patte, *The Gospel according to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 36-37: "The political and human authority of Herod is based on fear, indeed terror, that his use of the power of life and death inspire in people (see 2:16). Herod's authority is exerted through the use of disruptive and destructive power or force."

[16] Even though it was the soldiers who carried out the massacre of the infants, Matthew uses a third person singular verb ἀνεῖλεν to make plain that Herod was solely responsible for the atrocity.

[17] Van Henten ("Matthew 2:16 and Josephus' Portrayals of Herod," 117) observes that in Josephus's accounts Herod was usually able to control his anger in his earlier years but this changed toward the end of his life.

[18] Van Henten, "Matthew 2:16 and Josephus' Portrayals of Herod," 111.

Josephus's remark, stated specifically against Herod's execution of Hezekias and his followers, that it is forbidden by Jewish law to slay anyone, however wicked the person may be, unless the person is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin (Josephus *A.J.* 14.9.3 §167).[19]

Matthew says that Herod killed πάντας τοὺς παῖδας ("all the children"). The forms are masculine accusative plural, and it has been almost unanimously interpreted as meaning only male infants.[20] Strictly speaking, however, this phrase could be construed as a common gender inclusive of both male and female infants. The singular form of the noun παῖς can either be masculine or feminine in its grammatical gender.[21] If Matthew had meant that Herod killed only male children, he should have and would indeed have said ἀνεῖλεν πάντας τοὺς ἄρσενας παῖδας ("he killed all the male children").[22] Therefore, the text remains ambiguous at this point. Matthew could mean that Herod killed all the male infants or that he killed all the infants male and female. Which of the two meanings would have been closer to the authorial intent can only be conjectured through an informed guess.

In that context, it is important to notice what Josephus says about the death of Alexander Jannaeus, one of the Hasmonean kings (*B.J.* 1.5.1 §107):[23] Καταλείπει δὲ τὴν βασιλείαν Ἀλεξάνδρᾳ τῇ γυναικὶ πεπισμένος ταύτῃ μάλιστ' ἂν

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[19] Josephus *A.J.* 14.9.3 §167: καὶ γὰρ Ἡρώδης ὁ παῖς αὐτοῦ Ἐζεκίαν ἀπέκτεινεν καὶ πολλοὺς σὺν αὐτῷ παραβὰς τὸν ἡμέτερον νόμον, ὃς κεκώλυκεν ἄνθρωπον ἀναιρεῖν καὶ πονηρὸν ὄντα, εἰ μὴ πρότερον κατακριθείη τοῦτο παθεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ συνεδρίου. Note that Josephus here uses the noun ἄνθρωπος, which is more gender inclusive than ἀνήρ would have been.

[20] See, e.g., Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:264: "Note that the children to be slaughtered are all male children. In Matthew's mind, there could be no thought of a female king." In contrast, John Nolland (*The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005] 82 n. 2) does recognize the possibility that this phrase is gender inclusive, but he opts for the gender-specific interpretation of male, saying that Herod, in seeking to eliminate a "king," had no need to kill girls. It is true that in Matt 2:2 the magi refer to ὁ τεχθεὶς βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, which would have been their interpretation of a heavenly portent. It should be noted that heavenly omens are sometimes nonverbal, even though verbal forms of omen such as בת קול are very common in Judeo-Christian traditions. Further, whether verbal or nonverbal, omens are usually ambiguous and enigmatic. It would be reasonable to assume that Matthew regards Herod as being aware of the nature of heavenly portents and therefore being overly cautious in his attempt to circumvent them.

[21] See Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (rev. Gordon M. Messing; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) §197a for the masculine usage to designate the whole class and §198 for the category of common gender.

[22] Cf. Exod 1:22 LXX: συνέταξεν δὲ Φαραω παντὶ τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ λέγων Πᾶν ἄρσεν, ὃ ἐὰν τεχθῇ τοῖς Εβραίοις, εἰς τὸν ποταμὸν ῥίψατε, καὶ πᾶν θῆλυ, ζωογονεῖτε αὐτό. Here, male (ἄρσεν) and female (θῆλυ) children are clearly distinguished.

[23] Alexander Jannaeus was king of Judea from 103 to 76 B.C.E. He seems to have married Salome Alexandra, the widow of his older brother Aristobulus I, who died without an heir to the throne, apparently according to the biblical law of levirate marriage. Nowhere in Josephus's writing is this point made clear.

ὑπακοῦσαι τοὺς Ἰουδαίους, "He left the kingdom to Alexandra, his wife, having been convinced that the Jews would submit to her readily." This is quite remarkable, because Alexander had two sons from Alexandra. He could have left his throne to either of them, but he did not. Instead, he gave it to Alexandra, and even though Josephus does not quite call her βασιλέα ("queen") in this passage, his phrase καταλείπει δὲ τὴν βασιλείαν Ἀλεξάνδρᾳ makes it clear that Salome Alexandra succeeded her husband as the sole ruler of the Hasmonean kingdom. She reigned for nine years following her husband's death (76–67 B.C.E.) until her own death.[24] Assuming that this piece of history was widely known, one could see why Herod would have included female infants in his massacre, if he indeed did what Matthew reports.[25]

II. Rachel's Cry: Multiple Layers of Allusions to the Historical Tragedies

The massacre of infants by Herod would have instantly evoked in the mind of the Jewish Christian audience of Matthew a collective memory of the intended massacre of the Hebrew infants by Pharaoh in Exod 1:15-22. The slaughter by Pharaoh would have been regarded by the Jewish people as the paradigmatic case of victimization of innocent lives by an absolute ruler of a great empire through misuse of power. Matthew's report of the flight of Jesus to Egypt would have facilitated this association even further. With these extratextual clues at hand, Matthew did not even need to name this parallel. He could count on the evocative power of the intertextuality between his own text and the scriptural tradition, the exodus story in the Hebrew Scriptures. The upshot is that both for the intended audience and for any real reader who has knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, Herod is presented by Matthew as reenacting the role of the ruthless Pharaoh in abusing his absolute power to oppress innocent people.[26]

This short, matter-of-fact report by Matthew about Herod's atrocity of infanticide is immediately followed by a formula quotation of a poetic passage from Jeremiah:[27]

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[24] Joseph Sievers, "The Role of Women in the Hasmonean Dynasty," in *Josephus, the Bible, and History* (ed. Louis H. Peldman and Gohei Hata; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 132-46, esp. 137-39.

[25] In that context, note that in his citation of Jer 31:15 (LXX 38:15) Matthew changes the LXX expression of "Raehel weeping for her sons" (ἐπὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς αὐτῆς), which is a direct translation of עַל־בָּנֶיהָ of the MT, to "Rachel weeping for her children" (τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς).

[26] Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Bible and Liberation; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 85. In addition to Herod's reenactment of the role of Pharaoh in Exod 1:15-16, Carter says that in this Matthean passage Herod represents also the kings and rulers who conspire against God's will in Ps 2:1-2.

[27] Matthew here avoids the usual conjunction of the fulfillment formula, ἵνα or ὅπως, and simply uses the adverb τότε. The same use of τότε instead of ἵνα or ὅπως is found in Matt 27:9. In

φωνὴ ἐν Ῥαμὰ ἠκούσθη,
κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὀδυρμὸς πολύς·
Ῥαχὴλ κλαίουσα τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς,
καὶ οὐκ ἤθελεν παρακληθῆναι, ὅτι οὐκ εἰσίν.

A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she did not want to be comforted, because they are no more.

This citation is of Jer 31:15 (LXX 38:15). There is not much difference in wording between the MT and the LXX in this verse,[28] but on fine points, one notices that the Matthean citation is closer to the MT than to the LXX. For example, the LXX has three nouns, θρήνου καὶ κλαυθμοῦ καὶ ὀδυρμοῦ, all in the genitive case, whereas the MT has נהי בכי ("lament weeping") both in the nominative case in apposition to the first word קול ("sound"). This construction is exactly what Matthew has, except that the MT uses no conjunction such as ו between the two nouns, while Matthew uses καί. Further, the LXX has οὐκ ἤθελεν παύσασθαι ("she did not want to stop," i.e., stop weeping), whereas the MT has מאנה להנחם ("she refused to be consoled"), for which the Matthean οὐκ ἤθελεν παρακληθῆναι is a direct translation. Nor does Matthew have the MT's second occurrence of the phrase על־בניה ("on account of her sons"), with the result that the redundancy that was in the Hebrew original is now removed in the Matthean citation. This by no means indicates that Matthew actually used the Hebrew Scriptures over against the LXX, because there is no evidence of his knowledge of Hebrew or the lack thereof.[29] So, without prejudicing any speculations on Matthew's use of the Hebrew text, we could at least make an observation that, in this particular citation of Jer 31:15, Matthew's version preserves the poetic rhythm of the MT better than the LXX does, which certainly maximizes the dramatic effect of the citation.

This poetic verse of Rachel's crying (Jer 31:15) is part of what is usually called the Book of Consolation (Jer 30:1–31:40) in Jeremiah, which is a collection of oracles of different literary types. The editing of the Book of Consolation as a whole would have been done during the Babylonian exile, but the core oracle behind Jer 31:15-22 is usually dated shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in

both cases, the agent of the action that fulfills the Scripture is not God or Jesus but a human being who would have no interest in fulfilling the Scripture. That may explain the particular word choice of Matthew in these two verses. See Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew,* 124; and Michael Knowles, *Jeremiah in Matthew's Gospel: The Rejected-Prophet Motif in Matthaean Redaction* (JSNTSup 68; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 34-35.

[28] There are two different textual traditions for the LXX in this verse, but they show only minor differences that do not concern us here.

[29] For the issue of various textual traditions of Matthew's citations, see Richard Beaton, *Isaiah's Christ in Matthew's Gospel* (SNTSMS 123; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 86-121.

586 B.C.E. As the language of Jer 31:16 clearly indicates, the poetic oracle of Jer 31:15-22 is not ultimately about sorrow and despair but about God's promise for the return from the Babylonian exile.[30] It will be a difficult question how much of this larger literary context of Jer 31:15-22 should be taken into consideration in the exegesis of Matt 2:16-18, in which the citation of Jer 31:15 will inevitably generate a new dimension of meaning.

In the original stories of Jacob and his wives in Genesis, Rachel has two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. But there is no occasion in Genesis or anywhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures for Rachel to weep for Joseph or Benjamin, or for both.[31] Therefore, the depiction in Jer 31:15 of Rachel as weeping for her sons can only be a metaphorical expression.[32] Ramah is a town in the territory of Benjamin (Josh 18:25), and as such it is close to one of the traditional sites of Rachel's tomb (1 Sam 10:2).[33] It is in Ramah that all the captives of Jerusalem and Judah were gathered before they were deported to Babylon. Jeremiah was one of the captives gathered in Ramah, but he was released by Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard in Nebuchadnezzar's army (Jer 40:1).[34] Thus, Jeremiah's poetic oracle of Rachel weeping for her sons most likely reflects this situation: Rachel as an ancestral matriarch of the Jewish people is weeping for her descendants who are being exiled, "because they are no more [כי איננו])."[35] Jeremiah then would have personally witnessed the atrocities and sufferings caused by the invasion of the Babylonian army, and he now conjures up in oracular language a compelling image of a bereaved woman crying over the lost lives of her own children. In this oracle, on one level the lost ones remain anonymous, but on another level they are named as Rachel's beloved sons.[36]

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[30] Barnabas Lindars ("'Rachel Weeping for Her Children'–Jeremiah 31:15-22," *JSOT* 12 [1979] 47-62) says that the Book of Consolation in Jeremiah reflects influence of Hosea.

[31] In Gen 35:16-20, Rachel dies as she gives birth to her second son. As she dies, she names him בן־אוני ("son of my sorrow"), which Jacob changes to בנימין ("son of the right hand"). But Jer 31:15 certainly does not allude to this.

[32] Outside Genesis, Rachel appears only in Ruth 4:1; 1 Sam 10:2; Jer 31:15; and Matt 2:18.

[33] Lindars, "'Rachel Weeping,'" 52.

[34] *Genesis Rabbah* 82.10 makes a link between the reference to Rachel's burial on the road to Ephrat in Gen 35:19 and the oracle of Jeremiah (31:15-17), and from this it draws an allusion to the exiles passing by there as they were carried off by Nebuchadnezzar.

[35] Susan E. Brown-Gutoff, "The Voice of Rachel in Jeremiah 31: A Calling to 'Something New,'" *USQR* 45 (1991) 177-90. Brown-Gutoff cites *Pesiq. Rabbati* 3.69-70, in which Rachel is depicted as the mother of all Israel who many generations after her death is still heard weeping for her children who went into exile and praying for them (p. 182). See also Samuel H. Dresner (*Rachel* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994] 183-84), who cites another midrashic text, *Tanna Devei Eliyahu*, in which the name Rachel in the citation of Jer 31:15 is interpreted as representing the spirit of God through a wordplay that changes רחל (Rachel) into רוח אל (spirit of God).

[36] See Walter Brueggemann, "Will Our Faith Have Children?" *Word and World* 3 (1983) 272-83.

Matthew's citation of Jer 31:15 in conjunction with Herod's infanticide would have evoked in the minds of the Jewish Christian audience, who directly or indirectly would have experienced another fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., a highly complex set of emotions.[37] Regardless of one's position on the question of who was ultimately responsible for the fall of Jerusalem, there is no denying that the destruction of the temple was carried out by the Roman imperial army. Moreover, the readers of Matthew's Gospel have just been told by the narrator that Herod, the vassal king of the Roman Empire, killed an unknown number of innocent infants in Bethlehem in his effort to kill Jesus as a potential threat to his power. In that context, mentioning the Jeremian verse on Rachel's cry would create overlapping images of the first and the second falls of Jerusalem. Then, in the new literary context of Matthew's birth narrative of Jesus, the same Rachel's cry is now more vividly heard as her mourning for all the slaughtered infants and their bereaved mothers in Bethlehem, all anonymous and yet named here as the beloved children of Rachel.

As noted earlier, it is impossible to determine whether this infanticide of Herod was an actual historical event, because there is no corroborating evidence in other historical writings. But, for Matthew, who is presenting the infanticide of Herod as a real historical event, it would have seemed terribly unfair that Herod had never been held accountable for such an atrocity. When the whole world is silent, Matthew himself could easily hear all the voices of mothers and fathers crying bitterly over their slaughtered infants. Such voices of powerless people are often forgotten, suppressed, and neglected in historiography. Their cries turn into silence in the realm of history. Therefore, in the absence of historical data as to how the victimized people reacted to Herod's infanticide, Matthew invites an imaginary character, Rachel, who was once depicted by Jeremiah as vicariously weeping for those who were going into exile, to come and weep vicariously again for those anonymous infants who were slain by Herod. In this way, Matthew is resurrecting the lost voices of bitter cries of the mothers and fathers of the infants, who would have refused to be consoled because their children were no more.

III. Slaughtered Infants as a Case in Point for the Least (ἐλάχιστοι) in Matthew

In the narrative world of Matthew, the purpose of Herod's infanticide was to kill Jesus, but this plot of Herod was defeated by God's intervention and the subsequent flight of Jesus' family to Egypt. It looks as if Matthew is content because

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[37] For Matthew, the connection between Jeremiah's verse on Rachel's crying and Herod's infanticide in Bethlehem must have been the conventional location of Rachel's tomb in the vicinity of Bethlehem (Gen 35:19; 48:7). See George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus in Egypt: A Reflection on Mt 2:13-15, 19-21 in the Light of the Old Testament," *EstBib* 50 (1992) 225-49, esp. 245.

Jesus was spared even though all the other infants in Bethlehem were victimized by Herod on account of Jesus. There is even a sense of fulfillment of God's will in all this, which is conveyed through Matthew's use of the formula quotation.[38] It has been pointed out that Matthew does not directly address the question of theodicy in the massacre of infants by an absolute ruler solely for the ruler's self-preservation. For example, Ulrich Luz says, "Modern readers notice that Matthew does not raise the theodicy question in connection with the suffering of the inno-cent children. . . . It does not bother Matthew that God saves his Son at the expense of innocent people."[39] Matthew's remark on Herod's death in 2:19 does not have a causal relation with the infanticide, and therefore it cannot be taken as a divine punishment. It has been suggested that the innocent babies who were killed on account of Jesus would be regarded as martyrs and as such they will be rewarded accordingly at the general resurrection or in the apocalyptic kingdom of God.[40] But such an interpretation certainly goes beyond what the Matthean text warrants.

For an intratextual reference in the Gospel of Matthew, I propose a connec-tion between the infanticide passage (2:13-18) and the so-called parable of sheep and goats (25:31-46), which is located at the end of the fifth and last discourse of Jesus. These two passages do not seem to be directly related, because there is defi-nitely a generic character in the references contained in the parable of sheep and goats, whereas the infanticide is a specific episode. Yet the general principle in the parable of sheep and goats could readily be applied by the audience of Matthew to the specific case of the infanticide by Herod. The verdicts in the parable of sheep and goats are given on the single criterion of how the person treated "one of these smallest ones" (ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων).

The precise meaning of ἐλάχιστοι in this phrase cannot be determined with any degree of certainty.[41] A commonsense reading leads one to assume that the

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[38] See Elaine Wainwright, "Rachel Weeping for Her Children: Intertextuality and the Biblical Testaments—A Feminist Approach," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine; Feminist Companion to the Bible 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 452-69, here 467: "Difference and intertextu-ality combine, however, to shatter the order that fulfillment evokes. The voice of Rachel weeping uncovers another silence in the text—the mothers of Bethlehem weeping for their children, refus-ing to be consoled because they are no more . . . Their voices cry out to and against the intervening God of the infancy narrative."

[39] Luz, *Matthew,* 1:121.

[40] M. J. Mans, "The Early Latin Church Fathers on Herod and the Infanticide," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 53 (1997) 92-102. Mans cites Cyprian (*Ep.* 56) as the first to regard the innocent infants slain by Herod as martyrs.

[41] The precise meaning of this term has been a matter of intense scholarly debate. Among the many different interpretations of it, the two most viable options for the referents of ἐλάχιστοι are (a) to take it as a reference to fellow Christians, or (b) to interpret it as human beings in general who are in need. For an extensive discussion of different scholarly positions on this issue, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew,* 3:428-29.

word means people small in importance in general. On the other hand, it is possible to associate this phrase, ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων, with a similar expression in Matt 10:42, ἕνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων ("one of these little ones"), which refers to the disciples of Jesus. It is true that there is an indirect linguistic affinity between the two, but that should not necessarily lead to the conclusion that ἕνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων in 10:42 is identical in meaning with ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων in 25:45.[42] The latter is much broader and more inclusive in scope than the former. Therefore, the range of meaning of the phrase ἐνὶ τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων in 25:45 should not be limited to a narrowly defined group purely on the basis of a verbal similarity with another passage in the Gospel.[43] The phrase should rather be taken as a polyvalent signifier that could invite a most general interpretation, in which the ἐλάχιστοι can mean any "smallest" persons who are in need.

In that context, when the readers of Matthew's Gospel reached the part in the parable of the sheep and the goats that speaks of the "smallest" (ἐλάχιστοι), they could well have been reminded of what happened to the smallest characters in the earlier part of the Gospel. The slaughtered infants in 2:13-18 can truly be called the smallest ones (ἐλάχιστοι) in the narrative world of the Gospel of Matthew in both the literal and the metaphorical sense of the word. According to what the Matthean Jesus says in his last parable, that of the sheep and the goats, how one treats these smallest persons, such as the innocent infants in Bethlehem, will ultimately have a direct consequence in one's eschatological salvific status. Herod would be a case in point. Knowing what Herod did to the smallest (ἐλάχιστοι) infants in Bethlehem, the audience of the Gospel would not fail to believe that Herod would be a classic candidate for such a verdict of eternal eschatological condemnation, as in Matt 25:45.

If that is the case, for perceptive readers, the narrative world of the Gospel of Matthew has a literary design of *inclusio*. At the beginning of the Gospel narrative, Herod tried to kill Jesus but ended up slaughtering all the infants in Bethlehem except Jesus. Toward the end of the Gospel, Jesus delivers his last sermon (chaps. 24–25), which he closes with a parabolic prophecy about the final judgment. Again, Jesus, who was the immediate cause of Herod's horrific massacre of the smallest human beings (ἐλάχιστοι) in Bethlehem, now identifies himself with one of the smallest persons (ἐλάχιστοι) in the world and says, "whatever you did to one of the least [ἐλάχιστοι] of these, you did it to me" (25:40).

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[42] Matt 18:5 (καὶ ὃς ἐὰν δέξηται ἓν παιδίον τοιοῦτο ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ἐμὲ δέχεται, "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" [NRSV]), which is taken from Mark 9:37, is very similar to Matt 10:40-42. But in Matt 18:5, as in Mark 9:37, Jesus refers to a child (παιδίον) in the literal sense, not as a metaphor for the disciples.

[43] Luz, Matthew, 3:280: "Thus we should not construct the meaning of 'lowliest' (ἐλάχιστος) externally to the text—for example, from a designation of Christians as 'little ones' (μικροί), whomever it may have designated. Only the contents of vv. 35-39 can determine of whom the readers primarily thought."

IV. Concluding Remarks

For perceptive readers of the Gospel of Matthew who are able to recognize the association between the account of Herod's infanticide and the parable of the sheep and the goats, Matthew's message is crystal clear. History may forget Herod's atrocious abuse of power in his massacre of the innocent, powerless, and smallest infants in Bethlehem, but God remembers it. Herod may not have paid the penalty in this world, but at the final judgment, he will certainly be held account-able for what he did to the smallest people (ἐλάχιστοι) in the world. One could say that this is how Matthew addresses the question of theodicy in his Gospel.

Such a strategy of first writing a brief report of the event itself (Matt 2:16) and then providing an implicit commentary by citing a prophetic oracle (2:17-18) as well as offering a cross-reference to a significant parable (25:31-46) would have been the only way for Matthew to expose such a heinous incident as a case of injustice that deserves an ultimate punishment, since he could not have said so explicitly. In the context of a powerful empire and its subjugated world, in which unjust acts by the ruling elites went largely unchecked, relating an incident of abuse of power by a vassal king could in itself be a form of implicit criticism, and how effective such a criticism would be would depend on how alert and percep-tive the audience was, whether it was the intended audience or not.

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