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OF MICE AND MEN AND MATTHEW 2

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1 Introduction

When the New York Drama Critics Circle awarded its prestigious award for best play of the 1937–1938 season, it praised John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* „for its direct force and perception in handling a theme genuinely rooted in American life; for its bite into the strict quality of the material; for its refusal to make this study of tragical loneliness and frustration either cheap or sensational, and finally for its simple intense and steadily rising effect on the stage.”¹ In a sense, perhaps not the award itself but certainly the reason given for it is somewhat of a surprise. The novel and subsequently the play have an almost private quality about them which seems to use the setting of the California dust bowl and the misery of the migrant farm workers as merely incidental to the tragic story of Lenny and George, of Curley and his wife, of Candy and Crooks and the utter shattering of their dreams. Indeed, Steinbeck seems to travel a route with his story which takes him far beyond a genuinely American theme perceptively handled. His indeed very direct force is applied to the dignity and humanity of his characters who suddenly appear familiar to readers of other times and cultures as well.

Of Mice and Men is the second novel in a trilogy about agricultural labor in California's dust bowl during the troubled 1930ies. The first, *In Dubious Battle*, is an impressive novel on the topics of labor unrest and strikes. The third novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, is epic in its scope, telling the quest of the dispossessed in search of Eden. Both novels are set in the framework of the acute problems of migrant farm labor in central California. In the 1930s tensions rose between highly industrialized agricultural businesses and the underpaid and oppressed farm workers living in squalid conditions and without a hope of ever bettering themselves. Between 1935 and 1940 the southwestern States of the USA were hit by a drought that brought about 350.000 exiles from these states into California, thus exacerbating the already tense situation there. Both *In Dubious Battle* and *Grapes of Wrath* narrate this history in often painful detail.

Between these towering works of literature, *Of Mice and Men* seems almost diminutive. It tells briefly, in a play like style² driven by dialogue, the story of two friends, the small George and the towering yet mentally retarded Lenny working on a farm „a few miles south of Soledad”, the town with the Spanish name for solitude.

¹ The novel *Of Mice and Men* appeared first in 1937 and was quickly adapted by Steinbeck himself as a play. The quote is given in the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of the novel by Susan Shillinglaw, Steinbeck (2000). xxv–xxvi.

² In a letter to his agents Steinbeck writes in 1936: „The work I am doing now is neither a novel nor a play but it is a kind of playable novel.” Steinbeck (2000) xvi.

They share the dream of owning a small piece of land „an' live off the fatta the lan',” as Lenny shouts with mounting excitement. Even though the dream seems absurd at the beginning, the elderly and worn-out Candy has money and is willing to help in exchange for a quiet spot. Even the distant Crooks, the black stable buck, is drawn out of his reserve when he has the chance to become part of this dream. But Lenny, who is attracted to beautiful and soft things like mice and dogs, and dreams of rabbits because they might not break when he pets them with his uncontrolled strength, is also drawn to Curley's wife. When she offers him to stroke her hair he again cannot control his strength, and while she panics he breaks her neck. George, who knows and fears Curley's cruelty, shoots Lenny in a coup de grace after reciting once more their common dream.

Although set among the migrant farm workers of California, *Of Mice and Men* gives a strange quality to its background. Steinbeck ignores the problems of the 1930s completely, the labor unrest, the scarcity of work, the abject poverty, the trade union organizers and even ethnic diversity of the migrants. He seems to deliberately de-historicize the novel in order to focus on the conflict of the persons and their tragic existence. Yet at the same time the loneliness of the men, their games of horseshoe as well as their trips to the next town and its whorehouse, their taking measure of each other by their ability to lift grain bags or the length of their stay at one farm or another, their dream of owning their own piece of land, or, in Curley's case, of tranquil family life, all set this novel firmly within the migrant farm worker community. Even though *Of Mice and Men* gives very little concrete historical information and focuses almost entirely on its characters, the historical context is vividly present. It is the background on which the characters become real and alive, and their story touching. At the same time, the focus on the historical setting as a backdrop and not as the main story make the novel far more than just a quick glimpse of 1930s migrant farm workers. The book endures for the quality with which it describes human longing, loneliness and friendship.³

Thus the deliberate de-historization of the story has a double effect. On the one hand, a few broad brush strokes are enough to place the novel within a very particular context. On the other hand, this context, while giving color to the characters of the story, also pushes the characters themselves into the center of the reader's attention. Thus it is probably fair to say that the toning down of the historical background guides the reader to pay more attention to the figures themselves. The reader is invited to go even further in the de-historization and transpose, so to speak, Steinbeck's characters into her own socio-cultural context. The technique of obscuring the historical background lets the reader more easily supplement her own experiences, know-

³ Although not all seem to agree. Between 1990 and 1992 *Of Mice and Men* was the second most banned book in the USA, meaning that it could not be read in schools or obtained at public libraries. See Foerstel (1994). On the other hand, in 1962 John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for literature.

ledge or presuppositions as part of the world of the text interpreted by the reader.⁴ This world of the interpreted text is of course prompted by the reading of the text, yet this world is equally dependent on the experience of its reader. Consequently, the world of the interpreted text changes necessarily with each individual reader.

These observations hold a particular interest for the reader of the Matthean infancy narratives. The example of Mt 2 can illustrate this. There are characters in the narrative like Herod, the Jewish leaders, the magi, and Jesus and his parents as well, who evoke a very definite historical setting. Yet at the same time the described events surrounding the infancy of Jesus, the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem and their conference with Herod, and the subsequent flight of the magi, then of Jesus and his family, the slaughter of the infants in Galilee, the death of Herod and the return from Egypt, mingle the historical with the fictional in a way very similar to that of John Steinbeck in *Of Mice and Men*. For the study of Mt 2 we do well, then, to first separate the historical from the fictional. Then we can ask the question of the purpose of this combination for the Matthean story of Jesus.

2 History and Fiction in Matthew 2

Scholars and interpreters of Matthew's story of the magi and the evil Herod have been faced with the issue of its historicity for some time.⁵ Matthew's story itself cautions against a quick jump on the historical bandwagon. There are too many extraordinary occurrences in his tale.⁶ The star rising in the east and coming to a halt over a house in Bethlehem is an otherwise unrecorded celestial phenomenon. The assumed alliance between Herod and the chief priests and Scribes of the people (2,4) seems blithely unaware of the harshly conducted opposition between Herod and the religious rulers in Jerusalem.⁷ And that Herod should be unable to trace the colorful train of the magi from the east seems unlikely as well. Finally, though Josephus recounts in some detail Herod's horrible reign he does not mention the slaughter of the infants.

⁴ An introduction to the methodologies of what has come to be called reader-response-criticism as part of the new literary criticism can be found in Iser (1990). See also: Powell (1990). Besides Iser and Powell several others have formulated theories of the interaction between texts and readers, among them: Eco (1992); Grimm (1977); Link (1980).

⁵ For an overview of the positions of scholars favoring historicity see: Brown (1993) 188–190, 607–617.

⁶ Brown (1993) 188–189.

⁷ The famous trophies incident may serve as an illustration. These inscriptions in honor of Augustus and trophies from wars Herod had won adorned probably the amphitheater of Jerusalem. They were held to offend the prohibition of images in the Torah. The incident is described in Josephus, *Ant.* 15.272–279. Josephus places these in the theater, but such ornaments are much more frequently found in amphitheaters.

These arguments make the historicity of the account a well nigh untenable position.⁸

Yet despite the historically inaccurate descriptions there are still some reminiscences of historical figures and events. Herod, even when the actual events described in Matthew 2 cannot be substantiated by historical research, remains one of the best documented rulers of the East in ancient history. And Matthew's description of him converges if not in fact at least in the attitude toward him with those documents. Thus it seems overreaching to assume that Matthew does not care for history at all.⁹ For example, the Herod who according to Matthew slaughters little children was quite unpleasant in real life as well. The Jewish author of the *Testament of Moses* offers this characterization of Herod's cruelty:

And a wanton king, who will not be of a priestly family, will follow them. He will be a man rash and perverse ... He will shatter their leaders with the sword, and he will exterminate them in secret places so that no one will know where their bodies are ... Then fear of him will be heaped upon them in their land, and for thirty-four years he will impose judgment upon them as did the Egyptians ... (*TestMos* 6:2–6).¹⁰

Similarly Josephus finds Herod generally an unsavory character who especially in his last years was neither able to control his family's intrigues nor his own cruelty.¹¹ When Matthew describes a – fictional – Herod as unflinchingly ordering the execution of the infants of Bethlehem he recalls a – historical – Herod who had his father executed in 43, his wife in 29, and three of his sons between 7 and 4 B.C.E. Thus Matthew may not be describing historical events, but he certainly describes a man who would have looked plausible to Matthew's contemporaries. Matthew's readers or hearers would have recognized the Herod of the infancy narrative as the Herod they had heard their elders tell stories about. This sort of verisimilitude offers the reader the possibility to recognize the backdrop of the story as a real one without actually losing track of the fact that the story being told is not the story of the historical Herod but of the one who is Emmanuel – God with us – in Matthew's story.¹²

⁸ Ulrich Luz writes in his very learned commentary: „Unsere Geschichte ist eine knapp und nüchtern erzählte Legende, die nicht nach den Gesetzen historischer Wahrscheinlichkeit fragt.“ Luz (1993) 115.

⁹ Luz (1993) 119: „Aber Matthäus kümmert sich nicht um geschichtliche Realitäten“.

¹⁰ Priest (1983) 919–934.

¹¹ Although in recent years Herod has come in for rather more differentiated historical judgments. See e.g. Sandmel (1967); Schalit (1969); Stern (1974) 216–307; Richardson (1996). Especially this last volume offers a re-evaluation of Herod with particular regard to his religious views.

¹² Thus I find the contrast Brown construes between history and verisimilitude artificial; see Brown (1993) 190: „Yet, these contacts of the Matthean story ... do little to establish that the story is factual or to account for what originally inspired it.“ While this statement is certainly true it misses the point of this verisimilitude: To place a story squarely within a context that is recognizable for the reader.

A similar argument can be made for the appearance of a star announcing the birth of the king of the Jews to the magi. The literature concerning celestial phenomena surrounding the birth of Jesus is large.¹³ As a result one can say that there were certain phenomena which Matthew's star might have the audience reminded of. Chinese records show a nova or supernova appearing around 5 B.C.E. in the eastern skies. Halley's Comet appeared in 66 C.E. and might have influenced Matthew, or he might have known of the comet's appearance in 12 B.C.E. Likewise Matthew might have known about convergences of the planets Venus and Jupiter in 3 and 2 B.C.E. Yet none of these possibilities are correctly reflected in the Matthean narrative. Matthew speaks of the star of the king of the Jews which the magi saw when it rose (2,2), and again when they go from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where the star stops over the birthplace of Jesus (2,9). The Matthean narrative thus tells of phenomena that are not and cannot be explained through any of the astronomical occurrences that are witnessed in contemporary sources or astronomical calculations. This does not exclude that Matthew knew some of them. However, if he did he used them creatively to shape his own story of the star of Bethlehem. Again, if Matthew describes – fictionally – the birth of Jesus as accompanied by a star his readers might recall some – historical – phenomena of their time. And they might just as well recall that the Roman emperor Nero's birth was supposedly announced by a comet.¹⁴

The consequence of this line of argument is that a straightforward historical analysis alone offers very little insight into the purpose and meaning of the Matthean narrative.¹⁵ On the other hand Matthew does not away with history completely. Therefore, the inclusion of historical details must have a purpose for Matthew.

3 Getting at the Purpose of Matthew 2

It has become clear that Matthew's infancy narratives do not tell history, they tell stories of the magi, of Herod and his retinue of Jewish leaders, of Jesus' family and their flight to Egypt. Historical research can show us this fact, but it cannot reach for the purpose and meaning of Matthew's stories. For this, narrative criticism is a more helpful tool.¹⁶

¹³ For a survey of more recent material see Brown (1993) 610–613; Paffenroth (1994) 78–79; Deichmann (1984) 98–106.

¹⁴ Suetonius, *Nero* 36.

¹⁵ This seems to be the argument of Luz and Brown. On the question of the identification of the magi with kings in popular piety Powell brings the shortcomings to the point. Powell (2000) 459–480, esp. 461.

¹⁶ The basic methodology of this interpretation is described in Powell (1990). A shorter explanation can be found in: Fischer, Repschinski, Vonach (2000) 66–70. Of course, narrative criticism in its search for the implied reader is to some extent dependent on historical research in order to get a clearer picture of what a writing of the first century actually could imply for a rea-

The following analysis will focus mainly on the readers of Matthew's story. There are two basic questions which narrative criticism asks about the readers or hearers of the stories.

First is the question about what is implied about the readers within the text itself. What things are the readers assumed to know, what things are explained? Does the text exhibit assumptions about its possible readers?¹⁷ Second is the question about how the readers are led by the text. What does the text want its readers to understand? How does it build on the assumptions about its readers to guide them to an understanding of the story Matthew is trying to tell? What are the readers supposed to learn from the text, and what guideposts are the readers given to understand the story as it unfolds in the following chapters till the end of the gospel?

The analysis of the story is therefore narrative, in as much as it tries to uncover the readers implied by the text itself. It does not draw conclusions about the community which read Matthew's gospel, nor is its first concern about today's use of the gospel in various communities or cultures. Of course there is a connection between the implied readers and the actual readers of a text. However, by placing the emphasis on the implied readers the text itself gains interpretative weight.

4 The implied readers of Matthew 2

The first feature of note in the text under investigation is the heavy use of the Hebrew Scriptures. Already this was a feature in Mt 1 with its genealogy rooting the story of Jesus deeply within Judaism, with its allusions (Mt 1:20–21) to and quotations (Mt 1:23) of the Hebrew Scriptures. Obviously Matthew expects his readers to be able to draw out the implications of the quotes and make the connections to the allusions. In the second chapter this trend continues. The scriptures are quoted explicitly three times (Mt 2:6. 15. 18). When Herod asks about the birthplace of the newborn child the reader is assumed to know what the title Messiah means and that an easy answer will be found in the scriptures. Furthermore, it passes without comment that High Priests and Scribes are the ones to know where to find the relevant passage (Mt 2:4–5). This implies a reader who not only values the references to the Hebrew Scriptures in quotations but also recognizes allusions and knows enough about the institutions of Jewish society to place High Priests and Scribes. Thus she

der. But it is clear that such historical research does not interpret the text but has an ancillary function in the narrative analysis. There are other forms of narrative criticism which can dispense with historical research almost completely, e.g. when analyzing the actual readers in a particular modern situation.

¹⁷ Powell calls this the „discourse setting of the narrative“, by which he means not the setting around the time of the birth of Jesus but the time around the composition of the gospel, probably around 85 C.E. Powell (2000) 463. Such a proposition does not invalidate the possibility of the infancy narrative being composed in earlier tradition, but focuses on the final redaction of the gospel.

would be a person probably Jewish, most certainly at least steeped within Jewish tradition with the ability to recognize the scriptures within the gospel.¹⁸

The Jewish background of the implied reader is reinforced by the way the text treats Herod. Mt 2:1 unceremoniously introduces Herod as one of the main characters for the remainder of this chapter. Yet the subject of the sentence are the magi. The phrase „in the days of Herod the king” introduces Herod almost passingly, and no explanation seems necessary. Subsequently Herod is an introduced character and needs no further description. His actions are stated matter-of-factly and are not commented upon by the text except for the fulfillment quotation of Mt 2:18. Since Herod is one of the main characters in Mt 2 this seems surprising. Other main characters in the gospel so far have been introduced carefully. Jesus himself is introduced through his genealogy Mt 1:1–17 which of course also says something about Joseph. Thus the story repeats that Joseph, too, is a son of David (Mt 1:20). Joseph is described for the readers as just (δικαίος) in his deliberations (Mt 1:19). Perhaps here lies another allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures an implied reader is supposed to pick up. The Septuagint uses the same word when Saul says to David: „You are more just than I am” (1 Sam 24:18). The Davidic sonship is imbued with a special significance through the double mention. On the other hand, it is stated so matter-of-factly that the implied reader seemingly knows about what precisely this significance is.¹⁹ This knowledge is probably also presupposed behind the question of the magi: „Where is the newborn king of the Jews?” (Mt 2:2). A person with a Jewish background would know that a king of the Jews²⁰ would be a descendant of David. And the genealogy of Mt 1:1–17 with the long list of kings descended from David has prepared the reader for this.²¹

¹⁸ This paragraph does not try to re-open the question of the Jewish or gentile faith of the Matthean community. Here the point is simply to alert to the suppositions the text makes about its readers. Of course they have consequences for our imagining the Matthean community, but this is not the focus here. For more information on the discussion of the Jewishness of the first gospel see: Repschinski (2000). It is possible to address the question of the gospel’s Jewish background from a narrative perspective as well: Gielen (1998).

¹⁹ In the first few chapters Matthew seems to just state the fact that Joseph and Jesus are sons of David without filling this epithet with actual content. Surprising is the ongoing re-interpretation of this title throughout the main body of the gospel that departs from the expectations and connotations this title might have evoked judging from contemporary literature. See Duling (1977/78) 392–410; Luz (1990) 59–61.

²⁰ Davies and Allison remark on the fact that „king of the Jews” occurs only on the lips of Gentiles in the whole New Testament. Jews would prefer the title „king of Israel” as used e.g. in Mt 27:42. Davies and Allison (1988) 233. See also Luz (1993) 118. If this is so, the implied reader might actually stumble over the phrase. But that must be doubted because of the use of this phrase in Josephus, *Ant.* 14.36; 15.373; or 16.311 where it is used of Herod.

²¹ Carter (2001) 9–53 interprets Herod rather as a Roman puppet and contends throughout his book that Matthew’s readers would have been forcefully reminded of the Roman imperial strength to suppress them and others. Thus Carter concludes that it was the Roman background that shaped much of Matthew’s guideposts for the readers and theology. But, as he himself men-

Obviously the author assumes that Herod needs no introduction, and that her readers know about this king. What, then could a reader of Matthew have known about this king who had died about 90 years before the composition of the gospel?²² If such a reader was educated she might have known some of the material that Josephus collected about Herod, about his strife within his family, about the murder of his closest relatives. She might have known about Herod's constant wariness concerning threats to his throne, which precipitated the murder of his wife and his sons. She might have known about his order to kill, just a few days before his death, Matthias and Margalus, religious teachers with some popular support, who had seized on the opportunity of Herod's final illness to destroy the Roman eagle over the „Great Gate” of the temple in Jerusalem.²³ Particularly this incident with the eagle showed Herod, the king of the Jews, as a proxy of Rome with little Jewish sensibilities. In the aftermath of the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. it must have been bitter to realize for a Jewish person that her own leaders and kings were collaborators with the oppressive forces from Rome. By the time the gospel was finally put together, Herod had probably already become somewhat legendary with ill repute.

Similarly, the magi just appear without editorial comment on the scene. Matthew has them explain themselves during their arrival in Jerusalem as searching for the newborn king of the Jews whose star they have seen in the orient (Mt 2: 1–2). Ancient literary sources suggest that people in antiquity would not have thought about the magi as kings²⁴ as subsequent popular piety did. However, readers might have caught the intertextual relationship between Mt 2:2. 11 and Isa 60:3 and Ps 72:10–11:

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isa 60:3).

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service (Psalm 72:10-11).

tions, he looks as his approach as complementary to the more standard interpretation of Matthew's gospel against its Jewish background (p.1). Furthermore, I think that Carter's claims need to be discussed more thoroughly.

²² That there was a lot to know about Herod seems assured: „There is no figure in all antiquity about whom we have more detailed information than Herod.” Feldman (1992) 989. Most of this information comes from Josephus' *War* and *Antiquities*, which, written about twenty years apart and with 75–95 years distance from Herod's lifetime, have different purposes and therefore offer different evaluations of Herod. Nevertheless, in neither account does Herod appear as a hero.

²³ Josephus, *War* 1.648–655; *Ant.* 17.149–167.

²⁴ Delling 360–364. Delling finds four different meanings for the word, namely members of a Persian priestly class, possessors of supernatural powers, magicians, charlatans.

Thus the readers deal with two sets of information concerning the magi. On the one hand, they are not kings.²⁵ On the other hand, if the readers are familiar with Jewish scriptures they would recognize that the magi are fulfilling a prophecy about kings. In this sense, they do in fact what kings are supposed to do. This ambiguity about the magi will be an important guidepost in the assessment of what the readers learn, or how they are led by the story.

In sum, then, the implied readers of this story are familiar with Jewish tradition and scripture, but also with Jewish history, particularly as embodied by Herod. Readers with such knowledge are probably educated, and perhaps wealthy enough to afford this kind of education. The gospel thus implies readers with a certain degree of elitism.²⁶ Yet the text also poses some challenges to the readers. It tells its story not just to confirm what the readers know, but also to push them a little further. This leads to the next question: What does the text want its readers to learn? What are the things which are important for the story to develop? What are the implied readers expected to believe?

5 Things to Learn From Matthew 2

The story of Matthew 2 is arranged in three episodes. The first episode is the story of the magi. The second episode is that of the flight to and return from Egypt. This episode sandwiches a third narrative, of the murder of the children of Bethlehem. The three narratives are held together by the prominent appearance of Herod in each one of them. Thus it becomes obvious that Matthew considers the figure of Herod vital to transport his message to his readers. The analysis of the three episodes individually will highlight the purpose of Matthew's story.

5.1 Episode One: The Story of the Magi (Mt 2:1–12)

The story of the magi is a curious one. They arrive in Jerusalem at the prompting of a star that appeared to them in the east. They ask the question where the newborn king of the Jews is. The reader is not informed about the connection they draw between the star and the birth of the king of the Jews. Presumably the reader is sup-

²⁵ Powell (2000) 463–468, proves this sufficiently even if one does not follow his hypothesis that the magi would be understood as members of an oppressed class rather than retainers of the ruling class or kings.

²⁶ Although with methods very different from the narrative approach taken here, others come to similar results when they paint a picture of the Matthean community as being in contest for the leadership of the Jewish people after the destruction of Jerusalem. Overman (1990); Saldarini (1992) 649–680; Saldarini (1994); Repschinski (2000). Narrative methods are employed by: Frankemölle (1999; 1997), particularly interesting are 1.37–51; Giclen (1998).

posed to infer from the title „magi” that the visitors from the east are conversant with interpreting celestial phenomena.²⁷ But they are behaving strangely. They do not ask at Herod’s court where the king might be found. Since magi are usually associated with royal courts²⁸ this seems all the more unusual. Instead, they seem to be roaming about Jerusalem trying to gather information and telling people that they have come to adore this king. At the same time, Herod hears about it, but first consults with High Priests and Scribes. At first, then, there is no contact between Herod and the magi.

Here an interesting change takes place. Herod does not simply take up the question of the magi to pose it to his advisors. He recasts the question by asking where the Christ would be born (Mt 2:4). Thus Herod shows that he understand the quest of the magi correctly. What the Gentiles from the east search for the Jewish Herod recognizes immediately as the quest for the promised Messiah. This is borne out by the High Priests and Scribes who do not dispute the matter at all but simply deliver the information asked for, clothed in a suitable quote from scripture (Mt 2:5–6). Already here the reader can sense that there is something awfully wrong with Herod. The quote speaks about a ruler from Bethlehem in Judah, the city of David, who will shepherd God’s people Israel. But all these things are not true of Herod. Herod was Idumaeon of descent, not born in Bethlehem,²⁹ and his rule could be described as anything but shepherding God’s people.³⁰

Only after the consultation does Herod finally call the magi. But in this invitation already the evil purpose of Herod becomes clear. Herod meets the magi „in secret” to inquire first the timing of the star’s appearance (Mt 2:7). He treats them like servants, sending them to Bethlehem to inquire about the child and then report to him (Mt 2:8). He does not mention the real purpose of the magi to adore the child but expects them to do his bidding. At this point, the reader is no longer able to believe the stated purpose of Herod to go and adore the child himself. Herod is revealed as a hypocrite and a sinister figure.

The magi proceed to Bethlehem. Again Matthew surprises the reader. The magi do not follow the commands of Herod. Instead, the star appears to them once more, guiding them to the right place and filling them with great joy (Mt 2:9–10). Again the reader is alerted to the unreliability of Herod. The star becomes the real guide of

²⁷ This is borne out by some of the contemporary literature mentioning magi. See n. 24.

²⁸ Powell (2000) 463–468.

²⁹ He probably spent much of his childhood in Petra. Where he was born is not transmitted. Richardson (1996) 52–130.

³⁰ These characteristics of Herod are even further emphasized if one, like R. E. Brown, assumes that the basic background of Mt 2:1–12 lies in the story of Balaam related in Num 22–24 Cf. Brown (1993) 193–196. In this tale, the Moabite King Balak feels threatened by the Israelites led by Moses and summons the seer Balaam to curse the Israelites. Balaam however, a non-Israelite called „magos” in Philo, *VitMos* 1.50.276, prophesies well for Israel.

the magi. Consequently, when they reach the house with the child and Mary, they can finally complete their purpose of adoration and bringing of gifts.

At this point, the contrast between Herod and the magi becomes obvious. The magi have seen a sign, and they interpreted it as the announcement of the birth of the king of the Jews. Herod knows better that here the Messiah is meant. Yet it is the Gentile magi that come to the adoration of the child, not the Jewish Herod and his clique of High Priests and Scribes. In a perfect world the reader in a Jewish tradition would expect it the other way round: The Jews should adore the child, not the Gentiles. But instead Matthew points out that the Jewish leaders are failing in their responsibility towards their knowledge of the scriptures, while the Gentiles come to adore Jesus. The already mentioned ambiguity in the portrait of the magi now makes sense as well. Even though they may be servants, the intertextual relationship with Ps 72 and Isa 60 in drawing their portrait has them fulfilling the functions of kings. The magi do what kings are supposed to do. And the reader knows that these magi do what in fact king Herod is supposed to do.

The magi are further validated. In 2: 12 it becomes finally clear that the star guiding them was in fact a sign from God who now appears to them in a dream. Unquestioningly they obey, and they return to the east. Again Herod is mentioned here as the one they should not return to. The reader realizes that if the magi are servants, they are not servants of Herod but of God. In retrospect she also recognizes that God was the one directing the magi from the beginning. And she realizes that God has nothing to do with Herod and the High Priests and Scribes. They know more than the magi, but they do not act in the right way on their knowledge. And for the first time in the narrative Herod's plans are foiled.

5.2 Episode Two, Part One: The Flight To Egypt (Mt 2:13–15)

The second episode of Mt 2 is devoted to the actions of God himself as the main agent of events. God's angel appears to Joseph in a dream and orders him to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. The reason for the flight is revealed as Herod's intention to kill the child (Mt 2:13). Joseph does as he is told and remains in Egypt until the death of Herod. The reader is told that this happened to fulfil a prophecy of the Hebrew Scriptures.³¹

The fulfilment quotation of Hos 11:1 explicitly alerts the reader to the fact that God is the agent behind the story since it is God's word that is transmitted by the prophet (Mt 2:15). Throughout this part of the narrative God is directing the events. His actions are designed to countermand the plans that Herod has laid for the child, namely to kill him. The angel of the dream mentions this plan of Herod explicitly. In Episode One a contrast between Herod and the magi was built up. Here it is the contrast between God and Herod. The reader is alerted to the mounting conflict

³¹ The text here follows the Hebrew version of Hos 11:1, not the LXX. Luz (1993) 126.

between Herod and the child he did not adore. But the reader cannot doubt the outcome of the story either. Mt 2:15 already mentions that in the end it is not the child who will be killed, but that Herod is the one going to die while the child is in Egypt. The reader probably calls to mind other stories of royal children who escape persecution.³² This serves to emphasize the importance of the child and its close relationship to God. But his real importance is revealed in the quotation from Hosea when God calls „my son” from Egypt.³³ When Matthew uses this quotation of Jesus, he reminds the reader of Israel and its history of the exodus. While Matthew probably does not equate Jesus with the people Israel he suggests to the reader that the extraordinary saving power of God revealed in the exodus is about to be revealed again in the person of Jesus. The exodus of Israel is repeated and brought to fulfillment in Jesus.³⁴ Thus the reference to Egypt and to Hos 11:1 come together to remind the reader of Israel’s foundational religious experience and connect them with the fate of Jesus.³⁵ This also casts Herod in a role that emphasizes his sinister streaks: The reader recognizes Herod as another Pharaoh.³⁶ But the reader also knows that the plans of this new Pharaoh are foiled again.

5.3 Episode Three: The Murder of the Children (Mt 2:16–18)

The scene shifts from the actions of God to the actions of Herod. For the first time in the narrative Herod now becomes not somebody who reacts but somebody who acts. The reader knows by now how Herod has laid his plans, and how devious and sinister they are. But there is more: In his actions Herod shows himself to be the

³² Luz (1993) 84 gives a table of such narratives in antiquity. The stories of Cyrus, Mithridates, Gilgamesh, Abraham, Leto and Isis have parallels in the flight of the child. Moses in particular might be recalled as a child under persecution, even though the flight motif in Moses’ life comes much later in his story, and Moses eventually flees from Egypt, not to Egypt (Ex 2:15).

³³ I do not agree with Kingsbury’s suggestion that „son” is the only christological title used in Mt 2, since the reader will apply „king of the Jews” (Mt 2:1) and „Christ/Messiah” (Mt 2:4) to Jesus. However, Kingsbury rightly draws attention to the use of „son” as used by God himself. Kingsbury (1975) 46.

³⁴ Luz calls this „Israeltypologie.” Luz (1993) 129. Davies and Allison (1988) 262, see a strong connection with the Balaam oracle here, but they need the circuitous route to suggest that the use of Hos 11:1 was suggested by Num 24:8. While this is possible, and even though other Balaam parallels are suggested by Mt 2, I agree with Luz on the stronger influence of the Moses narrative on Mt 2.

³⁵ Thus some of the difficulties commentators have with the placement of the quotation from Hosea might be answered. Even though it could be construed as awkward to have the quotation about calling out of Egypt when Jesus just goes into Egypt (Brown 1993, 220), the quotation ties the narrative flow together very well and alerts the reader strongly to the intended Mosaic background. This in turn helps to understand the callous murder of the children in the following section.

³⁶ Recall the quotation of *TestMos* 6, which also compares the reign of Herod with the Egyptians.

direct opponent of God. When God acted to save a child, Herod now sets out to destroy many children. The grave danger to Jesus is exposed, and with it the mighty saving act of God. The evil of Herod is demonstrated in his revenge on all the children „in Bethlehem and all the neighboring country” (Mt 2:16).³⁷ Furthermore, Herod is not driven, like the magi and Joseph, by God speaking through dreams. His motivation is extreme anger.

The reader also notes the variation in the fulfilment quotation that follows. Even though the direct reference to the Hebrew Scriptures is made again, Matthew now no longer mentions that these things happened „in order to” fulfil the scriptures (cp. Mt 1:22; 2:5.15) but merely says that „then” the prophet Jeremiah’s prediction was fulfilled. Thus God is not given any responsibility for the murder.³⁸ Again the reader will recall the scripture quoted by Herod’s associates saying that the ruler born in Bethlehem will shepherd his flock (Mt 2:6). But Herod is the wolf who falls on the innocent sheep. Herod is proven completely without legitimation as king of Israel when he is shown as the killer of Rachel’s children. But the implications run even deeper: Herod’s rejection of Jesus becomes a rejection of Rachel’s children and by extension of Israel herself.³⁹ The leader of Israel turns against her. And yet, despite the extreme measures, Herod’s plans are foiled for a third time.

5.4 Episode Two, Part Two: The Return From Egypt (Mt 2:19–23)

Mt 2:19–20 resumes Episode Two with a parallel to 2:13.⁴⁰ The family returns from Egypt and now moves to Nazareth in Galilee. The dream has by now become a metaphor for God’s will and clarifies that now God is acting again. The death of Herod is mentioned, a further sign that God’s purpose is being fulfilled and Herod’s plans have come to naught. The return from Egypt once more recalls Israel’s exodus (cf. Ex 4:19–20). Jesus will be the New Moses leading his people from slavery into the freedom of the people of God.⁴¹ Joseph shows himself once more as God’s obedient servant who does as he is told.

³⁷ Luz (1993) 129.

³⁸ Luz shows that the question of how God saves his son at the expense of the children of Bethlehem enters the history of interpretation only very slowly. Luz (1993) 130. Indeed, for Matthew this is not the question to be asked. For Matthew the innocents are only the foil for the contrast between Herod and God. One wonders, though, why Matthew never admits the possibility of his readers, implied or real, stumbling at the slaughter.

³⁹ Luz finds this rejection of Israel „verhüllt angedeutet.” Luz (1993) 130. Yet the implied reader will probably pick up on this connection fairly easily, the rejection is probably more obvious than Luz thinks.

⁴⁰ The structure of both is: Genitive absolute + „behold” + „the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph saying” + „rise, take the child and his mother” + command to move to a different land + explanatory clause beginning with „γὰρ”. Davies and Allison (1988) 259.

⁴¹ Allison (1993).

But again Matthew surprises his readers by having the family not move back to Bethlehem but to Nazareth in Galilee, a city not suitable for a child of Davidic descent. Matthew explains this with a reference to Archelaos reigning in Judah in his father's Herod's stead (Mt 2:22).⁴² Again God orders Joseph through a dream, and Joseph obeys. Thus the whole return from Egypt is according to God's plan, further illustrated by another quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures (Mt 2:23).⁴³ And for a last time Herod's plans are foiled. He who planned to kill the child now is dead himself, while the child is back in the land promised to Israel.

Yet the story does not really bring closure. Archelaos, Herod's son, remains in Judah. Jesus is still a child, and his mission has not yet really begun. God's plans have been shown successful up to this point, but the reader senses that the full challenge is yet to come. Thus, in a very profound sense, the story of Matthew 2 is a prologue and prophecy of things yet to come.

5.5 What the Reader Learns from Matthew 2

The reader meets much in Matthew that is already known to her from her knowledge of Jewish Scriptures, tradition, and history. There are the figures of Herod, or the allusions to Moses and the exodus from Egypt, and the recurring quotations from the Scriptures that show how much the story is rooted within Judaism. At points the impression arises that the story is almost a retelling of the Moses narratives in the book of Exodus.⁴⁴ However, the identification with the Moses narrative should not be pressed, for there are remarkable differences as well.⁴⁵

In the Moses narrative it is the mother who by her wiliness saves the child from the persecution of Pharaoh (Ex 2:2–10). In Matthew's story the mother does not appear in any way except as the silent spouse of Joseph. For Matthew it is clearly God

⁴² Luz maintains that Matthew shows himself to be well informed about the political situation after Herod's death because Archelaos was about as mean as his father and had to be removed by the Romans after ten years of his reign. Luz (1993) 131. While this is certainly true, Matthew does not explain this fact to his readers. They are supposed to be aware of the situation themselves.

⁴³ Notwithstanding the fact that the quotation is hardly identifiable in the Hebrew Scriptures Matthew introduces it here as such. It might be that Matthew already found it in his sources. Fuller discussion in Davies and Allison (1988) 274–275. The difficulties need not detain us, however, since Matthew suggests to his readers that it is a quotation from Hebrew Scriptures.

⁴⁴ It should be noted, however, that some commentators also see a number of parallels to the narrative of Jacob and Laban in Gen 46:2–7. There is an old midrashic exegesis of Dtn 26:5–8 interpreting the journey of Jacob to Egypt as a flight from Laban, his father in law. Finkelstein (1938) 291–317; this essay is taken up by Daube (1956) 189–190. This midrashic interpretation of Dtn 26 appears, however, within the context of the Jewish Passover midrash, which interweaves the Moses and Jacob narratives. Furthermore, while the midrash may be ancient, it is no longer datable. Inferences from this midrash into Matthew must, therefore, remain speculative.

⁴⁵ Nolan (1979) 88–89.

himself who directs the events surrounding the saving of the child. When Moses has to flee, he is already an adult and has to flee from Egypt into the mountains of Midian (Ex 2:15). When Jesus has to flee, it is from Judah into Egypt.⁴⁶ And when in 2:20 Matthew alludes to Ex 4:19–20 it is Joseph who seems to correspond to Moses, not Jesus. And the magi are a completely different character with no correspondence in the Moses story at all. Perhaps they even introduce another theological thread altogether with an allusion to the Balaam story. If a correspondence between the Moses story and Mt 2 is maintained throughout, it is that between Pharaoh and Herod. Thus the readers are again and again reminded that even though the events surrounding Jesus are reminiscent of those surrounding Moses, Mt 2 is no simple retelling of the Moses narrative.

The somewhat open end of the story lets the reader expect a continuation of the story as well. The reader, prepared by the infancy narratives, will be looking for further connections with Moses. These will later on in the gospel be revealed as parallels between Jesus and Moses as teachers of the law.⁴⁷ But they will also be looking forward to the motifs mentioned in the adoration of the magi and the terror that befalls Herod and all of Jerusalem (Mt 2:3). The adoration as the proper attitude towards Jesus will be taken up in the episodes of a leper (Mt 8:2), of a leader of a synagogue (9:18), of the disciples in the boat (14:33), of the Syrophenician woman (15:25), of the mother of the sons of Zebedee (20:20), of the women meeting the risen Jesus (28:9), and finally of the disciples on the mountain in Galilee (28:17). On the other hand, the motif of rejection by Jewish leaders recurs again and again in the controversy stories and proves to be one of the driving themes of Matthew's story as a whole.⁴⁸ They culminate in the passion narrative when „all the people” reject Jesus with the cry „His blood be on us and our children” (Mt 27:25). Thus the story of Mt 2 is a prologue to some major themes of the gospel.

The readers learn yet more in this story of Jesus' infancy. It is striking that throughout Mt 2 neither Joseph as the head of the family nor Jesus himself are active characters. The real agents in this story are God who guides the magi and Joseph, and Herod who proves himself an adversary of God in his plots to have Jesus killed. It is Herod's name that is mentioned most often, while the name of Jesus is mentioned only once in 2:1. The reader gets the impression that Jesus is important in the story in that he provokes Herod to great evil which is then foiled in the actions of God. Yet again, the reader is given three clues to the importance of Jesus. The magi look for a newborn king of the Jews (2:2). Herod realizes that he is the Messiah (2:4). And finally the prophet Hosea bears witness to the fact that Jesus is the son

⁴⁶ Although Matthew gives the reader a hint that he still has the Moses story in mind by quoting Hos 11:1 at this point.

⁴⁷ Examples of this are the sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), or the transfiguration (Mt 17:1–9). Detailed analysis of the parallels between Moses and Jesus in Matthew can be found in: Allison (1993).

⁴⁸ Repschinski (2000).

of God (2:15). The reader suddenly realizes that this story is the first explication of another title Jesus was given in Mt 1:23: Immanuel, God with us. In the child Jesus the saving power of God becomes manifest for the first time. The gospel will take this thread up again and again in the various miracles and healings of Jesus. Finally the gospel ends with the statement of Jesus that he will be with his disciples until the end of the world (Mt 28:20). At the end of the gospel it is clear that Jesus truly is the „God is with us,” the Immanuel.

Thus the infancy narrative of Matthew serves to introduce the overarching themes of the gospel. In these chapters the reader is given a lens through which she can assess the material to follow. She knows that there are adversaries of Jesus yet to come, because she knows about Herod. She also knows that the plans of these adversaries are going to be foiled just like those of Herod. She knows that in the end, it will be God’s saving power that prevails.

6 Conclusion: Of Mice and Men and Matthew 2

John Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* on a historical background, but with such a degree of abstraction from it that made the drama of his characters stand out much more clearly. In this sense, the novel is much more a character piece than a time piece. The historical setting in the Californian dust bowl of the thirties provided for him the foil against which the drama of personal loneliness, human dignity and true friendship unfolds in a timeless manner. This feature is shared by the Matthean narrative of the infancy of Jesus. Matthew too uses a historical setting in the time of Herod and even makes Herod one of the main characters of his story. Furthermore, Matthew takes up themes and stories of Israel’s history in the allusions to the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt.

Yet Matthew uses this background very creatively. When the historical Herod becomes a character in Matthew’s story he feels free to invent, first a meeting with some magi from the east, then his plots to destroy Jesus, finally his murder of the Bethlehemite children. Matthew’s use of the Mosaic elements seem to draw almost randomly from the childhood and the adulthood of Moses. Yet the story told is not random at all, it is the story slowly unfolding power of God who wants to be with his people. The reader is given historical elements and traditional motifs not in order to check on the accuracy of their use or the historicity of the circumstances of Jesus’ birth. She is given hints on how to read the subsequent life story of Jesus. The reader is alerted to the fact that it is not history that is the object of Matthew’s gospel, but the fact that the kingdom of heavens has drawn near (Mt 4:17) in the person of Jesus.

But there is a further twist to the dehistoricization visible in Matthew’s gospel. When Matthew concentrates on the characters rather than on the setting of his story, he invites the reader to concentrate on precisely the actions of the characters in the

story. In Matthew's infancy narrative this means focusing on the epic struggle between those who try to destroy the child named Immanuel, and the plans God has for the child who is his son. Matthew's de-historization of the infancy narrative clues the reader to attempt her own re-historization in her own life situation. Matthew present the reader with a choice and with a number of clues on which way to choose. The reader is drawn into the story and made part of its continuation.

Here lies, I believe, the challenge for any form of contextual theology. What John Steinbeck and Matthew teach us, each in their very different writings, is the value of distancing a good story, or a good theology, from a too narrow historical context. The staying power of these narratives lies in their ability to invite ever new re-historizations by their readers. The texts engage the reader in the best sense of the word through inviting her to use her own imagination to fill in the concepts of friendship, of struggle, of salvation, or of the presence of God with her own experience. A theology, through its narrow focus on one particular situation, loses its drawing power and interest for those outside this situation. In a way, it is no longer theology for people outside of its context. For them it does not talk of God anymore, but only of itself.

The title of Steinbeck's novel come from a poem of Roger Burns⁴⁹ telling of a field mouse building a homely nest which is then destroyed by the plow of a farmer:

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane
 In proving foresight may be vain:
 The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
 Gang aft agley,
 An' lea'e us nought but gricf an' pain
 For promis'd joy.

In Steinbeck's novel it alludes to the shattered dream of George and Lennie and offers little hope of redemption. Matthew reminds us that grace, goodness and salvation are not laid down in schemes of mice or men or Herods, but in the power of God with us.

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⁴⁹ The following quote is but an excerpt of the whole poem. Steinbeck (2000) xxi.

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