Welcome back for the eighth day of Christmas. I am going to be continuing to look at echoes and symmetries within the Nativity and infancy stories of Christ. As we look in the Gospels, we see a number of ways in which they connect with later stories, and also with earlier stories from the Old Testament.

Here I am going to be returning to Chapter 2 of Matthew, to consider the character of Herod and the surrounding cast of characters, and to think more about what they might signify. Some of the connections that exist between Herod and other characters, such as Hadad and Pharaoh, I have already mentioned. I have talked about the way in which he is significant as an Edomite king, the way he is connected with the Canaanites and with Pharaoh. And then, Christ, by contrast, is connected with Moses, with Israel, and being brought out of the land of Egypt—these sorts of things.

There are other characters within the picture, though. And it is interesting to think about the way that the gospel writer is using these to draw attention, to fill out the picture, to show us more about what Herod is and the significance of what is happening. One of the ways we can see Herod being subverted is even within the quotes themselves. For instance, the statement that is made in verse 6, where the Old Testament is cited—Micah 5:2—“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.”

Now, if you read that text, if you do not know your Old Testament very well, you may not notice anything. But if you know your Old Testament well, you will notice that the quote has been changed. There has been an extra bit on the end spliced on, which comes from the story of 2 Samuel. And it relates to David being set up as king instead of Saul, and God saying to David, “It will be you who will shepherd My people Israel.” That is significant. It helps us to see that even within the quotation from the scribes and the chief priests, there is a subversion of Herod’s rule. The true king, David, will take the place of Saul—who himself is compared to Pharaoh and Canaanite Kings. And Herod, another Saul-like figure, who seeks the life of this Son of David, is going to be replaced. We are seeing a filling out of the picture even further. There is this broadening cast of characters, and there is also this deepening of the typological movements that are taking place. As we look at this sort of detail, we can see that there is a lot more going on in this text than we might otherwise think.

What else is going on? Well, we have looked at Herod as Pharaoh. What does this mean for the chief priests and the scribes of his court? Well, they play a role similar to the magicians of Pharaoh’s court. They are the supporting cast, the people who surround Herod, and support him, and act on his behalf, and contrast with the people who have come to worship this one born king of the Jews. And who are they? They are the Magi. The Magi are associated with magic, and other such arts. They are the ones that we might naturally associate with the magicians of Pharaoh’s court.

But here there is a reversal. Those we would expect to be the foreign magicians and opponents are the ones who come to worship the newborn king, and it is the chief priests and the scribes of the court that are seeking to destroy and subvert in the name of Herod, who is the Pharaoh figure in this picture.

And this helps us to see, again, that this picture is a fuller one than we might first think. The Pharaoh connection is familiar to people, but there is more that can be teased out from that. And the significance of the Magi coming fits in with some broader themes within Matthew. At the beginning of his gospel, he has already emphasized outlying characters, who are Gentiles, or people who are otherwise seen as potentially disreputable, who have been part of Christ’s family tree. And here we see something similar: there are Gentiles who come to worship this newborn king, just as we see Gentiles coming at key moments in Israel’s history to support them—whether that is Jethro supporting Moses, whether it is someone like Melchizedek bringing out bread and wine after the victory over the kings in Chapter 14 of Genesis, whether it is Hiram supporting David in collecting material for the Temple of Solomon, or whether it is figures such as Cyrus, with his decree.

In many of these cases, we see Gentiles assisting the people of God, providing material and support. And once again, we have Magi, we have foreigners, we have Gentiles coming to provide material, giving their material to help this new temple-building project, as it were. They are the ones who are going to assist and to support the Messiah as he establishes his kingdom and as he builds his Temple.

Taking all these things together, we see a fuller picture of the Pharaoh antagonist as Herod, and we also see this filling out of the picture to see the larger establishment of Jerusalem—the chief priests, and the scribes, and how they are all part of this house of bondage, of this new Pharaoh’s court. And they are all implicated in various ways. They are the magicians that serve with Pharaoh, and they must be overcome. And this new king, in an ironic statement, is declared to be the one who will subvert the Saul figure. The Edomite king is going to be removed, and this new king is going to take his place. And even within the text itself, we see Christ returning to the land after the death of this Pharaoh figure. Later on, we see a similar thing in the story of Acts 12. As God raises up his servant Peter, he strikes down the character of Herod.

Putting all these things together, then, we have a fuller picture, a richer understanding of these themes that are at play, and we will be able to understand how this sets a foundation for the deeper conflicts that animate this book, and the Gospels as a whole.