Matthew 2:13-15 and the Intention of the Old Testament Author

Presented to the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society
Lynchburg, Virginia, April 1-2, 2016
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1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. (Hos. 11:1 ESV)

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." (Matt. 2:13-15 ESV)

The reference to Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:13-15 is one of the more intractable cases of the New Testament use of the Old Testament. Many would agree with the assessment of Craig Blomberg that “Hosea 11:1 is a reference to the exodus, pure and simple.”¹ According to R. T. France, “It is a statement about the past, not a prediction of the future. It is therefore sometimes argued that Matthew’s use of the text here is quite illegitimate, transferring to the future and to a different individual ‘son’ what God said about his ‘son’ Israel in the past.”² Richard Longenecker refers to Matthew’s exegetical technique as “pesher” and says that Matthew is “rereading his Old Testament from an eschatologically realized and messianic perspective.”³ Peter Enns calls it “a highly theologized, noncontextual, reading of the OT.”⁴ According to Enns, “It is the reality of the risen Christ that drove [Matthew] to read Hosea in a new

³ Richard N. Longenecker, Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 128.
way.”⁵ According to Martin Pickup, “It is futile to try to defend Matthew’s messianic interpretation of Hos 11:1 on grammatical-historical ground.”⁶ He refers to Matthew’s technique as atomistic and midrashic.⁷

Robert Thomas calls this an “Inspired Sensus Plenior Application” of the Hosea text.⁸ In his view, “NT writers could assign such new meanings authoritatively because of the inspiration of what they wrote.”⁹ Thus, the new meaning which Matthew assigns based on the Hosea text is not a grammatical-historical interpretation of the Old Testament passage. It is a new revelation which “did not exist as far as humans were concerned”¹⁰ until it was revealed to Matthew. So, it is a grammatical-historical interpretation of the New Testament passage.

A common expedient is to call Matthew’s handling of the Hosea text typological.¹¹ But not everyone who uses this designation means the same thing by it. For some, typology is entirely retrospective. It is simply an exegetical technique used by New Testament authors that allows them to discover meaning in the Old Testament text which the Old Testament author may not have intended or understood.¹² It is a historical correspondence that is recognized after the fact. Admittedly, some would argue that the typological meaning which the New Testament author discerns is really in the Old Testament text, either in the sense that it was intended by the divine author, or in the sense that it

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⁵ Enns, “Fuller Meaning,” 201.
⁷ Pickup, 374.
results from a canonical reading of the text in light of later revelation. But when such correspondences are only recognizable retrospectively, then typology is robbed entirely of its prophetic value. Walter Kaiser rightly objects,

Unless the type is intended by the OT writer and is discernible from the normal practice of grammar, syntax, and its related modes of discerning meaning, the rest of what is classified under typology must be categorized as a form of applying and showing significance to some of the patterns in God’s salvific activity over the ages. At best then, such nonobjective types are our modern illustrations rather than divine predictions. ¹³

A better approach is to limit the designation “typology” to cases where the meaning adduced by the New Testament author is inherently present in the Old Testament text, where the typology is prospective rather than retrospective. ¹⁴ This distinguishes typology from mere analogy or illustration and preserves its prophetic and apologetic value.

The premise of this paper is that Matthew has correctly interpreted Hosea 11:1 and that the meaning which Matthew finds in Hosea is the meaning which Hosea intended. Affirming this seems critical to a high view of Scripture and a proper hermeneutic. If Matthew has misinterpreted Hosea or used a faulty hermeneutic, the doctrine of inerrancy falls. No appeal to a supposed sensus plenior can rescue this. Verbal plenary inspiration insists that the Holy Spirit worked through the human authors to produce Scripture, not around them. ¹⁵ Consequently, what follows here is a survey of four previous attempts to understand Matthew’s quotation from Hosea 11:1 from this perspective. Insights from these four provide a foundation that will help develop a more robust understanding of Hosea 11:1 in its own context and therefore, a better understanding of how Matthew uses this passage.

Walter Kaiser

In 1985, Walter Kaiser argued that “There is no distortion or abuse of the context of Hosea by Matthew; nor has he added his own interpretation to the text.”\(^\text{16}\) He begins by analyzing the structure of the book of Hosea. Following three autobiographical chapters, the book of Hosea contains three charges against the people of Israel in chapters 4-14 (4:2-6:3; 6:4-11:11; 11:12-14:9) and each of these ends with a word of hope. Hosea 11:1-11 occurs at the end of Hosea’s second indictment and emphasizes that even though Israel would be punished for their covenant unfaithfulness, they would be preserved by God’s love. Kaiser sees an analogous relationship between God’s preservation of Israel and His preservation of Jesus through His early years, but this by itself does not account for Matthew’s use of the passage.

Key to Kaiser’s understanding is the realization that by the time of Hosea the words “my son” had become technical terminology for the Davidic ruler (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). Kaiser argues that the terms “could be applied either collectively to the nation as the object of God’s love and election or specifically to the final representative person who was to come in Christ.”\(^\text{17}\) Kaiser suggests that Hosea writes with an awareness of this oscillation between the corporate and the individual son.

Kaiser suggests that in Hosea, “Egypt functioned as a symbol for the place of bondage and oppression, regardless of where it was located.”\(^\text{18}\) In Hosea 11:1, it is clearly a geographical designation, but in Hosea 8:13; 9:3, 6; 11:3-5; 12:3 it is used metaphorically for Assyria. Kaiser finds significance in the fact that Matthew places the quotation from Hosea at the point of Jesus’ entrance into Egypt and not His departure. He argues that the main point of the quotation is Jesus’ preservation through oppression and not His return from Egypt. He concludes, “This is biblical typology at its best, for it

\(^{16}\) Kaiser, The Uses of the Old Testament, 53.
\(^{17}\) Kaiser, The Use of the Old Testament, 49.
begins with a clear divine designation, is limited in its sphere of operation to the act of preservation and deliverance, and is circumscribed in its effects.”

John Sailhamer

In 2001, John Sailhamer sought to build on Brevard Child’s canonical understanding of the book of Hosea. His thesis was that much of what Childs understood from a canonical perspective could be demonstrated to already have been present to Hosea within his historical context. He argues that “Hosea himself already understood his words in 11:1 metaphorically and messianically.” Sailhamer suggests that “Hosea was making a reference not to the event itself but to the event as construed in the Pentateuch. Hosea approached the exodus as an exegete. Hosea was involved in what we today call ‘intertextuality.’ He referred to the meaning of the exodus, not from his own historical understanding of that event, but rather from the viewpoint of the canonical Pentateuch.” He mentions a number of places in the book of Hosea where Hosea’s message is “grounded in a careful and conscious exegesis of the Pentateuchal text” but settles on the Balaam oracles in Numbers 23:22 and 24:8 as the key texts which relate to Hosea 11:1. Sailhamer notes that despite the similarity in these two verses there is a critical difference between them. Whereas Numbers 23:22a states in the plural that “God brings them out of Egypt” (אֵל מוֹצִיאם מִמִצְר), Numbers 24:8a states in the singular that “God brings him out of Egypt” (אֵל מוֹצִיאָו מִמִצְר). Sailhamer notes that all the other pronouns in Numbers 23:21-22 are singular, referring to the people of Israel as a collective singular, but the plural pronoun in Numbers 23:22a makes it clear that the corporate entity is intended. Meanwhile, the singular pronoun in Numbers 24:8a cannot refer to the corporate entity since it is preceded in verse 7 which speaks of an individual king who will be higher than Agag and whose kingdom will be exalted. Sailhamer suggests

that in Numbers 23, “Balaam looked back at the exodus as the grounds for God’s future salvation of his people Israel” but in Numbers 24, “Balaam viewed the coming of a future ‘king’ as a new exodus.”

Hosea 11 is building on Numbers 23-24. Thus when Matthew quotes from this passage he is not engaged in typological exegesis of the Hosea text. “Rather, he was drawing the sensus literalis from the book of Hosea and it, in turn, was drawn from Hosea’s exegesis of the sensus literalis of the Pentateuch.”

Greg Beale

At the 2015 Shepherd’s Conference, Greg Beale presented a paper in which he sought to defend the appropriateness of Matthew’s use of Hosea 11:1. He acknowledged that there are three main problems with the passage. First, it is argued that “Hosea is a mere historical reflection, but Matthew clearly understands it as a direct prophecy.” Second, “what Hosea attributes to the nation Israel, Matthew attributes to the individual Jesus.” And third, “the Hosea 11:1 reference to Israel coming out of Egypt first introduces the holy family with Jesus entering into Egypt.” He argues that Matthew employs a typological interpretation of Hosea 11:1, but not one that is merely retrospective. He argues that the typological interpretation which Matthew sees is already inherently present in the Hosea text and that it can be discerned by considering the entire chapter of Hosea 11 and the entire book.

Beale points specifically to Hosea 11:10-11, which speak of a restoration of Israel from several lands, including Egypt. He sees here an allusion to Numbers 23:22, 24; 24:8-9. This is the only other passage in the OT which both speaks of God bringing Israel out of Egypt and compares Israel’s deliverer to a lion. He suggests that “the ‘lion’ of 11:10 may be the eschatological kingly leader of Israel’s

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The main point of Hosea 11:1-11 is to present Israel’s exodus from Egypt as a pattern that will be repeated at the end of Israel’s history.

Beale finds other references to the exodus from Egypt in Hosea 2:15; 12:9, 13; 13:4 and references to a return to Egypt in Hosea 1:11; 7:11, 16; 8:13; 9:3, 6; 11:5, which leads him to ask, “If one were to have asked Hosea if he believed that God was sovereign over history and that God had designed the first exodus from Egypt as a historical pattern that foreshadowed a second exodus from Egypt, would he not likely have answered yes?”30 This Exodus will be led by “one head” (רֹאשׁ אֶחָד) according to Hosea 1:11 and the one head is identified in Hosea 3:5 as a “latter-day Davidic king.”31

Beale understands the references to Egypt in Hosea 11:5, 11 literally.32 Thus, Hosea 11 begins with a reference to Israel’s past exodus from Egypt (v 1), proceeds to a mention of Israel’s return to Egypt (v 5) and concludes with a reference to Israel’s future return from Egypt (v 11).33 With this in mind, Matthew’s placement of the quotation from Hosea 11:1 at the departure to Egypt is appropriate since a return to Egypt is an integral part of the typological picture.34 Matthew’s reference to Hosea 11:1 is also appropriate because Hosea 11 is not a mere historical reference but a forward looking reference to a future exodus. And Matthew’s application of this passage to Jesus is also appropriate because He is properly identified as the messianic leader of that future exodus.

Abner Chou

At the same conference, Abner Chou also presented a paper in which he argued that Matthew gave appropriate consideration to the Old Testament context of Hosea 11:1. Chou insightfully asks why Matthew chooses to reference Hosea to talk about the exodus instead of going back to the exodus narrative itself. His answer is that Matthew chooses to use Hosea because Hosea is already a theological

33 Beale, “The Use of Hosea 11:1,” 221.
reflection on the exodus and not bare historical reference. “In context, Hosea 11:1 does not merely discuss history, but history as the precedent for God’s future workings.” Hosea is building on Exodus 4:22 where the people of Israel are first called “my firstborn son.” But the historical exodus from Egypt has already undergone considerable theological reflection prior to Hosea. Chou references Psalm 74:10-15; 77:14-15; 80:16 where the first exodus establishes a pattern for future deliverances. In Hosea 11 “the first exodus demands a new exodus led by the Messiah.” Subsequent to Hosea, this theological reflection continues in passages such as Micah 7:14-15 and Isaiah 43:1-21. Matthew stands at the end of this trajectory, making use of the entire history of interpretation, but without doing violence to what Hosea stated. Matthew sees that “God saved Jesus from Herod in his own personal exodus to demonstrate that God loves Jesus as much as he loved his son, Israel. This proves that Jesus is Israel’s true representative and King, who will lead them in a new exodus.”

Towards a Solution

Kaiser, Sailhamer, Beale, and Chou appear to be on the right track. When greater attention is paid to the larger context in Hosea, Matthew’s use of the passage makes a lot more sense.

First, it is abundantly clear that the exodus from Egypt serves throughout the Old Testament as a typological pattern for future deliverance. Hosea’s reference to the exodus partakes of this typological perspective. His reference to the historical exodus is not merely historical but forward looking since the people who came out of Egypt once, will return to Egypt (11:5) and from there will be delivered once again (11:11). This remains the case whether “Egypt” is understood literally in verses 5 and 11 or metaphorically as a reference to Assyria. The historical exodus envisions a future exodus. So, when

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Matthew relates the descent of Jesus into Egypt to that future exodus, he is not seeing what is not present in Hosea, but what is actually present in the context.

Second, the use of sonship language for both a corporate entity and for an individual representative of that entity is also widely established. This goes all the way back to Genesis 3:15 where three different conflicts are described, a conflict between the serpent and the woman, a conflict between the corporate seed of the serpent and the corporate seed of the woman, and a conflict between the individual seed of the woman and the serpent. It continues when Abram is promised that all the families of the earth will be blessed through him (Gen 12:3). Abraham’s seed will be as numerous as the stars of the heavens or the sand of the sea (Gen 22:17) but ultimately will find expression in one individual. In Exodus 4:22-23 the language of sonship is applied to corporate Israel at the time of the exodus. There are undoubtedly multiple purposes behind God’s deliverance of Israel from the land of Egypt, but arguably primary among them was the preservation and establishment of a people through whom the individual son would eventually come. This is perhaps reflected in the Balaam oracles in Numbers 23-24 when Balaam foresees future blessing both for the corporate body of Israel and for their king. God promised David concerning his son that “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Sam. 7:14a ESV). This clearly applied initially to Solomon, who was responsible for building the temple, then to a string of human Davidic rulers of whom it is said, “When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men” (2 Sam. 7:14b ESV), and then ultimately to one of whom it is said, “Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16b ESV). Hosea builds upon this idea. In Hosea 3:5, he speaks of a Davidic king who will rule the people in the latter days and this Davidic king cannot be far from view in chapter 11 when Hosea speaks of the historical exodus as a model for a future deliverance. Matthew begins his gospel by referring to Jesus as “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1 ESV). He is the fulfillment of the promise to David of a son who would reign forever the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham of a seed through whom the
whole world would be blessed. Matthew 2:15 is yet one more instance where Jesus is identified as the
individual son who represents the nation of Israel as a whole. 40

Thirdly, the fact that Matthew says Jesus went down to Egypt in order to “fulfill” what was
spoken by Hosea does not require that the Hosea text be considered a prophecy in the strictest sense.
According to Turner,

Biblical fulfillment in Matthew includes ethical, historical, and prophetic connections. These
categories are not discrete but overlapping; individual fulfillments may contain elements of all
three aspects. At times the ethical element is preeminent (3:15; 5:17). At other times fulfillment
of biblical prediction is primary (4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 21:4; 26:54, 56). But probably the most
prevalent aspect of fulfillment in Matthew concerns historical patterns (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23;
13:14, 35; 23:32; 27:9). Events in biblical history anticipate events in Jesus’s ministry in that
Jesus fills them with new significance. 41

Carson notes that, “Not only in Matthew but elsewhere in the NT, the history and laws of the OT are
perceived to have prophetic significance.” 42

But as has been seen, Hosea 11:1 is not a mere historical reflection. It is a reference to the
historical exodus, but it is not “a reference to the exodus, pure and simple.” 43 There is a forward looking
aspect to Hosea’s reference to the exodus so that the historical exodus anticipates a greater deliverance
that is yet to come. Jesus is rightly identified as the representative head of that greater deliverance.

The solution to the difficulties associated with Matthew 2:15 has come through greater attention to the
larger context in Hosea and it can be seen that it is not Matthew, but his critics, who are guilty of
reading the text too atomistically and without sufficient concern for the overall context.

40 It is significant that Matthew does not follow the LXX in rendering ἐξ Αἰγύπτου μετεκάλεσα τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ “out
of Egypt I called his children,” but more accurately renders the Hebrew וּמִמִצְר ֵ֖יִם ק ר ֹ֥אתִי לִבְנִִֽי with a singular ἐ
Αἰγύπτου ἐκάλεσα τὸν ὦν μου “out of Egypt I called my son.”
41 Turner, Matthew, 25.
42 D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,
1984), 8:92.
Bibliography


