

# Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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## Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):  
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

## Matthew 2:13-23

Year A - Christmas 1, Text: Matthew 2:13-23  
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### *Some Background on Herod the Great:*

When the wise men visited Herod the Great, most likely they met with him in Jerusalem. As they made the five-mile journey south to Bethlehem, they would have seen on the horizon about 2½ miles south of Bethlehem a fortress known as the Herodium. The fortress, built by Herod the Great, was the only site to carry his name. Its ruins can still be seen today.

The Herodium was a large rounded structure built on a man-made, cone-shaped hill. The fortress was reinforced by three circular towers, and a much higher round tower that probably housed catapults. This higher tower had a solid base so that the vibrations of the catapults would not shake it to pieces.

The structure was not only a fortress, but also a magnificently furnished palace well supplied with water and gardens. Within it were a colonnaded court, a synagogue, and bathrooms. Entry was by means of an underground passageway with about 200 steps leading up from the bottom of the hill. The Herodium served as Herod's district capital and as a monument that could be seen from a distance.

**Verses 2:16:** Although Herod could look to his large bodyguard and many fortresses and palaces to ensure his security, he felt fear when told that a “kings of the Jews” (he was that!) had been born somewhere in his realm. He tried to deal with the threat by mass murder (Matthew 2:3, 16). Although Joseph and Mary rescued Jesus from certain death at Herod's hands, other very young boys in Bethlehem were not so fortunate (Matthew 2:16).

**Verses 2:17–18:** Jeremiah 31:15 makes reference to Rachel weeping for her children — for the northern tribes taken into exile in Assyria in 721 BC. Bethlehem was linked to Ephrath, the place near where Rachel was buried (Genesis 35:18). Rachel's mourning was applied to her children of a later age, and also to those whom Herod killed. Ramah was about six miles

north of Jerusalem, so her lamentation was heard a long way away. However, Jesus (like Moses) could return to the Holy Land; those who sought His life were dead.

**Verses 2:19-23:** By his own order, Herod was buried in the Herodium with great pomp and ceremony. Archaeologists discovered the grave site several years ago on the northern slopes of the man-made conical hill on which the fortified palace was constructed. Josephus writes:

*Everything was done by Archelaus to add to the magnificence of the ceremony; he brought forth all the royal ornaments to be carried in procession in honor of the deceased. The bier was of solid gold, studded with precious stones and draped with the richest purple embroidered with various colors. On it lay the body wrapped in a crimson robe, with a diadem resting on the head, and above that a golden crown and the scepter by the right hand (War 1:33.9).*

Herod lies dead in the Herodium. The “Bethlehem Babe” Herod planned to murder is alive and well, and enthroned as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

### **Concluding Thoughts:**

Since Matthew is writing for a Jewish readership, he uses the first part of his gospel to show us that Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy and also recapitulates certain themes, persons, and institutions of the Old Testament. For instance, through Matthew's genealogy, we see that Jesus is the true and greater David and thus the promised Davidic Messiah.

In a similar way, the slaughter of the young boys in Bethlehem reminds us of the slaughter of the Hebrew children in Moses' day. Consequently, since Jesus and Moses were both threatened by the infanticide of their age and since they both escaped it, Matthew uses this event to show us that Jesus is the true and greater Moses and thus Israel's law-giver and deliverer.

Finally, since Jesus and Israel both fled to Egypt and sojourned there for a time, Matthew is also showing us that Jesus is the true and greater Israel. He is the one who can stand in Israel's place, obey God's law on their behalf, and deliver them from sin through His death and resurrection.