



**“ISSI MY KINDT NIE”**  
**AN IDEOLOGICAL STUDY OF MATTHEW 2: 16 – 18**  
***SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF CHILDREN AS SANCTIONING  
OF VIOLENCE AGAINST THEM***

by  
Whitney Caroline Muller

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Supervisor: Prof Jeremy Punt  
Co-supervisor: Dr Nina Müller Van Velden

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# Declaration

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Whitney Caroline Muller

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## Abstract

This thesis is a socio-rhetorical reading of Matthew 2: 16 – 18, which seeks to understand how the reality of the Roman empire and the hierarchical social structures of the Matthean context intersect to create an ideological environment in which the massacre of the babies described in the pericope could occur.

Matthew 2: 16 – 18 narrates an account commonly referred to as the “Massacre of the Innocents,” a dark element in the Matthean birth narrative wherein King Herod, perceiving his position to be threatened, orders every child under the age of two, the vicinity of Bethlehem to be killed. Vernon Robbins’ socio-rhetorical analytic allows for a dynamic and multifaceted reading of the text and enables the investigation of imperial and hierarchical social interactions to construct and fill out the disastrous ideological environment behind the violent account depicted in the pericope.

Robbins’ analytic furthermore allows for ideological analysis such as Postcolonial interpretation of the text. As the infants of Bethlehem were the children of subjugated people living in the context of the Roman Empire, Postcolonial analysis is appropriate to analyse domination and subjugation in its many manifestations throughout history, gaining insight into how the past informs the present. Postcolonial studies have been further advanced and made richer by such introductions as African Feminisms to the optic. From this perspective, scholars such as Musa Dube make us aware of the complexities and the intersectionality of oppression faced by colonised women under the foreign colonial systems of oppression as well as the foreign and domestic patriarchal systems of oppression. This point of contact is referred to as “double oppression,” It is the lens with which I attempt to read the pericope in question. Accordingly, I propose that the children of Bethlehem suffer under two different yet interconnected forms of oppression: the first from the imperial oppression as children of the dominated and the second from the hierarchical, patriarchal structures that dominate their cultural and social lives.

Ultimately, this study asks questions about the imperial and socio-cultural influences inherent to the Gospel and how the narrative helps to paint a nuanced picture of the vastly unjust interaction between the powerful and the powerless, as depicted in Matthew 2: 16-18. It also provides insights into the underlying ideological environment of the pericope, its place in the nascency account, and the theology of the Gospel as a whole.

## Opsomming

Hierdie tesis is 'n sosio-retoriese lesing van Matteus 2: 16 – 18, wat poog om te verstaan hoe die werklikheid van die Romeinse ryk en die hiërargiese sosiale strukture van die Mattheaanse konteks mekaar kruis om 'n ideologiese omgewing te skep waarin die slagting beskryf word in die perikoop.

Matteus 2: 16 – 18 vertel 'n verhaal wat algemeen na verwys word as die "Slagting van die Onskuldiges", 'n donker element in die Mattheaanse geboortevertelling waarin koning Herodes, wat sien dat sy posisie bedreig word, beveel dat elke kind onder die ouderdom van twee, die omgewing van Bethlehem doodgemaak te word. Vernon Robbins se sosio-retoriese analitiese maak voorsiening vir 'n dinamiese en veelvlakkige lees van die teks en stel die ondersoek van imperiale en hiërargiese sosiale interaksies in staat om die rampspoedige ideologiese omgewing agter die gewelddadige weergawe wat in die perikoop uitgebeeld word, te konstrueer en in te vul.

Die kinders van Betlehem was die kinders van onderworpe mense wat in die konteks van die Romeinse Ryk geleef het. Postkoloniale studies ontleed die oorheersing en onderwerping in sy vele manifestasies deur die geskiedenis, en verkry insig in hoe die verlede die hede inlig. Postkoloniale studies is verder gevorder en ryker gemaak deur sulke inleidings soos Afrika-feminismes tot die optiese. Vanuit hierdie perspektief maak geleerdes soos Musa Dube ons bewus van die kompleksiteit en die interseksionaliteit van onderdrukking wat gekoloniseerde vroue in die gesig staar onder die buitelandse koloniale stelsels van onderdrukking sowel as die buitelandse en binnelandse patriargale stelsels van onderdrukking. Daar word na hierdie raakpunt verwys as "dubbele onderdrukking," Dit is die lens waarmee ek die betrokke perikoop probeer lees. Gevolglik stel ek voor dat die kinders van Bethlehem ly onder twee verskillende dog onderling gekoppelde vorme van onderdrukking: die eerste van die imperiale onderdrukking as kinders van die gedomineerde en die tweede van die hiërargiese, patriargale strukture wat hul kulturele en sosiale lewens oorheers.

Laastens, vra hierdie studie vrae oor die imperiale en sosio-kulturele invloede inherent aan die Evangelie en hoe die narratief help om 'n genuanseerde prentjie te skets van die grootliks onregverdigde interaksie tussen die magtiges en die magteloses, soos uitgebeeld in Matteus 2:16-18. Dit verskaf ook insigte in die onderliggende ideologiese omgewing van die

perikoop, die plek daarvan in die nakomelingverslag en die teologie van die Evangelie as geheel.

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# 1. Introductory Chapter:

## 1.1. Introduction: Black Wednesday and Matthew 2: 16 – 18

On 16 June 1976, more than a hundred students between the ages of ten and twenty were shot down, injured, and killed by the South African Police force in an extreme crackdown on the “unrest” in the townships surrounding the Apartheid government’s proposed language policies in the education sector. For months leading up to the day, the government had proposed changes that would have instituted Afrikaans as the language of instruction for students in the black education system. Its implementation would have been untenable given that black teachers had received their education in English and would not have been able to instruct their students in a language very few in townships like Soweto even understood, much less spoke. Furthermore, the vast majority of school learners would have been further disadvantaged by what, by that time, had already become the prejudiced and skewed Bantu Education to which people of colour were subjected. So the students and teachers began debating the matter amongst themselves in classrooms, leading to the mass mobilisation of students who felt that the proposed policies would have negatively impacted their already severely handicapped standard of education (Hirson 1979, 8 & 177–80). On that fateful day in June 1976, the students demonstrated peacefully in their township, singing songs and holding up handmade signs, when they were met with fully armed agents of the state. At first, gas canisters and stones were exchanged, then they set the dogs on the children, first the dogs, then the bullets. By the end of it and in the words of a South African poet H. M. L. Lentsoane...

Eventually the sun set,  
it overlooked the deep and dark wells.  
Blood vessels had been cut,  
blood was left gushing from the wounds!  
It flooded heavily like hissing rivers.  
The powerful had killed,  
the youth were dead.

[Translated into English from Sepedi] (Krog 2022, app. 2)

Such was the horrific aftermath of 16 June 1976 that H. M. L. Lentsoane, a teacher who had witnessed the carnage, details his account of the event in an epic, deeply moving Sepedi poem (quoted above), “Laboraro le lesoleso.” Lentsoane’s poem, “Black Wednesday” – as the title is translated – represents a departure from South African resistance poetry of the time, typically written in English (Krog 2022, 113). In its very form, structure, and language medium, the poem lends itself to postcolonial studies as a rich literary expression witnessing to the stark and violent reality of imperialism from the perspective of the oppressed. It also functions as resistance, defying not only the Apartheid censure machine but testifies against any claims that white-minority rule and the separation and subjugation of people based on race was anything but violent imperialism to its victims. From the viewpoint of postcolonial biblical studies, the Gospel of Matthew can function similarly as a complex textual witness to the interaction between the imperial culture of its context and the local cultural experiences of its subjects (Carter 2001, 71).

This study does not assume any simplistic comparison, nor anachronistic similarities, but aims to explore analogies between the ancient and modern contexts as far as situations of imperialism and oppression are concerned, teasing out points of convergence for the sake of illuminating an ancient text. We see a prime example of this interaction in the tragedy of Matthew 2: 16 – 18, which depicts a cruel event in the larger Matthean birth narrative. In the account, the Gospel of Matthew narrates that King Herod has commanded all boys in Bethlehem under two to be killed to eliminate his political rival, Jesus. The evangelist then proceeds to quote a passage of Hebrew Scripture wherein Rachel of the Israelite tradition mourns for her children lost to the violence of conquest and exile. Rachel becomes a voice for the women of Bethlehem who mourn their children’s premature and tragic passing at the hands of a tyrant and a vastly unjust political system (Blomberg 1992, 68; Evans 2012, 60).

## 1.2. Subject of study: Ideological Investigation of Matthew 2: 16 -18

### 1.2.1. Research questions

My research question asks how imperial and hierarchical social structures interact to construct and fill out the disastrous ideological environment behind the violent account depicted in the pericope. How do these insights influence an ideological reading of the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18?

### 1.2.2. Research area and the main focus

Matthew 2: 16 – 18 narrates an account commonly referred to as the “Massacre of the Innocents” (Gundry 1982, 35; Carson 1984, 94; Blomberg 1992, 68; Clarke 2003, 22) and describes a singularly dark element in the Matthean birth narrative wherein King Herod, perceiving his position to be threatened, orders every child under the age of two in the vicinity of Bethlehem to be killed (Blomberg 1992, 68; Garland 2001, 25; France 2007, 82; Evans 2012, 59). While interpreters of the Gospel of Matthew have debated the historicity of the account, the plausibility of the event has essentially not been called into question. Interpreters have observed that the verdict would not have drawn substantial attention from historians contemporary to King Herod due to the relatively rural and insignificant perception of Bethlehem at the time (Carson 1984, 90; Blomberg 1992, 68; Hagner 1993, 35). Despite that, the evangelist augments the account with a quotation from Jeremiah 31: 15, likening the event to one of the most collectively traumatising events in Israel’s history and identity (Clarke 2003, 23; Evans 2012, 59).

My study seeks to investigate the ideological environment of Matthew 2: 16-18, focusing on the dominant imperial institutions and 1<sup>st</sup>-century Greco-Roman and Judeo-Palestinian social and cultural values concerning children in the Matthean context. My investigation seeks to establish a sense of the contextual circumstances dictating the lives and deaths of the Matthean infants of Matthew 2: 16 – 18. This study broadly uses socio-rhetorical criticism and extrapolates on inner textual elements in the text, imperial, social, and cultural intertextual elements implicit in the text, and social and cultural textures, to inform the backdrop for further ideological analysis of the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 (Robbins 1996a; 1996b; Gowler 2010b).

### 1.2.3. Relevant questions

A crucial first step is sufficient consideration of the contextual world of the Matthean text. The Gospel was not written in, nor does it detail events from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century context. Thus, it requires a sensitivity to the social arena of the time and the geographical area to avoid idiosyncrasies and ethnocentrism (Lategan 1985, 18). The Gospel of Matthew was written in a world dominated by the institutional power of the Roman Empire (Carter 2001, 37).

Therefore, delineating the imperial institutions and values of the empire is essential to grasping the infants' political habitat. As children of a conquered land and people, which imperial mechanisms were most relevant and at play in the children's fatal interaction with client-king Herod?

The Gospel narrative's events are within the broader 1<sup>st</sup>-century Mediterranean cultural context (Malina, 1993, p. 11), specifically in the social milieu of Second Temple Judaism and 1<sup>st</sup>-century Greco-Roman socio-cultural values. Embedded in these cultures, the Matthean audience would have been subject to, or at the very least influenced by, the patterns of social behaviour characteristic of those cultures. My investigation will therefore entertain questions around the social positions of Bethlehem's infant boys in light of social orders contextual to the Gospel of Matthew.

Ultimately, asking questions about the imperial and socio-cultural influences inherent to the Gospel and the narrative helps paint a nuanced picture of the vastly unjust interaction between the powerful and the powerless, as depicted in Matthew 2: 16-18. It can also provide insights into the underlying ideological environment of the pericope, its place in the nascency account, and the theology of the Gospel as a whole.

#### 1.2.4. Limiting the area of research

The historical and geographical boundaries of the study are limited to the geographical setting of the Gospel of Matthew, generally located in the ancient Mediterranean around the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Political and cultural boundaries are limited to Second Temple Jewish society in Palestine and broader Greco-Roman imperial and social institutions. These limitations correspond to the dominance of imperial values and institutions within which the Gospel takes place (Carter 2001, 37), the prevailing Greco-Roman societal constructs of the Matthean context, and the significant social and ideological influence of Second Temple Jewish society (Basser 2015, 2–3 & 47). The limitations are antithetical in as much as their broadness characterises them, with the purposes of this study not allowing for a more detailed and precise delineation of the vagaries of values in Jewish groupings of that historical context, nor those of the vastly diverse groups of people and areas in the Roman Empire. In

this case, universal models and generalisations will be best suited to accomplish the aims of this study.<sup>1</sup>

The Gospel of Matthew's overall conception of violence will not be dealt with in this study, nor will it extensively explore the gospels' comprehensive treatment of children. The latter subject of study is a recent topic of investigation by an increasing number of biblical scholars (Admirand 2012). My study does not extensively treat the depiction of the children in the Gospel of Matthew or the New Testament at large, commenting on it only as it serves the purposes of investigating the pericope and supplying some narrative or textual clues. I focus specifically on the children in the pericope and how the underlying imperial and socio-cultural mechanisms of the Gospel of Matthew's context bred a complex ideological environment that exposed the boys to Herod's absolute violence.

A significant limitation to note is the size of the pericope (Mt 2:16-18). Its smallness limits what I can explicitly extricate from the text from a strictly historical-critical perspective. Significant research into the context backdrop of the text – through literary documents, archaeology, and theoretical social models – and a fair amount of abductive<sup>2</sup> reasoning will have to be employed to glean insights into the pericope which are fair and responsible. Crucially, however, my study recognises the inherent role of the interpreter as the “meaning-maker” as an interpretation of biblical texts will inevitably be affected and determined by the exegete's background, character, and partiality. The position that no interpretation can ever be genuinely objective is one which I not only hold to but will attempt to honour as honestly as possible throughout my study and its findings.

### 1.3. Preliminary study: Historicity, Parallels, and Fulfilment Quotations

Previous formal interpretations of the pericope Matthew 2: 16-18 have primarily focused on three areas. Firstly, interpreters have speculated considerably on the historicity of this unique account not found in any of the other Gospels. Secondly, academics have studied the obvious parallels between this account in Jesus' infancy narrative and a similar account in the biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Universal models and generalisations cannot be applied 100 percent to any cultural group as there will always be differentiations, especially for such a large swath of area (Crook 2009, 599). Therefore, my study focuses on the values that *dominate* the specified geographical and cultural groupings and values but that cannot be applied evenly across all groups in an area. Such an approach seems to be more appropriate for a study of limited scope as is the case here.

<sup>2</sup> Abductive reasoning is derived from Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of logical inference; seeking the most evident or likely or simplest conclusion for available data or observations (Josephson and Josephson 1996, 1).

Moses' infancy narrative. Lastly, significant research has been done on the role of the fulfilment quotation in this pericope and the role of the fulfilment quotations in the Gospel of Matthew. What follows is by no means an exhaustive history of all interpretations done on this pericope but is meant to serve as a broad, thematic overview of the main directions of scholarship concerning Matthew 2: 16-18.

### 1.3.1. Historicity

When considering the historicity of the event, it is difficult to confirm details with any certainty; on the one hand, no extra-biblical sources attest to the massacre, and Matthew is our only biblical source recounting the event. Even Josephus, a Jewish historian not known to be shy in detailing the atrocities Herod allegedly committed during his reign, did not mention the account. The fact that Herod was well documented to have committed atrocities makes the massacre somewhat plausible as it does not go against his propensity to carry out violent acts to preserve his power. Specific Medieval European communities have accepted the account as a historical fact, as evidenced by its reference in the hagiography *The Golden Legend* (Clarke 2003, 22–23). Some scholars assert that there is no reason to expect that the account would have been documented; very few events depicted in the Gospel of Matthew are. In light of Herod's other atrocities, the account would not have been a significant moment in his political career. However, it coincides with what we know of Herod's vicious character towards his rivals (France 2007, 108–9 & 137). In the end, however, my focus is not on the event's historicity but rather on the role it played and plays in the Matthean narrative.

### 1.3.2. Parallel to Moses' birth narrative

Another popular area for speculation among researchers concerns the parallels between the Moses narrative and the Matthean birth narrative. The theory on this alleged parallelism I find most compelling is that Matthew uses an imprecise Moses typology. This typology is similar to the use of biblical figures and traditions in popular literature and media to illustrate and flesh out themes in the story by recalling images familiar to the audience. He does not equate the character with the other as each character and story is a standalone. Still, the



Moses narrative from which Matthews draws can offer insight concerning the narrative and message he wants to convey about Jesus (Luz 2007, 119).

### 1.3.3. Fulfilment quotation

The third area of speculation is particularly complex as it relates to the role of the fulfilment formula and its accompanying quotation. The theories surrounding the Matthean author's use of the quotation and its significance are notably broad due to the subjective nature of the inquiry. Each interpreter sees a different significance in Matthew's use of the fulfilment quotations in the Gospel of Matthew and how it is used in the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18. Nevertheless, scholars generally agree that the Matthean author consciously and skilfully weaved Jewish tradition into the larger purposes of his message. Moreover, intelligent principles governed his usage of the traditions as he identified thematic connections to undergird his larger premise of God's control over both the history and traditions of Israel and its fulfilment in the birth of Jesus Christ (Carson 1984, 77; France 2007, 45).

### 1.3.4. Proposed shift

Overall, the focus has been on Jesus instead of the children, but I propose a fundamental shift in perspective that correlates with Phyllis Tribble's concept of "texts of terror". Tribble posits that harrowing stories of violence against women in the Bible are not afforded the appropriate respect and sobriety such accounts of suffering deserve. As part of her methodological perspective, she proposes guidance points for a reader attempting to make sense of these violent narratives. Her third and fourth points strike me as most relevant and poignant and serve as the main departure point for my reading of the pericope in question:

To subordinate the suffering of the four women to the suffering of the cross is spurious. Their passion has its integrity; no comparisons diminish the terror they knew...

To seek the redemption of these stories in the resurrection is perverse. Sad stories do not have happy endings. (Tribble 1994, 2)

I work from her insights in recognising that, too often, the violence done to these children is put into a larger salvific arc to sanitise the cruelty of the account. The "Massacre of the Innocents" is usually seen as a minor tragedy as part of a larger birth narrative in which the

event is eventually redeemed. This story needs to be read, told, and written about because of the real suffering it witnessed in the past and partly because of the light it sheds on the real suffering of children even today. Moreover, it should be read and understood in its own right to give insight into the sometimes-vicious ideological habitats we create, exposing the already vulnerable to further systemic dangers and brutality.

#### 1.4. Provisional hypothesis: Ideological rejection of the norm

My provisional hypothesis is that given the imperial and socio-cultural contexts in which the Gospel of Matthew was produced, the children of Bethlehem were inherently vulnerable – a condition that Herod, in his absurdly advantageous position, could exploit with impunity. Contradictorily this inherent vulnerability would not have sparked a social desire to protect them; instead, that same perceived and inherent vulnerability could have caused the infants' demise to be deemed unnoteworthy. When read with this subtext in mind, this short, haunting narrative has the potential to illuminate much about the true nature of the ideological world we create and the real, disastrous effects it can have on those who can least protect themselves.

As Robbins points out, ideology does not have to detract from a careful and systematic reading of the texts but seeks to identify areas of uncertain or overlooked knowledge and perspectives (Robbins 1996a, 104). My purposeful utilisation of ideology in both my title and my study indicates a conscious effort to reject the idea of “neutrality” or “objectivity” in the art of interpretation. Interpretation is always, inevitably, influenced by the interpreter, the way that they understand and construct the world (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 12 & 19). Neither I nor the text can avoid questions of power and the dynamics embedded in our worlds. My study seeks to acknowledge that fact honestly by clearly pointing to my own presuppositions and allegiances, more transparently identifying how they affect my reading of the text, particularly my explicit attention to groups historically overlooked in biblical criticism and elsewhere.

Children, and in particular the children of Matthew 2: 16-18, in my view, are an example of one such group historically neglected in biblical criticism and other research. Matthew 2: 16-18 can be seen to ideologically reject this pattern by specifically mourning the loss of the children. It forces the reader to pause and re-evaluate how children, especially vulnerable

children, are viewed. The “Massacre of the Innocents” may have been socially sanctioned and perfectly in line with imperial machinations, but that is not how the Gospel portrays the event. The unique placement of the pericope forces its readers to pause the happy tidings that the birth of Jesus is meant to represent. It exposes the violent world the saviour was born into and reveals how vulnerable he and other children of his social station were in that socio-historical milieu.

### 1.5. Proposed methodology: Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation

The questions of this study are related to various socio, historical, cultural, political, and literary facets embedded in the text. I propose using Vernon Robbins’ socio-rhetorical methodology (Robbins 1996b, 1–3), an interdisciplinary interpretive analytic that can be used to delineate and identify the disparate spheres of questioning coherently. In Robbins’ own words, this type of interpretation is not a new methodology or novel specialisation. Instead, it is an “interpretive analytic”, referring to a broad orientation that nurtures the idea that texts articulate complex interactions within larger arenas of power (Robbins 1996b, 12). He envisions ancient texts through the metaphor of a tapestry, arguing that a tapestry comprises multiple textures, similar to texts and its different phenomena, such as ideology, sociology, etc., embedded in its creation and reception. Robbins asserts that using this analogy, one can manipulate different strands in the tapestry, i.e., focus on different phenomena in the text, to illuminate varying insights ingrained in the texts (Robbins 1996a, 2–3).

Robbins identifies four broad textures that the interpreter can use as a guideline to navigate the different social, religious, and ideological elements inherent to the text: Inner Texture, Intertexture, Social and Cultural Texture, and Ideological Texture (Robbins 1996b, 3; Gowler 2010a, 3; 2010b, 193) Socio-rhetorical interpretation allows me to investigate multiple phenomena embedded in the text and investigate the intersections between them.

The final texture, Ideological Texture, allows social, cultural, and literary insights to be interpreted through an ideological tradition. I found Postcolonial biblical interpretation the most relevant and enlightening for this study. Postcolonial biblical interpretation is a methodological optic that engages cultural studies<sup>3</sup> and biblical criticism through ideological

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<sup>3</sup> Cultural studies is the study of institutions of ‘culture’ such as the standardization of language, forms of literature, education, media etc. and its integral connections to the changes and conflicts of life (Fekete 1993, 487).

discourse, mainly by prioritising and analysing power dynamics between social groups in contexts defined by imperial-colonial formations (Segovia 2005, 23). Postcolonial criticism, therefore, highlights the relationship dynamics characterised by unequal power distributions and concepts of centre versus periphery, the metropolis versus the margins, and the norm versus the “other” (Segovia 2005, 23).

Musa Dube enriches the conversation by introducing the concept of “double colonialism” that Dube asserts women from the colonised world must endure. Using her insights, we can see the plight of children and their multivalent oppression. Essentialism, she points out, identifies a universally oppressed woman, thus obscuring the lived reality of the differences between the subjugation of different women in different colonised/colonising contexts. Women from colonised contexts, she says, are burdened by both colonisation and patriarchy within their contexts (Dube 1999, 214). Children of colonised and imperialised contexts are similarly “doubly” burdened by interlocking mechanisms of oppression working against them.

Overall, Socio-Rhetorical criticism, with its many interwoven textures, helps answer multivalent questions and investigate a single literary work from multiple angles, taking the text's literary and socio-historical aspects into account to arrive at more full-bodied readings. This methodology, like any other, has its associated flaws and downsides, but it does succeed in avoiding the issues related to more limited and narrow methodologies (Piotrowski 2016, 2–3). In this case, analysing literary textures, with their associated genre, rhetoric, and traditions, highlights how the text might have been read by its audience and how it may have shaped their understanding of themselves (Piotrowski 2016, 2–3). The pericope in question recalls and incorporates much older literary traditions and concepts in Judaism, such as exile and exodus. The contexts and concepts that the text recall can thus be seen as a commentary on the power dynamics that were at play in the Matthean community. By taking the contextual circumstances seriously, an analysis of the social and cultural power dynamics becomes possible, with a specific focus on the vulnerable position of children and their liability to become collateral damage in a story of opposing powers.

Reading the pericope and its subtext in this way, we see the vulnerability of the children more fully, but also how those vulnerabilities are deeply connected to their immediate contexts and identities. By working through some of the socio, cultural, and political textures in the text, I can highlight the intersectionality of the children's contexts, exposing a fuller image of the dangerous ideological world they inhabit.

## 1.6. Motivation for research: Childhood-centred studies

Children and childhood are historically neglected themes within scholarship and have begun to see attention from scholars since the late 20th century. Phillipe Ariès is commonly perceived as the pioneer of modern investigations of childhood through his work on the social reality of childhood and his historical-critical analysis of the concept (Bakke 2005, 3; Garroway 2018, 2–4). Scholarship with a specific focus on children in the fields of Ancient Near Eastern archaeology and biblical scholarship has emerged in recent years in recognition of the importance of the role of children in ancient households. Scholars have pointed out that since children comprise the largest segment of the population in societies with high child mortality rates, excluding children from scholarly work leaves a substantial gap when trying to understand life in the ancient world (Garroway 2018, 3).

In biblical scholarship, child-centred interpretations emerged as part of the liberationist orientation, which seeks to give voice to the underrepresented in biblical texts. Despite the pervasiveness of childhood both in the ancient world and today, as a social grouping, children receive a surprisingly scant amount of attention from biblical interpreters. The interpretation of this pericope is no exception. Scholars who have done creative and insightful work on using the fulfilment quotation in the Gospel of Matthew and its role in the pericope have made, at most, if any at all, passing remarks about the role of the children of the massacre. France (2007) is one of the only interpreters that mentions the possibility of mourning being significant, he does so only to dismiss the point as superficial and he assumes that the author must have much more in mind than to point out that there are grounds for experiencing grief at the loss of children. Given the context, I propose that he underestimates how impactful that moment of bereavement and recognition can be. Lament has a long history of subversive resistance and defiance within Israel's literary traditions. Walter Bruggeman asserts that lament can advance an alternative social reality (Brueggeman 2008, 223). The evangelist pauses the earlier joyful tidings and employs the powerful literary device of lament in conjunction with one of the most distinctive mechanisms in the Matthean arsenal: a fulfilment quotation. At the very least, this should indicate that this story's inclusion in the Gospel is not happenstance or casual; it is a crucial part of the epic story of the life and teachings of Christ.

### 1.7. Contextual implications: The plight of South African children

The Bible, its readings, its concepts, and our understanding thereof have had a significant impact on the history of South Africa and its present people and circumstances. Given that most South Africans identify as Christian, it can also be a powerful resource and lens to address and think through crucial issues related to societal concerns (Statistics South Africa 2017). In the final chapter of this study, I consider the contextual implications of my research in a context like South Africa with a specific focus on violence against children. Children in our country still suffer under the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Their positionality within the subjugated Global South and inherited social and economic ills put them at the mercy of exploitation and abuse.

Furthermore, their place in their cultural contexts complicates that vulnerability. In many African cultures, deference to older members of the family or society is strongly encouraged. This often has the unfortunate result of silencing children in the face of abuse from members of their society who are older and contributes to the comfort with which perpetrators abuse their victims. Churches and other religious organisations also contribute to this culture by reinforcing a hierarchical, patriarchal family and societal structure as the ideal.

The mixture of postcolonial circumstances and societal norms fosters an environment where violence not only occurs but occurs with alarming regularity. Violence against children in this light sheds greater insight into the intersectionality of children's vulnerability and offers a moral critique against propensities toward selective concern for children. By seeing their suffering as the result of a complex system of values in which we all play a part, twin adages well known in the Cape Flats seem to both confront us and correct us respectively, the first: "Issi my kindt nie" (translated to "not my child", implying: "not my child, not my problem") and second, in contrast, "your child is my child".

These insights are not peculiar to South Africa; globally, "Issi my kindt nie" refers to the reality that children's experiences cannot be placed outside the context that cares for them. In the ancient world, values such as universal human dignity were not a consideration. Therefore, children's "rights" depended entirely on whom they were related to. An increased interest in the human rights of all, including children, often misleads us into believing that this selective protection must not be as prevalent concerning children today. This is not the case despite transnational legislative measures with such efforts as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Admirand, 2012, pp. 188 & 193). An apt illustration

of this phenomenon on a global scale would be a comparison between the so-called “migrant crisis” and the war in Ukraine. In many African states and even in the United States and Europe, the influx of families due to violence saw already vulnerable children subjected to further mistreatment. Contrarily when the situation in Ukraine grew dire, refuge and other resources were donated to fleeing families and those most in need. Sadly, protections and care for children were and still are dependent on whom a child is related to and whom they represent rather than acknowledging their universal vulnerability as children.

## 1.8. Chapter outlines

In this first chapter, I identified my central research question as an inquiry into the ideological environment of the children of the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 primarily by looking at the interaction between imperial institutions and hierarchical social structures. I established my research area and focus, supplementing it with additional relevant questions aimed at directing the purpose of my study. I outlined the limitations of my research and summarised the essence of previous interpretations, presenting a shift in perspective based on Phyllis Trible’s work. After providing my provisional answer, I presented my methodological approach, the motivations for my research, the lacunae I hope my research helps to fulfil, and the contextual issues that my study may touch on or contribute to.

In the second chapter, I will provide some preliminary considerations of the Gospel of Matthew and review the prevailing arguments and scholarship around Matthew 2: 16 – 18, including a further exposition on broad themes such as historicity, typology, and parallels to Moses, and use of fulfilment Scripture in the pericope. I will also more fully delineate the methodology I will use to do exegesis on the text.

Turning to a socio-rhetorical approach, my third chapter is focused on the text’s inner texture, which deals exclusively with the text's inner workings and the author's clear wording choices as he appropriates and reconfigures older traditions in specific ways. This chapter will also expand on the intertexture of the text, explicitly recalling the imperial institutions and hierarchical social constructs relevant to the context of the pericope.

Chapter four of my study draws out the socio-cultural texture of the text, making use of various resources such as archaeology and authoritative literature to establish the social positions of children in typical Greco-Roman households around the first century CE as well

as Jewish households in the geographical area around Palestine in the first century CE. Establishing their social standings will help identify to which extent and in what ways first-century children were prone to violence.

My fifth chapter is a postcolonial interpretation of the text and the children of the text as subjects of the empire and as members of distinct and established social orders. The Matthean text then is read as a witness of imperial processes profoundly affecting the lives of the infant boys and as a type of resistance to that reality, exposing the violent face of the regime. I read the text parallel to another postcolonial literary text: H. M. L. Lentsoane's poem 'Black Wednesday'. I will analyse how Matthew 2: 16 – 18 and 'Black Wednesday' testifies to the multiplicity of the children's oppression and how their contexts intersect to form a toxic environment that can easily be perverted by those in a position to do so. Reading these texts is particularly relevant for contemporary South Africa, where the legacy of colonialism and imperialism still affects children today (Nicolaou and Durieux 2006, 33). Moreover, the prevalence of poverty, social inequality, and the inheritance of harmful social and political ideologies has contributed to a context of disturbing violence against children in our country. Therefore, it is all the more essential to engage with "texts of terror" for children that can illuminate their vulnerable circumstances and the roles we, as the collective, play in their endangerment and protection.



## 2. Chapter 2: Background and Methodology

### 2.1. Preliminary considerations: Dating, location, authorship, and background

#### 2.1.1. Dating

The scholarly consensus, if any, around the Gospel of Matthew's dating, authorship, and origin has always been notoriously difficult to ascertain. Still, there are some details that most Matthean scholars can agree upon. The dating of the Gospel of Matthew is customarily placed at around 80 C. E. for various reasons. First, the destruction of Jerusalem occurred at around 70 C. E., an event that chapter 22, verse 7 of the Gospel of Matthew seems to allude to in a parable depicting the destroyed city. Secondly, the Gospel of Matthew makes significant use of the Gospel of Mark as source material, widely considered to have been written around 70 C. E. Thirdly, The Didache and Ignatius Bishop of Antioch are known to be the first to quote the Gospel of Matthew around 100 C. E. These factors combined to place the dating of the Gospel of Matthew safely at around 80 C. E (Carter 2001, 36; Clarke 2003, xxii).

#### 2.1.2. Location

The location of the authorial audience is tentatively placed around Antioch in Syria, but this suggestion is primarily based on conjecture. There are many other contenders for the possible city of origin of the Gospel, including Palestine, Edessa, and Alexandria; the reasoning behind Antioch, however, is based on the limited clues we have at our disposal. Firstly, Matthew 4: 24 specifically mentions “Syria,” even though its source material, the Gospel of Mark, mentions only Galilee. Secondly, the Gospel of Matthew places particular importance on the Apostle Peter, whom Paul places as an influential figure in Antioch in Galatians 2: 11 – 14. Thirdly, both the Didache – thought to be written in Antioch – and Ignatius of Antioch quotes the Gospel of Matthew (Brown 1993, 47; Garland 2001, 3). Based on these considerations, scholars speculate that the Gospel of Matthew may have been written in Antioch in Syria, but thus far, the evidence is not overwhelmingly compelling.

### 2.1.3. Authorship and sourcing

The Gospel of Matthew sources heavily from the Gospel of Mark, as does the Gospel of Luke. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke drew from and interpreted the Gospel of Mark in their iterations of Jesus' life, works, and theology. In addition to sourcing from the Gospel of Mark, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke also seem to have shared another source, the hypothesised Q source of sayings. Lastly, the Gospel of Matthew has some unique material not shared by any other Gospels (Garland 2001, 3–4; Clarke 2003, xxii; Nolland 2005, 9).

The author of the Gospel is not known; for a long time, it was attributed to the disciple Matthew, the only one of the Gospels to be attributed to an Apostle. However, the attribution is now widely deemed improbable given the author's heavy reliance on another source, the Gospel of Mark, for first-hand reports. For the sake of convenience, however, I will use "Matthew" to denote the contents of the Gospel of Matthew, the composer/editors responsible for the final form of the Gospel of Matthew, and to indicate the narrating voice implied in the text (Brown 1993, 46; Clarke 2003, xxi; Weren 2014, 2).

What we can say about the authorship is that Matthew was probably a cosmopolitan Greek speaker as he wrote in koine Greek - the lingua franca of the Eastern empire – and improved upon the quality of the Gospel of Mark's Greek. The language in the Gospel of Matthew also does not indicate that there are significant sections directly translated from Semitic languages. However, the author shows a masterful command of the Hebrew Scriptures, traditions, and knowledge of the Jewish sectarian conflicts. This combination of indicators suggests that the Gospel was written by a Greek-speaking yet culturally Jewish Christian in the 1st century, writing to an urban Greek-speaking audience aware of and navigating Jewish sectarian tensions (Brown 1993, 46; Clarke 2003, xxii).

### 2.1.4. Contextual and theological background

Amidst a fair amount of uncertainty regarding date, provenance and authorship – significant concerns but not determinative for my investigation – attention to the contextual and theological setting of the Gospel is vital for my work. After the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE in response to the first Jewish revolt, the Jews had to recentre their faith around synagogues and the religious leadership of Pharisees and scribes instead of the Temple. Increasingly, as they were being excluded in this new dispensation, early Jesus

followers needed to redefine themselves in light of the life of their Saviour and the Jewish tradition in which he was born. Matthew answers this context with a detailed account of Jesus' life and teachings while placing it all within Israel's history and traditions. The polemic environment of Matthew's context leaks into the Gospel, somewhat anachronistically, as Jesus often appears brutally critical of Jewish leadership on multiple occasions. However, Matthew's overall religious and cultural framework is overwhelmingly Jewish, amplified by Jesus as the Messiah, the themes of the fulfilment of the Scriptures, and promises from the time of Abraham (Clarke 2003, xxii–xxiii).

While Mark's Gospel often makes veiled allusions to Jesus' relationship to Jewish Scripture and tradition, the Gospel of Matthew builds upon this interpretation of Jesus' life and teachings. Matthew explicitly links his narrative claims about Jesus to quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures. He clearly references textual sources for readers to refer to, and they further strengthen his assertion that Jesus fulfils the Scriptures. Through his use of fulfilled prophecy, Matthew frames Israel's Scripture as predictive, as the precursor to Jesus' life and works. From the time of its writing up until the present age, the Gospel of Matthew represents a well-written, easily digestible, and theologically rich retelling of the life of Jesus and how the community that followed him is related to the traditions and religion in which he was born (Hays 2016, 136–37).

The events of the Gospel and its writing also originated within the Roman Empire, which exercised enormous socio-cultural control over inhabitants' daily lives and literary productions. In such an environment, especially after the destruction of the Temple, communities such as Jewish sects and Jesus followers of various backgrounds, Jewish and Gentile, had to vie for and defend their identities in a pluralistic world. The robust polemical environment described in the narrative of Christ's life and his relationship with the Jewish religious leaders is likely influenced by later rifts in Judaism and Christianity occurring at the time of the writing of the Gospel of Matthew (Mongstad-Kvammen 2013, 43; Bassler 2015, 3; Hays 2016, 137).

Matthew tells the story of Jesus embedded within the social and religious world of Jewish first-century Palestine, the evidence of which lies in his profound understanding and use of Jewish concepts and literary forms such as legal formulae and allusions to prophetic literature. Simultaneously, Matthew also tells a story of clashes between the mainline Jewish communities and the Jesus communities, moving away from typically Jewish literary and

social structures that coincide with Matthew's contemporary context of competition and urgent need to address the Jewish and Gentile believers in the Jesus community. Finally, Matthew once again demonstrates his skill by interweaving these disparate positions in a unified and coherent narrative which requires no extensive expertise on the reader's part (Basser 2015, 3 & 47).

## 2.2. History of interpretation: Christological to Child-centric

Past interpretations of the "Massacre of the Innocents" can be characterised using three themes of inquiry, as already alluded to in the introductory chapter: historicity, creative use of tradition, and application of the fulfilment formula. Further elaboration of these three themes is essential for framing the interpretive context of the text in question.

### 2.2.1. Historicity

The first area of speculation is the issue of historicity, which has always been highly contentious among interpreters of the Gospel of Matthew. In this particular pericope, they largely disagree about whether or not the Matthean author may have fabricated the account or not. The lack of secular historical evidence and the seemingly explicit references to Jewish tradition, in the mind of some scholars, make the issue of historicity challenging to determine with any certainty (Clarke 2003, 2; Luz 2007, 120). What is noteworthy, however, is that the vast majority agree that it was a likely occurrence, especially in light of King Herod's character as depicted by various historical sources (Gundry 1982, 36; Carson 1984, 94; Blomberg 1992, 56; Hagner 1993, 35; Basser 2015, 56). However, the lack of secular historical sources to substantiate the account does not disqualify the event's historicity.

Christian tradition has certainly exaggerated the numeric extent of the massacre (Hagner 1993, 37; Clarke 2003, 22; France 2007, 85), most notably the hagiography *The Golden Legend* originating in Medieval Europe. This version of the account vastly overestimates the number of children who could have conceivably fallen victim to the massacre. Based on the area and speculated birth rate, the victims would have been closer to twenty than the traditional Byzantine number of 14000 and the Syriac 64000 (Brown 1993, 204; Luz 2007, 122). *The Golden Legend* also classifies the children as the first martyrs. In accordance with

their given name, ‘the Holy Innocents’, 28 December was designated as ‘Holy Innocents Day’ to commemorate the day of their martyrdom (Clarke 2003, 22–23). While the number of victims is hardly the measure of the atrocity, fairness, if not accuracy, in dealing with the historical context remains important. However, given the localised nature of the account, interpreters have remarked that, in all likelihood, historians contemporary to King Herod would not have regarded it as noteworthy in his political career overall (Carson 1984, 90; Blomberg 1992, 68; Hagner 1993, 35; Evans 2012, 59).

The focus of my study is not to speculate on whether or not the account happened historically but what previous studies all seem to indicate namely that such an event could easily have happened, and contemporary historians would not necessarily have been deemed it significant. If according to biblical scholars, such a horrific account, as depicted by Matthew 2: 16 – 18, would have been deemed inconsequential by ancient standards, this study seeks to understand what does that say about the social, cultural, and ideological world the children inhabited.

### 2.2.2. Creative use of tradition

The second area of speculation concerns the author’s creative employment of tradition. Many scholars argue that instead of relaying an actual historical event, the Gospel imaginatively utilised the traditions from his context to emphasise his more extensive characterisation of Jesus. Scholars posit that the Matthean author could have been using familiar literary tropes found in many cultural contexts in the ancient world. For example, in the Ancient Near East, mythological or folkloric motifs wherein an evil ruler threatens the divine child were fairly standard (Hagner 1993, 35; Clarke 2003, 22; France 2007, 82–83; Luz 2007, 119), as well as astrological predictions of future rulers’ births in the Roman Empire such as Caesar Augustus’ (Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum* 94) and Emperor Nero’s (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.47) (Carson 1984, 83; Clarke 2003, 17; Evans 2012, 44 & 60).

It is also possible for the author to have been making use of common motifs found in biographical histories of the Jewish saviours, including Moses, for whom there is a strong Jewish tradition that claims that Pharaoh’s astrologers were aware of a saviour’s imminent birth at the time of Moses’ nascency (Carson 1984, 82; Bassar 2015, 51). Another supposition is that the Matthean author may have sought to refer specifically to Moses to

create a typology wherein the characters of Jesus and King Herod are paralleled with those of Moses and Pharaoh (Gundry 1982, 36; 1982, 34; Carson 1984, 94; Garland 2001, 29; France 2007, 82–83; Evans 2012, 60; Bassler 2015, 51). Many Matthean scholars strongly disagree with this position, suggesting that the stories correspond analogically instead of being strict parallels. The Matthean author would then have used the Jewish tradition the way Jewish scholars typically did by utilising older traditions to understand new contexts. He, therefore, did not strictly characterise Jesus as the “new Moses” but used the familiar motifs found in the traditional Jewish stories to emphasise Jesus’ relation to deeper themes, such as his divine sonship or his embodiment as the Davidic King (Carson 1984, 83; Blomberg 1992, 67; Clarke 2003, 23; Evans 2012, 49).

These interpretations are typically ‘Jesus-centric’ and focuses mainly on how literary traditions drawing from the ancient Mediterranean world or Jewish literary traditions paint and expound upon the character of Jesus as he is depicted in the Gospel. These interpretations very rarely consider or problematize the position of the children who are not the Jesus child as the literary collateral damage within the Gospel. This study specifically focuses on the dangerous environment of the children and what that indicates about the world that Jesus is subject to as child of a conquered people and how this perspective enriches but also troubles our understanding of the Matthean birth narrative and the Gospel as a whole.

### 2.2.3. Fulfilment formula

Finally, most Matthean scholars today acknowledge that Matthew’s use of fulfilment formulas in the Gospel was not arbitrary. Using Hebrew Scriptures and traditions deliberately and insightfully, Matthew illustrates that Christ’s followers were not inventing a new religion but that the life and ministry of Jesus were the true realisation of the Jewish faith. Scholars agree that the Matthean author consciously and skilfully weaved Jewish tradition into the larger purposes of his message. Intelligent principles governed his usage of the traditions as he identified thematic connections to undergird his larger premise of God’s control over both the history and traditions of Israel and its fulfilment in the birth of Jesus Christ (France 2007, 45).

The fulfilment quotation, it has been suggested, looks backwards and forwards; it looks back by reflecting on the threatened birth of another liberator in Jewish tradition, Moses, as well as

many other ancient foretold kings and heroes whose lives were in danger from power-mad rulers at their infancy (Clarke 2003, 23; Luz 2007, 119–22). The story is also thought to look forward as a foreshadowing of what is to come, when the authorities will once again assist the powers of the empire, this time succeeding as they play a role in condemning Jesus to death (Clarke 2003, 23). Another debated suggestion is the role of the fulfilment scripture as the prediction of the future events to take place, some interpreters suggesting that the event foreshadows Jesus' final moments as he faces hostilities from both Jewish authorities and Pilate as an agent of Rome (Carson 1984, 83; Blomberg 1992, 70; Garland 2001, 30).

The issue of theodicy is not often brought up in the interpretation of the text; the Gospel of Matthew itself neatly avoids the association between the will of God and the death of the children through the use of “then was fulfilled the word” instead of the usual “so that the word may be fulfilled.” On this point, many scholars seem to agree that the author's use of “then was fulfilled” instead of the stronger conjunctions used in other explicit fulfilment quotations indicates a certain amount of distance between what God specifically wills and the evil humans choose to perpetrate (Hagner 1993, 37; Luz 2007, 121). Although, for most, the struggle is between God and Herod, the children are the unfortunate collateral damage in this conflict. Their deaths are seen as a type of martyrdom, forming part of – and eventually redeemed by – the passion and resurrection of Jesus (Luz 2007, 119). Scholars such as Warren Carter (2001: 66) point to a more political perspective where the emphasis is placed on the power dynamics as the characters of Jesus and Herod personify opposing worldviews of dominion and sovereignty (Carter 2001, 66).

In sum, interpreters agree that the overall the use of fulfilment quotations in the Gospel of Matthew is skilful and purposeful, indicating theological importance instead of a happenstance telling of a tragic event meant to merely demonstrate Herod's cruelty (France 2007, 45; Brown 1993, 49; Garland 2001, 26). Other interpreters like Carter also suggest that fulfilment quotations indicates larger themes within the Gospel of Matthew including the dynamics of political power represented by the characters portrayed (Carter 2001, 83). When looking at this particular pericope and the fulfilment quotation with a specific focus on the position of the children, this study focuses on the theological implications of Jesus' positionality as a child of Bethlehem by looking at the atrocities his peers were subjected to.

#### 2.2.4. Shift in approach

Phylis Trible, as part of a larger biblical feminist movement, critiques culture and faith and its deep-rooted links to misogyny and chauvinism. She approaches biblical texts to document the often-overlooked stories that testify to the widespread mistreatment of women in the Bible and recounts “texts of terror” as tools of sympathetic readings for abused women in the ancient world and today. Trible also joins the biblical feminist movement in its reinterpretation of biblical texts to develop what she calls a “remnant theology” critiquing and resisting sexism in the Scriptures (Trible 1994, 3).

In a similar vein, the recent child-centred interpretations emphasise the stories and roles of children that have often been neglected in ancient Near Eastern and biblical scholarship. Child-centred interpretation seeks to liberate the historically marginalised voices of children in biblical texts and develop a “remnant theology” critiquing and resisting the dominant adult-centric perspective assumed by the text and interpreters (Garroway 2014, 1; 2018, 4). Most interpretations of the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 have focused on the role of Jesus and other characters in the narrative, analysing the text using various historical, literary, and sociological perspectives. Notably, there has been a distinct lack of focus on the principal victims of the pericope: the children. My study reads the pericope as a “text of terror” for children in line with child-centred campaigns in ancient Near Eastern and biblical scholarship. My study aims to bring attention to the plight of children depicted in Matthew 2: 16 – 18. It seeks to understand how their place in their families, societies, and as subjects of the Roman Empire brought about the circumstances of their untimely demise.

### 2.3. Methodology: Application of Vernon Robbins’ Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation

#### 2.3.1. Presuppositions

This study assumes that language and, by extension, texts are thickly textured;<sup>4</sup> they consist of various phenomena such as ideology, society, history, and culture embedded in their production, meaning, and reception (Robbins 1996a). Not only are texts intrinsically complex due to the different elements at work in their production and propagation, but they are also highly interactive. They are simultaneously shaped by and shape the society they originate

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<sup>4</sup> Texts are a performance of language (Robbins 1996b, 1)



from and exist in, at once influencing and being influenced by the culture, ideologies, and religious beliefs of their contexts (Bakhtin 1981, 262–63; Diedrick 1993, 551; Robbins 1996b, 1; Gowler 2010b, 28; 2010a, 27).

This study further assumes an implied author and reader, both literary constructs. The implied author is the literary creation meant to represent the actual person or persons who authored the text; this conception is commonly referred to as the “second self” of the actual author. Inversely, the implied reader is the literary creation of a designated reader, accounting for the presence of a reader embodying all the required predispositions to receive the text in the place of a real or “empirical reader” (Holub 1993, 526). Understood this way, the New Testament texts represent implied authors communicating to implied readers through communication bound up in myriad dimensions and conditions like language and linguistic strategies, culture and geography, politics and power, and religion and ideology, among other structures dictating human societies. New Testament texts are both witnesses to the constellation of social, economic, political, and cultural influences of the context in which they were written, but those influences are also intimately grafted into their very conception (Elliot 1993, 11–12).

Interpretation transforms from the simple act of reading a translation of the New Testament texts as the modern reader becomes aware that their lack of knowledge concerning ancient social norms and their anachronistic assumptions severely impedes their ability to understand the texts adequately. Moreover, the very nature of our distance in time, geography, culture, and language impedes our ability to grasp the intentions of the implied author of the given text. Relevant knowledge of the multidimensional systems of the world of the text is thus essential to the modern interpreter who wishes to have fruitful interactions with the given text and decode its meanings (Elliot 1993, 10–13; Weren 2014, 98). While definitive understandings are broadly impossible, garnering a competent and responsible understanding of the biblical text remains a vital duty of the modern interpreter. Thorough investigations of various features such as literary, linguistic, rhetorical, historical, traditional, and theological dimensions are essential to a solid foundation in exegesis as each feature – adequately understood – determines the possible meaning one can responsibly elicit from the text.

### 2.3.2. Rhetorical Criticism

Of all the developments in interpretation during the New Hermeneutic (Robbins 1996b, 1), three broad movements will be most relevant for the methodology this paper employs: Socio-Scientific Criticism,<sup>5</sup> Literary Criticism,<sup>6</sup> and an amalgamation of the two: Rhetorical Criticism. Rhetorical Criticism emerged as a branch of Literary Criticism and assumed that the text was composed and arranged not just as a literary exercise but as a tool of persuasion on its intended audience. It merged the understanding that texts are social and literary, focusing on the relationship between language and human actions. Language in the text is assumed to have been employed to have a desired effect on its audience, evaluating the speaker's literary choices, the motivations behind them, and the audience's response. Rhetorical Criticism often scrutinises patterns, structures, and developments in communication and discourse in contexts contemporary to texts as part of the inquiry into the relationship between the language of the text, the human action it is meant to encourage, and the developments in the environment of communication. This dynamic is fundamentally interdisciplinary and constantly developing to encompass new insights from other disciplines, such as media, political, and economic studies (Elliot 1993, 10; Goodwin 1993, 175–77; Gowler 2010b, 194).

Rhetorical critical theory does not have a predetermined methodology or structure; instead, it borrows from numerous approaches like reader-response and structuralist presuppositions and various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and linguistics (Goodwin 1993, 175–77). These approaches all co-exist with, borrow from, and contribute to each other. However, the interdisciplinary nature of methodologies like these has been criticised as too varied and theoretically inconsistent, mainly due to the steady flow of new branches of interpretations functioning as unified theoretical approaches. This is not unique to this rhetorical criticism but is commonly seen as a symptom of a more significant crisis associated with the fundamental lack of theoretical consistency in the definition of “culture” (Biron 1993, 192).

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<sup>5</sup> Socio-Scientific Criticism incorporates the modern discipline of the Social Sciences by recognizing the inherent “sociological” nature of texts as proposed by Bakhtin (Elliot 1993, 9; Robbins 1996b, 1; Weren 2014, 97).

<sup>6</sup> Literary Criticism put the emphasis on the linguistic nature of texts and how the specific genius of the author and their intentions shapes the meaning of the texts (Elliot 1993, 9).

### 2.3.3. Robbins' Socio-Rhetorical analytic

The issue of collaboration without disarray when it comes to this methodology is what Robbins attempts to address with his interpretative analytic. He works off the assumption that “texts” can refer to far more than just literary work to devise a systematic and somewhat formulaic method to deal with texts as multivalent, persuasive, and dynamic.<sup>7</sup> Robbins, a biblical scholar, attempts to bring practitioners of different disciplines in biblical studies, like literary, biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan and socio-critical biblical scholar Richard Rohrbaugh into productive dialogue (Gowler 2010a, 16). Crucially, he attempts to do so in a way that would not bring further confusion or inconsistencies into the interpretation but integrates insights from the different disciplines to indicate that the language of the New Testament texts serves a function of communication within a larger literary and social world (Robbins 1996b, 1–3).

Instead of multiple, differing approaches being a weakness, Robbins points out that literary, rhetorical, and semiotic interpretative practices can yield various insights and deeper understandings of the text when analysed in a methodical interdisciplinary approach. Interpreters should be able to honour and explore the multifarious and dynamic nature of the text without giving in to chaos or incomprehensibility (Robbins 1996b, 14). Robbins, influenced by pioneers such as Amos N. Wilder,<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, and proponents of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*,<sup>9</sup> sought to accept the challenge of expanding the boundaries of the observable phenomenon in texts while integrating those specialised disciplines of biblical interpretation in a dialogic structured manner, creating the analytic dubbed Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation (Robbins 1996b, 9; Gowler 2010b, 15). In Robbins' own words, this type of interpretation is less a new methodology or novel specialisation. Still, it is an “interpretive analytic” referring to a broad orientation that nurtures the idea that texts articulate complex interactions within larger arenas of power (Robbins 1996b, 12). This analytic thus becomes a tool to probe the inner reasoning of biblical texts using multiple specialities in Biblical Interpretation in a dialogic and structural rather than polemic and chaotic fashion (Robbins 1996b, 13; Gowler 2010b, 191; 2010b, 18).

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<sup>7</sup> A premise influenced by Julia Kristeva and which has been criticised as too broad in the past (Weren 2014, 93)

<sup>8</sup> Wilder encouraged the use of insights from the fields of cultural anthropology and folklore to interpret biblical literature in his 1955 presidential address lecture at the SBL (Robbins 1996b, 1–2).

<sup>9</sup> Merging new modes of textual analysis with broad interests in religion that were characteristic of proponents of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Robbins 1996b, 15).

#### 2.3.4. Application of Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation on Matt 2: 16 – 18

Language, as discussed, is inherently complex and multifaceted, representing a myriad of phenomena that inspired the text's creation. Robbins emphasises this essential component of language in his formulaic conception of his analytic. As mentioned earlier, he envisions ancient texts through the metaphor of a tapestry. He argues that a tapestry comprises multiple textures, similar to texts with different phenomena, such as ideology, sociology, etc., embedded in its creation and reception. Using this image, Robbins asserts that pulling different strands in the tapestry, i.e., focusing on different phenomena in the text will illuminate different insights concerning the texts (Robbins 1996a, 2–3). This analytic demands that the interpreter engages with the text from multiple angles but with a conscious strategy, to facilitate a constructive dialogue. Robbins identifies five broad textures that the interpreter can use as a guideline to navigate the different social, religious, and ideological elements inherent to the text (Robbins 1996b, 3; Gowler 2010a, 3; 2010b, 193).

The first texture, Inner Texture, analyses the text's linguistic patterns and structural elements and how these literary elements are intended to communicate or persuade the intended reader. The second texture, Intertexture, concerns the interpreter's analysis of the phenomena outside the text, which the text may refer to implicitly or explicitly. This includes citations, allusions, and reconfigurations of the phenomena like institutions, language, and events outside the text. The third texture, Social and Cultural Texture, assesses the areas where the texts interact with the society and culture it originates from. It looks at the social and cultural norms and attitudes, the dominant modes of interaction, and the text's interactions with those norms (Gowler 2010b, 195). The fourth texture, Ideological Texture, analyses the alliances and conflicts evoked by the language of the text and its interpretation, as well as the ideological and power positioning of the authors and intended audiences. The fifth and final texture outlined by Robbins is the Sacred Texture, referring to the analysis of the text in light of its communication of the relationship between humanity and the divine. (Gowler 2010b, 195).

##### 2.3.4.1. *Inner Texture*

Inner Texture begins with the act of reading itself, with the understanding that language is the medium of communication through which the text “speaks”. From the perspective of socio-

rhetorical criticism, texts are complex subject-object interactions that require close inspection to garner insightful observations of potential meanings in the text (Robbins 1996b, 28). Inner texture observes the interaction and arena between the implied author, the narrator, and the characters who together convey information in the process of rhetorical communication. Inner texture analysis focuses primarily on the text's words, language, and material, with the implied author as both the producer and symbolic representation of the world in the background of the text. (Robbins 1996b, 29)

Inner Texture uses literary and narrative critique to advance what Robbins calls a “text-immanent” or “intrinsic” approach to texts. (Robbins 1996b, 29) The type of Inner Texture espoused here does not set itself up against historical criticism but explores the results of these different disciplines through dialogue in the format of textures. It also conceives of the implied audience as an interactive counterpart in the text's construction, acknowledging the reader's essential role as a critical player in meaning-making. In the socio-rhetorical analytic, inner texture analyses the interaction between authors, texts, and readers and their respective worlds to interpret the inner textual elements of the text (Robbins 1996b, 29–30).

Analysis of the inner texture of the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 allows us to place the pericope within the infancy narrative structure and its integral role in Matthew's gospel as a whole. Matthew's particular wording in the pericope contributes to how he frames Israel's scriptural tradition in his account of Jesus' birth, as well as how it is framed in the entire gospel. In addition, inner texture allows for a glimpse into the characterisation of the figures and the internal logic of Matthew's ‘Massacre of the Innocents’.

#### 2.3.4.2. *Intertexture*

Intertexture refers to the study of elements that texts evoke outside of themselves.<sup>10</sup> The term was coined by the scholar Julia Kristeva (Moyise 2016, 3) and adapted from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his idea of the “dialogic” nature of language. Kristeva extended the definition of “text” to include social situations, norms, and ideological allegiances that are absorbed and transformed. Texts are thus by no means closed systems. Instead, they are made

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<sup>10</sup> The term originated from the Latin ‘intertextēre’, which means to interweave and refers to the literary concept that texts are fundamentally interwoven with many threads of meaning interconnected by numerous links outside the text (Robbins 2010, 350).

up of numerous dialogue partners, which are not just individual texts but entire socio-historical worlds, codes, traditions, and ideologies outside of the text, all interacting and traversing within it (Robbins 1996b, 34; Gowler 2010a, 8; Moyise 2016, 3). Every text is essentially seen as a myriad of quotations which refers to an immense network of other texts. Similarly, Robbins' analytic language in a text functions as a signal for extratextual systems of social interaction (Gowler 2010a, 8), focusing on the analysis of the phenomena which occur outside of the text as how to understand the phenomena that the text represents with more insight (Robbins 1996a, 3; 1996b, 32). It is not just the implied author and implied reader that interacts in a text but the other texts and contexts surrounding and influencing the text that is also in dialogue with it (Robbins 1996b, 30). Robbins suggests a programmatic way of establishing the dynamics of intertexture through his outline: recitation, recontextualisation, and reconfiguration (Robbins 1996b, 33 & 40; Gowler 2010b, 196) wherein the author can imitate, invert, or otherwise restructure the rhetoric the text refers to suit the purposes of their argument (Robbins 1996a, 40). To work through these dynamics, an interpreter needs to have a "multidimensional system of knowledge" (Weren 2014, 98), which includes the language and environment of the text, knowledge of other texts from that same context, and knowledge of the political, social, and religious milieu of the world surrounding the text. The text is intimately connected to the socio-cultural world from which it originates and not only carries the norm of its context but contributes to its further development (Gowler 2010a, 8; Weren 2014, 97).

Intertextual analysis of Matthew 2: 16 – 18 looks at Matthew's use, adaptation, and appropriation of oral-scribal resources in and around his contemporary context. In his quotation of Jeremiah, the evangelist recites and reconfigures the traditions in his purview to serve the purposes of his narrative. Matthew 2: 16 – 18 also refers to insider literary and cultural knowledge, such as popular birth narrative motifs familiar to Jewish and ancient Near Eastern audiences. Intertextual analysis can identify and elucidate the implied imperial and institutional context implicit in the pericope and the text at large, helping to unearth cultural knowledge, such as popular birth narrative motifs familiar to Jewish and ancient Near Eastern audiences.

#### 2.3.4.3. *Social and Cultural Texture*

Social and Cultural Texture refers to the investigation of societal and cultural practices, customs, knowledge, and commonly shared values which directs interaction in and between the people groups evoked by the text (Robbins 1996b, 3 & 9). A social and cultural investigation uses socio-scientific insights such as societal models to analyse Ancient Mediterranean social values common at the time of the Gospel to establish an idea of the general dynamics of the society and the social role, place, and valuation of children in that context. Robbins refers to these commonly observable, readily accessible categories of social interaction as Common Social and Cultural Topics as they generally pertain to all persons in a region. Common Social and Cultural Topics typically pay attention to classifications like social roles, institutions, codes, and relationships to methodically assess the interactions between people in the context of the text (Robbins 1996a, 62).

This element of the investigation will be focused specifically on those models related to the social and cultural contexts of Ancient Mediterranean children and serves to colour a more accurate picture of children regarding their general perception in society at the time of the Gospel. Social and Cultural Texture is an important area to situate the study historically and contextually. Beginning with this texture orients the rest of the research in line with the socio-cultural circumstances of the ancient past rather than unwittingly appropriating modern social constructs, imbuing the subsequent textures and rest of the investigation with an abundance of anachronisms and misrepresentations. An initial contextual delineation of children's place and valuation can help avoid these common pitfalls.

In congruence with my shift to children as the main subject of my study, my social and cultural analysis is focused on the social and cultural world that children inhabit. Concepts of childhood and our associations with it as a social category are not static; they depend on many context factors, including social and historical circumstances, among others. To situate my final analysis, ideological texture, in the appropriate world of the children depicted in the pericope, I will broadly look at 1<sup>st</sup>-century Greco-Roman and Judeo-Palestinian households. This means respectively locating the children in that world based on their social births and standings in the family, the material circumstances of their context, the values concerning their treatment, and their vulnerability to violence. This analysis is meant to be the penultimate investigation informing the fundamental presuppositions undergirding my ideological engagement with the text.

#### 2.3.4.4. *Ideological texture*

The Marxist understanding of “ideology” defines the concept as the mechanisms by which the fundamental nature of social and economic relationships are concealed to serve and justify the unequal distribution of social and economic resources and relationships in society (McLellan 1995, 14). In short, Marx sees ideology as false consciousness. Ideology in this study adheres to the de Tracy tradition of the concept, which embraces a more general and total understanding of ideology as the “sociology of knowledge”. Scholars like Louis Althusser developed this way of thinking about ideology, who linked ideology to institutional contexts and practices of everyday life. (McLellan 1995, 33 & 43). As in Marx’s view, ideology primarily concerns the maintenance and reproduction of power (Robbins 1996b, 36), albeit on a much broader scale. In this light, ideology pertains to how a community views actions and relationships shaped by the specific understanding of their shared reality (Elliot 1990, 268; Robbins 1996a, 96; Verschueren 2013, xii). Ideology can also be seen as a symbolic universe integrating different meaning provinces. It is essentially made up of the institutional order in a symbolic totality, where the individual can place everything in its rightful place, legitimating attitudes, policies, and behaviours exercised in the world (Gager 1975, 82; Robbins 1996a, 106; Verschueren 2013, 2).

Due to the modest size of the pericope, the ideology discernible from the text must be retrieved through enthymemic means and abductive rather than inductive or deductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning refers to the method of arriving at a general conclusion by making use of specific information, while deductive reasoning refers to the inverse, namely, arriving at a specific conclusion by making use of generalisations. Abductive reasoning, by comparison, works off suggestion rather than formal logic, utilising incomplete data to discern the best possible or plausible answer from the data available. Viewing social acts and literature as symbolic and texts as enthymemic creates an environment in which conventional context or generally accepted social and ideological reasoning can be discerned, and which allows for a novel understanding of the text to be revealed based on those conventions. Conventional reasoning here refers to the ideology of a context, i.e., the presuppositions, dispositions, and values reflected in the needs or ideals of a particular group indicated by the text (Davis 1975, 14; Elliot 1990, 268; Robbins 1996a, 4; 2010, 350–51). Conventional thought stems from a need to understand and interpret the sense of self and others and justify



and control one's place in the world. This study will use these conventions as the starting point for discerning idiosyncratic thought and behaviour (Elliot 1990, 268; Robbins 1996a, 350; 2010, 96). Idiosyncratic representations in the text, which counter the conventional, create a dynamic context for new meanings and insights in which alternative ideologies can be observed, as in the case of the pericope (Robbins 1996a, 4; 2010, 351). I propose that Matthew 2: 16 – 18 functions as a reframing device as it represents potential idiosyncratic thought in tension with the conventional ideological framework concerning children in the text's historical, social, and legislative context.

Ideological criticism and its direction are crucially profoundly influenced by the ideological allegiances of the interpreter who performs it and that individual's social and cultural perspectives. At this stage, the interpreter recognises the impossibility of objectivity and fully embraces that fact by laying bare their ideological predilections in an attempt to mine the possibilities in the text (Robbins 1996a, 4; 1996b, 39). My ideological allegiances lie with historical and scholastic movements such as feminist, womanist, and postcolonial biblical scholarship due to the fundamental partiality those movements exhibit to texts and their meanings, which deliberately notice and give voice to the historically and contextually marginalised figures and groups in biblical texts. A crucial goal of such movements is to empower the liberation of the subjugated and contribute to transforming a more just world (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993, 11). My positionality as a woman, a person of colour, and being from the colonised Global South has nurtured an acute perception of the overlooked and voiceless in my biblical investigations. Exploring the text and its various possibilities has always been a delight, but the daily needs I see, and experience in my community drive my academic pursuits.

Beyond need, I see a devotion to and interest in the Bible within my community that I believe, with a more responsible engagement, can exact immense positive change in thought and practice. The combination of my inherited enthusiasm and curiosity for the biblical texts and the promise I see has imbued me with academic passion shaped by specific sensitivities to life-giving texts and perspectives that have the potential to revive, inspire, protect, and empower, in other words, texts such as Matthew 2: 16 – 18 read through the lens of Postcolonial biblical criticism.

Postcolonial biblical interpretation is an established optic within Matthean scholarship advanced by proponents of the discipline, such as Warren Carter (Carter 2007, 69). Using

Edward Said's definition of imperialism, Carter argues that the Gospel of Matthew is written in a world of subordination and domination and thus represents a complex textual witness of oppression, resistance, and the navigation of subjugated peoples in imperial contexts (Carter 2007, 69–70). Musa Dube enriches our understanding of postcoloniality by introducing the “doubly” oppressed figure whose experience of marginalisation under multiple interlocking systems of oppression renounces the essentialising of injustice despite the complexities of context (Dube 1999, 219).

Within these traditions, Matthew 2: 16 – 18 can be read as a complex textual witness to the intersectionality of the children of Bethlehem's oppression under various oppressive frameworks, most notably their imperial context and their conceptual and physical treatment in their society. I read their story as depicted in Matthew in conversation with literature that arose from a similarly traumatic event in South African history, the Soweto uprising in 1976, where children were wounded and killed by the power and agents of the oppressive Apartheid government. These accounts both lament the gruesome murder of children, exposing the horrors of imperial power and fundamentally advancing and calling for an alternative reality in the present context of South Africa and beyond.

### 3. Chapter 3: Inner and Intertexture of Mt 2: 16 – 18

Matthew 2: 16 – 18

**16** Τότε Ἡρώδης ἰδὼν ὅτι ἐνεπαίχθη ὑπὸ τῶν μάγων ἐθυμώθη λίαν, καὶ ἀποστείλας ἀνεῖλεν πάντας τοὺς παῖδας τοὺς ἐν Βηθλέεμ καὶ ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς ὁρίοις αὐτῆς ἀπὸ διετοῦς καὶ κατωτέρω, κατὰ τὸν χρόνον ὃν ἠκρίβωσεν παρὰ τῶν μάγων. **17** τότε ἐπληρώθη τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ Ἰερεμίου τοῦ προφήτου λέγοντος·

**18** Φωνὴ ἐν Ραμὰ ἠκούσθη,

κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὀδυρμὸς πολὺς·

Ραχὴλ κλαίουσα τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς,

καὶ οὐκ ἤθελεν παρακληθῆναι,

ὅτι οὐκ εἰσίν. (Nestle et al. 2006, 4)

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” [Jer 31:15] (v18)<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.1. Inner texture: Placing, structure, and narration

According to Robbins, analytic inner texture refers to the study of the language of the text as the primary medium of communication before the study of meaning. With this texture, the analyst considers how the text utilises the words to gain a more profound knowledge of the words and their structures and patterns as the context for later meaning analysis. Within this texture, Robbins delineates a further six strategies with which to explore the wording of the

<sup>11</sup> All translations are from the New Revised Standard Version (*Holy Bible: NRSV, New Revised Standard Version* 2007)

text: namely: repetition, progression, narration, open-middle-closing, argumentation, and sensory-aesthetic texture (Robbins 1996a, 7). I will not use all the categories Robbins outlines but select those most suited to serve the pericope and its exposition.

### 3.1.1. Opening-middle-end Texture

Open-middle-end texture concerns the beginning, body, and conclusion of a particular text or section of discourse (Robbins 1996a, 19). Due to the minuscule pericope size, this texture would be challenging to explore within the text itself. Still, an analysis can be drawn out across broader borders to place the wording of the pericope in its particular rhetorical context. The pericope Matthew 2: 16–18 is part of the first division of the Gospel of Matthew, where the reader is introduced to the main subject of the entire Gospel: Jesus Christ. Interpreters differ on the exact delineation of sections, but most agree that the Matthew 1 – 2 section forms the gospel's unified opening and introduction to the long-promised Messiah and king of the Jews. Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy from Abraham to his birth and anticipates the rest of the story of Christ with the rhetorical assertion that Jesus is the fulfilment of Israel's Scriptures and traditions (Garland 2001, 13; Clarke 2003, 1; Luz 2007, 73).

The pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 is intentionally placed within the infancy narrative as evidenced not just by the emphasis of the fulfilment quotation but by the plot development in Matthew 2: 3 – 8, the massacre's anticipation in Matthew 2: 13, and the reference back to the event in Matthew 2: 20 (France 2007, 138). As we will see, this account of Jesus' endangerment and the theme of mechanising imperial violence to eliminate him is not just localised to the beginning of Matthew's gospel. Matthew 2: 16 – 18 foreshadows even the end of the narrative depicted in Matthew 26: 3 – 5 as another political power, the Sanhedrin, plots the death of Jesus in cooperation with the forces and institutions of the empire. Despite having no parallels elsewhere in the gospels, it seems clear that Matthew 2: 16 – 18 was not a last-minute insertion into the text but an original and integral part of the author's grand narrative plan (Brown 1993, 49; Garland 2001, 26).

Supporting this idea, is the chiasm typically noted by scholars where the inclusion is made up of Matthew 2: 13 – 14 and Matthew 2: 19 – 21 (others include Matthew 2: 22 – 23). Within this structure, Matthew 2: 16 – also known as the rage of Herod – forms the terrible climax of the chiasm (Piotrowski 2016, 115; Erickson 1997, 10). As Richard J. Erickson notes in his

article ‘Divine Injustice?: Matthew’s Narrative Strategy And The Slaughter Of The Innocents (Matthew 2.13-23)’: “It is one thing to include the story, in the interest of the truth perhaps; but that it has been given this sort of prominence begs an explanation” (Erickson 1997, 10).

### 3.1.2. Repetition and Progression Texture – Formula Quotations as framing devices

Analysing repetition in a text is meant to give the reader a glimpse into its overall rhetorical movement by observing the different types of verbal phenomena reproduced. Clusters of repetitive data have the potential to point to a larger picture and movement created by the text. Related to this type of analysis, progressive texture helps trace sequential patterns in the text, further enriching the interpreter’s overarching rhetorical perspective (Robbins 1996a, 8–9 & 36). Viewed in this light, repetitive and progressive textures can assist in placing the pericope in Matthew’s overall rhetorical strategy.

Matthew’s use of fulfilment quotations (otherwise known as formula citations) is one of the most distinctive features in his Gospel. In his typical format, Matthew introduces a citation from the Hebrew texts via the formula *in order to fulfil* with the claim that the event he depicts in his gospel is a fulfilment of Israel’s scriptures (Brown 1993, 96). Matthew front-loads the quotations in the infancy narrative, with five out of at least ten appearing at the beginning of the gospel. This repetition and concentration of the fulfilment quotations are significant as an effective foundational element in reading the rest of Matthew’s gospel. Matthew purposefully prepares the reader for a carefully constructed argument, assuring the reader that the Messiah is indeed the long-awaited saviour foretold by the prophets. He backs up his claims with the entire narrative seeped in Jewish scriptural allusions, typological and prophetic themes, and explicit formula quotations aimed at priming the reader to perceive the rest of the Gospel in this light. The entire narrative and its elements are interwoven into a complex tapestry of foreshadowing, echoes, and allusions so that the gospel and, indeed, Jesus himself cannot be separated from his Jewish conceptual framework (Brown 1993, 49; France 2007, 106; Hays 2016, 136–37).

Matthew’s formulaic quotations and his framing of Israel’s texts as predictive are and have been so rhetorically influential that they have tended to impact how most Christians read the Hebrew scriptures, even to the present day. It is important to note, however, that fulfilment

quotations are not nearly the sum of Matthew's strategies in utilising Israel's scriptures and traditions. Such a limited understanding of Matthew hinders our own readings of the Scriptures and does an injustice to the richness with which Matthew navigates the Jewish backdrop of his narrative (Hays 2016, 138).

Piotrowski points out that though the allusions to Scripture indicate that Christ is embedded in the Israelite framework, *any* quote from Scripture could serve the same function. The question is, what do these *specific* quotations indicate (Piotrowski 2016, 11)? Piotrowski extends the prologue of Matthew to include Matthew 1: 1 – 4 and analyses what he calls the prologue formula quotations as the 'frame' which conjures up a specific narrative world and helps the audience anticipate the way the rest of the narrative is meant to be read. He suggests that the prologue formula quotations evokes exodus, exilic, and restoration themes both individually and in tandem to each other (Piotrowski 2016, 23). In this framework, the pericope both alludes to the context of exodus through his Moses typology and recalling the exilic context of Jeremiah by quoting Jeremiah 31: 15. Both of these contexts anticipates the coming restoration of the Israelite community from the oppressive powers that hold them in bondage. The quotations function as densely concentrated framing devices and serves, along with the other prologue quotations, to help the reader to understand the story and role of Christ and the circumstances of his followers within a redemptive-historical context (Piotrowski 2016, 4 & 12).

### 3.1.3. Narrational texture

Narrational texture is inhabited by the voices and characters through which the words speak; this includes the narrator, characters who act, and characters who speak, revealing the story's logic that drives the narrative forward. Analysing the narrational commentary and attributed speech draws out some of the inner nuances of the text. Much is revealed when considering how the text is staged, such as who the narrator presents and who is allowed to speak (Robbins 1996a, 18–19). The children of Bethlehem and Christ are conspicuously silent in the pericope, while King Herod dominates the actions depicted in the account. Even Jeremiah and Rachel of the Israelite tradition, symbolic though they may be, speak in the wake of the massacre, while the children never utter a word. In Matthew, the "Massacre of the Innocents" concludes Herod's evil intent, foreboded in his interest in the child in earlier verses (France 2007, 106; Evans 2012, 57).

The pericope represents the conclusion to Herod's initial interest and the lengths he would go to eliminate whom he perceives to be his rival. Interpreters interested in the political framework of the world of Matthew, such as Warren Carter, claims that, in a certain sense, his fears are not unfounded. Religion and politics in the 1<sup>st</sup>-century Roman empire were interlinked, and claims about the Messiah or king of the Jews being born into the world would have had genuine political implications for Herod (Carter 2001, 20). The violent episode effectively depicts Herod's dangerous nature and his true motivations in looking for the child, not ostensibly to worship him as he had first claimed, but to eliminate a potential rival and claimant to the Judean throne. The episode also reveals the dangerous political and social world the Messiah was born into and the world he would navigate throughout his life. Thankfully, due to divine intervention, the promised child escapes; others, Matthew tells us, were not so fortunate (Nolland 2005, 267; Luz 2007, 121).

#### 3.1.4. Argumentative texture

Argumentative texture investigates the inner reasoning of the text; Robbins indicates two types of reasoning: logical and qualitative. Logical reasoning in this texture refers to a discourse that presents an assertion and substantiates and clarifies this assertion with reasons, opposites, contraries, and counterarguments. According to Robbins, qualitative reasoning occurs when readers are meant to accept the portrayal of images and descriptions as accurate. Analogies, examples, and citations of ancient testimonies function as methods of persuasion to support the imagery (Robbins 1996a, 21).

Matthew 2: 16 – 18 is presented by Matthew as an accurate account of the birth of Jesus, and everything which occurs is not just accurate but even foretold by the Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew uses the quotation from Jeremiah 31: 15 but adapts it according to the purposes of the pericope and the version of the quotation readily available or most familiar to him. He made only two changes to the original quotation, the first is the use of τέκνα instead of the plural “sons” used in Jeremiah, and the second he adds πολὺς to give the impression of a large number of victims, even though historical research indicates the number to be a conservative twenty for a village like Bethlehem and its probable child mortality rate (Brown 1993, 204).

A motif of an imperial authority who abuses his power and inflicts tragedy upon the masses is not new to a Hebrew or ancient Near Eastern audience. Matthew refers and alludes to the oppressor figures such as Pharaoh and Herod, who represent a long tradition in Israel's and ancient Near Eastern history where the vulnerable suffer the most damaging effects of conflicts between opposing powers (Garland 2001, 29). As the African proverb goes: when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. Instead of singing as is depicted in the infancy narrative of Luke, the women of Bethlehem weep at the loss of their children even as the long-awaited Messiah is born unto the world (Garland 2001, 30).

Matthew evokes the narrative worlds of Jeremiah and Moses, specifically the frameworks of exile and exodus, pointing to the phenomenon of empire, conquest, and violent extortion that have played a significant part in Israel's contextual circumstances and the textual traditions that originated from them (Luz 2007, 121; Piotrowski 2016, 13). The narrative worlds, while assuming contexts of exile and oppression, also anticipates the deliverance of the Israelites through Moses and the coming restoration foretold by the prophet Jeremiah (Piotrowski 2016, 13). Similarly, the birth of the Messiah represents good news and joyful tidings for the poor and afflicted, but he is also born into a world of immense suffering and subjugation. The Matthean birth narrative holds these conflicting themes of present oppressive circumstance and the coming deliverance in taut, creative tension.

### 3.2. Intertexture: Use and reference to the traditions and social world of Matthew

According to Robbins, intertexture refers to the text's representation of and reference to the literary and physical phenomena outside the text. With this texture, we look at the interaction of language in a given text and the various phenomena of its time, such as historical context, contemporary texts, customs, institutions, and systems. The text interprets and configures its world through its language in a particular way, sometimes unequivocally commenting on external phenomena, sometimes referring to them subversively. The goal is to analyse the nature, result, and processes of the texts' particular configuration of the world outside of it. A text's interaction with the world outside of it can be complex and varied. It can restructure, invert, or support well-known traditions in various ways churning out a rich configuration of the text, culture, and socio-historical context from which it was written (Robbins 1996a, 40). Matthew is known to reconfigure Jewish tradition as needed in his Gospel; in fact, the Gospel



is often described by many scholars as a complex literary work thoroughly interwoven with Jewish scripture and tradition (Brown 1993, 97; Weren 2014, 2; Bassar 2015, 3). The pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 is no exception, as it quotes Jeremiah 31: 15 and alludes to familiar concepts and figures in Jewish scriptural tradition.

### 3.2.1. Oral-scribal intertexture

One of Matthew's literary strengths is its clear references to Scripture, which contributed to its widespread popularity in early Christianity due to its readability and specific and explicit links to the Hebrew scriptures (Hays 2016, 136–37). Texts like Matthew can reference language from other textual traditions in a number of ways in what Robbins calls 'Oral-Scribal Intertexture' and identifies five ways in which text can reference other texts, namely: recitation, recontextualisation, reconfiguration, narrative amplification, and thematic elaboration (Robbins 1996a, 40). For Matthew 2: 16 – 18, recitation, with its focus on the exact transmission of traditions, and reconfiguration, with its focus on reinterpretation, are constructive mechanisms for decoding Matthew's use of the fulfilment quotation in the pericope.

#### 3.2.1.1. *Recitation*

According to Robbins, recitation happens when an author transmits words from a literary tradition in the exact or modified configuration of the tradition as they received it (Robbins 1996a, 41). Matthew used recitation in various ways, one of which is through his distinctive fulfilment quotations. The Gospel of Matthew has at least ten fulfilment quotations, and he applies them throughout his gospel in different ways. The pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 is one of Matthew's more straightforward applications, and except for a few changes, he makes no significant adjustments to the text Jeremiah 31: 15, from which he quotes. Matthew's fulfilment quotations are usually introduced with "in order that" (ἵνα or ὅπως), but verse 17 of the pericope instead uses "then was fulfilled" (τότε), avoiding the implication that God had willed the massacre to happen. The only other time Matthew introduces the fulfilment quotation in this way is after the suicide of Judas in Matthew 27: 9; once again, the prophet Jeremiah is invoked.

In both cases, God does not will the deaths but carries out the salvation plan even amidst the suffering and selfish human ambition (Brown 1993, 205; Luz 2007, 121; Weren 2014, 44). Besides minor changes, the words of the prophecy in Jeremiah 31: 15 closely match the

quotation in the pericope and the events fulfilling it. Matthew follows the Masoretic Text version of the quotation with some influences from the Septuagint (hereafter LXX). Matthew augments the quotation with only two changes of his own; firstly, he adds the word “much” (πολύς), and secondly, he changes “sons” to “children” (τέκνα) (Nolland 2005, 171; Luz 2007, 118; Bassler 2015, 26).

Matthew’s choice of quotation, which allocates Ramah as the site of mourning, is somewhat peculiar due to Ramah’s location in the north of Jerusalem, not Bethlehem. Interpreters suggest that the inclusion of Bethlehem “and its surrounding territory” may anticipate the quotation mentioning Ramah and include it in the territory affected. Two separate biblical traditions connect Ramah, Bethlehem, and Rachel’s tomb, the first found in 1 Samuel 17, which is the Ramah Jeremiah refers to when he references Rachel’s burial site. The second biblical tradition is found in Genesis 35, which suggests her tomb was located in Judah’s territory in Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem. The LXX A version of the Hebrew place name would have avoided the geographical discrepancy altogether, leading some scholars to hypothesise that the quotation as it is presented in the text was readily available to Matthew as is, even if slightly inappropriate (Nolland 2005, 267–68; Luz 2007, 119; Bassler 2015, 60). Ramah is also mentioned as the specific place Jeremiah 40 indicates, where the exiles were gathered before marching into Babylon. Jeremiah takes the initial poetic license in his creative employment of exilic and lament imagery, which Matthew further appropriates according to his narrative purposes (France 2007, 140).

### 3.2.1.2. *Reconfiguration*

Reconfiguration refers to the author who recollects a past situation or event in a new way, reconfiguring the original context as a mere foreshadowing of the new event he describes in his text (Robbins 1996a, 50). We see a textbook example of the reconfiguration Robbins refers to in the pericope Matthew which quotes Jeremiah 31: 15 and frames it as a predictive text that anticipates the “Massacre of the Innocents”. Matthew amplifies and extends Hebrew tradition by correlating the life of Jesus with the Scriptures in multiple ways. He creates typologies with figures like Moses, introduces Jesus as the “Messiah,” a concept well-established in Jewish tradition, and explicitly references and quotes, some ten times, the Hebrew Scriptures and their fulfilment in Jesus (Clarke 2003, xxii). In the pericope, Matthew 2: 16 – 18 recalls familiar figures in Jewish tradition, such as Moses, the prophet Jeremiah,

Rachel, and Israel at large, and explicitly recites to Jeremiah 31: 15 in his fulfilment quotation found in verse 17 – 18.

The original context of the quotation was Jeremiah's lament of the Northern Exile (722/1 BCE) written in the time of the Southern Exile (587/6 BCE) in anticipation of the restoration of both kingdoms united as the renewed people of God. (Nolland 2005, 268; Evans 2012, 60). Jeremiah evokes Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin and wife of Israel, as she weeps for her children, or rather, the descendants of her children, i.e., the Israelites who are conquered and exiled by foreign powers (Clarke 2003, 23; France 2007, 140). Part of the evocative nature of the metaphor made by Jeremiah is the image of a woman weeping for her children. Historically, the conquered city is traditionally portrayed as a woman, and the city or territory's inhabitants carried off or killed are depicted as her children. For Jeremiah, Rachel is a figurative allusion referencing the immense trauma of Israel's captivity and deportation. While Jeremiah uses this metaphor loosely, Matthew is more literal in his interpretation of the quotation, directly comparing the "sons" of Jeremiah to the children in the infancy narrative (Nolland 2005, 268). The context Jeremiah references is characterised by conquest; the context he lives through is one of conquest. Similarly, the contexts Matthew writes about and lives in are rooted in the Roman Empire's conquest of the ancient Near East. Matthew, therefore, extends the metaphor of Jeremiah, who mourns the loss of Israelite war victims to exile and death, to include the children lost to Herod's rage and insecurity. Matthew applies the quotation in a way that can be applied to any case of violence and war where the most vulnerable are victims of the cruelty of the powerful (Brown 1993, 205; Clarke 2003, 23; Evans 2012, 60). Furthermore, by evoking Babylon, Israel itself is reconfigured as the place of exile and oppression from which the community must be restored.

### 3.2.2. Cultural intertexture

Robbins refers to cultural knowledge as insider knowledge, which involves interacting with a particular cultural context (Robbins 1996a, 56). The Gospel of Matthew is chock full of concepts, allusions, and patterns familiar to a Jewish audience with access to their stories, traditions, and texts. Even a casual reader of the Bible today would be able to note the similarities between the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 and the infancy narrative of Moses. Both children were threatened in their nascency by powerful rulers and escaped by divine

intervention. Jesus resembles Moses as Herod resembles Pharaoh, making it no wonder that their similarities and differences have been the subject of much investigation.

### 3.2.2.1. *Moses typology*

For a Jewish audience, the account of Herod's political insecurity and drastic measures against the children of Israel would no doubt have brought to mind the tradition of Moses' birth and Pharaoh's infanticide at the perceived political threat from the Israelites in that tradition. In both narratives, God intervenes to save the future saviours of Israel (France 2007, 122). Due to the apparent parallels, most scholars agree that Matthew sets up a typological model between Jesus and Moses. However, the extent to which the stories and figures parallel each other has been the subject of much debate, ranging from the idea that Matthew completely parallels the classic story and introduces Jesus as a "New Moses" (France 2007, 122; Bassar 2015, 51) while others claim the link between the narratives are much looser, akin to modern allusions to Scripture which keep each character arc and narrative firmly isolated and intact.

Jewish traditions about Moses' birth are far more protracted than the information represented by biblical tradition. For the first-century audience with access to the fuller tradition, there are further typological links to be made between Jesus and Moses' infancy narratives (France 2007, 122). According to the Moses tradition, just as Joseph was informed in a dream of Jesus' future role, Amram was informed about Moses' future (Josephus, *Ant.* 2.210-16). According to Josephus, just like Herod, Pharaoh was warned by astrologers of one child (i.e., Moses) who would exalt Israel, resulting in the alarm of Pharaoh and Egypt (*Ant.* 2.206, 215). Matthew 2: 3 tells a similar story wherein the wise men unwittingly warn Herod of the coming saviour, and he and all of Jerusalem are troubled by the news (France 2007, 123).

Further supporting the typological link, verses 19 – 20 of Matthew 2 detail the family's return to Galilee from Egypt which is analogous to Moses' return to Egypt from Midian detailed in Exodus 4: 19 – 20. Both are depicted as the future deliverers of a renewed people of God, while Pharaoh and Herod are presented as the oppressors. (France 2007, 122; Luz 2007, 119). Even in this model, the narratives are not paralleled precisely; for example, in the Moses narrative, Moses' parents do not flee with him as Jesus' parents do, and Egypt is represented as a place of danger for Moses. In contrast, in the Matthean narrative, Egypt represents a place of refuge for the holy family. Jesus' birth narrative may correspond to Moses' in various places, but it is still presented as a new narrative inaugurating a new age (Luz 2007, 119).

Some argue that Matthew was not trying to present Jesus as a new Moses; instead, he was using Jewish tradition and material the way the Jewish did by reconfiguring and reinterpreting their texts in new and interesting ways (Basser 2015, 49). In the Jewish conception of their tradition, there were hardly any universal concepts as we conceive of in the Western tradition. All words in the Jewish tradition existed in a closed system where each image, word, and sound evokes biblical vocabulary without evoking the independent conceptual paradigms of Moses/Pharaoh compared to Jesus/Herod (Basser 2015, 49–50). Matthew reworks language from earlier Jewish traditional narratives to conjure familiar images, but it does not necessarily mean that the narratives agree conceptually (Basser 2015, 52).

Herbert Basser draws our attention to the example of William Shakespeare, who might allude to or even reference biblical traditions such as Jephthah and his daughter in Judges 12: 7 in the story of Hamlet. Still, he does not parallel the characters to one another. Even though Shakespeare recalls the familiarity of Jephthah and his daughter, Polonius does not become a new Jephthah, just as Ophelia does not become a new Jephthah's daughter. Likewise, Jesus, Herod, Moses, and Pharaoh remain themselves (Basser 2015, 52). Yet, by evoking Moses' narrative world and associating Herod and his co-conspirators with Pharaoh, Matthew is able to reconstruct Israel and its leaders as the new circumstances of exile, despite being in the geographical promised land (Piotrowski 2016, 13).

### 3.2.2.2. *Ancient Near Eastern hero's birth motif*

Israelite tradition is not the only literary tradition that details the threat of a murderous tyrant aimed at a future saviour in infancy. The trope is paralleled in Roman literature, such as the birth of Emperor Augustus detailed in Suetonius's account (*Augustus* 94) of a portent predicting the birth of a child who would be king, prompting the senate to decree a ban on the rearing of male children in that year (Evans 2012, 60).

Such birth motifs were common in various cultures of the ancient Near East. Many origin stories of future heroes contain some element of difficulties or obstacles to their survival while they are helpless infants. Usually, a dream or oracle foretells the birth of a special child, the child's life is threatened, and they are then, as in the case of Moses, often saved by being

sent away in a box set adrift on a body of water. Examples of such ancient figures include Sargon, Oedipus, Romulus, Gilgamesh, and others (Basser 2015, 51).

Awareness of the typologies Matthew may have been making aid in contextualising this peculiar pericope and makes us aware of the motif's prevalence and widespread use in the implied audience's traditions and knowledge. The audience would have been aware that it was at this point that the hero was at his most human and vulnerable to the power structures in that context. The interaction between Herod and Jesus, deeply unequal as it may be, establishes the opposing powers, Israel and Rome on the one end and Jesus sent by God on the other. Jesus' birth narrative, understood from this motif, helps legitimise him as the central opposition figure in the conflict between the powers of the day and the coming reign of God.

### 3.2.3. Social intertexture

Social knowledge, according to Robbins, refers to knowledge held by all persons in a region regardless of their cultural location (Robbins 1996a, 62). Robbins names several categories interpreters can explore: social roles, institutions, and relationships. One of these, social institutions, particularly the imperial institution, was one of the most pervasive aspects of the world embedded in the production of the Gospel of Matthew. For all intents and purposes, the Roman Empire ruled the known world and had a profound effect, implicit and explicit, on Matthew's writing and the events depicted in the pericope in particular. The context of empire framed the world the text navigates and depicts, as well as the world the implied audience had to navigate (Carter 2006, 1).

Herod was king of Judea at the behest and with the permission of the Roman Empire; the army had conquered the entirety of Judea, including Bethlehem, the Empire was responsible for the destruction of the Temple and the enormous religious shift that occurred as a result of the fallout—a shift which necessitated the writing of the Gospel of Matthew. The empire is prevalent even in the language of the text and the format. For my investigation, I will analyse two interrelated and foundational mechanisms of the imperial machine, which exposes the vast power imbalance in the interaction between the children and Herod: the *right of command* and *concrete territorial sense*.

### 3.2.3.1. *Right of Command*

Right of the command was the affirmation that a few representatives maintained the privilege of ruling over others, a privilege which was thought to be ordained and sanctioned by the gods (Carter 2001, 9). The empire espoused aristocratic values, meaning that a very small elite ruled most of the empire's inhabitants. (Carter 2006, 3) Although divine right was undoubtedly a rhetorical justification for controlling the lion's share of resources, the elite used stronger, more violent coercion, such as the Roman legionaries, to enforce submission from the populace (Carter 2006, 4). Roman emperors ruled alongside the elite and built relationships and alliances with different territories and their rulers, such as the client king Herod of Judea, to maintain Rome's interests and hierarchical power structure throughout the empire (Carter 2006, 5)

The Roman Empire installed Herod as king of Judea or "king of the Jews" around 40 BCE by the Roman Senate upon Mark Antony's recommendation (Josephus, *J. W.* 1.282) (Evans 2012, 51). Herod was seen as somewhat of an outsider by the Jewish population he was ruling. He was an Edomite of Idumean heritage which traditionally placed him in the lineage of Esau rather than Israel. Herod also had no claims to the Jewish royal family, the Hasmoneans, and was thus not recognised as a legitimate king. His reputation was one of ruthlessness and conquest, routinely eliminating anyone he saw as a threat to his rule, including his wife and children who were linked to the Hasmoneans. (France 2007, 138; Evans 2012, 58; Bassar 2015, 56). However, during his reign, he kept Judea politically independent until his death around 4 BCE (Bassar 2015, 56).

### 3.2.3.2. *Concrete Territorial Sense*

Concrete territorial sense refers to the land, resources, and people Rome controlled, assets of the empire that were primarily obtained through military action. Roman imperialism assumed a dominant metropolitan centre ruling a distant area and people (Carter 2001, 9). The empire was agrarian as wealth was measured in land owned by the elite; the elite also consumed the bulk of the production benefit though they never physically engaged in the labour themselves. Through a system of taxation, the nonelites, at their own expense, functionally funded the lavish lifestyles of the elite. Refusal to pay was regarded as rebellion against Rome and was often met with vicious and violent retaliation from the Roman military forces (Carter 2006, 3–4).

If the elite comprised about 2 – 3% of the population, nearly all the rest were non-elite and lived at the mercy of circumstance and the elite's goodwill (Carter 2006, 10). Matthew and other New Testament writings can sometimes resist this harsh status quo and how their hierarchical society was structured. Though Matthew primarily indicates Herod as guilty of the slaughter, the narrative implicates the leaders of Israel as Herod's allies against Jesus (Piotrowski 2016, 116). Herod and the religious leaders of Israel represent the interlacing of imperial and cultural power structures and frameworks which dominate the lives of the masses. Matthew's methods of resistance and compromise towards this pervasive institutional power are varied (Carter, 2006, p. 13), and this complex negotiation is explored later in my study.

For now, it is essential to note the positionality of the children of Bethlehem who were a part of the non-elite, whose families sometimes literally had to slave away for the benefit of the ruling elite like Herod. Moreover, Bethlehem fell within the distant territory that Rome, the metropolitan centre, ruled and subjugated. Given these interlocking mechanisms of hierarchy and the context of immense exploitation, the power dynamics between Herod and the children from an imperial perspective begin to look absurdly unequal even before we explore the social and cultural marginalisation of children in the ancient Near East.



## 4. Chapter 4: Social and Cultural Texture of Mt 2: 16 – 18

### 4.1. Social and Cultural Texture

Social and cultural textural analysis refers to the investigation of the social and cultural location of the text. According to Robbins' analytic, social and cultural texture applies sociological and anthropological theories to reveal social and cultural categories, namely: specific cultural topics, common social and cultural topics, and final cultural topics. Each of these discloses a different element of the social and cultural person the text assumes (Robbins 1996a, 71). For example, when Matthew speaks of Bethlehem's children, he refers to them assuming completely different presuppositions about what it means to be a child in his social and cultural milieu. By exploring the social and cultural texture of children in the Matthean context, we not only begin to see a clearer picture of their specific material circumstances, but my study purposefully centres their experience as the primary victims, with the main focus being my analysis of their calamitous interaction with King Herod depicted in the pericope.

#### 4.1.1. Increased interest in childhood studies

Interpreters' failure to focus on the role of the children in the pericope Matthew 16 – 18 is not limited to Matthean scholarship, as the study of childhood has long been a neglected theme of formal academic investigation. In recent years, however, a greater understanding of infancy and childhood as distinct and essential stages of human development increased interest in academic research in this field significantly. As a result, biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholarship studies focused primarily on children in the ancient world began to take off, albeit later than the emergence of the discipline in archaeological studies. Child-centric archaeological scholarship, focusing on representations of childhood in texts and material culture, informs biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholarship directed at questions about what it was like to be a child in those contexts (Garroway 2018, 1).

The motivations for working with this particular focus are also related to attentiveness to the inherent vulnerabilities of children and recognising their dependence on others for survival.

Children face various contextual challenges that impact their lives and circumstances over which they have little control or agency (Aasgaard and Horn 2018, 3). Interpreters and researchers study the vulnerable and historically overlooked because their experiences indicate the kind of society we live in and what attitudes and values we espouse. Thus, children's experiences have the potential to be a critical lens through which to view power conflicts and struggles in our society generally. Moreover, what we think about children and their treatment reveals some things about our envisioning of the ideal human life. (Aasgaard and Horn 2018, 4)

As for nomenclature, no consensus has yet been reached among scholars regarding the classification of this focus as a distinct discipline nor what it should be termed; "childist theory" and "child-centred interpretation" have thus far been suggested options. Nevertheless, childist theory, primarily occupied with children and the cultural construct of childhood, is well-suited to interdisciplinary approaches. Childist interpreters employ the work and scholarship of childhood archaeologists to explore the intersections between history, gender, linguistics, and many other disciplines to gain insight into the experience of children represented and living in the Bible and the ancient Near East (Garroway 2018, 5).

#### 4.1.2. The definition of "child" and "childhood."

The concept of childhood and children's experiences are not static categories but fluid and largely dependent on multiple contexts such as their historical, geographical, social, and cultural circumstances. Within these contexts, childhood and the role of children in the family and society can be defined in a multiplicity of ways. The goal of childist theories is to flesh out these dynamics in an attempt to construct a clearer picture of what it would have meant to be a child in the ancient world in their various specific historical and socio-cultural contexts (Garroway 2014, 1; Aasgaard and Horn 2018, 3; Baker 2018, 80).

To qualify their understandings of and distinctions between the concepts of "child" and "childhood," scholars correlate "child" to membership of a social category and refer to "childhood" as the various, gradual stages of life leading up to adulthood. These constructs are principally categorised by age categories, such as *infant*, *toddler*, *youth*, *adolescent*, and *juvenile*, which are informed by cultural constructs rather than chronological ages (Garroway 2014, 16). Social ages are more suited to the aims of childist theories in biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholarship because ancient texts exclusively refer to minors by their social ages. Additionally, people of different chronological ages could occupy the same social age

with their assigned roles and responsibilities. Children of the same chronological age could transition from one category to another at different rates (Garroway 2014, 19).

#### 4.1.3. Historical Circumstances

Children have constituted a large part of the general populace in most contexts throughout history, especially in contexts with relatively high mortality rates (Aasgaard and Horn 2018, 3). Life expectancy in the biblical and ancient Near Eastern contexts was generally low, and poverty, malnourishment, and oppression ran rampant, especially for the non-elite populations. Children were particularly vulnerable to these historical circumstances as around a quarter of all children in the ancient Roman Empire died before the age of one, and a further quarter before the age of ten. Other factors such as gender, ethnicity, and class also played an essential role in the material experience of their upbringing. Children of poorer families are commonly put to work to labour for the family much earlier in their lives than their affluent counterparts. However, due to famine, plagues, highly unsanitary conditions, and limited healthcare, life expectancy was consistent among the elite and non-elite (Laes 2011, 25; Admirand 2012, 188).

#### 4.1.4. Greco-Roman childhood

The world of children was very much different from the world of children today; their place in society in the ancient Near East in the larger Greco-Roman context and the Judeo-Palestinian context was very different from their roles today. What follows is an overarching exposition of the main conceptual perceptions and experiences of children living in those contexts.

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, philosophers and medical practitioners at times followed one of the more dominant classifications of human life as proposed by Hippocrates. He dissected the human life span into eight stages, with the first three stages, *παιδίον*, *παῖς*, and *μειράκιον*, ranging from zero to around twenty years of age and making up the stages of childhood. (Bakke 2005, 1; Weren 2014, 43)

#### 4.1.4.1. *Greco-Roman philosophy of the child*

Literary evidence, such as philosophical treatises, indicates that the writers were not focused on children; free adult men were the main subject of philosophical thought and interest. When trying to get a sense of the lives of the children from these writings, special attention has to be given to any mention of children to glean bits of information mostly left in passing (Bloomer 2018, 56).

The broad consensus in Greek philosophical understandings was that it was logos that made people act rationally and that only free male citizens possessed it. Enslaved peoples, barbarians, and children were not thought to have logos; in fact, children were a symbol for the absence of it. For instance, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asserted that his course was not suited to the young, for they, living on emotion the way they did, did not have the experience and stability needed to understand Aristotle's teachings and instructions. (Bakke 2005, 15; Fossheim 2018, 38)

Overall, Aristotle and other rhetoricians' perception of children is overwhelmingly characterised by what they did not possess. According to him, children: could not be truly happy, could not engage in philosophy, could not be friends with a man, and had different standards and values than free men. These, among other negative traits, were the leading indicators of the state of children's character in the opinion of most ancient philosophers (Bloomer 2018, 58)

Greek and Roman philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Pliny the Elder, Cicero, Quintilian, Seneca the Younger, and the Epicureans and Stoics, all associated children with stupidity and lack of reason. The Romans also considered their physical weakness something to be looked down upon. Weakness in children was associated with cowardice and a propensity towards illness. If at all intellectually valued, children were only valued because of their potential to grow into someone with reason. They considered the state of childhood an immaturity that needed to be outgrown to reach the epitome of humanity, which was the free adult citizen of the state (Gundry-Volf 2001, 32; Bakke 2005, 15–21).

Overall, the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition portrayed children as the counterfoil to free citizens; they were considered negative symbols and paradigms along with other weak and marginal groups. If the free male was the centre of power, children were located at the periphery and along the margins if included in society at all (Bakke 2005, 21–22).

Despite the largely negative views, philosophical discussions around early education offer a more positive on the common conceptualisation of children in the ancient world. Plato sees children as naturally mimetic, sensitive, and receptive, and those characteristics should be nurtured via art and music to orient them to a character of beauty and harmony. Though they had none, children could develop rationality if good characteristics were fostered (Grahn-Wilder 2018, 33). Aristotle's model of sowing and harvesting presented a similar view, i.e., what one invested earlier dictated the quality of one's later seasons. Childhood was thus a crucial time in the human life cycle, for it set a person up for a future of virtuous living and success. The foundation was set during childhood for such a future; mistakes could not be rectified once the foundation had been laid. (Fossheim 2018, 39)

Writings on Roman education were deeply indebted to and influenced by Hellenistic writers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon, yet Cicero and Quintilian, forerunners in writings about childhood and education, did not simply reiterate Greek ideas but expressed Roman values and goals by focusing on the formation of children for the betterment of the wider society and state (Bloomer 2018, 68). Quintilian conceives of children as agents, distinct from yet aiming at adulthood. Rather than only being essential for ensuring the dynastic hope of their family, children are also viewed as important for their educability. According to Quintilian, education is a prerequisite for a contributing member of society to attain full-functioning adulthood. In this stage of their life cycle, children are especially suited to the process of education and formation. (Bloomer 2018, 69)

Besides education, when children are thought of positively, they are treated as necessary for typifying social virtues that occur before the adverse, decaying effects of social ambition and vices. They represented positive virtues such as generosity, sympathy, and charity. On the other hand, children were also considered uninformed, with unruly and undisciplined passions that needed moulding; their formation was seen as a critical element in pursuing a better society. From the perspective of philosophical literature, the picture of children that forms is one of ambivalence; on the one hand, children are seen as passive, negative foils to the standard of the free adult male, while on the other hand, their teachability is an essential element in the process to reach that standard (Bloomer 2018, 56–58; Grahn-Wilder 2018, 33).

#### 4.1.4.2. *Greco-Roman household*

In the ancient world context, “household” refers to three key components: social persons, material possessions, and behavioural dynamics between the different members of the family and their related social roles. Social persons in a household can include nuclear or extended biological family, adopted members, day workers, servants, enslaved peoples, and others with access to the domestic sphere. Material possessions concern the material aspect of the home, the space, and the objects people live and interact with. Behavioural dynamics concerns itself with the complex system of membership of interaction and relation between social persons. Socialisation and the formation of children and their identities occur within this sphere. “Household codes” refers to regulations that dictate the roles and conduct of husbands, wives, parents, children, enslaved peoples, and owners (Garroway 2014, 19–20; Bjelland Kartzow 2018, 120).

A household is not a self-contained unit but essentially a microcosm of broader society, its organisational and social structures correlating to the wider society in which it exists. Due to this fundamental importance, entire fields in anthropology and archaeology have been dedicated to studying households and their various interacting elements, such as gender, status, production, and household religion (Garroway 2014, 3). The Greco-Roman household was a patriarchal structure – embedded and reflected in the public sphere – wherein the husband/father/master dominated wives, children, enslaved people, and property. The father owned children and enslaved members of his household like property and could treat them in any way he pleased with the knowledge that there would be no legal consequences (Bakke 2005, 38; Admirand 2012, 189).

In Greek, the term οἶκος referred to either material possessions or all members in the family subject to the head of the house. The Latin noun *familia* functions similarly to *paterfamilias*, referring to both material possessions and people under the control of the husband/father/master of the house (Bakke 2005, 34). The words for children indicated something of their association; παῖς in the Greek and *puer* in Latin could be translated as “child”, “boy,” or “slave”, and *infans* and *infantia* referring to younger children translated means unable to speak (Baker 2018, 81). This hierarchical and patriarchal structure both allowed for and legitimated abuse of power in families. However, not every father took advantage of the sweeping power they held. In Roman family life, there were two moderating factors, the first: a societal desire to be seen as a good father (*bonus paterfamilias*), and the

second: the family council (*consilium*); despite these, the father still had an absolute say in the lives of the members of the family (Bakke 2005, 39).

#### 4.1.4.3. *Social birth*

In the Roman household, the father (*paterfamilias*) had the juridical right to determine the family's life and death; he decided if the child would be accepted into the family after the first week of life. If accepted, the family would celebrate the day of purification (*dies lustricus*) and give the child a name. In some ways, this social birth was more important than the biological birth because the child would not have been considered a person before this rite of passage. At this point, the child officially enters childhood, which was thought to be the training ground for adulthood (Gundry-Volf 2001, 34; Bakke 2005, 29). The child also officially entered the household of the father, who had complete control over the life or death of the child from the moment of their birth. Due to the hierarchical nature of their social structure and their low status within it, infant girls were especially vulnerable to the practices of infanticide and infant exposure at the father's exclusive prerogative (Carroll 2001, 122).

#### 4.1.4.4. *Children cherished and valued.*

All this is not to say that children were not loved and cherished by their parents, as is the case today. On the contrary, funerary inscriptions and other literary evidence indicate parents' deep affection and concern for their children's development and well-being. Legally and conceptually, however, children were not considered legal citizens in society, nor did they enjoy any of the rights and benefits that came with it (Carroll 2001, 122; Admirand 2012, 189). Still, children were cherished as the family's legacy in this life and the life after death. They were considered the soon-to-be contributors to the state in matters of the economy, society, and the military. When lost, children were mourned for the loss of hope and the promise of a prosperous future (Gundry-Volf 2001, 31–32; Bloomer 2018, 60).

Although all children were the recipients of and susceptible to these concerns and vulnerabilities, texts and funerary inscriptions indicate that social status significantly affected the treatment and valuation of children in the ancient context (Garroway 2014, 2). For elite children, especially the boys, their value was tied to their education, which would prepare them for a future in government and elevate the family's prestige. This is why we see that

when rhetoricians like Quintilian paid attention to children, they focused on developing special education that analysed their psychology as learning agents. (Bloomer 2018, 60)

In the case of the tomb erected for young Quintus Sulpicius Maximus in the first century, we see the parents' idealisation, hopes, and grief, as well as a report on the child's education until his passing. His family expresses his tragedy as an incomplete education, which, as the family valued, upheld, and forever engrafted into the symbol which stood as a testament to the boy's life and his family's grief (Bloomer 2018, 58–59)

Non-elite children made up the vast majority of child populations, were on the whole not educated and were not as sheltered, and had to contribute to the family as soon as possible, the vast majority were forced to work on farms, and the rest training as craftsmen at a young age (Bakke 2005, 40). On the whole, enslaved peoples and their children, who made up about around a third of the entire population in Mediterranean, experienced additional challenges due to their status as non-persons (Bjelland Kartzow 2018, 111).

As mentioned, the word *παῖς* is the same for enslaved person or child, indicating the similarity in the shared status and function as well as the complexity between enslaved people and children and their social dynamics. Like enslaved people, children were not considered socially equal to free adults and shared some of the negative associations of immaturity and impulsivity. Enslaved people, regardless of age, were considered children, property, or charges and treated accordingly. The vast difference between the free children and enslaved children was their futures. Free children would one day, upon reaching adulthood become one of the slave-owning class; while enslaved boys were thought of as not capable of reaching manhood, they were the perpetual child who would never be able to reason or act morally. Another complexity is that enslaved and free children often shared the same social spaces. The same enslaved women would nurse both children, they could grow up together as friends, they could share an early education, and in some cases, technically be half-siblings if the master impregnated one of the enslaved women in his household (Bjelland Kartzow 2018, 118).

Enslaved people could obtain some education of higher social status, and in many elite families, enslaved people were responsible for nursing and educating the free children of the home. Thus, in many cases, the enslaved caretaker was the principal part of the child's most formative years. As we will see, education was intimately related to discipline via physical



beating, which meant an enslaved person could beat a free child. However, some philosophers considered such a situation “against nature” (Bjelland Kartzow 2018, 117).

#### 4.1.4.5. *Violence against children*

Violence against children, especially in an educational context, was widespread and socially accepted. Augustine refers to his own teachers as torturers, indicating how common and accepted physical violence was in the education system (Bakke 2005, 40). Education was regarded as a critical feature of a child’s development from ignorance and immaturity to a knowable, mature adult with the ability to reason. Severe discipline came part and parcel with education, both physical and verbal. However, some rhetoricians like Quintilian and Plutarch advocated for some restraint in this regard; nevertheless, it was an accepted practice within educational environments (Gundry-Volf 2001, 23).

The situation was even worse for the children of enslaved peoples and children who were enslaved, considering what we know of the brutal and violent treatment of most enslaved people who were considered first and foremost property of the master. Since corporal punishment for free children and enslaved members of the house was a socially accepted custom, it implies that the physical treatment of most enslaved children in the ancient world could be particularly ruthless (Bakke 2005, 41).

In infancy, exposure was commonly practised in the ancient world by the poor and the rich, though the poor commonly exposed children due to financial and resource restraints. Some other reasons include the illegitimacy of the birth, ill omens, in some rare cases, as an extreme act of political resistance, and obvious physical deformities. Evidence also indicates that girl infants were more frequently exposed than boys (Bakke 2005, 30–31). With this background in mind, the violence against children depicted in Matthew 2: 16 – 18 would not have raised much uproar in the Greco-Roman context. Children were already barely considered people; these children from a rural territory, not supported by any Roman significant or elite families, would have been considered of even less import. Though the children of Bethlehem lived in the larger Greco-Roman cultural and social milieu, they were also situated within the Judeo-Palestinian social and cultural context, which held similar values towards children in some cases and differences in others.

#### 4.1.5. Jewish Childhood

The generic Mesopotamian word for childhood, *sehrum*, is the same for anything in its more diminutive form. However, the connotation of smallness was considered neither negative nor positive in their worldview. The popular Hebrew terms for “son” and “daughter” are בן and בת, pl. בנים, and בנות and the collective term טף. When comparing the broader influence of the Mesopotamian social and cultural context on perceptions of the word *sehrum*, similar correlations of smallness and the lack of positive or negative associations holds for the generic terms for children in the Hebrew (Brenner 2005, 4; Flynn 2018, 11–16).

##### 4.1.5.1. *Jewish philosophy of the child*

As in the Greco-Roman context, not many Jewish philosophers specifically wrote about children’s experiences or childhood in the ancient world (Flynn 2018, 142–43). Biblical texts such as Proverbs 22: 15, Isaiah 3: 4 – 5, and Wisdom 12: 24 – 25, however, consider children to be ignorant and undisciplined based on their inability to know and therefore fulfil the covenantal responsibilities required of the Jewish people. Similarly, rabbinic literature assumes children’s inability to practice covenantal responsibilities is tied to their general ignorance (Carroll 2001, 123). Due to this immaturity and ignorance, children are meant to be ruled and taught. Philo, in his *Special Laws* (2.232), emphasised the role of the parent as superior and encouraged parents to be harsh in their discipline as they needed to be, for severe discipline even unto death was considered lawful. His values were reflective of his time and culture, not just in the Judeo-Palestinian principles but of the broader Greco-Roman attitudes towards the physical discipline of children (Gundry-Volf 2001, 35; Admirand 2012, 189).

Children were seen as inherently foolish and prone to dishonour the family; therefore, a strong disciplinary hand was needed to ensure that the child and the family could have a strong future. Physical discipline was also seen as an act of love by the parent who would discipline their children for their good, especially as represented in Proverbs 3:11 – 12; 13: 24; 22: 15 and Sirach 30:1-13 (Carroll 2001, 125). Children were also considered the hope of their families and community as they represented the continued evidence of God’s divine promise to their ancestors. They were the natural inheritors of the divine promise and would be responsible for maintaining it into the future (Carroll 2001, 124). Therefore, the parent’s

primary responsibility was to teach their children the words and laws of the covenant and all the obligations that needed to be fulfilled (Gundry-Volf 2001, 35). The image Jewish philosophy paints is thus similarly ambiguous though more positive than the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. Although children may have been seen as simple-minded and incapable of fulfilling their duties, they were still considered fully a part of God's people. Moreover, they symbolised God's continued blessing on His people that the Covenant and its promises were still in effect (Gundry-Volf 2001, 35).

#### 4.1.5.2. *Jewish household*

The Israelite family was patriarchal, with the proper word to describe the household being *בית אב*, which translates to "house of the father". The husband was the master (*ba'al*) of his wife and had absolute authority over his children; in early times, this authority was nearly supreme and included even power over life and death (De Vaux 1961, 20; Tischler 2006, 207). However, there were some, if not significant, restrictions to the father's immense power. For instance, the father was allowed to marry his children without consent or sell them into slavery to settle debts, but he was not allowed to sell his wife or daughters into prostitution (Tischler 2006, 207). The power structure of the Jewish family also considered age to be a determining factor in authority. The father and older people were considered wise and just; obeying and following their words was right. Jewish families favoured sons, for they would perpetuate the family line and fortune and preserve the ancestral inheritance; because of this, daughters were held in much less regard (De Vaux 1961, 41; Brenner 2005, 10–11).

#### 4.1.5.3. *Social birth*

The Jewish social birth happened almost immediately after the biological one when the child was circumcised (in the case of boys) and named. Mothers were considered ritually unclean for some time after the birth. After the designated period – twice as long for a girl as for a boy – she was expected to cleanse herself ritually and offer a thanksgiving sacrifice (Tischler 2006, 73; Schmitt 2012, 391).

At the end of the period, a feast would be held to welcome the mother and child into the family, and the father would bless the wife and child, accept the infant, and name them. Though in exceptional cases, the father could choose not to accept the child as his own.

(Hosea 1:6) (Schmitt 2012, 391). If a son were born, he would be circumcised in accordance with Genesis 17:12, 21:4, and Leviticus 12:3 on the name-giving feast and integrate the infant into the family and the community. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel. It also later became a way for the community to define themselves in relation to their neighbours and affirm their identity as a community (Genesis 17:12; 21:4) (Schmitt 2012, 392–95). Though they still needed to be taught the laws and the accompanying obligations that went with them, children, from the name-giving day, were already an integrated and intrinsic part of the family and covenantal community. From birth, the parents' primary duty in religious instruction would begin (Carroll 2001, 123; Gundry-Volf 2001, 35).

#### 4.1.5.4. *Children cherished and valued.*

As in modern contexts, parents in the ancient context cared for their children and held them in deep affection and love; 4 Maccabees speaks of a parent's passionate love for their child, and other writers and rabbinic traditions attest to great parental love. Even Philo, who emphasised parents' superiority and was a proponent of harsh disciplinary measures, writes of powerful parental love and the relationship between parent and child. (Carroll 2001, 122; Gundry-Volf 2001, 34)

Children represented a continuation of the familial line, which Jewish communities saw as the continuation of the covenantal community and conceived of children as divine gifts from God going back to primordial history and God's instruction to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1: 27 – 28). Many children were a sign of blessings and joy, while childlessness was a state of wretched barrenness. Children were, after all, directly implicated in God's promise to Abraham to give as many descendants as there are stars in the heavens (Gundry-Volf 2001, 35; Tischler 2006, 73)

Since the ancient world's economy is more appropriately defined as agrarian, children played a far more crucial economic role than in an industrial economy which most of us are used to. Children were especially appreciated for their future economic and political contributions and functioning as a sort of retirement fund meant to provide financial support in their parents' old age. In addition, they would be tasked with properly performing the religious burial rites after their death. As a result, many children afforded the family increased economic and social power and status (Carroll 2001, 122 & 124).

Jewish families also cherished children differently but did so primarily according to gender rather than class, as in the case of the Greco-Roman context. Sons were also the primary addressees of the liturgical and sacrificial obligations. Deuteronomy regulated their inheritance, and the commands to honour one's parents and the hyper-severe consequences for a rebellious son were also explicitly aimed at boys. (Brenner 2005, 6)

In the case of daughters, though her word and promise are considered her own, her responsibility is with her father (Numbers 30:17,4), and her sexuality is her father's potential honour or shame. This is evidenced by the fact that most prohibitions specifically concerning daughters are related to virginity, rape, and prostitution. (Deuteronomy 22, Leviticus 19:29) (Brenner 2005, 6). The daughter was considered a burden to her father because he needed to maintain her until her betrothal and marriage, meanwhile maintaining her purity lest dishonour falls on him or his family. Fathers sometimes, against moral exhortations, married their daughters off as minors or to young boys to avoid the burden of obligation (Sivan 2015, 291–92).

In matters of the law, however, sons and daughters were on much more equal footing. For example, directives to keep the Sabbath (Exodus 20: 10 and Deuteronomy 5: 14) and other festivals and sacrificial meals (Deuteronomy 12: 12) applied to both genders. Similarly, prohibitions on worshipping other gods, intermarriage, incest, and human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 13:7; 7:3; 27:22; 18:10) applied to sons and daughters. In cases of bodily harm, victims of goring by an ox, whether a son or a daughter, were considered equally (Exodus 21: 29 – 31) (Brenner 2005, 5).

#### *4.1.5.5. Violence against children*

According to Jewish rhetoricians such as Philo of Alexandria, parents have complete authority and mastery over their children. Under this paradigm, much leeway is allowed for the parents to accuse, reprove, and discipline children with as much severity as the parent deems fit. Philo says that it is all permitted by the law, which does not curb the severity of punishment, even unto death. The law in question which allows such severe punishment is Deuteronomy 21: 18 – 21 and is not thought to have been practically implemented. Still, Philo's comments indicate the mindset concerning discipline and authority at the time (Admirand 2012, 189). As with the Greco-Roman world, violence in the ancient Jewish

educational sphere was the norm, with the Hebrew Bible and other biblical traditions advocating for the rod as a method of discipline. Such cultures assumed that children would naturally bring dishonour upon the whole family if their excesses were not curbed with strong physical discipline. (Carroll 2001, 125).

Despite their views on child discipline, Jewish communities were largely known to reject infanticide or exposure. Philo wrote that it went against divine law, which encouraged people to be fruitful and multiply over the earth. Birth was a phenomenon that the Jewish community saw as the continuation of the blessing passed down from Genesis to Abraham to the people of Israel. As such, the community scorned all forms of curbing the drive to procreate and multiply on the earth (Bakke 2005, 32; Tischler 2006, 72). This rejection of abortion, infanticide, and contraception was somewhat unique in the ancient world compared to their neighbours' cultural norms and practices. It also became part of the religious duty of the community to support the children of people experiencing poverty and keep them from perishing (Goodman 2007, 93). Though Jewish communities rejected these cruel practices, there are still traditions in the Hebrew Bible that underscored the inherent vulnerability of children in the ancient world. For instance, stories of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, Lot's offering of his daughters to the men of Sodom in Genesis 19:8, and Moses' life threatened by Pharaoh as an infant in Exodus 1 and 2 (Carroll 2001, 124).

The pericope Matthew 2:16 – 18 picks up on and ties into this theme of vulnerability that children caught in the crosshairs of larger ideological battles face. Within this small section of Matthew's infancy narrative, he interweaves older traditions of the Exodus and prophetic lamenting literature to protest Herod's actions. In this chapter, I discussed the role of children from Jewish and Greco-Roman perspectives and how, even in infancy, boys were especially considered a blessing to their Jewish families and communities. Though in the Greco-Roman view, Herod's assassination of the children would not have been considered important, in the Jewish context, he had done the unspeakable. Herod had essentially gone against nature and God by killing the very evidence and manifestation of God's blessing on His people. Chapter 5 goes into the imperial ideological mechanisms that are in play when children of the subjugated are targeted and the ideological response that such an act provokes in Matthew's gospel as a text from the perspective of the subjugated.

## 5. Chapter 5: Ideological Texture of Mt 2: 16 – 18

### 5.1. Ideological texture

Ideological texture in Robbins' optic concerns the overarching systems of beliefs of reality that all hold in common and the text's conscious and unconscious reactions to those systems. It centres people and makes them the principal subjects of the investigation, first looking at the interpreter's biases, then the tradition of interpretation, and finally bringing the text into an interpretative dialogue (Robbins 1996a, 95–96).

The pericope, Matthew 2: 16 – 18, is firmly embedded within multiple layers of imperialism. It explicitly details the heinous actions of a client king enabled by Rome and implicitly recalls the imperial violence of Israel's history and the effect that it has had on the most vulnerable. My reading of the pericope, therefore, is focused on the children of the "Massacre of the Innocents" as the ultimate victims of not just Herod's machinations but the much larger ideological world of imperialism and familiar violence which started way before the events of the pericope began and continue even unto today.

#### 5.1.1. Interpreter's ideological commitments

As indicated, ideological analysis as used here, is not a rejection of close scrutiny of the text but a rejection of the claim of objectivity and an attempt to interpret texts transparently, by indicating where my ideological allegiances lie and how it colours my reading of the text. Ideological analysis starts with the presuppositions of the interpreter in question – myself. I start with my socio-cultural location as a Coloured woman living in post-apartheid South Africa. My upbringing as a child was filled with images and national rhetoric of a nation that espoused the values of equality and opportunity for all, yet my experience revealed a different reality. The stark evidence of the historic legacy of colonialism and apartheid played out in my community daily. Scholarships to schools outside my area allowed me to peek into a rainbow of social classes with conditions very unlike my own. Although we lived in the same country and theoretically had access to the same opportunities, my peers and I lived in vastly different worlds. At every corner, on every institutional level, my context impeded my ability

to fully participate in the various educational opportunities the school made available. If attaining a good education, with all its possibilities of social mobility, was difficult even with the assistance of multiple scholarships, without them, I realised, it would have been categorically impossible. Therefore, framing the challenges that I and my community faced as personal, as I was taught to believe, painted an inadequate picture of our circumstances. Our challenges were as much, if not more, historical and institutional than a simple matter of work ethic or individual failings.

In this context, I learned to navigate opposing worlds and circumstances, noticing that assumptions and decisions were made on behalf of my community and myself without real comprehension of our circumstances. I began to see myself as a translator, alternating between multiple worlds and communicating my home context using foreign, “formal” language. I began to see my context, community, and myself as the legacy of our country’s dark past and murky future and made use of the tools and inherent ideologies of colonialism and neo-colonialism embedded in my education to navigate these complexities.

My original social location, therefore, orients my concern for the overlooked in politics, society, and history. My positionality at the margins of dominant society substantially influenced my perception that the world, society, and the problems we face are as systemic as they are individual. My emergence into biblical academia further sparked an interest in the biblical texts as postcolonial texts, which, like me, straddled multiple worlds, communicating in multiple layers. A growing sense of the history of interpreting biblical texts further convinced me that there were communities like mine in the Bible whose voices and experiences were drowned out by dominant voices and interpretations. It is needed, then, when analysing our treasured texts to search for marginalised stories and voices with purposeful intention, lest the status quo of inequality and ideological hegemony embedded in dominant interpretations continue to play out as it has been.

These interlocking contexts and insights inspire my postcolonial orientation in biblical scholarship, believing that systemically, historically, and ideologically certain people have been oppressed and silenced by those who hold dominant positions in society. My role as a Christian and as a future biblical scholar, as I see it, is to search for these voices, to highlight the plight of the poor and oppressed and all those pushed to the margins. My reading of Matthew 2: 16 – 18, therefore, perceives the plight of the children in this account as an example not just of one man’s evil but the evil of institutionalised violence. Herod was able



to act with impunity due to the ideological world he lived in. My ideological investigation seeks to understand this world as Matthew depicts it and present a fuller depiction of the children's institutionalised circumstances. Using postcolonial theory in my ideological analysis, I bring the silent victims of the massacre to the forefront and question the power imbalances which enabled their demise. My investigation looks at the interaction between the children and Herod, how Matthew depicts the account, and the complex, interrelated and socio-cultural, historical, and political realities of their contexts, warranting deeper exploration.

### 5.1.2. What is postcolonial interpretation?

Postcolonial criticism began after decolonisation as a literary movement where interpreters from colonised contexts sought to confront their colonial past and the legacy of their silenced and misrepresented identities weaponised to maintain colonial power dynamics. This movement was part of the larger decolonisation process that gained momentum in the 1940s as colonial powers began relinquishing their formal colonial powers, giving way to independent nations and neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism refers to newer forms of international economic and cultural imperialism. Matthew, written and occurring millennia before these events, clearly does not occur in modern postcolonial circumstances. In fact, by the time his gospel was written, Matthew was not yet in the “post” imperial era; he was still living in a political world dominated by Roman imperial rule. Technically, based on the definition ‘*colonia*’, which referred to an implanted colony of retired soldiers, the suspected area of Matthew's composition, Antioch, was not even colonial. However, it was imperial if imperialism is defined as a dominant metropolitan ruling a distant territory’ per Edward Said's definition (Said 1993, 9). Rome dominated and gained enormous economic benefits from patron-client relationships, trade, taxes, and slave labour, among other mechanisms, from the territories under their control (Carter 2007, 69–70).

Postcolonial interpretation emerged as a way of engaging with literary productions intimately affected by the geopolitical reality of imperialism. Postcolonial studies looks at domination and subjugation in its many manifestations throughout history, gaining insight into how the past informs the present. Postcolonial studies analyse the strategies empires use to construct the colonised's identity and how the colonised have used and gone beyond those strategies to reconstruct and rearticulate their identities. Postcolonial interpretation traces the entire

imperialising experience in its many diverse forms, from its origins to its consequences (Sugirtharajah 2006, 7; Carter 2007, 70).

### 5.1.3. Matthew as postcolonial text

In my study, the Gospel of Matthew is envisaged as complex textual interaction expressing local cultural experiences. It also testifies to a profoundly imperial context engrafted into the text and its reactions. Matthew's gospel is an expression of voices from the margins embracing and resisting imperialism, sometimes co-opting the rhetorical strategies of the empire, and at other times opposing them (Carter 2007, 70–71).

A postcolonial interpretation of Matthew centres on the imperial essence of the text and the subjugated's complex reaction to it by seeking out marginalised voices, persons, and circumstances. It also sets out to dissect the various means by which the empire exerts control, silences, and dominates all those under its purview (Carter 2007, 71). Just as the empire employs various ways of oppression through silencing and domination in its multiple forms, the subjugated negotiates and interacts with the empire using various evaluations and reactions such as accommodation, complicity, and resistance, both openly and subversively (Carter 2007, 72).

The Gospel of Matthew attests to the ambiguity of navigating imperial contexts as a marginalised voice. Often resistance is not overt or explicit due to fierce retribution from imperial forces; however, the “weapons of the weak” should not be underestimated. They are a contributing factor in limiting the empire's power and protecting the interests of the submissive groups as far as possible. These resistances, even when subversive, ensure the survival of the vulnerable while imaginatively advocating for alternative, just realities (Carter 2001, 19).

## 5.2. Double colonisation

Musa Dube enriches our understanding of postcolonial thought by highlighting that certain groups, for instance, African women, suffer under the burden of more than one system of patriarchy, foreign and domestic, in addition to the oppressive systems of colonisation. The “double colonisation” she introduces seeks to highlight the multifaceted nature of oppression

(Dube 1999, 216). Essentialism, Musa points out, may be a survival tactic of the oppressed to assert a common front against a type of oppression, but it can become oppressive when all groups from various contexts are expected to be affirmed equally. She notes that essentialism becomes oppressive when certain groups experience victimhood differently are obstructed from expressing the multiplicity of their oppression due to essentialist thinking among the majority oppressed (Dube 1999, 218).

In my investigation, the children of the “Massacre of the Innocents” is one such example of “double colonisation” because they labour under multiple interlocking systems of oppression. While it is true that any subject of the Roman Empire in that era was oppressed by the overarching control Rome exercised over their territories, a Jerusalem elite man experienced that oppression far differently than a peasant from Bethlehem. Similarly, all children suffered under societal models which did not view them as fully human, but the boy child from a free Roman family experienced that oppression far differently from a girl child born to an enslaved mother. My postcolonial analysis seeks to draw out some of the complex textures within children’s experiences in Matthew’s world, explore the multiplicity of their oppression, and observe how those insights can contribute to our understanding of Matthew’s overarching message and what it can say to us today.

I propose that the children of Bethlehem suffer under two different yet interconnected forms of oppression: the first from the imperial oppression as children of the dominated and the second from the hierarchical, patriarchal structures that dominate their cultural and social lives. When understood in light of these power disparities, the dynamics between the boys of Bethlehem and Herod are revealed to be absurdly unjust, further adding to the ideological impact of the pericope in the text.

#### 5.2.1. Contextual circumstances of the children of Bethlehem and Soweto

The children of Bethlehem as depicted in their Bethlehem setting inhabit a world characterised by its intersections of hierarchical social and cultural frameworks. Two socio-cultural frameworks stand out as the dominant frameworks that informed the lives of the Matthean children: that of the Roman Empire and the general Judeo-Palestinian cultural framework situated in the Levant. The Roman Empire was an extremely powerful and expansive political entity that would, in search of more resources and power, conquer and then control peoples outside of its own territory. The empire propagated and promoted ideologies and social and cultural hierarchies in the interest of maintaining its power. They,

therefore, characterised the people they conquered within certain lesser categories of people and asserted that they were less than the standard, the full free citizen male of Rome. Yet it also perpetuated a father-centric model of family as a microcosm of the empire at large, which was meant to be upheld by their subjects in the interest of the empire. Within this paterfamilias-dominant context, the role of children was relegated to almost that of property of the father (Garroway 2014, 3; Bakke 2005, 38; Admirand 2012, 189). When King Herod took power in 44 BC, he attempted to replicate the Greco-Roman standard of Rome as many other provinces under the empire were prone to do to court the favour of the emperor, the father of Rome (Evans 2012, 51–56). Thus, the Roman Empire empowers King Herod, who provides him with the ideological apparatus and military might to carry out his plan on provincial peasants without repercussions.

The children also inhabit the Judeo-Palestinian social and cultural world, which places children very near the bottom of the hierarchy. The context of foreign occupation and killing children is no new phenomenon in Israel's history. The author of Matthew evokes the narrative world of exilic Jeremiah, during which time it was not unusual to cart off children as spoils of war or kill them as a sign of military prestige (Lee 2010, 114–15). The author also evokes the narrative world of Moses' exodus, a world in which the killing of boys is used twice as a show of one power's might over the other. Despite technically being the promised land of the Exodus and being freed from the Babylonian exile, Israel is reframed, through Jesus, as the land of Egypt and exile (Piotrowski 2016, 13). The situation the children find themselves in is not a new phenomenon but a tradition of violence against children as a signal of power over one's enemies.

The colliding worlds of the children of Soweto can be seen through the lens of the two dominant powers as well, the dominant and oppressive apartheid government of South Africa and the African cultural frameworks they were born into. From the perspective of the Apartheid government, the native children of South Africa were to be educated only as far as they could be taught to serve the dominant white minority as a cheap labour force. From 1953 – 1974 the Apartheid government instituted numerous measures to curb and otherwise limit the growth of education for blacks (Hirson 1979, 93–97). Therefore, the result was a black education system inaccessible to most and widely known to be subpar to the education white children received. In doing so, the Apartheid government sought to ensure that black children would be educated only as far as it would provide their white constituency with a future cheap labour force to serve their needs (Hirson 1979, 93).

Though these measures were widely recognised as one of the Apartheid government's tactics of oppression, there is evidence that the children's plight was not at the forefront of the liberation leaders' minds. The ANC addressed the Bantu Education Act at its conference in December 1954 casually by stating in its National Executive Committee report in the following way:

"The Bantu Education question has been handed over to the women and youth sections of the African National Congress working together with other organisations whose purpose is to fight against this Devil's piece of legislation. This means that they work under the supervision of the senior body, but specialise on this campaign. The plans have been drawn up which recommend a withdrawal of children at least for one week. A speaker on the subject will enlighten you more as to precisely what should be done" (Hirson 1979, 47).

According to Baruch Hirson, before 1973 there was no real effort to unite school student movements and national liberation movements. Elders, Baruch points out, would in all likelihood not have "deigned to 'talk politics' with 'children'" (Hirson 1979, 29). Yet as the Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974 was proposed teachers introduced their pupils to movements such as Black Consciousness and Black Power and classrooms became spaces of political conversation which broke down cultural barriers associated with their age differences (Hirson 1979, 178). It was partly through their initiation into this kind of "adult" discussions – discussions they had always been left out of yet crucially affected them – that led to the students' mobilization in 1976.

We see therefore the multiple layers of oppression that both the children of Matthew and the children of Soweto had to face. They straddled multiple worlds and the frameworks and histories with all its layers of power dynamics merged and compounded resulting in the dire circumstances represented by the pericope in Matthew and the poem Black Wednesday and the events they recount.

### 5.2.2. Literature resisting imperialism

My study conceives of Matthew as a postcolonial text which, like other creative texts from colonized contexts, can emerge as a site of decolonisation and political action (Dube 1999, 217). The concepts of decoloniality and postcoloniality are similar in their criticism of

knowledge production centred in colonial empires and imbedded in eurocentrism. Where they differ is in their relation to time period and geographical location, with decolonisation in particular originating from South America. Decolonial scholars extend the debates of modernity by especially considering the circumstances of their colonial experience arising from the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Bhambra 2014, 119). Postcolonial scholars in comparison reflect on the legacy of European colonialism and the post-1940's decolonisation process that gave way to neocolonialism. Working from the latter category, South Africa is postcolonial context wherein postcolonial thought can be used to confront the colonial legacy of our mis- or unrepresented voices and identities. The Gospel of Matthew, under Edward Said's definition of imperialism can also be read using a postcolonial optic if "postcolonial" is meant to be understood as investigation of the whole imperialising experience in its many forms (Carter 2007, 69–70; Said 1993, 9).

Matthew 2: 16 – 18 can thus be read alongside other postcolonial texts, such as the poem "Black Wednesday," testifying and detailing the massacre of South African children in the Soweto uprising of 1976. "Black Wednesday" and Matthew 2: 16 – 18 are both postcolonial works of literature emerging before the moment of independence. They are written in the voice of the marginalized and lament the violence of the empire on the most vulnerable among us (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 82).

Matthew 2: 16 – 18 references Jeremiah 31: 15 and creates a typology between Jesus and Moses of the Exodus tradition. In doing so, Matthew evokes ancient, rich traditions of lament prayers, liberation, and justice (Lee 2010, 3). The tradition of lament prayers goes back even farther than Israel's own history, with one of our earliest examples dated 4000 years ago to ancient Sumer. In this lament, poets mourn and lament as the Sumerian city of Ur falls, feeling that their gods had abandoned them (Lee 2010, 24). In the traditional model, laments are ways people may process painful memories and tragedies and call for their deliverance and a transformed, just society. Over the years, many other cultures have shown their own forms and innovative versions of lament that helped them to articulate their trauma and plead with God or their deity for liberation (Lee 2010, 3–5).

In the lamenting tradition, the voice of women has been a powerful tool in the act of mourning and the expression of shared grief. The voice of women is related to the historical reality that women have had to bear the brunt of the consequences of war. They, along with children, would often be sent off to serve their conquerors as spoils of war. The city is also

frequently pictured as a woman described as being violated and weeping, symbolizing what was done to the city's people (Lee 2010, 31–32). Children were also deported, and military iconography shows the invading army killing the children in the conquered city, which signalled some prestige in the military (Lee 2010, 114–15). In the pericope, Matthew makes clear allusions to multiple contexts of imperialism; namely: through his Moses typology recalling Egyptian hegemony and through his evocation of Jeremiah's contexts of Assyrian and Babylonian hegemony. Matthew references Rachel's lamenting voice and conjures its traditional ties to public, relational mourning (Lee 2010, 108).

“Black Wednesday” is a South African resistance poem detailing the events and aftermath of 16 June 1976, commonly called the Soweto uprising, which saw the apartheid government open fire on protesting school children. The author, H. M. L. Lentsoane, uses his mother tongue, northern Sotho, to compose his poem. The employment of his African language inherently resisting the imperial cultural program wherein English was an essential tool of domination (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 3). His poem details the violent oppression of imperialism and resists it by discarding the dominant European languages of South Africa in favour of his native language and in line with the format of oral traditions. Lentsoane's poem evokes emotion, fear, and fantasy to record the historic events of that day that fly in the face of modern Western modes of historiography (Krog 2022, 125). Oral cultures assume that words, spoken in the appropriate circumstances, can bring events to life and embody reality rather than representing it (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 80). Access to poems like “Black Wednesday” offers alternative histories and forms of history that can shed light on the richer expressions of the subjugated towards their reality of imperialism.

“Black Wednesday” and Matthew 2: 16 – 18 share some interesting literary links, such as their apparent appeal or references to their ancestors, Lentsoane's poem to his ancestors, and Matthew to Rachel. The massacres also seem to share a certain fatefulness. Lentsoane's poem in lines 10 and 11 assert that the children were acting out the plans the ancestors set out, while Matthew introduces the fulfilment quotation and depicts the massacre foretold long ago. The plots of the empire are apparent in both texts, as the Apartheid machine schemes relentlessly in “Black Wednesday,” so does Herod in the verses leading up to the massacre (Krog 2022, 116–17).

Both texts offer a complex witness of imperialism and engage their audiences on the relationship between violence, suffering, and hope (Lee 2010, 95). In Matthew 2: 16 – 18,



though the infants in Moses' narrative are killed, he is saved and, in turn, plays an integral part of the Israelites' salvation from Egypt. Matthew evokes Jeremiah and Rachel, recalling an immensely traumatic history of imperialism and exile but also of hope and restoration of the new people of Israel. Finally, Matthew places the massacre in the infancy narrative, which heralds the coming of the Messiah who would save all of humanity. "Black Wednesday" in turn, is a complex witness to the destruction of imperialism on the bodies of the young. Still, Lentsoane renames the students in his poem as "initiates," evoking powerful cultural language to signify the beginning of a new reality for them and for what they have, with immense courage at such a tender age, brought into the world.

### 5.2.3. Complex childhood represented by the text

#### 5.2.3.1. *Gospel of Matthew*

Matthew's treatment of children throughout his narrative is one of smallness and vulnerability but the concept of childhood is also used as teachings concerning faith and the reign of God. In Matthew there are three healing narratives concerning children: the official's daughter, the Canaanite woman's daughter and the epileptic boy (Betworth 2015, 75 & 85–92). In each of the cases, regardless of the class of the parents, the children are depicted as vulnerable and their healing comes from the initiative and pleading of their parents. The discipleship community is encouraged to embrace this inherent vulnerability as the community is often referred to as "little ones". Matthew defines "greatness" through the image of children who in essence are devoid of status, wealth, and power of their own, and Jesus insists that the children be brought to him as the kingdom belongs to such as these (Betworth 2015, 92–96).

Admirand in his article 'Millstones, Stumbling Blocks, and Dog Scraps: Children in the Gospels' (2012) throws this rosy view of childhood into question by pointing out the overwhelming silence and passivity of the children depicted in the Gospels. The children barely contribute to the dialogue and have limited agency (Admirand 2012, 187). He points to the reality that the place of children in that time socially, would have been at the bottom of the hierarchy and thus would have far more susceptible to abuse. He asks that in context of widespread violence against children, if such images of children and childhood do not contribute to the problem when they are adopted uncritically by the church today (Admirand 2012, 189).



This line of enquiry feeds into my choice of pericope for an analysis of the ideological world of the children and the alternative it represents instead of the more positive constructions of childhood depicted in Jesus' teachings in Matthew. The values that Jesus associates with children certainly does provide an alternative to the far more negative depictions of childhood in the ancient world yet it represents, largely, the ideal the discipleship community must work towards. In my view, the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18 deals with the harsh and cruel material realities that vulnerable groups such as children live under while living in exile or oppression. At no point is Jesus as vulnerable and threatened as he was when he was a child himself, and it is at this point where his solidarity with human beings are at its starkest before the crucifixion moment.

The text, by recalling the political pasts of exodus and exile, recalls a present of oppression and future of liberation. Tracing the story of children in that framework points to a dangerous present, fraught with exposure and vulnerabilities. The restoration is not yet come and the story of Herod's massacre is vicious reminder of that. Yet the expectation for the coming salvation is still set through the exilic and exodus contexts evoked, as well the birth and escape of the Messiah from the massacre. This leads to uncomfortable questions about God's role in the demise of the children, and why they were not saved along with Jesus.

As Erickson points out, Matthew himself seems to ignore the question of theodicy entirely (Erickson 1997, 6–7). His reasons for doing so, in my view, is due to the ancient understanding of clashing powers, values and worldviews embedded in the framework of violence and winner-takes-all. In the pericope, Herod plans to destroy the promised child through a scheme that kills the children of Bethlehem, when God divinely intervenes by saving Jesus. In Matthew's world, if his people were to be saved, then his enemies had to be destroyed. In that world power was a zero-sum game, there could be no peaceful outcome for all. Violence is embedded in his understanding of salvation.

Matthew would not have raised the issue of theodicy because Herod, the enemy, is obviously to blame. He exercises his power the way they did in that context, through immense violence. God is not portrayed to be culpable in the massacre for saving Jesus and not the others because opposing powers and values are in tension with one another. Herod makes a move and God subverts. Infanticide of boys seems to be a show of immense power as it occurs twice in Exodus in attempt to break the opposing side. Even the fact that the firstborns of Egypt were killed to liberate Israel would in all likelihood not even have perturbed Matthew

as such shows of power were expected to overcome the enemy. Liberation of one's own people was linked to the destruction of the enemy, not a peaceful resolution. In such a context there can be no question that Herod is responsible for the deaths of children in his mission to overthrow the true king of the Jews.

The rhetorical function of the pericope in light of its broader usage presents an important perspective for how the entire Gospel should be read, drawing on Israel's traditions for exile and restoration. The other examples of children in Matthew could be read from this perspective, as they are clearly vulnerable and in need of help yet adult Jesus offers them restoration through his healing and by making even their exposed and powerless situation the ideal in the kingdom of God. This first instance of immense brutality however presents a stark picture of the dire situation vulnerable groups find themselves in under oppressive regimes and frameworks yet sets the tone for a reading the rest of narrative. It encourages the reader to hold the present oppressive age and the coming reign of God through Jesus in an impressive and complex balance.

Oppression is a postcolonial concept that helps us to identify where the power lies and how it manifests. In this context of the pericope Matthew 2: 16 – 18, the Roman Empire had political control over the region of Judea; it was an absurdly powerful political entity exercising its influence over territories far outside its centre. King Herod, appointed by the Roman emperor, answers to the Empire as a client king. He embodies the worst intersections of a hybrid identity when he uses the methods and structures of the empire to exact immense violence on his own people (Mongstad-Kvammen 2013, 121). The oppressed in this context are the people of Judea, conquered by Rome, and having to operate under its purview and influence. The *right of command* has been placed on Herod, and he exercises this apparent "divine right" by wantonly executing children in search of a rival that may threaten that command. Yet in this very act, Herod undermines his authority because not only does the child escape, but the brutality of the event exposes his insecurities and the falseness of his claim to divine rule (Luz 2007, 121). What ruler, instituted by the gods, could be threatened by mere infants, and what deity would sanction the destruction of helpless babies of a ruler's own people to maintain that ruler's right to rule over them?

"Double oppression" highlights the infant's multivalent vulnerability as children born into the ancient Near Eastern world. In the larger ancient Mediterranean, children were seen not as whole human beings with inherent human rights but as dependent on their familial

associations for honour and protection. Poor or enslaved people were not afforded the justice that wealthy, landowning, and free citizens had access to, and that situation extended to their children. Children in their own cultures were not given any autonomy, nor were their concerns or feelings considered in the ancient world's hierarchical and patriarchal Greco-Roman or Jewish family structures. Even though the Jewish familial structure put as little stock into the child's voice as an agent as their Greco-Roman counterparts, infanticide on this scale would have been considered a grave and terrible occurrence. As mentioned, the Jewish framework saw children, especially boys, continuing the Abrahamic promise. By killing the infant boys, Herod killed the evidence of God's blessing and the community's future. By committing such violence, Herod also reveals the true face of the empire, the extreme violence it depends on to maintain its so-called "peace", how it preys on the weakest in society, and how vulnerable it ultimately is if infants can threaten it.

#### 5.2.3.2. *Black Wednesday*

The Soweto uprisings, which "Black Wednesday" attests to, were initiated when the Apartheid government attempted to change the language of instruction in secondary schools to Afrikaans. This proposed act coincided with a massive swell in black students attending high schools and the emergence of Black Consciousness in South Africa. The increased numbers gave the students a sizable resistance force, and the concepts of Black Consciousness gave students the needed political tools and unification to structure an often fractured resistance (Nieftagodien 2014, 8). This uprising saw students, exceptionally young, embarking on autonomous political action, mobilizing vast numbers of their peers, building organizations, and innovating political tactics in the face of a vastly more powerful and resourced oppressive foe (Nieftagodien 2014, 9). Needless to say, due to lack of experience these children made blunders and poor judgments, and the fact that they were up against one of the most powerful governments on our entire continent at the time made the fight even more absurdly unbalanced. However, it made the gains and impact they made all the more impressive (Nieftagodien 2014, 22–25).

On that first day, 16 June 1976, the deaths of Hector Pieterse and Hastings Indlovu sparked months of unrest that led to the deaths of more than 300 black youths in the months of ensuing violence. Their deaths became a symbol of the true face of Apartheid, far more indicative than the claims of "peace" the apartheid government touted as the reasoning behind segregation based on race. Though momentum died down around September of that

same year, the political landscape and trajectory were forever changed after the uprising. The structures of power which controlled the townships were permanently broken and stripped. People never forgot the picture of stones, children's playthings, up against revolvers, pistols, automatic rifles, tear gas cannisters, and heavily armoured vehicles (Krog 2022, 118). The famous image of little Hector moved people of different backgrounds and faiths to take their place in the resistance that positioned South Africa on a trajectory that would eventually bring the Apartheid government to its knees (Nieftagodien 2014, 7 & 206).

During the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the Soweto Uprising marked a decisive turning point in the Struggle. Despite their cultural ideologies, which did not encourage children to participate in essential matters, teachers helped their students to mobilize and make their voices heard. When the peaceful march turned to chaos and then carnage, even the staunchest supporters of Apartheid, who truly believed that the policy was attempting to maintain peace between races, had a hard time explaining the horrors of an armed police force murdering children in the street. The inherent violence of the system was exposed and could no longer be denied. Just as in the Matthean text, the true nature of the empire was exposed by the destruction of the most vulnerable. The ideological impact, however, was revelatory and a catalyst for a more demanding, sustained fight for liberation. Following the 16 June uprising of 1976, the youth became even more involved in the Struggle, showing a determination and ingenuity to disrupt many vital structures of the Apartheid government, including the economy and the education system (Hirson 1979, 9). The uprising was both a massacre exposing the regime's true face and signalling the beginning of its end. The quotation in the pericope recalls a metaphorical Rachel mourning for her children as they are led into exile and creates a vivid image of Israel's history with foreign conquering armies. Yet it also recalls a history of restoration from foreign powers and now heralds the coming of the ultimate restoration in the life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### 5.3. Conclusionary Remarks

Despite the robust and progressive Constitution of South Africa sports, especially regarding special rights afforded to children – here defined as people under 18 – violence against children is still a phenomenon which occurs in our context with alarming frequency (Nicolaou and Durieux 2006, 33). Just last year the South African Police Service revealed shocking figures reporting 243 children and 855 women killed, and 1670 children grievously

harmed within a period of 3 months, from April 2022 to June 2022 (Mafico 2022). In a context where the majority of the nation's population identifies as Christian and where the Bible is held up as authoritative, the Bible can function as a dynamic conversation partner in uncovering the mechanisms of power which impacts the lives of the vulnerable groups in our context.

Reading texts like Matthew 2: 16 – 18 through the lens socio-rhetorical interpretation and as a text of terror for children aids in understanding the complex mechanisms underlying these abuses. (Nicolaou and Durieux 2006, 31). A socio-rhetorical interpretation allows for an investigation of the text from multiple viewpoints based on the phenomena embedded in the text. Every day we are confronted with yet another violent account describing yet another child abused or killed. Reading Matthew 2: 16 – 18 from an interdisciplinary viewpoint helps to see these harrowing stories from a different perspective. The tragedy of Matthew 2: 16 – 18 and their modern counterparts exposes the violence at the centre of our political and cultural organizations. Reading their stories highlights the ways in which we unknowingly play a part in the ideological environment facilitating abuse in our communities.

These stories are a testament to the reality that the process of realizing restoration and justice for children in South Africa is far from over. Matthew 2: 16 – 18 with its complex interaction of suffering and hope has the potential galvanize our efforts to realize a just and safe society for all children in our country regardless of the circumstances of their birth. Isolating child abuses from the child's material context far too often removes us from implication, and paralyzes our action by making it seem beyond our individual control. Rejecting that idea, "that is not my child" acknowledges the sacrifices of the children who died exposing the true face of our failed systems and propels us to work towards just more institutions. May we be inspired by the children of Soweto who took up their autonomy to fight for their own futures. Now, partly thanks to their sacrifices, many more black children have a fighting chance at better future too. Matthew 2 and other texts like it is essential reading in a context where colonization, poverty, patriarchy, and their effects are still commonplace in our communities. The results these legacies are hideously evident in the story of the massacre of the innocents and in the names and stories of all the South African children dying and hurting even today.

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