

Babylonian exile. Ramah, a town about 5 miles north of Jerusalem, seems to have been a deportation depot for those being shipped into exile (see Jeremiah 40:1). Rachel was the favored wife of Jacob (see Genesis 25-35) and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin.

Here, the connection to Jesus is pretty easy to see. Though the Jews began returning to Jerusalem centuries before, many understood that the exile had never truly ended. Herod's killing of the babies was only the latest reminder that the exile continued. The exile is more than mere geography, for oppressors continue to rule over God's people. Jesus and the salvation he brought would be the true end of exile, which he announces when he begins his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth (see Luke 4). Further driving home Matthew's point, Jeremiah 31 is also where we find the famous New Covenant passage, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts . . ." (31:31-34).

"He will be called a Nazorean" (scene 3, v. 19-23)

The fourth fulfillment ends with a "quotation" that isn't really a quotation at all! It can't be found anywhere in the Bible or outside the Bible for that matter. When we look at Matthew's words closely, we see that he is going about this one a bit differently than in his other quotations. No specific prophet is named and he uses a plural "prophets," not the singular. He knows that this isn't a specific quote.

Instead, it is probably a wordplay, using the similarity between the Hebrew word for "branch," *neser*, and the name of Nazareth. Though it is used only in Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch/*neser* shall come out of his roots," *neser* became an important messianic theme among the Jews. The messianic figure of Isaiah 11:1 is the Immanuel of Isaiah 7:14. Thus, Matthew cleverly prepares the reader for the surprising news that the hometown of God's Messiah is Nazareth, a place bereft of all significance. As Nathaniel puts it when being recruited by Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Matthew replies, "Most certainly . . . the branch of Jesse!"

Fulfillment

Each of these fulfillment scenes are crafted so as to help us see the larger story that is being played out in the birth of Jesus. In fulfillment of God's promises made long before, the time had finally come for God to break into human history in a new way.

The baby is the long-awaited Messiah and more. The Christ-child is God incarnate who brings the salvation that only God could bring. As Jesus would himself say later, "the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). Gary Burge writes:

When Jesus entered this stage of Judaism's history, the country was rife with political tension. Deep skepticism about resistance held for some; others were ready to find their messianic leader and fight. Jesus' baptism evoked numerous themes in this: he begins his ministry with an act of purification (immersion in the Jordan River), the Spirit anoints him with power, and God's voice echoes the words of Psalm 2—the very liturgy used for Israel's kings—saying that indeed Jesus is God's chosen son. Jesus emerges from the Jordan just as Joshua had (Jesus' name in Hebrew is Joshua) and he enters the wilderness to defeat Satan. And in Matthew when Jesus begins his ministry he speaks from a mountain (as Moses had). Even the prophet John the Baptist, dressed like the prophet Elijah, is his promoter, announcing that this is indeed someone unparalleled coming into the world (Malachi 4:5; John 1:29). It is no surprise that the theological specialists from Jerusalem come to the Jordan River to investigate (John 1:19-28) and continue to interrogate Jesus later. If this is a fraudulent claim, then it must be judged as such.

The unfolding of Jesus' ministry in each of the Gospels reinforces this same idea. Jesus is the fulfiller of Israel's hope. He is empowered by the Spirit of God to do fabulous miracles and to teach profoundly. This is why Mark begins his Gospel with the words "good news." This term (Greek. *euangelion*, or "gospel") was a well-known designation for an official announcement. Its use by the Romans was widespread, and here Mark is happy to exploit it. The good news is that the Messiah has come, the hope that had been nurtured for two centuries is now among us, and the redemption of the people is at hand.²

Next week, we'll see that this fulfillment is further realized in Jesus' announcement that the kingdom of God was arriving in and through him.

² Burge, Gary M. *The New Testament in Seven Sentences* (pp. 18-19). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.