

# “A New Israel”

*Matthew 2:13–23*

## ***Predictions of a Messiah or something more?***

Find a quiet corner sometime and read through the first two chapters of Matthew’s gospel. You will see that Matthew grounds his story in the writings of the Old Testament. In the second chapter alone, Matthew refers to five events as fulfillments of what was said through the prophets of Israel. We usually think of these merely as fulfilled predictions that are meant to be proofs of Matthew’s claims. But they are far more. Coming to grasp Matthew’s purpose can help us see the truth of Jesus in ways we have not before.



Matthew’s five “fulfillments” in chapter two help us to see that what was true of Israel, will now be true of Jesus; i.e., Jesus is a new Israel. Israel (the family of Abraham) went to Egypt. So does Jesus. Abraham’s family came out of Egypt and returned to Canaan. So does Jesus. Israel was overrun by the Babylonians, suffering a terrible holocaust. So do the infant boys of Bethlehem. The story of Israel is replayed in the story of Jesus. Why does Jesus have twelve disciples? Because there were twelve tribes of Israel . . . and so on. Jesus is the new Israel.

This matters because coming to know Jesus, who he is and what he was about, is essential to deepening our faith, i.e., coming to truly trust Jesus with what matters most. So it is important to see that the family of Abraham, Israel, were to be the ones through whom God would rescue all humankind from sin and death. But Israel was not up to the task; they refused to simply love God and love others every day. But God had made a promise, so God provided a new Israel, who would prove up to the task, loving God and others without fail. This new Israel had a name: Jesus.

With this in mind, let’s then take a closer look at the story Matthew tells in his second chapter. Perhaps we will grasp the truth in new ways. Matthew has crafted three powerful mini-scenes that not only reveal the larger story but also tell us much about Matthew’s understanding of Jesus and his use of the Old Testament scriptures.

### ***“Out of Egypt” (scene 1, v. 13-15)***

When the angel tells Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt, Matthew writes, “This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet, ‘I have called my son out of Egypt.’” The prophet is Hosea and this is a quotation of Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

In the context of Hosea, it is clear that the “son” is Israel, the people of God, whom God rescued from slavery in Egypt. Matthew certainly knows that. So . . . was he merely thumbing through a concordance looking for a verse that incorporated “Egypt” and something like “son,” that he could then use to refer to Jesus to bolster his view that Jesus is the fulfillment of numerous OT prophecies? Hardly!

Instead, Matthew places himself firmly within a large stream of New Testament writings that want us to connect the Exodus from Egypt (freed from bondage to Pharaoh) with the New Exodus in Jesus Christ (freed from bondage to sin). This is yet another instance that highlights the importance of reading Scripture for context and connection. Hosea 11:2 goes on to talk about the disobedience of Israel after their rescue from Egypt. This ought to help us see the contrast with Jesus’ faithful obedience and the rescue it accomplished.

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus may be refugees fleeing out of Israel to escape a murderous tyrant, but their flight is only the beginning of Israel’s redemption from bondage. Mary’s baby will grow to be the representative of Israel and all humankind whose faithfulness creates a New Exodus that transcends even God’s rescue of Moses and the slaves.

### ***“A voice was heard in Ramah” (scene 2, v. 16-18)***

The second mini-scene (2:16-18) in today’s passage draws our attention to the world’s darkness. Here, the massacre of the infants is a fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophet of Jeremiah. The quotation is from Jeremiah 31:15, a woeful lament over the 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, it would be a mistake to think that the exile ever truly ended. Herod’s killing of the babies is only the latest reminder that the exile continued in Jesus’ days; the exile is more than mere geography, for oppressors continue to rule over God’s people. Jesus and the salvation he brings will 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 Nazarene” (scene 3, v. 19-23)***

The third mini-scene 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. 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 a probably 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 Emmanuel 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!” That is, the Messiah, the New Israel.