

# The Prophecy Quoted in the Gospel of Matthew About Jesus' Birth

*Matthew 1–2*

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Prophecy is often treated as little more than a verification system — a means of confirming that Jesus is who he claimed to be. And it is that, certainly. But the unique way Matthew uses prophecy does something more: it shows us not only *that* Jesus is the Christ, but *what it means* for Jesus to be the Christ. The four Old Testament passages Matthew chooses to quote in the first two chapters of his Gospel are not chosen arbitrarily. They are chosen to tell us something about who this child is and what his arrival into the world actually means for us.

This raises an interesting question. Matthew could have quoted prophecy about the shepherds, the manger, the wise men, the star — and there are Old Testament texts that point toward those things. But he does not. Instead, the four moments Matthew anchors in prophetic fulfillment are these: the virgin birth of Jesus, his birth in Bethlehem, the flight of Mary and Joseph into Egypt, and the slaughter of the children by Herod. Why these four? What is Matthew doing?

He is, of course, using prophecy to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, the one in whom the promises of Israel find their fulfillment. But beyond that, I believe Matthew is using these four prophecies to unfold the *meaning* of Jesus' birth — to show us, layer by layer, what it means that God has entered the world in this child. Each prophecy adds a dimension to our understanding. Taken together, they form a portrait of a God who is with us, for us, involved in us, and present in our deepest pain.

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## Jesus Is With Us

The first prophetic reference Matthew quotes comes when the angel appears to Joseph, instructing him not to divorce Mary. She has conceived by the Holy Spirit, the angel says, and Joseph is to name the child Jesus. Matthew then draws on Isaiah 7:14:

“*The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel*” — which means, “*God with us.*”

The original context of this passage in Isaiah is worth pausing over. Jerusalem is under siege. Two hostile kingdoms have surrounded the city, and the king's heart — along with the hearts of his people — trembles like the trees of a forest shaken by the wind. It is into that darkness that God speaks through Isaiah: *Do not be afraid. Do not let your heart grow faint.* The sign of the virgin who gives birth to a son is given as assurance that before this child is old enough to know right from wrong, the enemies who threaten the city will have been destroyed. How can this be? Because of the name: Immanuel. God is with us.

That is the first thing Matthew wants us to understand about Jesus. In a world living under siege — surrounded by darkness, fear, and the powers that threaten to undo us — this child is born as the ultimate fulfillment of that ancient promise. Jesus is God with us.

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## Jesus Is For Us

The second prophecy comes when the wise men arrive in Jerusalem seeking the newborn king. Herod, disturbed by the news, summons the chief priests and scribes and demands to know where the Messiah is to be born. Their answer draws on Micah 5:2, and Matthew records it in this way:

“*But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.*”

Notice the contrast Matthew is quietly drawing. Herod is a king, but he is a king who slaughters children to protect his throne. The ruler whom Micah foretold is a different kind of king entirely — one who comes not to be served but to shepherd. He rules not for his own power or preservation, but for the good of his people.

This is the second layer of meaning. Jesus is not only God with us, he is God *for us*. The shepherd-king of Micah's prophecy has arrived, and his rule is oriented entirely toward the welfare of those in his care.

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## Jesus Shares in Our Exile

The third prophetic reference appears in Matthew 2:15, in the account of Joseph being warned in a dream to take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. They remain there until the death of Herod, and Matthew tells us this was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet Hosea:

| “*Out of Egypt I called my son.*”

This is the passage that most often gives readers pause. If you turn to Hosea 11 and read it in context, you might reasonably ask: how is this a prophecy? The passage quite clearly connects the phrase “out of Egypt I called my son” to the Exodus — to Israel’s historical deliverance from slavery. And the chapter that follows is not a triumphant one; it goes on to describe Israel’s persistent unfaithfulness, the very sin that eventually leads to the nation’s exile.

But that is precisely Matthew’s point. By reaching back to Hosea and drawing this connection, Matthew is telling us that Jesus — the Christ, the Messiah — fully enters into the story of his people. He takes on Israel’s journey as his own. He goes down into Egypt, and he comes up out of Egypt. He walks the path of the exile, not as a distant observer, but as one who has lived it from the inside.

This adds a third layer to what the birth of Jesus means. God is not only with us and for us — God is also *intimately involved in us*, in our condition, in our struggles, in the long and painful history of a people who have wandered far from home.

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## Jesus Shares in Our Pain

The fourth and final prophecy is perhaps the most haunting. After the flight to Egypt, Matthew recounts Herod’s fury — his order to slaughter all male children in Bethlehem who are two years old or younger. Archaeological evidence and demographic estimates suggest that Bethlehem at this time was a town of roughly one thousand to fifteen hundred people. By those numbers, the children killed in Herod’s purge would have numbered somewhere around twenty to twenty-five. It is a small number by the scale of history’s atrocities, but it is a number made up of names, of faces, of mothers who held sons and then did not.

It is at this point that Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15:

| “*A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.*”

This text is layered with meaning that repays careful attention. Rachel was the wife Jacob loved above all others. She bore him two sons — Joseph and Benjamin. Genesis 35 records that as they were traveling near Bethlehem, Rachel went into labor and died in childbirth. With her last breath, she named the boy Ben-Oni, which means “son of my sorrow.” She is buried at Ramah, a few miles north of Jerusalem — dying in grief, never comforted.

Centuries later, in Jeremiah’s day, Ramah became the staging ground for the Babylonian deportation of Israel. It was there that the captives were gathered — stripped, shaved, bound in

chains — before being marched into exile. And so Jeremiah reaches for this image of Rachel, weeping again at her grave, because once more her children are being taken from the land.

What is remarkable, though, is the context in which Jeremiah 31 places this weeping. The chapter is not a dirge — it is a chapter of *hope*. Despite the tears, despite the horror, the prophet declares that God will turn weeping into joy. The exile will end. The mourning will not have the final word.

Matthew is doing something theologically profound by placing this quotation here. He is acknowledging the full weight of the darkness — the real suffering, the real grief, the real horror of a world where unnatural things happen, where children are murdered by frightened men clinging to power. He does not look away from it. But he plants that darkness inside a larger story of redemption. God is not only with us, not only for us, not only intimately involved in us — he is also present in the very depths of the most horrific tragedies this world can produce, and through his power there is a redemptive hope that evil cannot extinguish.

This, finally, is the essence of the Gospel itself. The murder of the Son of God becomes the salvation of the world. God takes what is most evil and leverages it for the most profound good. That is what is being announced in Bethlehem. That is what Matthew is telling us through these four prophecies.

Jesus is Immanuel — God with us. He is the shepherd-king — God for us. He walks the road of exile — God involved in us. And he is present in our deepest grief — God sharing in our pain, and turning that pain toward a hope the world cannot take away.