

Matthew writes a sequel (Matthew 2:13-23)

For which he needs to invent some prophecy

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December 30, 2022

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In the early 1990s, the director of the historical biopic *The Madness of King George* chose to adjust its title from the name of the stage play he was adapting. After all, he reasoned, American audiences might be confused by a film called *The Madness of George III*. They might wonder: Had they missed the earlier installments, *The Madness of George I* and *The Madness of George II*?

Hollywood does love a sequel, and moviegoers seem to agree: the most popular films of 2022 are next chapters in longstanding series. From *Top Gun: Maverick* to *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, we go to the cinema to watch familiar, beloved characters and themes get rearranged and retold, their storylines expanding with each successive film.

People of the first century loved sequels just as much as we do. Imagine the evangelist's agent meeting with his publisher: "If you loved the Hebrew Scriptures, you're going to *adore* the Gospel according to Matthew!"

Indeed, Matthew's second chapter reads like a remix of all the Old Testament's favorite characters, plot points, and themes. There's a dreamer named Joseph. An autocratic tyrant. Deaths of innocent children. A sudden exile. This chapter makes Matthew's message clear: the story of Jesus follows directly from the story of the people of Israel. The messianic promises we've read for years have now been realized.

Matthew peppers the text with quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, underlining the connections he hopes readers will make. He cites Micah, Hosea, and Jeremiah, words that would have been familiar to his hearers, even as he gives them new and unexpected context as illustrations of Jesus' story.

And then we get to verse 23. After their harrowing flight to Egypt, after their years as refugees, Joseph settles his holy family in Nazareth, "so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazarene.'"

All well and good—except that the prophets never actually said that. There's no such sentence anywhere in the Old Testament, not even in part or in paraphrase. In fact, the village of Nazareth is not mentioned anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Commentators have scrambled to try to explain this discrepancy. Maybe these words appeared in another source that's been lost? Possible, of course, but not likely. Maybe they refer to a Nazirite, one who makes a vow of holy abstinence? Again, maybe, but it feels like a stretch. Or perhaps they're a reference to Isaiah 11:1, "a branch shall come from the house of Jesse," since one Hebrew word for branch (though not the one used by Isaiah!) sounds like "nazer." In the end, none of these suggestions is fully satisfying.

Perhaps there's another explanation. Perhaps Matthew has entered the existing narrative and given it his own new twist. He has taken an undisputed fact about Jesus—that Nazareth was his hometown—and given it prophetic imprimatur, claiming Matthew's own prophetic identity. Like any good writer of a sequel, he has taken the outlines of the existing series and brought them forward into a brand-new episode.

The Jesus volume of this series has a setting that the earlier seasons never anticipated. The Messiah springs from an unknown place, disparaged or overlooked by those in power. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Yet even from here, in the middle of nowhere, God's power can be revealed. This backwater village is where the next installment of this great story will take place.

Jesus' story is always unfolding, weaving themes from the past into a narrative made new in every generation. A new sequel is always coming soon. With Jesus, there is still more to write.