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August 30th: Jonah 1 & Matthew 2

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Jonah flees from the presence of the Lord. The visit of the Magi.

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Transcript

Jonah chapter 1. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me. But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish.

So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his guard, and they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.

But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship, and had lain down, and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your guard. Perhaps the guard may give a thought to us, that we may not perish.

And they said to one another, Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they

said to him, Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us.

What is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you? And he said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, What is this that you have done? For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. Then they said to him, What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.

He said to them, Pick me up and hurl me into the sea, then the sea will quiet down for you. For I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you. Nevertheless, the men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.

Therefore they called out to the Lord, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you. So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. The book of Jonah is the fifth prophet in the book of the 12, perhaps one of the most famous stories of the Old Testament. It is also one of the most surprising and rich, containing intertextual depths that few plan.

In the context of the Old Testament, the subject matter of the story is surprising. It's a story of a prophet who goes to sea, and who also brings the word of the Lord to a foreign nation. Both of these things are rare within the Old Testament.

The only other major boat story that we have in the Old Testament is the story of Noah and his ark. And in looking through the book of Jonah, we'll find further connections between these two narratives. While the New Testament has stories of boats and fish on regular occasions, the Old Testament is dominated by land stories.

The anomalous subject matter of the book of Jonah is an indication of a shift that has occurred on other levels, a shift of the horizon beyond the immediacy of the land of Israel and Judah, as the word of the Lord goes out to a pagan nation. We don't know a great deal about the character of Jonah, beside the fact that he prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II. We read something of Jonah's prophecies in a passage that gives us a sense of the historical background, in 2 Kings 14, verses 23 to 27.

In the 15th year of Amaziah, the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned 41 years. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam, the son of

Nebat, which he made Israel to sin.

He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-Hemath as far as the Sea of the Araba, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-Hepha. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, the son of Joash.

Jonah would have been a contemporary or near contemporary of Hosea and Amos, both of whom also addressed Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. In 796 BC, the Assyrians under Adad-Nerari III had defeated Damascus. Prior to this defeat at the hands of the Assyrians, the Syrians, or Arameans, had greatly troubled Israel.

They had chipped away at its territory and caused them all sorts of other problems. Their woes continued after Adad-Nerari's defeat of Damascus, and as a result, they were greatly weakened in the period that followed. After the death of Adad-Nerari, Assyria wasn't the same power either.

Their involvement and pressure upon the region was much diminished, and as a result, the northern kingdom of Israel was in a position to regain much of its lost territory. Things would later change with the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III. The story of Jonah, both on its immediate narrative level, but also on its deeper allegorical level, needs to be read against this historical background.

Israel dwelt in a region caught between southern and northern powers. The southern power was generally Egypt. The rising northern power at this time was Assyria, later to be succeeded by Babylonia.

Keeping the situation of Israel and also the wider geopolitics in mind, we can also begin to understand the deeper levels of the story of Jonah. The clear structure of the story of Jonah is something that most commentators observe. Chapter one and three begin nearly identically, and as Uriel Siman observes, there is a common structural paradigm to be observed in the two scenes of the book.

There is, he argues, a parallel to be drawn between the sailors and the Ninevites. The ship is in danger of breaking up, and Nineveh is threatened to be overturned in 40 days. The sailors pray to the Lord, and the Ninevites also seek God.

The sea stops raging, and the Lord also relents concerning the destruction of Nineveh. The sailors and the Ninevites provide a foil for understanding the Lord's dealings with Jonah. The Lord, in the first instance, pursues his prophet, and then Jonah refuses to pray to the Lord and is cast into the sea instead.

In the second instance, the Lord's mercy causes Jonah to get angry, and then he protests

against the Lord's mercy and watches the city, hoping that it might be destroyed after all. Then there are parallels between the story of the fish and the story of the plant. In both cases, the Lord appoints these creatures to deal with his wayward prophet, Jonah.

Chapter one begins with Jonah being sent to the city of Nineveh. However, rather than going to the Assyrians in the city of Nineveh, as he has been instructed, Jonah tries to flee from the presence of the Lord. He makes a journey down.

He goes down to Joppa, goes to a ship going to Tarshish, the identity of which is uncertain, and then goes down into the boat. His desire is to escape from the presence of the Lord. The Lord is especially present in Israel among his people, and so Jonah wants to get as far away from there as possible.

But his journey away from the Lord's presence is a descent. The story of Jonah is one in which the Lord is seen to be sovereign over all of creation's forces. The elements of creation itself really come to the foreground in the book of Jonah.

From the greatest, the waves of the sea, to the smallest, the worm in chapter four. As the Lord hurls a great wind upon the sea, a mighty tempest arises. Faced with the possibility that the ship is going to break up, the pagan mariners pray to their various gods.

Jonah, however, is somehow asleep in the inner part of the boat. As the crisis is beyond human power to respond to, divine help is sought. But the captain realizes that Jonah is not participating, and so he goes down into the ship and rouses Jonah, sharply charging him to join in the prayer.

Perhaps Jonah's god will listen to them. When, despite their prayers, the storm continues to rage, possibly a storm that is of such focused severity that they can only take it as a sign of divine wrath against someone on the ship, they decide to cast lots to determine who it might be. When the lot falls upon Jonah, they seek to establish his identity and to determine what he has done to provoke the divine anger.

Jonah's response, of course, has an irony to it. He declares that the Lord is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land, and yet he is in the process of trying to escape from this God, trying to go away from his presence. As the psalmist in Psalm 139 points out, there is nowhere that you can flee from such a God's presence.

At this point, the storm is only getting more severe, and they realize that they're going to have to do something if they're going to survive. Jonah, recognizing that he has brought the disaster upon them, says that they ought to throw him into the sea, and yet they try and save his life. They row hard to get back to dry land, and yet they are not able to do so.

When their efforts to get back to dry land fail, they call out to the Lord in prayer. They

pray that the Lord would not lay the blood of Jonah to their account. As the Lord himself seems to have brought this situation about, they trust that they will not be held guilty for shedding innocent blood.

Against the foil of their prayer here and their subsequent sacrifice to the Lord and their making of vows, the rebellion of the unfaithful prophet Jonah really stands out. As they cast Jonah into the sea, the sea is stilled and the disaster is averted. Their response has all of the hallmarks of conversion.

Here we clearly see an anticipation of what will happen in Nineveh. The people of Nineveh will also call out to the Lord in the face of an imminent crisis, and as that crisis is averted, they will seek his face. The chapter ends with the Lord appointing a great fish to swallow up Jonah.

We're not told what type of fish it was, although historically many have speculated that it was a sperm whale. Jonah was in the belly of this fish for three days and three nights. When we step back from the immediacy of the narrative, we begin to notice some patterns in the story of Jonah.

The name Jonah means dove, and among other things, at the beginning of this book, one of the questions is whether Jonah is going to get to dry land. In the story of the flood, the dove is sent out by Noah in search of dry land. Here in the book of Jonah, a similar theme might be in play.

The world of Israel and Judah is about to suffer a new deluge, and the big question is whether the nations will survive and be brought to dry land on the other side. Jonah himself reminds us of Israel. He is an unfaithful prophet running away from the word of the Lord.

Just as his nation Israel is, he's joined with pagans, just as Israel is joined with the pagan nations roundabout, and Israel's unfaithfulness will bring a storm of judgment upon the region, a storm that will threaten to overturn many nations beyond Israel itself. Israel will have to be thrown into exile. But yet, as they are thrown into the sea of the Gentiles, the Lord will appoint a mighty sea monster to swallow them, and they'll be protected in its belly.

This should help us to see that the sea monster here, the big fish, is not just a random miracle. It is a sign. Jesus speaks about the sign of the prophet Jonah, and it's important to recognize that this sign of the prophet Jonah was already a sign even before Christ related it to his resurrection.

Jesus is taking up the meaning of this existing sign and relating it to something fuller within his own ministry. James Bajan has observed the theme of being swallowed by a great sea monster and then disgorged later on. In Jeremiah chapter 51, in verse 34 of

that chapter, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, has devoured me.

He has crushed me. He has made me an empty vessel. He has swallowed me like a monster.

He has filled his stomach with my delicacies. He has rinsed me out. And then in verses 44 to 45, and I will punish Bel in Babylon and take out of his mouth what he has swallowed.

The nation shall no longer float to him. The wall of Babylon has fallen. Go out of the midst of her, my people.

Let everyone save his life from the fierce anger of the Lord. Later on in that chapter, we are told that Babylon would sink into the sea. Already then, we can see that elements of the story of Jonah can be read as an allegory of the story of Israel, the unfaithful prophetic nation that is bringing the storm upon the region is about to be thrown into the sea of the Gentiles, where it will be swallowed up by the big fish of Babylon.

Yet this big fish has been appointed by the Lord precisely in order to rescue the prophet and to bring it back and to set it on its mission once more. The story of Jonah then was already a sign, but Jesus uses it as a sign of his own mission in Matthew chapter 12, verses 39 to 40. But he answered them, an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Later on in Luke chapter 11, verse 30, for as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the son of man be to this generation. There Jesus suggests that Jonah was a sign not just to his own people, but also to the people to whom he was sent in Nineveh.

What might they have taken from his sign? Perhaps for them as for Israel, the sign of Jonah was a sign of the Lord's power over the natural forces and also a symbol of his power over all of the nations. As the geopolitical order is thrown into a tempest, the Lord is sovereign over that tempest and he can establish a power within that to rescue his people. Jonah's sign is a symbol of exile and return, but also a symbol of death and resurrection.

In the life of the people of God, this would take the form of exile and then being disgorged by Babylon and sent back to the land. In the case of Christ, Christ goes to the deeper exile of the grave itself and rises up from the grave, overcoming that exile. The Lord is God, not just of the waves of the sea, nor just of the powers of the nations, but over death and the grave themselves.

In Matthew chapter 4, verses 36 to 39, we find a story of Jesus that clearly looks back to the story of Jonah and which also looks forward fittingly to the story of his death and

resurrection and leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was, and other boats were with him. The great windstorm arose and the waves were breaking into the boat so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern asleep on the cushion and they woke him and said to him, teacher, do you not care that we are perishing? And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, peace be still.

And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. The book of Jonah has also been associated with the day of atonement. It is traditionally read on that day by the Jews.

We might see already in this chapter some of the themes of the day of atonement. In the casting of lots, in which Jonah is selected and cast out of the ship, for instance, we might see a parallel with the scapegoat. In chapter three, there will be mourning and confession of sins.

Shortly after, Jonah will build a booth associated with the feast of tabernacles. James Bajon first brought these connections to my attention. A question to consider, in Acts chapter 27, Paul sails for Rome and there is a storm followed by a shipwreck.

How does Luke's telling of the story of Paul's shipwreck in the book of Acts play upon the background of the story of Jonah? What can we learn from the similarities and the differences? Matthew chapter two. Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

They told him in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet. And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem saying, go and search diligently for the child. And when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him.

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you. For Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him. And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod.

This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, out of Egypt I called my son. Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise man, became furious and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise man. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah.

A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be comforted because they are no more. But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt saying, rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel.

For those who sought the child's life are dead. And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in the place of his father, Herod, he was afraid to go there.

And being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. Matthew chapter two, Matthew is placing Jesus within the preceding narrative, but also demonstrating Jesus's credentials as the Messiah.

It's important that he established the site of Jesus' birth. Jesus is associated with Nazareth. He's called Jesus of Nazareth, but yet he's also someone who, if he is to be the Messiah, needs some sort of association with Bethlehem.

Matthew chapter two brings these two things together, helps us to understand how Christ is both a Nazarene and also someone who is the son of David come from Bethlehem. The Magi come inquiring about the one who is to be born King of the Jews. This is the first introduction of this expression.

And in both times in the gospel, it's voiced by the Gentiles. It's a Gentile way of understanding the Messiah, perhaps. Themes of kingship are prominent within this section.

There's the star and the Magi, and there's also Herod who's described as the king. Many different theories have been brought forward for the nature of the star. Some have seen it as a comet, others a planetary conjunction, some a nova or supernova, and others have suggested that this should be seen as the Shekinah glory, leading them through

the wilderness.

That connection would certainly heighten the irony of the situation, where magicians who were associated with the opponents of Aaron and Moses in Egypt are now coming to the land of Israel in search of the King of the Jews, whereas the king in the land is going to act the part of Pharaoh and seek to kill the baby boys. So there's a certain ironic reversal taking place here. It's an inverted Exodus, perhaps.

In the book of Daniel, the Magi also appear as opponents, but then also as people that Daniel will rule over and lead. We might also compare the Magi with the Queen of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba comes a long distance to see Solomon's wisdom and to bring gifts to Solomon.

In Isaiah chapter 60 and also Psalm 72, there are references to kings coming that distance to greet Israel and to see the rise of their Messiah. Psalm 72 verses eight to 11 seems to stand in the background of part of what we're reading in this chapter. May he have dominion from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.

May desert tribes bow down before him and his enemies lick the dust. May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute. May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

May all kings fall down before him. All nations serve him. Isaiah chapter 60, arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will be seen upon you and nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around and see, they all gather together, they come to you. Your son shall come from afar and your daughters shall be carried on the hip.

Then you shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and exult because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nation shall come to you.

A multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah. All those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense. They shall bring the good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you.

The rams of Nebaroth shall minister to you. They shall come up with acceptance on my altar and I will beautify my beautiful house. All of this is coming to pass in the story of Christ.

In Christ, Matthew presents these kings coming from afar, bringing tribute as an

expression of the tribute of the Gentiles brought to the Messiah and to Israel at the time of the kingdom's dawning. The chief priests and the scribes who within this story are characterized as if they were the magicians in the court of Pharaoh, because they're associated with this pharaonic character of Herod, they declare that the Messiah will be born in the city of David in Bethlehem of Judea. They refer back to the prophecy of Micah 5, verse two, but there's also an allusion to 2 Samuel 5, verse two, which refers to the fact that David is going to be established as the king, the one who will shepherd the people Israel, rather than Saul.

And this plays off the character of Herod as well. Herod is a Saul-like character, one whose authority will ultimately be taken from him and the one who has all true authority, all authority in heaven and earth is Christ. Many have seen here an allusion in part to the story of Balaam and Balak.

In the final oracle of Balaam, he says, I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.

It shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed. Seir also, his enemies shall be dispossessed.

Israel is doing valiantly and one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities. Here we see a descendant of Edom, Herod, the Idumean king, and a descendant of Jacob standing up against each other. Jesus is the true king of the Jews and Edom is going to be dispossessed.

The Idumean king, Herod, might also recall some of the conflict between Israel and Edom in the past. We might think, for instance, of the story of Hadad in chapter 11 of 1 Kings, which has a number of similarities with the story that we read of Christ here. And the Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite.

He was of the royal house in Edom. For when David was in Edom, and Joab the commander of the army went up to bury the slain, he struck down every male in Edom. For Joab and all Israel remained there six months until he had cut off every male in Edom.

But Hadad fled to Egypt, together with certain Edomites of his father's servants, Hadad still being a little child. And moving ahead a few verses. But when Hadad heard in Egypt that David slept with his fathers and that Joab the commander of his army was dead, Hadad said to Pharaoh, let me depart that I may go to my own country.

This is very similar to the story of Christ escaping from Israel to go to Egypt to take refuge there while Herod is seeking the life of the baby boys. This story is playing out again, but the roles have been reversed. It's as if Christ is taking upon himself the burden of the sins of David's house.

And the fact that it is an Idumean king that's persecuting him brings to mind the rivalry and the opposition and the mistreatment of Edom by David in the past. In the gifts that they give to the infant Jesus, the Magi present him as the king, but also in some ways as the brigram. The brigram, the lover, is connected with spices, with precious stones and metals and other things like that.

Jesus is not just the king, he's the brigram of the people. Dreams are important within the story, not just for Joseph, but also for the Magi. The Magi are led by dreams and Joseph is led by dreams.

Joseph is led by a dream to take Jesus and Mary into Egypt. We can think about the fact that in the previous chapter he's been introduced to us as Joseph, the son of Jacob. Now there's another Joseph, the son of Jacob in the Old Testament.

And Joseph, the son of Jacob in the New Testament is playing out something very similar in terms of pattern of life. He's someone who has dreams and he's someone who leads his people down into Egypt to take refuge. In being delivered into and then later from Egypt, Jesus is a new Israel.

And to underline this point, Matthew quotes Hosea chapter 11, verse one. The verse in Hosea chapter 11, verse one refers to Israel in the first Exodus, but Matthew says it is fulfilled in Jesus and his deliverance from Egypt. Now, part of what we're seeing here is that Matthew is using the Old Testament in a far more creative way than many people think.

Many people think that there's an Old Testament verse and it directly points to Christ and then there's the New Testament fulfillment. But then there's a problem when we see verses like Hosea chapter 11, verse one, which clearly do not refer in the first instance to Christ. They refer to specific historical events.

And it might seem to us as if Matthew is just taking verses randomly from the Old Testament and applying them for his own theological purposes without any regard for the original purpose or context. However, it's important to have a sense of the richer theology that Matthew is operating in terms of. He does not treat what happens to Christ as a straightforward fulfillment of a prediction, but rather something that's playing out a parallel, a model and a fulfillment.

The Old Testament deliverance of Israel from Egypt was a symbol of something yet to come. We should also note the various inversions of themes that can be seen in this chapter. Jesus is brought out of Egypt much as Israel was brought out of Egypt.

But Jesus is brought out of Egypt as one who has taken refuge in Egypt from a Pharaoh-like figure who's on the throne of Israel. The chief priests and the scribes are the ones associated with the Pharaoh figure, whereas the magicians are the ones that come from

afar following the light to come to meet the King of the Jews. The irony of the situation should not escape us.

Jesus has a background in the surrounding Gentile world within Matthew's portrait, continuing the themes that we see in the genealogy where the women that come in are Gentiles for the most part. In describing the massacre of the innocents, Matthew again draws attention back to the Old Testament. This, he argues, was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah.

A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be comforted because they are no more. As usual, it's important to go back to the original context to see where these words come from.

Matthew is bringing to mind the memory of Israel's exile. At this location, this was where the Judean captives were taken from Ramah. And this mourning of Rachel is mourning the exile of her children.

But there is the immediate promise after that that her children will be restored, that there is hope for her future, that God will visit her in her plight. This is not the first time that Rachel might be lurking in the background of Matthew chapter two. In verse six, there's a citation from Micah chapter five, verse two.

And looking in the broader context of Micah chapter four and five, there are many references back to the struggle of Rachel in birth with Benjamin and the way in which she almost died in that situation. But now there's the promise that there will be a child that comes from Bethlehem. Rachel died on the way to Bethlehem as she gave birth to Benjamin, who was the ancestor of the first king of the people, Saul.

But now, finally, they're going to arrive at Bethlehem and it's going to be from Bethlehem that the true king is going to arise. So Rachel's story is in the background in chapters four and five of Micah. And now Rachel's story again is recalled from Jeremiah chapter 31.

She's the one who stands as the great matriarch of the people as they go out into exile from the place near her death. She mourns and she weeps for them. And as she weeps, God will hear her voice.

These children will be restored. And the immediate verse that we have next is the death of Herod and the appearance of an angel in a dream to Joseph telling him to return to the land. Now notice the way that it's described.

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. For those who sought the child's life are dead. And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

In Exodus chapter four, we find something very similar. And the Lord said to Moses in Midian, go back to Egypt for all the men who were seeking your life are dead. So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt.

He's a very similar because Moses is being connected with the characters of Jesus and Joseph. The pattern of the Exodus is being played out again. Returning to the land of Israel, Joseph avoids the region of Judea because Archelaus is reigning there in the place of his father Herod and has a bad reputation too.

And he goes to the district of Galilee instead. The realm of the older Herod, the Herod that has just died, was divided between Herod Antipas in Galilee and Perea, the east of Jordan, Archelaus in Judea, and then also Philip. The chapter ends by connecting Jesus with the town of Nazareth, where they settle in the district of Galilee.

And on account of settling in Nazareth, we're told that what was spoken by the prophets would be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. Now this is a very strange reference and there are many different theories to account for it. There is no Old Testament verse that is clearly referenced here.

Some have proposed Judges 13, verse 7, where it's told that Samson shall be a Nazarite, but the word here is Nazarene, it's not Nazarite. The words may be similar, but there seems to be some difference. The birth oracles connected with Samson and Samuel may have some similarity with John the Baptist.

And while Jesus does play the part of a Nazarite at the very end of Matthew, it doesn't seem that he plays the Nazarite more generally. He's one who comes eating and drinking. The other thing is that this is connected with the place name, the place where he ends up settling.

So any explanation would seem to have to take account of that. Others have suggested a connection with the Hebrew word for branch, netzer in Isaiah chapter 11, verse 1. Maybe there's something there. There shall come forth of shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his root shall bear fruit and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

So it may be a reference to the shoot or the branch that comes up. Now, whatever we're supposed to make of this, it has to connect with Nazareth. And I think the most promising suggestion I've seen brings those two things together.

And it's suggesting a play upon words that Matthew is doing something a bit more creative here. Jesus is the branch, but also the branch that comes up out of dry ground, out of unpromising soil. And Nazareth is a new town.

It has under a thousand inhabitants. It's a place that has no particular auspicious things associated with it. In John's gospel, chapter one, Nathanael asked, can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nazareth seemed to be a place that was not really regarded very highly.

And in that sense, it fit. This may be what it looks like for the Messiah to arise out of dry ground. And this lack of recognition of his origins is appropriate to a figure who comes as it were incognito rather than with great fanfare from a center of activity and power.

What Matthew has done by this point though is present a strong apologetic for Christ's identity. As one born in Bethlehem, as one associated with Nazareth, as one to whom the riches of the kings come, as one who plays out the story of Israel being delivered from Egypt again, he is one who bears all of the hallmarks of the true Messiah, the true leader of the people. A question to consider.

In Exodus chapter four, verse 22, God describes Israel as my firstborn son. In Matthew chapter two, Matthew quotes Hosea chapter 11, verse one, out of Egypt I have called my son. How do you think that Matthew's use of Hosea chapter 11 and the Exodus tradition is serving his characterization of Christ both in relationship to God and in relationship to Israel?