

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 4, Chapter 2

We concluded chapter 1 of Matthew's Gospel last time, and I remarked then that Matthew's goal was to begin his Gospel by explaining who Jesus is. According to Matthew He is the prophesied Messiah of Israel; the Son of David, Son of Abraham. The importance of Believers understanding this cannot be overstated. Christ is a Hebrew; or more specifically a Jew. He was not and is not some kind of generic universal human being. We must understand His Jewishness and embrace His Jewishness in order to find the correct context for understanding His words to us. And as we will read in chapter 2, He came for the people of Israel.

Christ's one-of-a-kind conception was a direct work of the God of Israel, or more correctly a work of the Holy Spirit. Matthew goes on to explain that the Messiah's Hebrew birth name, Yeshua, was God-ordained because it explains what He will do: He will act as the Father's agent to save the people of Israel from their sins. I realize that including the Father in the salvation process sounds almost like heresy to much of Christianity, so focused on Jesus of Nazareth is the Church. But because a name in that era carried such weight in projecting the character, destiny and purpose of a Jewish person, we must look closely at what Christ's actual Jewish birth name, Yeshua, means. Typically Pastors and even Bible scholars will say it means "God saves". That is not correct. Rather it means "Yehoveh saves". Yehoveh is the formal name of the Father as first revealed to Moses. It is most certainly true that by His death on the cross Yeshua atoned for our sins, also that He is part of who God is (in some mysterious way that no one has found a means to adequately describe), and that Yeshua is also our Passover Lamb who is both our King and Lord. Yet, Yeshua is subordinate to the Father, and the salvation plan of which He was the cornerstone is of the Father;

that much is made clear by the ancient Old Testament prophets, by Christ Himself in the Gospels, and also by the Apostle John in the Book of Revelation.

As we turn our Bibles to the 2nd chapter of Matthew we begin by encountering a story that has caused both controversy and incalculable joy within Christianity. I want to encourage you that although we are going to immediately take a substantial detour that is pretty technical, everyone listening is perfectly capable of understanding it both for the content and for its importance to followers of Christ. You don't have to be highly educated or a theologian; God's Word is meant for ordinary humans; not just the elite class. Thomas Edison once said: "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration". So the issue is not your ability to comprehend; it is your determination and dedication to focus and learn (and hopefully apply) what the Lord wants us to know.

Open your Bibles to Matthew Chapter 2.

READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 2 all

The first half of verse 1 concludes Matthew's story of the conception and birth of Yeshua by saying that He was born in ***Beit Lechem*** (Bethlehem) of Judea. Although Matthew doesn't go into detail by explaining the significance of the place of Christ's birth, it was because the common Jew of his day would already have known it (and as I'll occasionally remind you, Matthew was a Jewish Believer whose Gospel was written to Jews). But for we Believers of the 21st century (mostly gentiles), I'll explain that Bethlehem of Judea was also the birthplace of King David. The direct familial connection between the Messiah and King David is a must in the messianic prophecies (as demonstrated by Matthew's genealogy of Yeshua in chapter 1), as well as the two figures (born many centuries apart) sharing a common birth place.

The second half of verse 2 gives us an approximation of the date of Jesus' birth based on the reign of King Herod. We know that by modern calendars Herod ruled from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. So according to Matthew's timeline Jesus had to have been born prior to 4 B.C. The last part of verse 2 also begins a captivating story about a visitation of magi in search for this new king of the Jews; an account that we find only in Matthew's Gospel. To be clear, this story about magi coming and meeting with King Herod as part of their search, and of a mysterious star that seems to move and then hover over Bethlehem in order to guide the magi, appears in no other place in the New Testament than in the Book of

Matthew. Because we've just read the story of the visitation of the magi, we're now going to begin our detour in order to better understand it because a significant number of scholarly explanations about who the magi were and what prompted them to make such a long journey, and of course about the appearance of this mysterious star, have been set forth in Christianity and I think we can probably shed a little more light on the subject and clear up some misconceptions. Most explanations that we're all familiar with have been based either on modern Western thinking, or they incorporate the mindset and circumstance of an ancient era and region that does not properly represent the era and place of Christ's birth.

I want to say in advance that I owe a debt of gratitude to the outstanding works and research of scholars like Michael Molnar, Otto Neugebauer, Wayne Sayles, Owen Gingerich, and others who have gone the extra mile to publish their findings that shed such valuable light on the subject of the magi within the context of the magi's beliefs and understanding of the celestial bodies as it was in the 1st century at the time of Christ's birth. So here we go.

Who were these magi? The first thing to notice is that despite the many Christian traditions and songs about them, and the countless Christmas programs that always portray 3 magi, we are not told how many there were. So the idea of 3 magi traveling to find the Christ child is entirely fictional and not supported by the Bible or any other ancient source. Perhaps the next most fictional description within Christian tradition is that the magi were "kings". So the famous song that begins "we 3 kings of orient are", is wrong on just about every account.

The magi were highly respected experts in their field in which they used the wandering lights in the sky to interpret current events and especially to determine future events. Although they are said to have come from the east, there's an awful lot of land mass to the east of Judea so their point of origin can't be pinpointed (although there are some hints that might narrow it down a bit). Perhaps the most important feature of the magi for us to understand is that they were not astronomers as we might think of an astronomer today, and they were not Babylonian astrologers; rather they were Hellenistic astrologers. What does Hellenistic mean? It means those who have adopted the Greek language, culture, thought, art, and religious views. In the 1st century it mostly meant to assimilate into the Greek based Roman culture; so what the magi believed and practiced was standard and universally accepted within the Roman worldview of the Roman Empire. To say it another way: these magi did not practice some

ancient form of oriental Babylonian astrology as is typically portrayed. In fact that particular form of astrology had ceased to exist shortly after the world-changing conquests of Alexander the Great in the 300's B.C.

The other point that is fundamental for proper understanding is that Jews (particularly Holy Land Jews) generally did not practice any form of astrology at this time. They did not look to the skies for understanding events or for foretelling the future. However understanding events and foretelling the future is exactly what Hellenistic astrologers did, and so it is what the magi that we read of in Matthew did.

There is an underlying historical context that greatly aids our understanding of the role of the magi in Christ's birth story. First: Rome and the Holy Land were in a constant state of confrontation and tension. The Jews felt offended by Rome's overwhelming presence, and Rome was frustrated with these stubborn people who refused all effort to assimilate. The Jews valued and insisted on keeping their unique faith, culture, traditions and history while Rome wanted them to abandon their heritage and instead conform to the progressive Hellenistic way of life that the rest of the empire adopted. This festering hatred of the Romans led the Jews to openly express their hope for a Jewish Messiah to deliver them from Rome's heavy hand. In turn the Romans were very concerned about the Jews' messianic prophecies of a charismatic deliverer, and so were on high alert for his arrival. Interestingly, in both cases, the expectation was for a Jewish leader to emerge that would defy and challenge the Romans militarily. The Jews of course welcomed the notion, while Rome feared it.

The second element of the context for the influence of the magi on our story is that astronomy was advancing at a high rate in the years leading up to Christ's birth. It is ironic that while Hellenistic astronomers still thought of the earth as flat, the sun as revolving around the earth, and they had a rather mistaken understanding of the layout of our solar system, nonetheless their many years of celestial observations enabled them to develop mathematical equations that could fairly accurately predict the movement of the stars and planets. This will play a role in our understanding of the famous star that the magi followed to Bethlehem.

The third element is that there was no real distinction between astronomy and astrology in this era (in fact those terms are modern and weren't in use in the 1st century). The constantly progressing understanding of the movement of the

luminous objects in the sky that could now be predicted (something that we could probably call science) made the development of astrology all the more credible and exciting. The entire purpose of astronomical observations in that era was to more accurately aid in the predictions that the cosmos was thought to reveal to the magi. The belief that fate could be determined in advance of a future event by means of observing and interpreting the movement of stars and planets was well accepted throughout the Roman Empire (except by the Jews). Thus those highly educated people who were expert star gazers (the magi) were greatly prized and admired for their knowledge, and their wisdom was much sought after and believed. They were anything but charlatans; they were convinced that the movement of the stars and planets, when properly understood, was a gift from the gods to help humankind navigate the present and to prepare for the future.

By the time of Christ's birth, the astrologers had devised a system of interpreting the meaning of the lights in the sky that we might call the Zodiac. It consisted of constellations of stars that were named and associated with living creatures. Very interestingly the Hellenistic star gazers had determined that the constellation Aries, the Ram, was the Zodiac symbol that had to do with the region of Judea. Thus the magi from the east would have looked towards Aries to tell them about events concerning Judea, among which could be indications of the death of a current king or birth of a new king of the Jews. It is within that belief system that we have to consider the fascinating Bethlehem Star.

One doesn't have to read too many biblical commentaries on the Book of Matthew to see the wide spectrum of both theological and scientific views about the star of Bethlehem. Among those views is that this star is just a fictional myth meant to add drama and glory to the birth of Jesus. Another view is that there is no point in trying to explain the star astronomically or astrologically or in any natural terms; there indeed was a star but it was a supernatural event..... a rather short lived divine miracle of God. Other views are usually about trying to find rare, but natural, celestial events that coincided with the nativity. Recently some scholars have argued that the appearance of the mysterious star is a Jewish Midrash on the famous Old Testament account of the seer named Balaam; an account that says that the appearance of a star would accompany the birth of the Messiah. We read about this in the Torah, in the Book of Numbers.

^{CJB} Numbers 24:15-17 "This is the speech of Bil'am, son of B'or; the speech of the man whose eyes have been opened; ¹⁶ the speech of him who hears God's words; who knows what 'Elyon knows, who sees what

Shaddai sees, who has fallen, yet has open eyes: ¹⁷ "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not soon- a star will step forth from Ya'akov, a scepter will arise from Isra'el, to crush the corners of Mo'av and destroy all descendants of Shet.

Obviously Balaam's mention of a star stepping forth is being related by some scholars to the star over Bethlehem. While I don't find this line of thinking conclusive, it is hard to ignore the many parallels between the story of King Balak with his hired gun Balaam, to the magi's journey to Judea and its back story.

- 1) King Herod's family was from Idumea (formerly known as Edom), and King Balak was also from that same region.
- 2) Just as the magi ruined King Herod's plans to kill the Christ child, so did Balaam ruin King Balak's plans to kill off the Israelites.
- 3) Balaam was, himself, a magi just as were the star gazers of the east who came to find the new king of the Jews.
- 4) The magi came because a star announced the birth of new king of the Jews, and Balaam mentioned a star that had to do with the arrival of a savior and king that would come from among the people of Israel.

So on its face, we can't simply discard the idea of this connection between Balaam's prophecy and the magi coming from the east as an explanation for the Bethlehem star. So what would have been the significance for these magi of a star appearing? Why would they or anyone pay attention to it?

During the time of King Herod's reign over the Holy Land it was not only the Jews who were looking for a sign of a new figure to arise and fundamentally change the circumstances within Judea. For the Jews the expected figure was a Messiah; for the pagan star gazers the figure was a king. The sign the Jews were looking for was not to be found in the sky, and yet the Jews in some ways didn't seem to know for sure exactly what they should be looking for beyond their current circumstances and their hopes for a charismatic military leader to suddenly come upon the scene. But the sign the magi were looking for could only be in the sky because that's where they believed all such signs appeared (they were, after all, astrologers). The terms that more closely fit what the magi looked for are "portents" and "omens"; terms more associated to the pagan worldview.

So those are the terms that I will use as we go forward as it relates to the magi.

Let's look again to the story of the magi and the Bethlehem Star that is in Matthew chapter 2 verses 1 - 16. A close reading shows that the magi did NOT go to King Herod and ask "where is the newborn king of the Jews?" Rather they arrived in Jerusalem and began asking around of the common city folk. It was the word of this inquiry that reached the ears of Herod because it so unsettled the residents of Jerusalem. One can only imagine what this news did to Herod's already paranoid and suspicious psyche. Herod was a brutal man who committed terrible atrocities even upon his closest family members. It was not just his brutality that distanced him from his Jewish subjects; it was also that Herod wasn't even a Jew. His mother was Nabatean and his father Idumean (the Greek name for Edom). Even though some time earlier Idumea had been forced to accept Judaism as their authorized religion, Herod was not raised in a Jewish household, but rather in a Hellenistic household where some combination of Hellenistic and Jewish traditions were practiced.

Herod, then, was a Hellenistic tyrant, completely aligned with Rome and fully in tune with Roman culture although in another sense he knew and adopted some of the Jewish traditions taught to him in his childhood. Any inkling of danger to his throne (real or imagined) was instantly dealt with murderously. He killed 3 of his own biological sons thinking they might be plotting against him. He had so many people killed (most of them innocent) that Augustus Caesar once commented that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's family. With thousands of Roman troops trampling over the Holy City coupled with Herod's ruthless rule, it is no wonder that the Jewish people yearned for a deliverer and thought that they must be living in the prophesied times of the apocalypse.

Notice that the question the magi asked the residents of Jerusalem was not IF a new king of the Jews had been born but rather WHERE. There was no doubt in their minds that a new Judean King had been born because a celestial portent had alerted them to it, and they fully trusted what they saw and what it meant. Oddly enough the good people of Jerusalem, as well as Herod, were startled by the magis' hunt for a new Jewish king; they were unaware of such an event. Yet Herod understood the dire consequences of the meaning of the magis' message because he believed that they were not talking about yet another of the many rivals for his throne, but rather this new king would also be the Messiah. We are left, however, with a couple of important but unanswered questions: 1) how exactly did the magi know that this new king of the Jews had been born and 2)

what was it they saw in the sky that alerted them to it? Something that the very people over whom this new king was supposed to rule were completely unaware of, but pagan star gazers expected and found? Clearly the Star of Bethlehem plays a key role in this mystery. Because the Bethlehem Star has mesmerized, thrilled, and inspired millions and millions of Christians over the centuries it is definitely worth our while to explore exactly what this star might have been and where it might have come from.

Most of the theories about it are based upon how best to translate the Greek word for star, which is **aster**. Matthew doesn't go to any lengths to give us much help to understand the particulars of this star. But perhaps the main problem we face is that the term **aster** could describe any number of heavenly bodies and luminaries including comets. Therefore perhaps the most widely proposed solution for the identity of the Bethlehem Star is that it was indeed a comet. Because of their nature, comets can appear in the sky unexpectedly, hang around for weeks or a couple of months, and then disappear. Here's the issue with such a seemingly reasonable solution that the star was actually a comet: for the pagan magi, a comet was a portent of disaster; it was a bad omen. It was anything but something to be excited or joyful about. Comets were thought to portend the *death* of a king... perhaps even an emperor as powerful as Caesar... not his birth.

During the rule of Vespasian in 79 A.D., less than a decade after the destruction of the Temple, a comet suddenly appeared in the night sky and he knew that his subjects and rivals would believe that this was an astrological portent that the end of his life was imminent. When such a thing is believed by the population in general and his enemies in particular, it often became a self-fulfilling prophecy. It gives them an opening to act upon a king and blame it on fate. So to deflate any such hope for his demise, Vespasian's reaction and clever counter-move was recorded by the historian Suetonius:

"..... He (Vespasian) did not cease his jokes even in apprehension of death and in extreme danger; for when among other portents.... a comet appeared in the heavens, he declared that it applied to the king of the Parthians, who wore his hair long."

So Vespasian declares that the comet's bad omen of death didn't apply to him, but rather to the king of Parthia. What has long hair to do with it? It is because the Greek term **cometai** (from which we get the English word comet) doesn't just

mean "comet"; it literally means "long haired stars" (because most comets have long trailing tails behind them). Parthian kings customarily wore long hair and Vespasian took advantage of this common knowledge to deflect any belief that his death was imminent. However to end this short story I must tell you that after a few months from the first appearance of the comet, the long haired king of Parthia still hadn't died; but Vespasian did from what was probably dysentery. I could offer you a few more stories and examples from Roman times about the bad omen that comets symbolized, but time doesn't permit it. So I'll just sum it all up by quoting Claudius Ptolemy, a famous Greek astrologer, from about 150 A.D.

".....For these comets naturally produce the effects peculiar to Mars and to Mercury: wars, hot weather, disturbed conditions, and the accompaniments of these. And they show, through the parts of the Zodiac in which their heads appear and through the directions in which the shapes of their tails point, the regions upon which the misfortunes impend..."

The point is that comets were harbingers of death and calamity to the Hellenistic astrologers of the first couple of centuries before and well after Yeshua's birth. So the thought of modern Bible scholars that the Star of Bethlehem was a comet that happily portended the birth of new king of the Jews to the visiting magis doesn't pass muster. The Star of Bethlehem was no comet, and we can confidently scratch that one off of our list of possibilities.

Modern astronomers, and the Bible scholars who consult them, have sometimes come to the conclusion that the Bethlehem Star must have been a Supernova. Nova means "new star". It is named thusly because all of a sudden a new light appears in the sky that hadn't been there before and it hangs around for a few weeks. For those among us who have interest in such matters, a celestial nova is not an event revealing the birth of something new, but rather it concerns a sudden change in something that is old. A nova is a star that has burned for billions of years but is now in the late stages of dying. Without getting technical, this star that had formerly been too faint to see but suddenly is so bright that it can't be missed, occurs as it begins to run out of fuel and the result is essentially like the violent meltdown of a runaway nuclear reaction. But there is also something similar that scientists term a Supernova; it is even more spectacular than a regular nova. A very bright new light in the sky suddenly appears and over a period of a few months slowly fades into oblivion. There are many today who mentally picture the Star of Bethlehem as a super bright object lighting up the nighttime sky that suddenly appeared and then soon faded away. Thus the

thought by some Bible academics is that the birth star of Christ was actually a coincidental Supernova event. It is interesting that it was Johannes Kepler, the famous astronomer of the early 17th century, that first came up with this theory. However in time he discarded it when the astronomical evidence from his own research proved to him that this was not the case, and instead he opted for the Bethlehem star being a divine miracle.

In the end, there is no historical evidence going back to the 1st century that claims that a bright new star appearing (whether a nova or Supernova) was of much interest to the astrologers. And it certainly did not portend the birth of a king. So from the viewpoint of the magis a bright new object in the sky in and of itself had no bearing on their search for a new king of the Jews. Let's move on to the next theory.

The next most popular theory of the Bethlehem Star is that it was a somewhat rare planetary conjunction. What is a planetary conjunction? A conjunction is when any two or more objects in the sky appear to be very close together. A conjunction could be of asteroids, comets, stars or planets (thus a *planetary* conjunction as opposed to some other kind).

The reality, however, is that in the 1st century not a great deal of distinction was made between stars and planets. They were all called **aster**..... what we translate as stars. So for the astrologers of that day stars, **aster**, was a rather all encompassing term applied to the many different kinds of lights in the sky because they had no means to understand what they were or how they might be inherently different from one another other than what the naked eye could detect. It is fascinating that when Kepler was first formulating his Supernova theory (which he later abandoned), that he also calculated that there was an event that occurred in 6 B.C. of not 2 but 3 planets coming into conjunction (this has been confirmed by modern math and science). Although he made note of this rarity, he didn't associate it with the Bethlehem Star.

Here's the rub of what we've discussed thus far: whether comets, supernovas, or planetary conjunctions, there is no historical evidence that these kinds of events would have played any role in the perception of the magi about the Bethlehem Star in and of themselves or would it announce the birth of a king of the Jews. Further, when Matthew reports about the Bethlehem Star he in no way describes it as a divine miracle. Rather what we must find (if possible) is some celestial circumstance that would have conformed to the detailed and powerful

astrological belief system of the magi; not something that might tantalize us. Some spectacular happening in the skies no doubt would have caught their attention and they would have thought deeply about it. But the portent of the birth of a king (in our case, a king of the Jews) would have had to fit an already well established set of criteria in order for the magi to assign it that specific meaning.

Here's the thing to ponder as we finish today's lesson: what did the Magi see that without any doubt whatsoever to their minds told them (correctly, by the way) that a new king of the Jews was born in Judea? And yet the people in Judea certainly didn't notice it. Jews may not have practiced astrology but that doesn't mean they didn't pay attention to the movement of the stars, the sun, and the moon. They used them to determine months, years, seasons and even the beginning and ending of the some of their festivals. So they certainly would have noticed something spectacular or unusual occurring in the sky. What this heavily implies, then, is that whatever the magis saw in the sky that told them that a new king of the Jews had been born, it had to be subtle and not obvious. Or even better: it had to be something that learned star gazers would notice, but nobody else would.

We'll pick up this topic again next time and see if we can discover what it was that alerted the magi to the birth of Yeshua.