

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 5, Chapter 2 Continued

We spent the bulk of our previous time together on the birth story of Our Lord and Savior as we find it in the Book of Matthew; it is the only place in the New Testament that we'll hear about the magi and the Star of Bethlehem. We have spent some time understanding who the magi were, what their profession actually was, and what it was that they saw that caused them to go on a long journey to Judea in search of a new born king. We'll briefly review.

The magi were astrologers. We must not picture in our minds modern astrologers who mainly produce horoscopes. Rather the magi were a combination of astronomers and seers. They were experts in understanding the heavens, tracking and predicting the movements of stars and planets, and then using those objects' positions in the sky as omens and portents for the purpose of interpreting the present and foretelling the future. These were not the ancient Babylonian brand of astrologers because that practice had died out 3 centuries earlier. Rather they were Hellenistic astrologers; that is, the brand of astrology they practiced was the product of a Greco-Roman culture and so was seen throughout the Roman Empire as valid and valuable..... except for the Jews who did not practice or accept it.

Even though the Jews did not embrace the concept of the Zodiac or employ astrologers to tell them the future, they did, of course, pay attention to the sky as did all human beings. They were aware of the several constellations formed by patterns of stars. The Book of Job is considered by most scholars to be the oldest book in the Bible, written well before the time of Moses and the Torah. In it we find this statement in which Job is describing the greatness of God:

CJB Job 9:8-10 ⁸ He alone spreads out the sky and walks on the waves in the sea. ⁹ He made the Great Bear, Orion, the Pleiades and the hidden constellations of the south. ¹⁰ He does great, unsearchable things, wonders beyond counting.

The Great Bear and Orion are constellations. The Pleiades (also known as the Seven Sisters) is a star cluster that helps to form the constellation Taurus. Job gives God credit for forming these stars into patterns. So even in Job's day these stars and constellations were observed and named.

We spent the final half of our time together last week discussing the Star of Bethlehem that appeared in the sky and what it might have been. Unfortunately to explore this phenomenon we have to get a bit technical; but I think you'll find it worth the effort. Some theologians believe the star was a comet. Others think it was a Supernova. Another group surmises it was a planetary conjunction. We examined each of these and found that none of these, of themselves, would have alerted the magi that a new king of the Jews had been born. That falls in line with the thinking of many Believers that the star was simply a divine miracle. We'll continue the pursuit of the nature of this star as we continue with today's lesson.

Part of what we are dealing with is that when we compare the words of Matthew's Gospel to what has become Christian Tradition and unquestionable belief by millions of Believers, we find some inconsistencies. For instance the birth star is usually pictured in illustrations as an unusually large and bright star that suddenly appeared. Nowhere does Matthew suggest such a thing. In Matthew (the only place in the New Testament where the star is mentioned) it is made clear that the ONLY people who had any knowledge of a special star announcing a newborn king of the Jews were the pagan magi; the Jews seemed to be completely unaware of it. Even King Herod knew nothing of it and this paranoid man was always on high alert for any sign of anyone that might represent the slightest threat to his throne.

We read in Luke's Gospel that it was NOT the star that illuminated the place of Christ's birth, but rather it was something else.

CJB Luke 2:8-11 ⁸ In the countryside nearby were some shepherds spending the night in the fields, guarding their flocks, ⁹ when an angel of ADONAI appeared to them, and the Sh'khinah of ADONAI shone around them. They were terrified; ¹⁰ but the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, because I am

here announcing to you Good News that will bring great joy to all the people. ¹¹ This very day, in the town of David, there was born for you a Deliverer who is the Messiah, the Lord.

So it was the Glory of the Lord (the Shekinah) that accompanied an angel that illuminated the area and informed the Shepherds of the birth of Messiah, not the star. So what was the sign of how these Shepherds would know **which** child was the long awaited Deliverer?

CJB Luke 2:12 ¹² Here is how you will know: you will find a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a feeding trough."

So the sign that this was the Messiah was where the baby was located, and that he'd be lying in a feeding trough (a manger). It had nothing to do with a star, and interestingly, it was not a newborn king the Jews were to be looking for but rather their Deliverer. Here's where things begin to get dicey.

After visiting Herod, and the magis being urged by him to find this newborn king of the Jews and then to let him know right away, they continued their journey. Here's how Matthew describes it:

CJB Matthew 2:9-10 ⁹ After they had listened to the king, they went away; and the star which they had seen in the east went in front of them until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

A plain reading of these 2 verses seems to say that this special star that the magi first saw, which told them that a new king of the Jews had been born in Judea, actually moved and led them to where the child was; and then it stopped and hovered over the place where Yoseph, Miryam, and Yeshua were. This defies any natural explanation so it is no wonder that much of Christianity sees this star as a miracle of God. It may well be that it was. However there's another explanation that must be considered because Matthew in no way implies that the star was miraculous or supernatural.

Various constellations of the Zodiac were thought by the magi to represent different regions of the known world. The constellation Aries, the Ram, was representative of the region under the control of Herod at this time, which centered around Judea. So Aries is where these astrologers would have looked

for portents about Herod's kingdom. Vettius Valens of Antioch as well as Ptolemy recorded that Herod's kingdom was ruled by the Zodiac sign of Aries.

Before we continue concerning the star I want to add one more piece of information. In Luke 1:5 we're told this: ⁵ ***In the days of Herod, King of Y'hudah, there was a cohen named Z'kharyah who belonged to the Aviyah division. His wife was a descendant of Aharon, and her name was Elisheva.*** This is the beginning of the birth story of John the Baptist, and we're told that this took place during King Herod's reign, meaning it had to have happened before 4 B.C. when Herod died. Luke 1:36 puts Yeshua's birth about 15 months following the conception of John the Baptist. We also know that Herod was still living and ruling after Christ was born. Thus it is becoming more and more agreed upon by biblical scholars that 6 B.C. is a very good candidate for the year of Messiah's birth.

At this point the understanding of the Zodiac and the position of planets and stars within each sign of the Zodiac enters greatly into the matter of what the magi were looking for as a portent. It is well beyond our scope to get into much detail about this, so I will just present you with some interesting bottom line facts. Where stars and planets appear within a section of the sky that represents the sign of a certain region on earth had much to do with what omen or portent was being signaled. Of the many things these ancient Hellenistic astrologers were looking for, was the sign of a king dying or being born since kings were very powerful and greatly affected matters of importance. The position of planets in the Zodiac had everything to do with determining a portent about a king. To quote Michael Molnar: "Thus, for a horoscope to be undeniably suited for a royal birth it must have a strong set of conditions for attendance". In other words: the magi would have been looking for something very specific and technical about those tiny dots of light in the sky that only they and other members of their profession would have known to look for.

As the famous astronomer Kepler pointed out around 1600 A.D., there had indeed been a somewhat rare (about every 60 years) conjunction of planets that occurred in 6 B.C., the likely year that Christ was born. Using modern mathematical and astronomical techniques, scientists have determined that precisely on March 20, 6 B.C., a special conjunction of planets and the movement of both the moon and the planet Jupiter occurred within the Zodiac sign of Aries (the sign for the region of Judea). Might this have been what the magi saw that alerted them to the birth of a new king of the Jews? It certainly fits

the scenario quite well. More importantly it fits within the mindset of pagan astrologers, the magi, of the 1st century A.D.

But now what to make of the statements in Matthew about the mysterious movement of the Star of Bethlehem? The first thing we must do is to attempt to get outside our modern Western thinking and instead adopt the mindset, and grasp the vocabulary, of Greek astrologers in the 1st century, which is also the time at which the Book of Matthew was being written by a man who had no choice but to consult with experts, eye witnesses, and written records in order to gather the many details contained in his Gospel account that we are studying.

Verse 2 of the second chapter of Matthew has the magi asking the people of Jerusalem this question: ***"Where is the newborn King of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*** What is the meaning of the description of where it is that they first saw the star? Does it mean that the magi were located in the east where they resided when they saw it? The term "in the east" is taken from the Greek and the literal English translation of it is indeed "in the east"; but what it sounds like to us isn't what it **meant** to these ancient astrologers. For them "in the east" is a technical astrological term that means "at the rising" (in fact, in recognition of this some Bible translations are now saying "at the rising" instead of "in the east"). This term is referring to a planet that rises over the eastern horizon of the earth before the Sun appears. Thus what the magi saw was a morning star.

A few verses later in Matthew 2 we read:

^{CJB} **Matthew 2:9** ***9 After they had listened to the king, they went away; and the star which they had seen in the east went in front of them until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.***

"Went in front" or "Went before" are also literal translations of astrological terms. The technical term is proegeseis, and while it means in laymen's terms to "go before", in astrological parlance it means "to go in the same direction as the sky moves". The ancient Greeks thought that the regular direction in which a planet moves is the same as the direction that the overall sky moves. For those of us who live in the 21st century the idea that the sky "moves" is rather amusing. But remember that we're talking about people who had incorrect views about the structure of our solar system, believed the sun revolved around the earth, that the earth was flat and had 4 corners, etc.). So the term "stopped over" or "stood

over" (that seems to us to describe the birth star becoming stationary over the place where Christ was born) has a slightly different meaning in ancient astrology. According to Ptolemy it more means "above in the sky". So allow me to rephrase the meaning of Matthew 2:9 into its astrological meaning to reveal what this verse is telling us.

"After they had listened to the king, they went away; and the star which they had seen at the rising, which went in the same direction as the sky moves, came and was above in the sky where the child was".

In the end what we have in Matthew regarding the Star of Bethlehem is that either it was a celestial event that signaled a portent, appearing in the Zodiac sign of the Ram (Aries), which only the highly trained magi would have recognized; a very subtle sign that occurs about every 60 years, and one that would indeed have been marked by a morning star that rises in the east and then moves its position across the sky, and then at some point appears to stop (before it makes kind of a looping turn)..... or we have a miracle of God. I cannot say with certainty which it is. But as we ponder this event we also need to factor into our thinking that the birth star was NOT a sign that God gave to the Jews, but rather it was a celestial sign meant for pagan astrologers. As Luke chapter 2 explains, the sign God provided for the Jews was that they were to look in Bethlehem for a baby that was laid in a feeding trough. Would God actually give pagan astrologers a sign (any sign) of the birth of a divine Jewish Messiah? We find God interfacing with pagans on a number of occasions in the Bible and one of the more famous encounters involved the pagan magi Balaam, in the Book of Numbers, which we talked about in a previous lesson and may be prophetically connected to the birth of Christ.

In Matthew 2:11 when the magi finally found the child: ***Upon entering the house, they saw the child with his mother Miryam; and they prostrated themselves and worshipped him. Then they opened their bags and presented him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.***

The magi worshipped the child as they would any king. Remember: the magi were not looking for a Savior or a god but rather for a new born king of Judea. Prostrating oneself before a king was usual and customary. Presenting expensive gifts when visiting a king was usual and customary especially for first-time foreign visitors.

My opinion on the matter is this: God in His amazing providence timed the birth of His Son to coincide with a sign that pagan astrologers were looking for. A sign that the Jews had no knowledge of, and a sign so subtle that the Jews never noticed it (because they would have no reason to notice it). Gentile pagans worshipped Miryam's child as a king, with no understanding that He was Israel's divine Messiah. At the same time God gave His chosen people a) a miraculous announcement of the arrival of their Messiah (as a human baby) by means of an angel and the appearance of the Glory of God in the night sky near Bethlehem; and b) He also gave them a sign in order for them to positively identify this child by saying He would be the one laying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem. So God introduced His Son to the world as both King and Messiah; king to the pagans, and Messiah to the Jews. And He did it in ways that each could identify with and using means that each could accept. Let's keep that in mind as we carry out our commission to introduce Jesus Christ to our unbelieving friends and family.

OK; let's return from our extensive detour and put the narrative of Matthew chapter 2 together. Several pieces of information are given to us in rapid fashion in the 1st verse. First, the name of the child (the Deliverer) is given: it is Yeshua. Second, the place of His birth is provided: it is in Bethlehem of Judea. There were a number of "Bethlehems" in the Holy Land so the addition of the words "of Judea" was necessary. Third, Christ's birth occurred during the reign of King Herod (meaning it had to have happened before 4 B.C., and the most likely year for Yeshua's birth is 6 B.C.). Fourth, magi from a foreign land came to Jerusalem looking for this new king of the Jews. Why Jerusalem? Because it was the seat of government in Judea and so it seemed logical to them that this is where the new king would be found. When they asked the local townspeople where this king was they weren't asking in terms of what city or town he might be in; rather they fully expected him to be somewhere in Jerusalem. Turns out, they were in the wrong place because we've already been told that He was born in Bethlehem (something they did not yet know).

When in verse 2 the magi say they have "seen his star", it more means that they have identified an astrological portent that indicates a king has been born in the region of Judea. Most Bibles have it that they say the reason they came was "to worship" him. While that is not wrong, to the Western mind "worship" is reserved for deities. However from an old English standpoint, worship means to pay homage (usually to a king or aristocrat). Therefore some Bible translations such as the NAS use the word "homage" (this projects a much more correct image to we moderns because what the magi intended was in no way religious).

Verse 3 says that it didn't take long for Herod to hear about these magi asking the townspeople about a new king of the Jews. Naturally this caught his attention and the townspeople knew full well that the homicidal and brutal Herod would not take this news lightly, so everyone got upset right along with him. Herod did what any experienced king would do: he called for experts to come and give him council. We are told that the chief priests (plural) came, and so did the Scribes of the people (or as the CJB has it, the Torah Teachers).

We discussed in the Introduction to Matthew that at this time in history the Jews operated under a dual religious system consisting of the Temple and the Synagogue. These institutions were completely separate and run for different purposes by different sets of authorities. The Levite priests ruled the Temple, and the Scribes (who were not Levites) ruled the Synagogues. There was one Temple but there were scores and scores of Synagogues. Also notice that when the Chief Priests of the Temple were summoned, this was not speaking of the High Priest but rather the most senior regular priests. Herod wanted to know exactly where the Messiah was to be born, and seemed to understand that since His advent was prophesied such information would be found somewhere in Holy Scripture. Without hesitation (because those who knew Scripture knew the answer) the priests and Scribes said it was to be Bethlehem of Judea because the prophet had recorded it. The prophet they were speaking of is Micah, and what they quote is essentially Micah 5:1 or 5:2 depending on which Bible version you are using.

^{CJB} Micah 5:1 *But you, Beit-Lechem near Efrat, so small among the clans of Y'hudah, out of you will come forth to me the future ruler of Isra'el, whose origins are far in the past, back in ancient times.*

So in the mid-700's B.C. (the time of Micah) it was foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But now around 5 B.C. Herod wanted to know WHEN the magi first saw this star that sent them on their journey because from this he could judge the child's current age, which would be useful in identifying him. Please notice that Herod had no doubt that the magi were correct. Herod was fully a Hellenistic king and so bought in to pagan astrology. We're not told how the magi responded to him; only that Herod bade them go to Bethlehem and find this new king. And once they did, report it back to Herod so that he, too, might go and pay homage to him. Yeah, right. The magi were intelligent men; they understood that King Herod was not about to go and pay homage to his potential replacement. The magi of course behaved as though they were obeying

Herod and set out towards Bethlehem. We are told that the star led them there, but as we discussed earlier that's a misunderstanding of terminology. First of all, they didn't need to be led to Bethlehem. The road to Bethlehem was well marked and well traveled, and it was no more than a half-day's walk from where they were. Second, Bethlehem was a small place and the process of finding the Christ child wouldn't have been difficult. Nonetheless, they were excited beyond measure that the star had indeed given them the correct information, and inside the house they found Miryam and her child..... the new born king of the Jews.

It has become a Christian tradition that Miryam gave birth to Yeshua not in a house or an inn, but rather in something like a barn or a cave. Verse 11 specifically says "house"; it can't be translated any other way. This tradition of a cave or barn comes from the mention of the child being laid in an animal feeding trough. But in that era (and it is still that way in parts of the Middle East) animals are brought in at night to a courtyard that is part of the residence, and the residents will sleep nearby to the animals. The purpose was to protect these valuable animals from predators and from thieves. So naturally there was a manger (a feeding trough) inside the courtyard. No doubt where the holy family stayed was very lowly (it wasn't usual to put a child in a feeding trough as a bed). According to Matthew it was a house and I feel certain that it was.

The magi paid homage to the child-king, giving him gifts of great value. How old might this child have been by the time the magi found him? It is difficult to ascertain. The description seems to be of an infant. And yet the timing says the child might have been about a year old. So we'll just have to leave that an open question. I'll repeat what I said earlier; to the magis' minds they were not worshipping this child from the religious sense even though Christian Tradition makes it seem so. Rather they were paying the typical homage due to a king. Honoring even a baby if it was born regally was not at all unusual.

After paying homage the magi began the long journey back to their homeland (it is not stated where that is), but they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. As seers they were sensitive to dreams and visions. Did they really have a dream or was it really their instincts that told them that Herod was obviously up to no good?

In verse 13 the magi now completely exit the story but the issue of Herod's clearly murderous intent towards this child remains. We are told that an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph to warn him to take his family and flee to

Egypt because Herod wants to harm the child. There is disagreement among Bible versions about whether this is "the" angel of the Lord or he is "an" angel of the Lord. The first suggestion makes this a unique angel, or even the Lord Himself. The second suggestion ("an" angel) makes this an unidentified angel of which there were others like him. I opt for "an" angel for a couple of reasons. First: when we find the phrase "**the** angel of the Lord" in the Bible, invariably the original language word isn't actually "Lord", it is Yehoveh... God's name. However here Lord means Lord; God's name isn't used. There is only one Angel of the Lord (Angel of Yehoveh) because this Angel is but another manifestation of God. Yet a complication is that we have this angel speaking in the first person; he uses the term "I" when he says to go to Egypt and stay there until **I** tell you to return. Second: usually when the first person is used by an angel described as the Angel of the Lord, that Angel is God. However here the wording is such that it could be that God will again send this particular angel to Joseph in Egypt once it is safe for them to go home (and the angel is aware of this fact). However the unusual way Matthew phrases this indeed leaves room for doubt.

Verse 14 explains that Joseph obeyed the angel in his dream, and then verse 15 presents us with a sticky problem. The angel says that the overriding reason Joseph, Mary and Jesus were to go to Egypt was so that the prophecy of "Out of Egypt I called my son", would be fulfilled. This prophecy is taken from Hosea 11:1. Context is everything in the Bible, so listen to the entire verse.

^{CJB} Hosea 11:1 *"When Isra'el was a child, I loved him; and out of Egypt I called my son."*

So Matthew is applying to Yeshua a prophecy that specifically named Israel as the child that God calls "my son". So the original context in Hosea is the exodus of Israel from Egypt as led by Moses. Israel is called God's son as far back as Exodus 4:22, going so far as God insisting that Israel is His **firstborn** son. So is it right of Matthew to make such application by switching the subject of the prophecy from Israel to the Messiah? It seems much like allegory for him to do so rather than revealing straightforward biblical history and truth. While we could camp here quite a while I'll hurry us through it.

Again remembering that Matthew is a well educated Jewish Believer, who (as we will see as we move through the chapters) is equally knowledgeable with the biblical Torah as he is with Jewish Tradition, he is likely employing what is called the **remez** method of Bible interpretation. I've taught this before, but briefly: there

were 4 standard and accepted means of interpreting the Bible among the Jews of Christ's era and it has more or less remained so to this day. The first is **p'shat** that means "simple". That is, it is the plain, literal sense of the biblical words. The second is **remez** that means "hint". That is, the biblical passage hints at a truth a bit deeper than what we read in the **p'shat** (the simple, literal sense). The third is **drash**, from which we get the Hebrew word **midrash**. It allows a person to make application of what is said in the Scriptures in a way similar to (but not quite the same as) allegory. That is, **drash** depends on God guiding the human interpreter to truths not necessarily directly stated by the biblical words. The Apostle Paul was a master at **drash**. Fourth is **sod**, meaning "secret". It is the mysterious meaning behind the plain meaning. Gematria (the use of numbers) to reveal less apparent truth is part of **sod**. Might Matthew be making use of one of these 4 methods when he connects Hosea's prophecy to Christ? Probably. I would speculate that he is employing the **remez** method of interpretation; that is, Hosea 11:1 speaks directly of Israel as God's Son that He calls out of Egypt, but in fact it also hints of a prophetic future calling of His Son Yeshua out of Egypt.

Such a concept makes a direct and intimate link between Israel as God's Son and the Messiah as God's Son. Christ and Israel are as one. Yeshua represents the ideal Israel. This idea is sprinkled throughout the prophets and especially in Isaiah 49. Essentially we have Jesus repeating Israel's experience by being called by God the Father to come out of Egypt.

Herod died in 4 B.C., so we can assume that it was in that same year when the angel returned to Joseph and told him his family could safely return to the Holy Land. They probably were in Egypt for about a year. However shortly before his death, Herod went into a paranoid rage when he realized the magi had tricked him. They had gone to Bethlehem as instructed, but then went home without returning to him with the information he had sought. In response Herod ordered all children (probably only the males) 2 years of age and under who lived in Bethlehem and areas nearby to be slaughtered. Apparently in their visit to Herod the magi had told him when it was that they first saw the star. However their seeing the star didn't necessarily mean (to him) that it represented the specific date the child was born; it could have a little earlier or a little later. Since he wasn't certain of the date he killed a wide range of ages: the children who were 2 years old and younger. Here we see the continuing connection with Egypt because Pharaoh did something similar to the Israelite children 1400 years earlier.

CJB Exodus 1:15-22 ¹⁵ Moreover, the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was called Shifrah and the other Pu'ah. ¹⁶ "When you attend the Hebrew women and see them giving birth," he said, "if it's a boy, kill him; but if it's a girl, let her live." ¹⁷ However, the midwives were God-fearing women, so they didn't do as the king of Egypt ordered but let the boys live. ¹⁸ The king of Egypt summoned the midwives and demanded of them, "Why have you done this and let the boys live?" ¹⁹ The midwives answered Pharaoh, "It's because the Hebrew women aren't like the Egyptian women- they go into labor and give birth before the midwife arrives." ²⁰ Therefore God prospered the midwives, and the people continued to multiply and grow very powerful. ²¹ Indeed, because the midwives feared God, he made them founders of families. ²² Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born, throw in the river; but let all the girls live."

We'll close for today and pick up Matthew chapter 2 next week and then move into chapter 3.