

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 6, Chapters 2 and 3

As we drink in and deeply reflect on the beauty, salt, and light that the Book of Matthew provides us, let us also be reminded of something about the author himself. Our Jewish Matthew was not an eyewitness to anything he was reporting nor does he claim that he was. The disciple Matthew was a tax collector, while writers of Gospels were usually literary experts, often making a living from it as a profession, even if that wasn't their only occupation. So all indications are that this is not the same Matthew that was an original disciple of Christ. Therefore, Matthew the Gospel writer had to do extensive research of documents for information about Yeshua's life and ministry, and also would have conducted interviews with some folks who may have been eyewitnesses to it. He would have had to familiarize himself with some matters of which he didn't personally have any expertise, so he would have sought out those who were knowledgeable in the field. And before I say another word I would be remiss if I didn't credit the Holy Spirit and divine inspiration for leading and directing Matthew's writing (who was probably mostly if not completely unaware of God's hand upon him) to provide us with the truthful and invaluable information that we have before us today.

Because he was a Jewish Believer who probably lived in the Holy Land near to the Temple and also to synagogue leadership; a man who we will soon see had considerable depth of Torah knowledge as well as a solid grasp of Jewish Tradition, he would have had little to do with pagan astrology because such a thing was shunned within the more strict segments of Jewish society. Thus in his birth story of Jesus, wherein he placed considerable relevance on the visitation of the magi (the other Gospel writers never even mention it), he would have had to seek out those who practiced astrology for their knowledge on the subject.

I point this out because I was (and perhaps you were, too) quite struck with Matthew's use of technical astrological terms and phrases that only a few experts would have known; terms and phrases to help describe the magis' discovery of the heavenly portent of a new king of the Jews being born in Judea; a portent known in Christianity as the Star of Bethlehem. I suspect that Matthew might not have been all that surprised that pagan star gazers from a distant land had received knowledge of Christ's birth. While it is true that the magi didn't in any way think of this child as divine or as a Messiah, but rather as an earthly king, nonetheless it was not a mere coincidence that in using the celestial Zodiac and astrological reckoning they were, by Matthew's account, the **first** to know of Christ's advent even before the Jews did! While that might seem odd to us the biblical pattern may just reveal that for His own good reasons, this is how God had always intended it.

When I look at a listing of Old Testament prophecies put together by the classic Christian scholars that predict the coming of a Messiah, I have yet to run across one that includes the story of Balaam and Balak in the Book of Numbers. And yet **Jewish** sages and scholars have for millennia emphasized this story, and especially Balaam's speech in Numbers 24, as a clear and powerful prophecy about a Messiah for Israel that will come from the tribe of Judah that seems to even include a celestial portent.

**CJB Numbers 24:15-17** <sup>15</sup> *So he (Balaam) made his pronouncement: "This is the speech of Bil'am, son of B'or; the speech of the man whose eyes have been opened; <sup>16</sup> 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: <sup>17</sup> "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.*

Balaam was a pagan magi, just as were the magi who visited the Christ child. In Numbers we have Balaam making this incredible prognostication that one would think would only come from the lips of a great Sage of Israel or perhaps a venerable Hebrew prophet. But no; this comes from the mouth of a pagan magi. So why does Matthew give so much attention to the magi when none of the other Gospel writers even mention them? And why doesn't Matthew wonder out loud about the seemingly ironic reality that pagan astrologers were the first to learn of Messiah's coming and this due to some confluence of stars and planets in the sky? I can only speculate that because of the Jews' belief that the Balaam

speech was prophetic of a Messiah, which even included the mention of a star..... a Torah account that the learned Jew Matthew was no doubt quite familiar with.... that it was Matthew who put 2 and 2 together and saw the relationship between the magis visiting the Christ child in Bethlehem and the Balaam story.

Later in Matthew chapter 2, Matthew again exposes his Jewish mindset and Bible knowledge by connecting a prophecy found in Hosea 11:1 with Yeshua. There we read:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Hosea 11:1** *"When Isra'el was a child, I loved him; and out of Egypt I called my son.*

But one must ask: how does Matthew legitimately transfer the meaning of Hosea's words, which clearly has Israel in mind, to Yeshua? We discussed last week that the Jews used (and continue to use) 4 different methods for interpreting Holy Scripture, and one of those standard methods is called **remez**, meaning hint. Only an educated Jew like Matthew would be aware of these kinds of interpretation techniques and be able to deftly apply them to the situation of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fleeing to Egypt to avoid being murdered by King Herod. So here is early evidence in the Book of Matthew that Matthew was determined in his Gospel to show his readers something of supreme importance. Something that has been all but lost within Christianity: it is the proper relationship between Christ and the Torah and the Prophets. And at the same time (as we'll see later) questioning (if not rejecting) many of the views and teachings of the synagogue authorities of that era: the Scribes and the Pharisees. Why? Because so many of those views were based on manmade traditions and customs that were not founded on actual biblical truth. So taking Matthew's lead, we'll continue today to do our best to put on a Jewish mindset in order to understand what the Jewish Matthew is telling us, but also to take the Bible for what it says and avoid filtering those words through long held Christian traditions.

We ended our study last time with the death of King Herod in 4 B.C., about 2 years after Yeshua's birth, and with Herod's unconscionable slaying of the children in Bethlehem and nearby areas because of his paranoia that the magi were right: a new king of the Jews had been born and so that meant Herod's hold on power might be challenged.

Open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 2.

## RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 2:16 - end

Before we move on, it is important that we notice something else about Matthew's Gospel that supplies an important backdrop for his presentation. It is that there is a strong connection present in Matthew between Moses' life and Yeshua's. I don't think it is too strong to say that Matthew makes Jesus a kind of second Moses. And while that thought might at first unsettle us, when we look at the matter from the 30,000 foot view it makes sense. To begin with, in the Torah we hear these words from Moses:

**CJB Deuteronomy 18:14-19** <sup>14</sup> *For these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to soothsayers and diviners; but you, ADONAI your God does not allow you to do this.* <sup>15</sup> *"ADONAI will raise up for you a prophet like me from among yourselves, from your own kinsmen. You are to pay attention to him,* <sup>16</sup> *just as when you were assembled at Horev and requested ADONAI your God, 'Don't let me hear the voice of ADONAI my God any more, or let me see this great fire ever again; if I do, I will die!'* <sup>17</sup> *On that occasion ADONAI said to me, 'They are right in what they are saying.* <sup>18</sup> *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I order him.* <sup>19</sup> *Whoever doesn't listen to my words, which he will speak in my name, will have to account for himself to me.*

The biggest error that the Hebrews of old, and Believers today, make regarding understanding prophecy is that they (and we) don't take it literally enough. When we look back at the prophecies that have already been fulfilled, invariably they have hit the nail on the head including details that may have seemed improbable or not comprehensible until these fulfillments finally occurred. The near universal tendency in Christian academic circles of teaching prophecy allegorically (because the scholar can't see how the event can happen literally as the Bible predicts) takes Believers on wild goose chases or builds false expectations that are completely unnecessary. Some of this is due to our impatience to know the outcome of a prophecy in advance and rather than waiting for it to actually happen. The result is that speculation is substituted for fact and then it is adopted by the eager student or congregation member as a settled matter.

When Moses said that God would raise up "a prophet like me" from among Israel, it happened exactly as said. So it should be no surprise to anyone that the Messiah would be that prophet, and that the similarities between he and Moses

would be extensive. One of the reasons I address this with you is because many modern Bible scholars and the commentaries they write (commentators who are usually skeptical of the ancient biblical records) take the many similarities between Jesus and Moses as an indication that the entire story of Christ is suspect and contrived because it bears such resemblance to Moses and his experiences..... completely ignoring that such resemblance is exactly what was prophesied by Moses in the Torah!

I have explained in previous lessons that perhaps Christ's overriding and underlying theological purpose is to inaugurate a re-Creation. Genesis opens with the first heavens and earth, and the Book of Revelation ends with the re-Creation of a new heavens and new earth, and Yeshua is at the center of it all. Therefore it should not be surprising that while Moses was God's first Mediator, and brought God's Word in stone to God's people, Yeshua was God's second and better Mediator and was Himself God's Word in the flesh brought to God's people. Moses was the Father's agent of redemption for God's people in one capacity, and Jesus was the also the Father's agent of redemption for God's people but in another and greater capacity. I could go on with the many similarities but time doesn't permit. So just be acutely aware of the Yeshua/Moses connection that Matthew has in mind as we study his Gospel.

Verse 17 explains that the mass homicide King Herod perpetrated upon helpless children simply because any Jewish boy under 2 might have been the new king the magi came to find, was itself a fulfillment of prophecy according to Matthew. He quotes from Jeremiah 31:14 (or 15 depending on your Bible version).

**CJB Jeremiah. 31:14 <sup>14</sup> *This is what ADONAI says: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamenting and bitter weeping. It is Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no longer alive."***

Matthew connects Rachel weeping and refusing to be comforted because her children are no longer alive with the mass slaughter of Jewish children by Herod that would have devastated the entire Jewish community. However context is everything and so as good students of God's Word we need to continue reading in Jeremiah.

**CJB Jeremiah 31:14-16 <sup>14</sup> *This is what ADONAI says: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamenting and bitter weeping. It is Rachel weeping for her children,***

*refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no longer alive." <sup>15</sup> This is what ADONAI says: "Stop your weeping, and dry your eyes, for your work will be rewarded," says ADONAI. "They will return from the enemy's land; <sup>16</sup> so there is hope for your future," says ADONAI. "Your children will return to their own territory.*

When we add in more context we see that although Rachel is weeping uncontrollably at the moment, God tells her to stop weeping because there is hope. Be aware that when Jeremiah mentions Rachel (who was one of Jacob's wives), it is using her name as representative of some or all of Israel. Many Christian scholars scratch their heads over Matthew 2:18 because the connection between Rachel weeping and the murder of small children in Bethlehem shortly after Jesus' birth is weak if not irrelevant. So what's Matthew's intent? It seems to me that once again we see Matthew's Jewish mindset at work because he employs one of the 4 Jewish methods of Bible interpretation (perhaps **remez** although in this case it could be the **drash** method) in order to connect the Jeremiah prophecy to the horrific murdering of Jewish children by Herod. In other words, Matthew sees a firm relationship between the two events that occurred far apart in history.

On the surface Jeremiah's prophecy is not a Messianic prophecy but rather it's about return from exile for Israel. Jeremiah lived at the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judea that included the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the exile of most of Judea's population. Genesis 35:19 explains that Rachel died on the way to Ephrath; interestingly Ephrath was an early name for Bethlehem. Yet, Jeremiah's prophecy can't be primarily about the Babylonian exile because Rachel's children are Joseph and Benjamin (plus Dan and Naphtali through her handmaiden, Bilah). While in Egypt, Rachel's son Joseph fathered 2 sons of his own: Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim and Manasseh together represent the bulk of the 10 northern tribes of Israel that were conquered by Assyria around 720 B.C. and scattered all over their empire. The territory of Benjamin was like a buffer state between the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah, so there were mixed loyalties among the Benjamites. The part of Benjamin that was loyal to northern kingdom went into exile with them, and the part that was loyal to the southern kingdom remained in the land but would themselves be exiled upon the Babylonian conquest about 130 years later. So God seems to be telling Rachel to stop weeping because all the exiles of Israel (both the northern and southern kingdoms), and perhaps even the dead ones, will eventually return to the Holy Land.

Notice the common elements of Matthew's narrative that include Egypt, Bethlehem, and the murder of Israelite children. All of these apply both to Rachel's children and to Christ's birth story. In the end, despite the gut wrenching disasters associated with the two exiles and the murder of the innocents, God says there is hope; so hope is the theme. The underlying connection seems to be that there is hope for Israel's return from exile and there is also hope that it is the Messiah that will manifest that return. The Good News is that Messiah has been born. A Jewish reader in the 1st century might catch on to this; but a gentile reader would have found it most difficult to understand what Matthew is getting at. But now you know.

Starting in verse 19 we're told that once Herod died an angel came in a dream to Joseph as he and his family were still in Egypt, and the all-clear was given to him to return home. However when Joseph heard that it was Herod's son Archelaus that replaced his father, Joseph decided to go the Galilee instead of returning to Judea. It seems that Archelaus assumed control over Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Joseph's decision to avoid Judea was a wise one because Archelaus turned out to be at least as brutal as his father. In fact his cruelty so alarmed Rome that they finally stepped in and replaced him with a Roman governor in 6 A.D. and from then forward only Roman governors ruled Judea and the region.

Galilee, where Joseph took his family, and neighboring Perea were put under the control of another of Herod's sons, Antipas. He was a somewhat more reasonable ruler and so the area was generally peaceful and secure.

Now for verse 23. Frankly this verse is problematic and there is little way around it. The first half of the verse is simple enough in that it identifies Nazareth as the town that Joseph and his family settled in. Nazareth, like almost all of Galilee, was agricultural. It was a small and insignificant place; perhaps Joseph chose it just for that reason so that they could be inconspicuous as a protection for his son Yeshua. The problem part of the verse is the second half. Matthew claims the fulfillment of a yet another prophecy and supposedly quotes Scripture from some unnamed prophet that says that the Messiah will be called a Nazorean or in Hebrew, a **Natzrati**. No known Scripture or combination of Scriptures does that. Several possibilities to solve this dilemma have been suggested that I'll briefly go over. First, is that the intention was to say that Christ became a Nazarite. Nothing in the New Testament or in His actions imply that He took the vows of a Nazarite. Second is that the meaning is that a Nazorean is what a resident of Nazareth is called. And third is that the word comes from the Hebrew

term **nezer**, which means "branch" and thus it connects Yeshua to Isaiah 11:1.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Isaiah 11:1 *But a branch will emerge from the trunk of Yishai, a shoot will grow from his roots.***

I sort of favor the simplest solution. In John's Gospel 1:44 - 46 we read:

**<sup>44</sup> Philip was from Beit-Tzaidah, the town where Andrew and Kefa lived. <sup>45</sup> Philip found Natan'el and told him, "We've found the one that Moshe wrote about in the Torah, also the Prophets- it's Yeshua Ben-Yosef from Natzeret!" <sup>46</sup> Natan'el answered him, "Natzeret? Can anything good come from there?" "Come and see," Philip said to him.**

The point is that Nazareth was apparently a town that was often the brunt of jokes for some reason. So people who lived there were considered to be living in a worthless place, therefore any resident of Nazareth took on the same worthless character as the town. Therefore to be called a Nazorean (or a Natzrati) identified a person who lived in a place unworthy of mention. To me that fits well with the characterization of Yeshua as a humble man from a humble place; a Messiah and king who was anything but prominent, aristocratic, or charismatic in appearance..... all things that humans tend to value but God doesn't.

Let's move on to chapter 3.

### **READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 3 all**

In this chapter Matthew quickly turns from the birth of Messiah and all the circumstances that surrounded it, to John the Baptist. In fact, Matthew suddenly jumps over about 30 years; that is, Christ's entire childhood is not discussed. The Gospel of Mark does the same. Only Luke's Gospel spends any time with Yeshua's youth and if you'd like to know more about it read Luke 2:21 - 52. Most scholars attribute this curiosity to Matthew essentially copying Mark's interests and style. We've already discussed that the historical record provided by the earliest Church Fathers is that whatever copying was done was done by Mark, since Matthew's was the first Gospel account written according to those same Church Fathers. But I think that what we need to be focusing on is that Matthew was certainly a Jew, and nearly as certainly so was Mark. Luke, on the other hand, was just as certainly a gentile (he was Dr. Luke who accompanied Paul on some of his journeys). So for the Jews Matthew and Mark, Yeshua's youth was



relatively unimportant; it's His adult life that mattered. But for the gentle Luke, who thought and wrote as a gentile and for gentiles (remember how he constructed Christ's genealogy not as Hebrews did but rather as gentile Romans did in his era), Yeshua's youth was an important part of his story and his mostly gentile readers (and probably his patron) would have wanted to know about it.

Verse 1 begins "In those days" or "During those days". This is an indefinite term that simply means some amount of time has passed and entirely new circumstances are about to be discussed. In this case the time that has passed from the end of chapter 2 is 3 decades, plus or minus a couple a years. The new circumstance involves a very strange, yet passionate, man called John the Baptist. "John" of course was not his birth name; rather it is an English-ized version of **Yochanan**. In Hebrew **Yochanan** means "Yehoveh shows favor" (NOT God shows favor).

Matthew characterizes John as a preacher, and his starting point of preaching is said to be the wilderness of Judea. For anyone who has been to Israel, Jerusalem, and the south, it quickly becomes apparent that wilderness does not mean densely forested hills and valleys but rather stark and mysterious desert. Matthew also always refers to John as "John the Baptist"; not just "John" as Mark tends to do. An interesting feature in this chapter is that just as Matthew jumped completely over Yeshua's youth, he does the same with John the Baptist. It is often stated in Christian commentaries that this omission assumes that John (and Yeshua) were already well known in the Jewish community, as were their birth circumstances, so there was no need to mention it. Perhaps. However my view is that in Jewish thought and writing, unless the point of a biblical narrative is about a person's time as a youth (such as when David as a teenager faced down the menacing Goliath, partly as a humiliation of the adult Israelites who were too scared to do it) then the Hebrew cultural value system of placing more value on mature adults than on infants and children was what was at play. Further, since all the Gospels are about a religious matter, and since in Jewish society a man had to be 30 years old to be considered eligible to be a religious authority, then for Matthew what those 2 men did as youth wasn't particularly relevant. When we consider that Yeshua grew up in distant and tiny Nazareth, and John was a strange man who lived the later part of his youth in a desolate desert, then whatever encounters the Jewish public may have had with these two as youth, must have been few and far between. So it is difficult to imagine the local Jewish society being familiar with Yeshua's and Yochanan's infancy and youth.

It is significant for us to gain what the term "baptize" meant to Jews in the 1st century A.D. because whatever we find in the New Testament about baptize and baptizing is meant to be taken in that context. We'll discuss this at length to begin our next lesson. What I can tell you for the moment is that Christian Tradition has altered the meaning of the term and the means of performing it.

John the Baptist brings two critical messages to the Jewish public: repent for your sins, and the Kingdom of God is near. They are at once two different things, and yet intimately related. As David Sterns aptly says in his New Testament Commentary, the idea of repenting because the Kingdom of God is at hand mostly conjures up a picture of some weirdly dressed guy, standing on a makeshift box, at a busy street corner, shouting to no one in particular, and people avoiding looking at him. So even in the Church, the idea of repenting because the Kingdom of God is near can bring a communal wince upon the congregation members. So much so that the most popular of TV evangelists try to avoid using those terms.

John doesn't say to repent; he says to turn from your sins. However the English term repent is an excellent word to abbreviate John's words. The Hebrew word ***teshuvah*** embodies this concept. Literally it means to turn or to return. In its Jewish religious sense it means to turn from one's sins AND to return to God. So it doesn't only mean to quit your bad behavior; it also includes sincerely and personally recommitting one's life to the Lord and to His ways. An atheist can notice his or her bad behaviors and stop them; but that is not biblical repentance. Reforming one's relationship with the God of the Bible is the other necessary ingredient. Further, Jews rightly acknowledge that even this act of the human will is set into motion by God. We can only truly repent by God's grace. All else is but a short-lived emotional response to our conscience.

The second part of John the Baptist's message is that the Kingdom of God is near. What, exactly, is the Kingdom of God and what does he mean that it is near? And further what relationship does that have to repentance? We'll discuss that and more next time.