

Book of Matthew Chapter 2

As we are all well aware, the gospels of Matthew and Luke are each written with a very different readership in view. Matthew writes mainly with a Jewish reader in mind and therefore sets out the claims of Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah, the king of Israel. That is why Matthew begins his account by immediately giving us the genealogy of the Lord Jesus:

1 The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Luke, on the other hand, does not raise this subject until chapter 3 and then he traces the genealogy all the way back to Adam, for Luke is interested in Jesus the man.

Both writers tell us something about the early years of the Lord's life, but as we shall see, the two accounts are by no means identical. Let's see how Matthew begins in verse 1:

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem

The AV would seem to suggest that the arrival of the wise men coincided with the birth of the Lord Jesus. It is interesting, however, to note how Mr Darby renders this first phrase:

"Now Jesus having been born in Bethlehem of Judaea".

This suggests the possibility that Jesus might have been born before the arrival of the wise men. The word for "wise men" is MAGOS in the singular, or MAGI in the plural. It is the word used by the orientals to describe the wise men or astronomers of such countries as Babylon and Persia. Such were the wise men of Daniel's day in the land of Babylon, and it may well be that these men came from Babylon or Persia. They came with a very special purpose in mind – to find the king that had been born and to worship Him:

2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

It is true of nearly every king that he is born to be king – ie at some later stage in his life. But this child was different – He was born king of the Jews. The magi had seen His star in the east and somehow they had linked the appearance of the star with the birth of the king of the Jews. Certainly Balaam in his prophecy had spoken of a star out of Jacob and linked it with a sceptre. Numbers 24:17 says:

There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel,

Their possible acquaintance with this prophecy and their knowledge of astronomy, no doubt with the help of some divine revelation, had led them to their conclusion, and they had come to worship Him. Here is proof already of the deity of the Lord Jesus. From Genesis to Revelation, it is an absolute truth that worship belongs to God and to Good alone. The first two of the ten commandments emphasised this point.

Thou shalt have no other God before Me.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.

Israel broke these commandments when they made the golden calf. Not only does worship belong to God, God will not allow any other creature, be it man or angel, to be worshipped. In Acts chapter 10, Cornelius bowed before Peter to worship him, but Peter says, "Stand up, for I myself also am a man". In Revelation chapters 19 and 22, John would have fallen and worshipped before the angel that spoke with him, but on each occasion he is told, "See thou do it not" "Worship God".

News of the wise men's mission comes to the ears of Herod:

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Who was this "Herod the king"? He is the first of five Herods in our New Testament:

Herod the king
Herod Archelaus
Herod the tetrarch (Herod Antipas)
Herod Agrippa I (See Acts 12)
Herod Agrippa II

They were all marked by an overwhelming desire to hold on to political power, by fair means or foul. The Herod of our chapter was given the title of king by the Romans. He is known in history as Herod the Great. He is noted for his building work, and especially for the reconstruction of the temple built by Zerubbabel. This he hoped would gain him the favour of the Jews. But he like his successors was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, a nation noted for its perpetual enmity towards the Jews. History tells us that he was a cruel scheming man. It is even said that he murdered his own wife and three of her sons in order to preserve his throne. It is hardly surprising therefore that he acts in the way that he does in Matthew chapter 2.

Far from welcoming the news regarding this child, Herod is troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. How different is the response that we read of in Luke's gospel where we read of Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna. Anna went out to break the news to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

Herod knew enough of the Jews' religion to know that there was a prophecy somewhere in the bible that prophesied where the Christ would be born. He therefore gathered together the chief priests and the scribes to put the question to them. Their reply is immediate, as recorded in verses 5 and 6:

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,
6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

They mention Bethlehem of Judaea for apparently there was also a town called Bethlehem in Galilee. They are quoting the words of Micah 5:2 where Ephratah or Judah is mentioned. The king that Micah spoke about was totally different from the murderous scheming Herod. The word Governor has the sense of a leader while "rule" has the idea of to feed like a shepherd. God's king would be no tyrant like Herod but be the leader and shepherd of His people.

Thus Herod, now armed with some knowledge of the child's birth place seeks more information from the wise men. Verse 7 says:

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

The word "diligently" has the idea of "accurately". Herod wanted to know exactly when it was that the star had appeared in the east. Now if the wise men arrived just before the birth of the babe, this question might seem irrelevant but we will develop this thought later. Herod therefore sends the wise men to Bethlehem, with instructions to return and tell him where to find the child.

When the wise men set off towards Bethlehem to the south of Jerusalem, the star which they had seen in the east reappeared to them. It is evident that they had not followed the star from their own country to Israel. But now the star appears to them a second time. The star went before them until it stood over where the young child was. We read of their finding the child in verse 11:

11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

Notice that they did not enter the inn as recorded by Luke – they entered into the house. They saw the young child and His mother. This is the first of five occasions in Matthew

chapter 2 that we read this expression, "the young child and His mother". It is an expression contrary to nature for we hear normally of the "mother and child". It is contrary also to certain religious groups who have built their doctrine around the cult of "the Madonna and child". Even as a young child, the Lord takes precedence over Mary His mother. The Lord also takes precedence over His bride on the great nuptial day. In Revelation 19, we read, not of the marriage of the Bride, but of the marriage of the Lamb. It is of some significance that although the verse says that the wise men saw the young child with Mary His mother, they fell down and worshipped **Him** and they presented to **Him** their gifts.

Much has been said of the three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gold would speak of His deity. I suppose from a purely practical point of view, this gold would have sustained them during their stay in Egypt. But where was this gold when the couple came to Jerusalem in Luke's gospel? Luke tells us that when they brought the babe to Jerusalem, they offered two turtle doves for Mary's cleansing and not the lamb as stated in Leviticus chapter 12. Mary offered that which God was willing to receive from the poor of Israel.

Frankincense was added to all the meal offerings given to Jehovah. The frankincense was never to be lacking. The meal offering reminds us of the humanity of the Lord Jesus, and the added frankincense speaks of the fragrance of His life that ascended to God.

Le 2:2 And he shall bring it to Aaron's sons the priests: and he shall take thereout his handful of the flour thereof, and of the oil thereof, with all the frankincense thereof; and the priest shall burn the memorial of it upon the altar, to be an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD:

Myrrh had a sweet smell but was bitter to the taste. It would speak of the bitterness of the sufferings through which the Saviour had to go which nevertheless arose as a sweet incense to the nostrils of God.

Having offered their gifts, the wise men, being warned of God in a dream went home some other way and did not return to Herod. Joseph also has a dream. The angel of the Lord says to him:

Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. Joseph obeys and they go down into Egypt. The reason for the flight is obvious – to preserve the life of the young child. But Matthew alone tells us of the descent into Egypt and that it was in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, written by Hosea in chapter 11 of his prophecy:

14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt;

15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son

If we think now of the record given to us by Luke, we can see a major divergence with what is found in Matthew. According to Luke, they remained eight days in Bethlehem until the child was circumcised. When the babe was 40 days old, Mary and Joseph brought the babe to Jerusalem, where they met up with Simeon and Anna. From there, Luke tells us that they returned to Nazareth. The two accounts differ widely. In Matthew, after the departure of the wise men, the family goes not northwards to Nazareth but southwards to Egypt.

But scripture does not contradict itself so there must be some other explanation of this apparent difference. This is how I see the chronological order of events, according to the evidence in the gospels.

The birth of Christ The arrival of the shepherds The wise men see the star

After 8 days – the babe is circumcised

After 40 days, Mary & Joseph come to Jerusalem They return to Nazareth

After a year perhaps, the wise men arrive in Jerusalem

Herod enquires what time the star appeared

The wise men see the star again – it leads them to the house, not the inn.

Mary and Joseph descend into Egypt

Herod kills all the male children around Bethlehem of two years of age and under -

according to the time which he had accurately enquired of the wise men.

Mary & Joseph return after the death of Herod – they go to Nazareth

When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, it is more than likely that Mary and Joseph were then in Nazareth, according to Luke. So although they started off heading south to Bethlehem, they needed the star to redirect them northwards to Nazareth instead. There they entered the house and found not a baby, the word often used by Luke, but a young child, or an infant. This child might have been a year old by this time, and that is why Herod killed not just the new born babes in the region but all those from two years of age and under. He was looking for an infant, not a baby.

The Christmas cards which we receive every year, showing the shepherds standing beside the wise men, might look very pretty, but they are not based upon fact. But then men never allowed facts to get in the way of a good story, especially when the bible is involved.

We make just a few more comments before we leave this chapter. Why is it that only Matthew tells us of the flight into Egypt and therefore only Matthew quotes the verse from Hosea chapter 11? The exact words of the prophet were:

When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.

Hosea's words were initially written about the nation of Israel and their Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus proved God's love for His people. But it was a people that was soon to be marked by failure in the wilderness.

2 they sacrificed unto Baalim, and burned incense to graven images.

The nation soon gave itself over to idolatry. Following the exodus, the people came to the Red Sea. In I Corinthians chapter 10, Paul says they were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They made a commitment to follow Moses wherever he would lead them. In Matthew chapter 3, we read of the baptism of the Lord Jesus. After Israel crossed the Red Sea, God tried them for 40 years in the wilderness – and they failed. In Matthew chapter 4, the Lord is tempted for 40 days in the wilderness and emerges triumphant. In the gospel to the Jew, Matthew shows how the Lord retraced the footsteps of Israel and triumphed where they failed.

All of Herod's efforts to keep his throne were ill founded. The young child was in fact no threat to Herod at all but verse 19 tells us that within a very short time, Herod himself was dead. His son Archelaus did reign in his stead.

Just as an angel had warned Joseph to flee into Egypt, so an angel directed him to come back. He is still fearful on his return to Judaea, but being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into Nazareth. This in itself was no coincidence for verse 23 tells us:

23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

I cannot think of any one verse which speaks of this, but it is interesting that Matthew quotes, not one prophet, but the prophets. He is saying in effect, this is the summary of what the prophets had to say about Him, "He shall be called a Nazarene". He was to be known as Jesus of Nazareth. He was to be linked not with Jerusalem, or Bethlehem, but with one of the most despised towns in the despised region of Galilee. Nathaniel was surely right to pass the comment, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"