

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets  
in many portions and in many ways, in these last days  
has spoken to us in His Son...” (Heb. 1:1-2).

“...the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory”  
(John 1:14)”

No man has seen God at any time, the only begotten God,  
who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1:18).

We have now entered “a most wonderful time of the year;” we celebrate the season that made the Easter season, the true Passover and the First of the First Fruits, possible, the coming into space-time confinement, the miracles of the incarnation. Charles Wesley (1739) captured the thrill of it all in these lines, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate deity. Pleased as man with men to dwell. Jesus, our Emmanuel!”

I have chosen in this brief two-part series to focus two traditional birth narratives. The first concerns the story through the Joseph, the second that of Elizabeth and Mary.

### Dreams, Divine Confirmation, and Joseph (Matthew 1:18-2:23)

It is important to note that in this section of the birth of Jesus, the emphasis is on Joseph, not Mary, and divine guidance for him through dreams. The narrative is written from his viewpoint. Further, Matthew does not describe the birth of Jesus, that being a misnomer; he described the circumstances of His conception!

#### I. The First Dream: An Awkward Situation (Matt. 1:18-25)

##### A. The context, vv. 18-19

1. The horrifying situation, v. 18
2. The reasonable solution, v. 19

##### B. The message through the messenger, vv. 20-23

###### 1. The be, v. 20a-b

Joseph was informed that Mary had not been unfaithful to her marriage promise and there would be, therefore, no grounds for his planned marital dissolution.

There are several statements in the passage that point to Jesus’ miraculous conception. Mary, not Joseph, is the one “of whom” (a feminine pronoun, v. 16) Jesus was born; Joseph was his legal father, not his physical father. “Before they came together” (v. 18), “knew her not until” (v.25), and “from the Holy Spirit” (vv.

18, 20) clearly implies our Lord's virgin birth. Later, the couple would have several children together (12:46).

2. The reason, v. 20c

While certainly pregnant, the conception was a divine intervention.

3. The purpose of the pregnancy, v. 21

This 'son of David' (v. 20) would be given a son who will be the deliverer of his people. The 'clock' of the drama of redemption was about to take a giant forward step in its realization!

4. An editorial comment, vv. 22-23

Matthew states that the virginal conception of Mary was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah (7:14). Jesus is the promised one of the OT Scriptures; He is the fulfillment of prophecy, the long awaited one. The threat to the house of David, like that of Ahaz's day, will be met by an Immanuel figure. *(It is important to grasp how Matthew uses references to OT passages. His method is typological; that is, OT events are seen as shadows, pre-figures, or patterns that come to fulfillment in a later event. Such a way of reading the OT-fulfillment-in-the-NT does not require for him a strict literalism; sometimes Matthew uses an OT passage because of its theme.)* The context of the quotation from Isaiah is that the wicked king, Ahaz, sought solace from God through the prophet; an invasion was pending. To comfort the king and assure him of God's promise of deliverance, the Lord gave a reassuring sign. The Lord gave Ahaz assurance by indicating that before a woman could conceive and birth a child he would be delivered (7:14-15). The Hebrew term "almah" can mean a literal virgin, being used that way in the Hebrew Scriptures (Gen. 24:43) though the range of meaning can be broader. Matthew interprets the term narrowly. The point of the word has more to do with a time element than "sexual experience." Within the time frame of conception and birth, a deliverance is promised. In context, relief from the invasion of the Syrians. Matthew projected from the Ahaz-Syrian crisis to a greater deliverance through one born of a literal virgin who would truly be the 'Immanuel-figure,' Jesus.

5. The consequence, vv. 24-25

When Joseph awoke from the dream, he took Mary into his home, but did not consummate the union until after the child was born. By taking a pregnant woman into his house, people would judge him morally suspect; in a society dominated by the value of honor, he would be a communal object of shame. It could have brought into question his moral integrity, or at least had the potential of stirring the gossip mill. In conformity to the angelic instruction, Joseph named his son Jesus. It is important to note that Joseph named Mary's offspring (v. 25), making him the legal father, cementing his official status as an heir

II. The Second Dream: An Amazing Intervention (Matt. 2:1-12)

A. The visit of the wise men, vv. 1-12

If Jesus was from Nazareth, a non-Davidic and obscure village in the Galilee, how does he fulfill the prediction about Messiah's birthplace? It is from Bethlehem that he would come. There is a Bethlehem in the Galilee (Josh. 19:15) so Matthew is careful in designating the birthplace as 'Bethlehem of Judea' (v. 1).

1. The arrival of the wise men to Jerusalem, vv. 1-2

a. The context, v. 1

It is important to note that the arrival of the wise men was 'after' (v. 1) the birth of the child; the town was less crowded, and Mary and Joseph were residing in a home (v. 11). Since Herod destroyed the children in the environs of Bethlehem less than two years of age, it is reasonable to say that Jesus was at least several months old, perhaps over a year (v. 16), at the time of the magi-visit.

The wise men were probably Gentile astrologers/astronomers from Babylon or Persia (this is based on the length of travel-time to Jerusalem) who believed the Scriptures. Possessing a knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, they may have understood the appearance of the star to be a fulfillment of the Balaam oracle. Instead of cursing the nation, he blessed (Num. 24:2) saying, "A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall arise from Israel" (24:17). Perhaps a clue to the celestial phenomena can be found in Stephen's epic message ("The glory of God appeared to our father Abraham and said..." [7:2]). Could it have been the visible presence of God, the shekinah glory?

There has been considerable discussion about the star phenomena. It was a unique, divinely directed luminary in the sky. It appeared as the wise men left Jerusalem and stopped over a dwelling (v. 9). It simply was not an ordinary light in the sky! Could it have been the glory of God appearing in the sky, a bright light, a divine celestial appearance, as Abraham experienced according to Stephen (Acts 7:2). Thus, 'his star' (v. 2) may have been a stellar manifestation of God's glory (because its actions are unique [v. 9]). Compare Acts 7:2-3.

b. The question, v. 2a

The child born in obscurity, not the royal capitol, is recognized as the "King of the Jews;" the readers of the gospel should know that the one born under suspicion of illegitimacy is, indeed, a legitimate Davidic son! Note also that the magi say, "Where is he who has been born king," not "born to be king." Jesus was king upon his coming! Additionally, they offer another designation for Jesus, 'King of the Jews.'

c. The evidence, v. 2b

d. The reason, v. 2c

2. The reaction of Herod in Jerusalem, vv. 3-8

a. The consternation, v. 3

Threats to Herod's hegemony over the region are well recorded. Herod (37-4 BC), a client ruler under the authority of Rome, was an Idumean (his mother was Arabian), who married into the Hasmonean dynasty and ruled Judea from 37 BC. He was more interested in his own throne than his own soul. His response reveals that his attachment to the Jewish faith was superficial; instead of rejoicing in the advent of the promised one, he responded in fear and retribution.

b. The request, v. 4

The religious leadership of the nation was alarmed and apathetic. They knew the scriptures intellectually without any interest in investigating such a startling claim. Formal knowledge is not heart affection.

- c. The answer, vv. 5-6  
In quoting Micah 5:2, Matthew makes it clear that the ruler will fulfill the promises to David. The king will be a shepherd to his people (II Sam. 5:2)!
- d. The question, v. 7
- e. The instructions, v. 8
- 3. The journey of the wise men to Bethlehem, vv. 9-11
  - a. The guiding star, vv. 9-10
  - b. The worship, v. 11  
Further, the visit came after the actual birth of Jesus because the text indicates that they were residing in a home in Bethlehem. The numerous visitors that had come to comply with the mandated registration had certainly returned to their homes (Luke 2:1-7), leaving better options for the accommodation of a new-born and a recovering mother.

The gifts they brought would likely have financed the flight to Egypt (v. 11). They tell us much about their perception of the baby. Gold speaks of His royalty; frankincense of His priestly role; and myrrh (perfume for embalming the dead) of His death. In these gifts we see who He is, what He came to do, and the cost He paid! There is, perhaps, an allusion here of the visit of the Queen of Sheba (I Kings 10:1-10) to a son of David, Solomon, bringing gold in great quantities and spices.

- 4. The return of the magi, v. 12  
Through a dream the magi are warned not to return to Herod and, as in each of the five dream revelations, they followed the instructions.

### III. The Third Dream: A Striking Revelation (Matt. 2:13-18)

#### A. The escape to Egypt, vv. 13-15

- 1. The dream, v. 13  
God took sovereign action to preserve His Son through a dream, the third in these two chapters and second in which direction comes by an angel. Egypt was a well-ordered Roman colony outside the jurisdiction of Herod. There were about a million Jews in Egypt according to Josephus at that time.
- 2. The obedience, v. 14a
- 3. The significance, vv. 14b-15

The quotation from Hosea 11:1 contextually (v. 15) is about Israel's return from Egypt in the Exodus. Jesus' return fills this text with deeper meaning in that He is the "true Israel" figure. Jesus is here seen as the "new Moses" who would also deliver his people! Moses delivered the nation from bondage, but he failed in the wilderness and could not lead the people into the Promised Land. The "new Moses" will experience the "wilderness," rise above temptation and solicitation, and lead his people to the "Promised Land;" he will not fail! In the case of both cases, powerful monarchs failed in their plots to kill them. Both founded nations, Moses in

the Exodus and Jesus in the “New Exodus.” As Hosea tells us, God’s great love for His people was at the root of the first exodus, so much so the coming of Jesus from Egypt as the “new Moses-figure.”

The way New Testament writers, such as Matthew, employ OT passages is quite important to grasp. Sometimes the words quoted apply literally to Jesus and are fulfilled in him. In this case, Matthew took a concept from a verse, the motif of deliverance, and applies it to Jesus. Jesus fulfilled the role of Moses in that he was called from Egypt to affect a great deliverance (Matthew’s method is typological, the recognition of parallels between OT themes and Jesus).

4. The treachery of Herod, vv. 16-18

a. The destruction, v. 16

Since the age limit on the killings was two years, Herod must have gleaned information from the wise men and probably extended the time to be sure Jesus was included. Thus, we have a clue that Jesus was born about 6/5 BC; Herod died in 4 BC. That Herod would be evil enough to exterminate the children in the environs of Bethlehem is well attested in the works of Josephus. Upon marriage into the Hasmonean dynasty, he murdered all his Hasmonean rivals for the throne, including his brother-in-law, mother-in-law, and his favorite wife, Mariamne. Those were only a few examples of his murderous plotting.

b. The significance, vv. 17-18

There is a question in the quotation of Jeremiah 31:15 since Rachel weeps for the exiles from Ramah, the location of the deportation, in the time of the Babylonian exile, which was not an event in Bethlehem. Rachel is symbolically seen as the mother of the nation; weeping is the universal language of grief. Prophecy has many fulfillments, but one ultimate fulfillment when time shall be no more. In the Jeremiah passage, Rachel is comforted with a promise of the restoration of her children; the child born of Mary fulfilled it. Matthew is saying that a new deliverer, a “New Moses,” who will affect the deliverance of his people, weeping will end. With the advent of Jesus, a new era dawned, the blight of captivity and deportation was gloriously resolved. Jeremiah 31 is a chapter of hope expressing the promise of the return of the Babylonian exiles, except for v. 15. The point is that there is hope beyond immediate tragedy.

Also, as mothers shed tears at the Babylonian deportation and God promised a return of the captives, there is hope for the Bethlehem mothers because Messiah escaped and would inaugurate His kingly reign in His ministry, most fully at the end of times.

IV. The Fourth Dream: An Instruction to Return (Matt. 2:19-21)

A. The context, v. 19a

B. The instruction, vv. 19b-21

In a fourth dream, Joseph is informed that the child’s nemesis was no longer a threat

and that he should take his child and wife back to Israel. The location of return was not specified in the dream, but circumstances proved determinative.

V. The Fifth Dream: A Specific Determination (2:22-23)

A. The fear, v. 22a

Joseph must have expected Herod Antipas, one of Herod's sons, to rule in Judea, but Herod had changed his will. Archelaus, who was as horrible as his father, ruled in Judea until 6 A.D. when he was deposed and a series of Roman-appointed procurators replaced him, such as Pilate (26-36 AD), in succession for several decades.

B. The dream and compliance, vv. 22b-23a

Warned through a fifth dream, which seems to have validated his fear of Herod's son, Archelaus, Joseph brought his wife and son to his former city, Nazareth.

C) The significance, v. 23b

Nazareth is not mentioned in the OT, Josephus, the Talmud, or the Jewish Midrash. The village was a small (less than 480 people), unimportant place; Matthew seemingly is focusing on the general thrust of the OT that Christ would come from obscurity and contempt (Isa. 53:3). If so, the citation contains the gist of several passages or a collective reflection; it is not a direct quotation. A clue may be found in that Matthew speaks of the source of the citing as 'the prophets' (a plural term). Also, he introduces the quotation with the words 'so that,' not "said," the only such occurrence in quotations in the gospel. As such, the quotation is a collective allusion to the teachings of the prophets as to the origins of Jesus. The point is that the promised one would come from obscurity.

The recent commentator, R.T. France, suggests an interesting perspective on the phrase, "he would be called a Nazarene." To claim to be from such an obscure village as Nazareth would be to invite ridicule and disdain. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" said Philip (John 1:46). Perhaps He was called a Nazarene because He too would experience rejection and disdain. In this line of thinking, "Nazarene" would be used as a slang-word for a country bumpkin or backwoodsman, a slanderous connotation.

Others have argued that "Nazarene" is not so much a geographic location (a resident of Nazareth). Though this seems a stretch, one might argue for multiple and simultaneous nuances as a description of a predicted person. There are two options in this line of thought. It may be an allusion to Isaiah 11:1 where the Messiah is called 'a shoot (or branch, *netser*) will spring from the stem of Jesse'. It could also be the English rendering of the Hebrew noun *Nazir* meaning one dedicated to God. The former would emphasize his obscure origins, the later his moral character.

It is interesting that this chapter places Jesus, the New Israel, the "true Moses" the "true Joshua" on the same path as the experience of the ancient people of God. Like Abraham and Joseph, Jesus went from the land of promise into Egypt. As the "New Moses," He was called out of Egypt to lead his people. As Matthew 1 presented an advance, a new chapter, in redemptive history in the one who would make all things

new, this chapter calls forth for a new deliverer, a new Moses, having come out of Egypt.

Applications:

1. Joseph is a case study of a faithful man who acted righteously in a most troubling situation (1:19). The character qualities of a person are not as often revealed in good times but in distressful ones. Can you image the pain of hearing that your mate has been unfaithful? What do you reveal about yourself in hard times? What steps are you taking to ameliorate the worst of it?
2. An unmistakable assumption in the Holy Scriptures is that there is a world of reality far more magnificent, enduring, and beautiful than the one that surrounds us. The sum of what we can see and understand is far less than what truly exists. To access that world of infinite glory and peace, someone from that world must come to reveal it to us. Simply put, finite cannot approach infinitude, but infinitude has come into the realm of finitude. Infinitude came in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and to us in the person of the Spirit of God. Finitude, however great, is not infinite and the greater world can only be ours through one who came into our world so that we could enter it. Our greatest need is no help to find our way but one to be our way, and one alone is our divine substitute, Jesus!
3. The magi are a striking example of faith, a profound contrast to others in this chapter. They came to a place they did not know and worshiped when they met Jesus. They possessed a paucity of information and great faith. It is not the strength of faith that is as important as the object of faith. How does this insight bring you comfort?
4. Jesus remains the great divider of men and women. There are three responses to him in this chapter: apathy with knowledge, fear with deception, and worship with gifts. Those responses are still with us when it comes to Him. Most are uninterested, others are aroused to hatred and fear, and still others recognize His worth. Where are you among these responses?
5. God protects his people from the tyrants of this world with His promises, his unexpected provisions, and his providential leadings. We are safe in the protective will of God even if the mightiest monarch should threaten us. Has this not been true in your experiences in life?
6. We should never think that an obscure life is an unimportant life. Jesus' years of public ministry were only three, yet He was on the earth some forty years. He was born in an obscure village and raised in a despised town, yet he is the greatest of the living. Small beginnings are no indication of small endings.
7. Matthew's message in this chapter is that Jesus is what Israel should have been but failed to be. Spiritually, Jesus is "true Israel." He replicated the nation's experience without the nation's failure. He is the promise to that nation, and us, fulfilled. Do not miss who Jesus really is in the middle of so many events, stories, and reactions.
8. Matthew changed the way that the Hebrew Scriptures should be read. He believed that Jesus was the topic of the OT. He sees Jesus; his contemporaries (and many today) do not. Perhaps this tells us that we should look more carefully for Jesus in the Old Testament and expect to see Him more often. Do you read the OT looking for Jesus?

