THE MAGI

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi came from the east to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."
Matthew 2:1-2

Encapsulated in these two verses we have three character-representatives:
Magi – from the east coming with hearts of worship,
Herod – the king and his administrators coming with hearts of rejection,
Baby Jesus – representing both Immanuel and the ideal or true Israel.

What Matthew will continue to show us is that when it concerns the Christ, *outsiders* are coming to seek him while *insiders* seek to disregard or destroy him.

Quite conspicuously in his Gospel, Matthew continuously reveals the arrival of Jesus as the 2nd Exodus, and Jesus himself as the one like Moses.

The *magi* are an example of this. Jesus is True Israel. In the Exodus story, the birth of the nation of Israel at the Passover in Egypt and their subsequent trek through the wilderness is met with a man from the region of Syria bordering the Euphrates named Balaam.

In Matthew's Gospel, the birth of True Israel, Jesus, is met with *magi* from the Mesopotamian region who come to worship him. The reference to Balaam's *"open eyes"* is obvious.

The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered.
Numbers 24:3-4

Balak is the wicked king of Moab who desires to destroy Moses and Israel; Balaam is a Gentile magician, a *magi* from the east who blesses Israel which frustrates Balak's plans.

Balaam also refers to a rising star out of Jacob which is to rule over many nations and possess a kingdom that will increase.

I see him, but not now, I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.
Numbers 24:17

Note the elements of this Old Testament Exodus story within the narrative of Matthew.
The wicked and threatened king – Balak – Herod.
The strange magician from the east who recognize God's presence –

Balaam – magi. *Prophecies concerning a coming king with "star" symbolism.*

Matthew also relates to us the dreams of Joseph of Nazareth which might suggest that he is alluding to the dreams of Joseph the son of Jacob in the Genesis account. Joseph ben Israel is the pinion that connects the story of God's promises to the patriarchs with the Exodus.

The focus of the Numbers blessing however is on the King who *will* rise and reign and this is exactly what Matthew would draw our attention to. What the *magi* are going to behold is *Immanu -el* now become *Immanu-adam, "God with us."*

In chapter two, Matthew's stress on geographic locations in the narrative calls our attention to the names of places. He also stresses with those place names within the story, the *acceptance* or the *rejection* of the born Messiah. The geographic locations are as follows:

Bethlehem, v.6 from Micah 5:1, 3.

Egypt, v.13-15 from Hosea 11:1.

Rama, vv.16-18, from Jeremiah 31:15.

Nazareth, vv.22-23, from Isaiah 11:1 – There shall come forth a shoot – "nay-tser" – from the stump of Jesse.

As seen above, the Hebrew word for *branch* or *shoot* is *"naytser or nayzer."* The Hebrew word for *"Nazarene"* relates to shoot or branch which is a Messianic title.

Matthew gives four Old Testament locations. Three of them, *Bethlehem, Nazareth*, and *Egypt* have direct connections to the nation of Israel prefiguring *"types"* of the Messiah.

Bethlehem – where Rachael died giving birth to Benjamin – "the son of my right hand" (Psalm 110:1) and where Micah revealed the Messiah would be born near the "Tower of the flock."

Egypt – the place where Joseph became the Messianic "Bread of Life" saving the world, and where God called his son out from in Hosea 11:1.

Nazareth – the town whose name means "branch" which refers to a Messianic title.

Rama – though there isn't a direct connection to the Person of the Messiah here, his Messianic Purpose is on display as Jeremiah foretells of Rachael weeping as her children are stationed here before being exiled to Babylon: they are no more. The Messiah will "restore" the fortunes of her children and reunite them.

Matthew is revealing a pattern to the reader in the order of the place names above:

Bethlehem is where the Messiah is born.

Egypt is where the Messiah must go to call out a people in exile for the 2nd Exodus.

Nazareth is where the Messiah will grow as the shoot from Jesse.

Rama is symbolic as the place of his purpose in restoring exiled humanity.

All of these places as *"locations and types"* recall a history of sorrow.

Bethlehem – death and grief.

Egypt – bondage.

Nazareth – displacement and curses.

Rama – the grief over destruction and exile.

Matthew's patterns are evident in the action of the *magi* within the narrative.

They worshipped, They offered, They departed, Having fallen to the ground. Having opened treasures. Having been warned.

By this formula Matthew brings to completion the mission of the *magi.*

> *Though we are early in Matthew's Gospel narrative, one must understand that he is telling the story in a calculated way so that the readers can grasp the fuller theological significance of Jesus as well as expect the themes in these early chapters to be repeated throughout the narrative.*

> *Now after <u>Jesus was born</u> – γένεσις - <u>in Bethlehem of Judea</u> in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi came from the east to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*
> *Matthew 2:1-2*

Matthew 1:1, 1:16, 1:18, and now in 2:1 all have Matthew bringing us back to that concept of Jesus as the New Creation, the *γένεσις*¸ the birth of Jesus, taking place in *Bethlehem of Judea,* setting the stage for the prophecy of Malachi.

> *The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go. <u>I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite</u>, for <u>I have provided for myself a king</u> among his sons." And Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward.*
> *1 Samuel 16:1, 13*

Note that Matthew gives us an historic marker here by telling us that Jesus was born in the days when Herod the Great was king. Herod died in 4BC so the birth of Jesus must have been before that date.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi came from the east to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?"

Matthew contrasts two kings here. Ironically, the *magi,* though talking to King Herod, seem to ignore his title, seeking instead, the *"king of the Jews."*

What is important to Matthew's Gospel is that those considered *alien* to God's purposes, show a tendency of *openness* to God's purposes. Here it is the Mesopotamian magicians who seek the newborn king of Israel.

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him. When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from the east and the west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 8:5, 10-11

Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit.
Matthew 21:43

Worthy of note in Matthew's Gospel is that the *magi* are clearly not familiar with the Micah passage. They go to Jerusalem, assuming the capital city is where the newborn king would be. They do not go there to see Herod but are summoned by him.

"Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?"

The only other occurrences of this phrase *"king of the Jews"* is in the passion narrative. There it is used in a mocking manner and always by Gentiles.

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"
Matthew 27:11

and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"
Matthew 27:29

And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."
Matthew 27:37

Note how Herod rephrases the *magi's* question to his Scripture experts:

"Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?"

and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, Herod inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.
Matthew 2:4

Herod's question contains political overtones, revealing the Jewish expectation of the Messiah.

"For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

The *star* has implications in Matthew's narrative and for the *magi.* Many theories abound about this star: Jupiter and Saturn in conjunction with Virgo or Leo or Pisces; an exploding supernova, and so on. What's important is that regardless of the phenomenon, these magi-astrologers perceived the sign to be the fulfillment of the Jewish eschatological expectation concerning the coming king.

Ironically in this context, Jesus is referred to as the rising star.

Because of the tender mercy or out God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high.
Luke 1:78

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you would do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star lights in your heart.
2 Peter 1:19

I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.
Revelation 22:16

the people who dwell in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region of shadow and death, on them a great light has dawned.
Matthew 4:16

The *magi* may have followed the natural (or supernatural) phenomenon of the star to Jerusalem, but it took the word of God (written and spoken) to direct them to Jesus Christ.

The star got them to Jerusalem: only Scripture can bring them to Bethlehem.

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;
Matthew 2:3

Once again, we see Matthew repeating the word *"King"* thus stressing Herod's fear in the *magi's* seeking of the King of the Jews. Matthew is setting up the battle of the kings of this world against the Christ: the rejection of Jesus by Jerusalem.

The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
"Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."
Psalm 2:2-3

and assembling the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.
Matthew 2:4

If the coming Christ – the Messiah – is indeed, the eschatological and final king, then Herod as well as *all of Jerusalem (v.3) would be troubled*. Their way of life would be coming to an end.

Therefore, this reaction is understandable. There is, however, no reason to think that anyone assembled here save Herod, has sinister intentions. These are the people he would gather to inquire of in this matter. They certainly make up the important part of the Sanhedrin.

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah: for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."
Matthew 2:5-6

The quote comes from Micah 5:2 below.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth <u>for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days</u>.
Micah 5:2

Matthew desires his readers to understand that the Messiah born in Bethlehem is indeed, as the above passage says, from God; born in Bethlehem and therefore can lay claim to all that being born that in place entails; that he will be ruler in Israel, and that he is preexistent.

Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"
John 7:41-42

Since Jesus was known to come from and was even called *"Jesus of Nazareth,"* Matthew most likely presses the birth in Bethlehem and the subsequent story to validate the Son of David claim and to let readers know how Jesus came to live in Galilee.

Herod didn't realize it, but his advisors just shared an important piece of the gospel message with him, but he did not heed it. Herod had the embodied *"living Gospel"* only miles away but did not lift himself to go the five or so miles to validate the words of the prophet.

Micah says that:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little . . .

Matthew altars the text to where it doesn't match either the LXX or the Masoretic Text.

And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least . . .

This is most likely due to Matthew's writing his account AFTER the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and not before like Micah. Micah's words have now been fulfilled and Matthew's wording seems to confirm this.

Common to rabbis, Matthew takes Micah 5:4 and applies it the quote made by Herod's advisors in order to connect the newborn Messiah to the ministry of David as a shepherd.

In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, "You shall be shepherd over my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel."
2 Samuel 5:2

Matthew wants his readers to know that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecy and that he, therefore, is the rightful King to rule Israel.

He is also letting them know that something far greater, far more cosmic and eschatological has happened in the small town of Bethlehem. Gentiles are open to receive this King. The Jews are closed, having neither eyes to see or ears to hear the Scriptures.

The door to the Kingdom has been thrown open. Heaven has come to earth and the Kingdom of God is at hand.

All humanity has a choice to make:

Reception or rejection of the King.

Bow the knee or have the back bent.

Yield to the Authority of the Creator or enjoy the temporal exhilaration of self-governance.

Matthew's Gospel sets all of this before us and more. God is with us. The question is which of us will go and seek the one is born *"King of the Jews"?*