

The Gospel of Matthew is the retelling of the story of Jesus attributed to the disciple named Matthew. This account of Jesus' life insists in particular on hebraic culture and literature, leading scholars to believe that it was addressed specifically to a Jewish audience (quite possibly in ancient Syria). The story of the birth of Jesus is only told in two of the gospels (Matthew and Luke). Here the story starts with this genealogy rooted in the Hebraic people and their history, before expanding to include the Gentiles (or foreign peoples) represented by the Magi who come bearing gifts for the child who will be a light to the nations. Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus starts in the center of the Jewish homeland and finishes with Jesus sending all disciples to the four corners of the earth in the teaching we call "The Great Commission" (Matthew 28). This movement from one nation to all nations, from the center to the margins, from one history to all of history, characterizes the whole of Matthew's gospel project.

KING HEROD: Herod the Great (37BCE-4CE) was a tyrant that sought to rally the people to his side through largesse and populist gifts. He was not Jewish, from a Idumean family made into vassal kings of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40. He was one of six Herods that ruled. He is different than Herod Anitpas who dealt with Jesus at his execution. The spiritual and religious elites didn't consider him legitimate. He reconstructed the temple, as well as many amphitheatres and public space to win the heart of the people through "bribery". A true narcissist, haunted by his insecurity, he ended up killing his wife and children to preserve his rule. Upon his death, his kingdom was divided and made wholly subservient to the Roman Empire.

Bethlehem: this was a marginal, unimportant city. Historically it was the place where David was crowned king by Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:13. But it was a "nowhere" town, in comparison in relationship to **JERUSALEM** – the capital city of the royalty, and the religious, intellectual, and military elites.

Messiah: in Greek it's the word Christos from which we get "Christ." It means the anointed one: a king. Here the child king is contrasted with the adult king, who ironically acts like a child.

wise men (or Magi): Contrary to the popular Christmas song, these people were not "kings." The term originally was used for members of the Persian priestly class serving the ruler. In the Greek New Testament (Acts 13:6) the (singular) term for magi is translated as "magician." The term was often used in antiquity as a pejorative for those who did mysterious acts, such as interpreting dreams or deducing meanings from the stars. (Herodotus, Cicero). Their perspective was at times sought by powerful rulers (see Daniel 2:2-10 the only use of the word "magi" in the Greek version of the OT) yet they could also threaten royal power with their visions or words. Many ancient writers thought they were frauds and charlatans. What is curious here is that they alone take the vision of the star, and the interpretation of the scriptures by the scholars seriously. They alone know to come, find the child, and worship out of respect.

FRIGHTENED: this same verb is used in Daniel 5:9 as King Belshazzar response to the writing on the wall which condemns his rule.

January 6, 2019

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-23

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ An In the time of **KING HEROD**, after Jesus was born in **Bethlehem** of Judea, **wise men** from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was **FRIGHTENED**, and all **JERUSALEM** with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the **Messiah** was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ *'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'*"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the **wise men** and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the **HOUSE**, they

saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in *Ramah*,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.²² But when he heard that **Archelaus** was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.²³ There he made his home in a town called **Nazareth**, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a **Nazorean**.”

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What shimmers in your attention in this reading?
- The story contains contrasts of the center and the margins, the insiders and the outsiders, of the elites and the overlooked folks. What is that saying about how God moves in the world?
- Much of this story is around contrasts of power, kingship, wisdom and insight. It deals with immigration, refuge, power and powerlessness. How do you hear the Spirit of God inviting you to act, speak, be, or live relationally today through the word of this scripture?

HOUSE: The text seems to imply here and in v.22 that Joseph has a house in Bethlehem. Throughout Matthew’s gospel numerous important things happen in **HOUSES:** see 8:14; 9:10, 23, 29; 17:25; 26:6.

Archelaus : the son of Herod the Great. He ruled over Judea and Samaria for 10 years (4BCE - 6CE) after which he was deposed for being unusually cruel and tyrannical. Judea then became a Roman province, directly ruled by the Emperor through his prefects.

Quotes from the Prophets: Throughout the narrative Matthew makes a point of tying the developing story back to historic prophecy, to give Jesus legitimacy as the promised Messiah:

Verse 6 is a quote from Micah 5:2 & 2 Samuel 5:2.

Verse 15 is a quote from Hosea 11:1

Verse 18 is a quote from Jeremiah 31:15.

Ramah: also one of the main staging places from which the Israelites were sent to exile in Babylon: a historic place of great mourning and relational loss. Jeremiah 40:1.

Rachel: was one of Jacob’s two wives. Known for her infertility before finally giving birth to Benjamin and Joseph. She seems to represent all Jewish mothers here.

Nazorean : The word seems to be a pun for it can mean “a person from the village of Nazareth” and also the title “Nazarene” which denotes someone who has made a holy vow to serve God (such as Samson did), and also is a derivative of the Hebrew word (Nazara) from ne-tser, נָצַר, meaning branch (this is linked to Isaiah 11:1 which reads “There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots” – identifying Jesus as the Messiah promised to King David long ago.)