

God With Us¹ (Matthew 1:18 – 2:23)

The birth of Jesus is generally told during Christmas holidays which many folks commemorate as the birthday anniversary of Christ. Apart from that season, the birth of Jesus is seldom discussed. However, the annual celebration of Jesus' birth is altogether unrelated to why Matthew and Luke give their stories about the birth of Jesus. The concept of Christmas did not even enter into their minds. The celebration of Christmas did not originate until the church began to go into apostasy several centuries after Jesus was born. Today, in our increasingly secular world, there is a growing sentiment that Christmas should be totally secularized. That debate is beside the point, however, because it does not consider the teaching of scripture.

Insofar as the birth of Jesus is concerned, there is absolutely no way the stories surrounding his birth can be secularized. The actual story of Jesus' birth is told only by Luke. Matthew gives two stories surrounding Jesus' birth - one before and one afterward. All these stories are filled with the Divine presence. Matthew cites no less than five occasions when an angel appeared in a dream with a message or a warning. In these two stories Matthew also cites no less than five prophecies which are fulfilled by the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. In addition, the birth of Jesus is recognized as miraculous because he was born of a virgin. And then there's that special star which was seen by wise men in the East and which guided them to the place where the Christ child was. There's no escaping the Divine presence in these stories.

The question might well be asked, 'Just what is Matthew telling us by these two stories and by the particular prophecies he mentions?' First, let's be sure we understand the stories, then we'll look at some of their details more closely.

The first story is about how God persuaded a righteous man to act justly in order to bring Christ into the world. Joseph had thought his espoused wife, Mary, was with child and that the child was not his. He therefore concluded she had been unfaithful and immoral. Hence, he could not take her for his wife. Rather than deal harshly with her, however, he wanted simply to turn her away quietly. As he thought about it an angel appeared to him in a dream and informed him that the child conceived in Mary was "of the Holy Spirit." Moreover, he was told that Mary would have a son and that his name should be "Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Finally, he was told that this event was in fulfillment of prophecy. Joseph did as he was commanded, but did not know his wife physically as a husband "till she had brought forth her firstborn Son."

The second story is about how God guided wise men from the East to the newborn Christ child that they might worship him, and how Joseph and his family escaped the threat of destruction by Herod, the ruler over the Jews. When the wise men inquired of Herod where he was who was just born "King of the Jews," Herod did not know. He wanted to know, however because, in spite of the fact that he said he wanted to worship the child, he really wanted to have him killed to remove any threat to his own kingdom. Herod therefore inquired of chief priests and scribes where the Christ child was to be born. When they revealed the prophetic location to him, he informed the

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wise men that it was in the region of Bethlehem, and sent the wise men there to find the child, with the commission that they return to inform him of the exact location. The wise men came to worship the Christ child, and then gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

When an angel of the Lord warned the wise men to return to their homeland another way, Herod realized he knew not the exact location of the Christ child, and therefore had all the male children who were two years old and under in the region of Bethlehem killed. This, too, was in fulfillment of prophecy. After the departure of the wise men, an angel of Lord warned Joseph to flee to Egypt for the life of the newborn child was in danger. They remained in Egypt until Herod died, then they returned, in fulfillment of prophecy, but being warned again by an angel not to stay in Judah, they returned to Nazareth, also in fulfillment of prophecy.

Now, lets go back to that question, ‘Just what is Matthew telling us in these two stories by the particular prophecies and miracles he mentions?’ Why does Matthew tell us these stories, and not some others? More particularly, what would the telling of these events have meant to Matthew’s first readers? If we can answer these questions satisfactorily, then perhaps we, too, will have a better understanding of what Matthew wanted his readers to understand.

In order to understand the conditions of the people to whom Matthew wrote, it may be helpful to know when Matthew wrote his gospel. While no one can pinpoint precisely the time, most scholars would agree that the Gospel of Matthew was written before the Roman destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 A. D. Being the first Gospel recorded in the New Testament canon, some scholars think Matthew’s gospel may have been the first of the Gospels to have been written, although that evidence is contestable. Some have dated Matthew’s gospel as early as 42 A. D., although most would date it later. In any case, Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience during a time when the Jewish community was oppressed by the Roman government. That fact has a bearing on what Matthew wrote.

More precisely, the prophecies quoted by Matthew would have had significant influence upon his Jewish audience. These prophecies can best be comprehended when first understood in their original settings and after that as they are used by Matthew in his time for his audience. After we understand the original setting of these prophecies and also the setting in which Matthew tells them to his first readers, then we’ll be in a better position to appreciate what Matthew’s message means for us today.

The first prophecy mentioned by Matthew occurs after the angel has appeared to Joseph and informed him of the Son to be born to Mary. It is a quotation from Isaiah 7:14 regarding the virgin birth of Jesus. Now the most significant thing about this prophecy, in both its original setting and in Matthew’s quotation of it, is *not* that Jesus would be born of a virgin - however important a fact that may be.

In Isaiah’s time, the important message is the promise that God will be with the house of David. The setting is that of Jerusalem and the Judean king being besieged by Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel. Although those kings want to destroy Jerusalem, the message from God is that “it shall not come to pass” (Isaiah 7:7). However, Ahaz, the king of Jerusalem, is told that he must believe and that “if you will not believe, surely you shall not be established” (Isaiah 7:9). It

is in this context that Isaiah invites Ahaz to ask for a sign. When Ahaz refuses, Isaiah gives him one anyway, saying

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings.”

Thus, in Isaiah’s time, the most significant idea about this passage is the meaning of the name of the child to be born. That name is Immanuel and it means that God is with us. The virgin birth is merely a sign pointing to the truth that God is with us. For King Ahaz, it meant that God is with us in preserving us from the kings of Syria and Ephraim.

In Matthew’s time, the real significance of this prophecy also lies in the name of the child to be born. In the dream, the angel had specifically said “you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Then Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, and after declaring that “the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son,” the passage says, “and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us” (Matthew 1:22). The name Jesus means, “Jehovah is Salvation” while Immanuel means “God with us.” Like Isaiah, Matthew’s emphasis is that “God is Salvation” and that “God is with us.” The miraculous virgin birth of Jesus to Mary is merely a sign attesting to the truth of that fact.

The second prophecy mentioned by Matthew related to the village where the Christ child was to be born. The prophecy came from Micah who prophesied in the countryside of Judah preceding and following the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. That was a time when the territory of Judah was also ravaged by their Assyrian enemies, although the city of Jerusalem itself was not taken. In such a difficult situation, the Judeans would desire a ruler to come among them to deliver them from their oppressors. From where might their deliverer come? From the strongholds of Jerusalem, or from some other mighty place? No! Their ruler would come from the obscure and insignificant village of Bethlehem. “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2).

That this prophecy referred to the Christ child was generally realized among the chief priests and scribes when Jesus was born. That’s why they could tell Herod the name of the city where the child would be born. However, the significant thing for Matthew seems not to be the location of his birth so much as the nature of his person. The emphasis seems to be upon the fact that “out of you shall come a *Ruler* who will shepherd my people” (Matthew 2:6). The wise men had come, knowing of his significance. They called the newborn child “King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Herod also realized his significance, felt his own kingdom threatened by the birth of the child, and therefore wanted to identify his location in order that he might have him killed.

When Matthew cited this prophecy shortly after citing that of the virgin birth, he would be saying to his Jewish audience who were oppressed by Roman domination that God is with us. God is bringing our salvation by the birth of the Christ child. Though we are oppressed, as were God’s people in the days when Micah prophesied, yet in the birth of Jesus, God has given us the promised ruler who will be our shepherd.

The third prophecy came after the wise men had departed from their worship of the Christ child. Joseph was warned in a dream that “Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him” (Matthew 2:13). The family therefore left for Egypt, as instructed by the angel, and remained there “until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, “Out of Egypt I called My Son” (Matthew 2:15).

The original prophecy as stated by Hosea is “When Israel was a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son” (Hosea 11:1). In its original context, Hosea the prophet recognized the evil ways of Israel because they left God and worshipped foreign idolatry. Still, God remembered when Israel was in its youth and desired that it come back to him. In its youth, Israel had been in Egyptian captivity, and God had preserved it, and brought it out of its oppression.

When Matthew applies this passage to Christ, is he not saying that just as God preserved and protected Israel and brought Israel out of Egypt, so also God preserved and protected the Christ child and his family from Herod’s fury, and brought them safely back to Israel from Egypt to which they had fled? And would he not also by that be suggesting to his Jewish readers that since God is with us, since God is our salvation, since God has given us Jesus as our ruler to shepherd us, and since God is our protector and preserver in times of oppression, will he not guide us during these times of Roman oppression, during these days of sin and sorrow?

Matthew’s fourth citation of prophecy is stated as the result of Herod’s failed attempt to learn the whereabouts of the newborn Jesus. He therefore “put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under” (Matthew 2:16). Matthew says this was a fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy, “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (Matthew 2:17).

When he prophesied about Israel’s future return from Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah described the blessings of God upon the people and the expressions of their happiness.² Not everyone, however, was happy.

There was a small segment of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi who had remained in the environs of Judah, especially in the area where Solomon’s temple once stood, and they were sorrowfully and mournfully weeping. They reflected quite vividly on the good years of the past – in short, they mourned for such a time, but they thought of their future as being hopeless. Their grieving and weeping were analogous to the pain and weeping that Rachel, of past history, had experienced while giving birth to Benjamin, and dying at the same time (Gen. 35:18-19). Rachel died while weeping for herself and the child which she was birthing but the prophet Jeremiah’s purpose was to encourage his people to refrain from fear and weeping for, as Rachel successfully gave birth to a

²“For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, And ransomed him from the hand of one stronger than he. Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, Streaming to the goodness of the LORD; For wheat and new wine and oil, For the young of the flock and the herd; Their souls shall be like a well-watered garden, And they shall sorrow no more at all. Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, And the young men and the old, together; For I will turn their mourning to joy, Will comfort them, And make them rejoice rather than sorrow. I will satiate the soul of the priests with abundance, And My people shall be satisfied with My goodness, says the LORD.” *Jeremiah 31:11-14.*

son while dying, so Judah [Bethlehem of Judea] would be the birthplace of the Redeemer.³

In the same way as Jeremiah sought to encourage his people from fear and weeping because of their sense of hopelessness, is not Matthew, by quoting this prophecy from Jeremiah, seeking to encourage his Jewish audience? Even as Rachel had wept when there was cause for rejoicing because her child was born, so now the small group of Jewish people around Bethlehem wept for the loss of their children, yet there is cause for rejoicing because the redeemer has come.

The fifth and final prophecy cited by Matthew in this pericope is on the occasion when Joseph brings the family to live in a city called Nazareth. Matthew states that this happened that “it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene” (Matthew 2:23).

There is a problem in understanding precisely what Matthew meant. Matthew claims that “He shall be called a Nazarene” was declared by the “prophets,” i. e., by more by than one. We might expect therefore to find the statement in more than one prophetic writing. However, the statement occurs in none of the prophets. We might understand the statement that Christ “shall be called a Nazarene” as an equivalent statement to what many of the prophets had taught, namely, that the Christ would live a lowly life among the people. Jesus was himself not a Nazarite, but since he lived in the city of Nazareth, he came to be called a Nazarene. The city of Nazareth was named after that class of Israelites such as Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist which were known as Nazarites. As a city, Nazareth was insignificant. It was generally considered a “despised” city. This is one way the prophecy may have been considered as fulfilled. There is also another.

The word Nazareth in Hebrew meant “sprout,” “shoot,” or “small branch.” Since the term is applied to Jesus, the question is how he would be considered “a shoot?” Any Jewish person knowledgeable of Old Testament prophecies would immediately think of Isaiah 11:1. In predicting the forthcoming Christ, Isaiah had said, “There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots.” The Davidic kingship had come from Jesse, but had not existed for many years. Isaiah’s prophecy is that the Christ would come from that stump of roots. Matthew may have been referring to the fact that Jesus is that Messiah which had been prophesied by Isaiah.

Matthew’s mention of Jesus as a Nazarene would not be misconstrued by his original readers. They would realize both that the Christ had been prophesied to live a humble life, and also that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ had indeed lived a lowly life among the least of them. And because he had lived among the least of them, the ruler could therefore identify with his subjects. That understanding would be true whether or not Isaiah’s prophecy was in Matthew’s mind. If Matthew was referring to Isaiah’s prophecy, then he would also have been giving additional proof that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

This then is the composite portrait which Matthew gave of the Christ which was just born into the world. His birth was attended by the miracle of the virgin birth, by the messages and warnings of an angel in dreams, and by the special star which appeared to wise men in the East

³Rex A. Turner, Sr. *Jeremiah*, A manuscript, (unpublished, 1998) 274-275.

and which came to stand over where the Christ child was in Bethlehem. His birth was presented as fulfillment of prophetic scriptures. These scriptures declared that in the birth of Jesus, God is with us, Jehovah is salvation, and that a ruler to shepherd God's people had come among them. Moreover, these prophecies indicated that God preserved the Christ child, keeping him from harm's way by protecting him from Herod when the wise men came to worship the child. God is shown as not only delivering the Christ child from evil, but as giving occasion for rejoicing because the redeemer has now come. God is demonstrated as directing the child to safety, sending him first to Egypt and then, after Herod's death, guiding him back to Nazareth to live humbly.

Name all the characters in these two stories, Joseph, Mary, Herod, the wise men. Then if you try to identify the most important character, you'll discover that it is none of the above. The most important person in these stories is God. In these two stories, these miracles, these angelic declarations, these prophecies, God's presence is written large, and the theme of Matthew's gospel - God with us - is well demonstrated. This theme will be further demonstrated throughout the gospel of Matthew. Then when Matthew comes to the close of his gospel, he presents Christ, the Divine ruler as saying,

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, *I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:18-20).

“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Because the age has not yet ended, God is still with us. Just how is God with us? In the same way as he was when the gospel message was first presented. He desires our salvation from sin. He desires our belief and obedience. The words of Isaiah to King Ahaz of Judah are appropriate for our consideration, “If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established” (Isaiah 7:9). Surely, you do not need another sign to enable you to believe and to obey. Are not these prophecies and their fulfillments enough for us to believe that God is with us?