

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART THREE

The King, promised to Abraham, promised to David, promised again to the Jews returning from exile in Babylon, finally arrived to serve His people by saving them from their sins. He was born to a faithful newly married couple, Joseph and Mary, but by a creative miracle of the Holy Spirit, so that God became a man. Surely everyone would have been excited to welcome Him? This was a unique moment in history. Luke describes the circumstances surrounding the birth in grossly underprivileged conditions, and His reception by shepherds, the lowest of the low in that society.

Matthew, on the other hand, relates His reception from the top of society in the weeks or months that followed His birth. Herod the Great was great only in public works; on a personal level he was cruel and inhuman. He was an Edomite whose family had gained favour with Rome and were permitted successively to rule the Jewish people for a hundred years. He was first governor from 47-37BC then king from 37-4BC. Herod had an obsessive hatred for anyone even rumoured to be wanting to take over his throne. Because of this he had already executed his wife, Mariamne, and three of his sons, Alexander, Aristobulus and Antipater. At the time of the birth of Jesus he was dying, probably from peripheral vascular disease, but determined to pass his throne to another son, Archelaus. This 'King of the Jews' was a threat.

The Magi were a group of Parthian pagan priests with a long history going back at least 700 years. Daniel in first Babylon and then Persia would have been seen as a threat by earlier magi because of his influence with successive kings. They were often the kingmakers, the power behind the thrones of Persia and later Parthia. They used occult practices giving rise to the word, magician. They took up the Zoroastrian religion and were the forerunners of the Parsees in India. They were certainly not Christians! At the time of the birth of Jesus there had been many years of war between Parthia and Rome in which Judea was dangerously caught in between the two superpowers. The arrival of the magi in Jerusalem at the court of Herod would therefore have been a tense political moment. Why had they come? Terrified at the prospect of a rival he asked the visitors to let him know when they found him. His purpose was certainly not worship!

Somehow, despite their false religion, God had revealed news of the birth of His Son to these men, presumably through their study of the stars. What was the nature of 'His star in the east' we are not told. One reasonable suggestion is that at that time, the star Regulus, almost coincided in position in the sky with the planet Jupiter, in the area of the heavens traditionally associated with the tribe of Judah. Both Regulus and Jupiter were associated in those days with kingship. From Jerusalem these two stars would have been in exactly the direction of Bethlehem. What is certain is that the Old Testament promised that the Shepherd-King who was coming would be born in the city of David, Bethlehem. (Mic.5:2) By the time they arrived in Bethlehem, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were living in a house, no longer a stable.

How they found the right house we do not know but once they did their response was one of submission, worship and joy. They presented gifts that could well be seen as symbolising Jesus' three roles, gold for a King, frankincense for a Priest, and myrrh

for a Prophet. Their coming illustrates how God can show His purpose to anyone, even a heathen priest, genuinely searching for truth, like Melchizedek in Gen.14, Jethro in Exodus 3 and Balaam in Numbers 22. The same God who led them to the new King, now protected Him by leading them to avoid Herod on their way home.

Just as God had sent an angel to Joseph to protect Mary before the baby was born, so He had to do it again to protect the young child. Again Joseph responded by faith, immediately leaving what must have seemed like the security of the city of his ancestors, to escape to the dangerous world of Egypt. As well as providing security in a time of genocide he was unwittingly fulfilling another prophecy in Hosea 11:1 that God would call His Son out of Egypt just as he had brought Israel's descendants out of Egypt to escape another king. One of the last murderous acts of the dying king must have been his order systematically to slaughter every male child in the area of Bethlehem under 2 years of age. Another Old Testament prophecy, this time from Jer.31:15, had warned of the grief of mothers for their children in the city where Rachel, Jacob's favourite wife, had died in childbirth.

For the third time the angel was sent to Joseph to tell him it was safe to return home. Again by faith he responded obediently. Wisely he was cautious about returning to Bethlehem because of Herod's son, Archelaus. Following more heavenly instructions, by faith, he headed instead for his original home of Nazareth, in the relative safety of Galilee. By this choice one more Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled. Nazareth was a fairly new town that did not exist in Old Testament times. 'Netser' is a Hebrew word for 'branch'. A frequent symbol of the coming Messiah was that of the Branch.(Isa.11:1; Jer.23:5; Zech.3:8) 'Nazarene' was apparently a play on this word.

The King was to be preceded by a herald. Chapter three describes his introduction of the King.

3:1-3 Q.1 What do we know from the other gospels of the birth and purpose of John? How was his family related to Jesus? Where did his ministry occur? What Old Testament leaders had started their ministries in similar places? What were the essential two parts to his message? How does one follow the other? What had Isaiah said was the reason for God sending John first? In what sense is our witness to be like John's?

3:4-6 Q.2 How do you explain the contrast between John's lifestyle and his magnetic influence on his people? What was the response to his ministry?

3:7-12 Q.3 Why do you suppose the religious leaders came to hear John? What was his reception of them? What did he tell them to do? What did he recognise was wrong with their thinking? What was his warning to them? How did he contrast his role and importance with that of the One who would come after him? How are we to be the same?

3:13-17 Q.4 Why did John not want to baptise Jesus? How did Jesus persuade him to do it? What events followed immediately after Jesus' baptism? Why was the Spirit pictured as a dove? What would be the future importance for Jesus of knowing the Father was pleased with Him? How can we know God is pleased with us?

