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# Wise Men and Flight to Egypt

The prologue to Luke's Gospel draws to a close with the Presentation of the baby Jesus in the Jerusalem temple and acknowledgement of His status made by devout ordinary people, rather than the religious leaders. Luke recommences his account of the Lord Jesus' life and work some twelve years later when He returned to the Jerusalem temple with His family to celebrate the feast of Passover. The writer Luke, however, leaves us with one small puzzle: in 2:39 he tells us that after the Presentation, the Holy Family returned to Galilee to their own home town, where Jesus grew in wisdom and grace.

The 'Christmas' narrative continues in Matthew, however, in the account of the visit of the wise men from the East, which took place *in Bethlehem at least six months later*, as we shall see. Who then is right, Luke or Matthew? In practice there is no real conflict here. Luke in his account jumps twelve years and quite correctly states that Jesus' home town was during most of that time Nazareth. Matthew lingers with the Nativity and infancy of the Lord Jesus, however, and covers the short exile to Egypt and final return to Nazareth.

We may infer the likely movements of the Holy Family in this way: Mary and Joseph, having initially left Nazareth in order to register in Bethlehem, travelled the ninety odd miles to Bethlehem

where Jesus was born. For reasons we do not know, the couple decided to settle in Bethlehem —certainly it would remove them from the narrow-minded gossip of Nazareth, and surely Bethlehem as ‘David’s City’ would have seemed the ‘right’ place to bring up their new son. They had, no doubt, certain domestic matters to wind-up: some living quarters to dispose of, and Joseph’s carpentry tools would probably need to be sold or moved from Nazareth to Bethlehem so he could resume his trade. So, following the Presentation of Jesus in the temple, the couple returned briefly to Nazareth but shortly afterwards travelled back to Bethlehem with the intention of settling permanently there. It is to the Gospel of Matthew that we turn for the final details of the infancy of the Lord Jesus:

### **The visit of the wise men**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judaea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judaea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star they

were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

*Matt 2:1-12*

Magi, as the *New International Version* of the Bible correctly names the ‘wise men’ (rendered incorrectly but very poetically as ‘kings’ in the famous and lovely carol by the American John Henry Hopkins, ‘We Three Kings of Orient Are’<sup>1</sup>) is the term used in the Septuagint, and also by Philo, Josephus and other ancient writers.<sup>2</sup> It describes both magicians practised in ancient ‘magical arts’ as well as Eastern (especially Chaldean) priest-sages who appear to have held deep philosophical knowledge, not tinged with superstition, based on their exhaustive researches and study of ancient learning. It was these latter priest-sages, rather than magicians, to which Matthew refers in his Gospel. The number of Magi is not stated, but it is a widespread assumption that there were three, on account of the number of gifts given. Their number, however, is of no consequence.

This ‘priestly’ caste of the Medes and Persians in New Testament times were dispersed over various parts of the East. Magi are thought to have emerged in what we now think of as Arabia. Certainly there was trade and political interaction between Judaea/Galilee and ‘Arabia’ generally. Indeed, from about 120 BC to the sixth century of our own era, the kings of the area now occupied by Yemen professed the Jewish faith.<sup>3</sup> The presence in those same Eastern lands of large numbers of Jews of the *diaspora* would have enabled the Magi to obtain first-hand information about the great hope of a Messiah which the Hebrews held so dear. It is likely that they were familiar with the much-studied prophecy of Numbers 24:17 which promised that “a star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.” Paul Barnett, in his excellent book *Bethlehem to Patmos*, notes that the Septuagint,

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the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, had rendered Numbers 24:17 as, “a star shall come forth out of Jacob, a man shall arise out of Israel” and that this prophecy was so widely known, that it is also found in the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus (Macrobious, Saturnalia, 2:4:11).<sup>4</sup>

Some time after the Presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple and after the Holy Family returned from Nazareth to Bethlehem, there arrived in Jerusalem Magi with a strange message. They had witnessed the rising of a star which they regarded as announcing the birth of the Jewish Messiah-King and accordingly had travelled to Jerusalem to pay homage to him. They arrived in the Jewish capital not, we may assume, because they expected to find him there but because they thought that in Jerusalem they would receive information about where he might be found. They addressed themselves first to the head of the nation, King Herod.

Herod ‘the Great’, we have already noted, was fast losing his mental and physical grip in the twilight of his life. Whilst he had been an excellent client-king of the Romans, rivalling Emperor Augustus in the lavishness and extent of his building programmes and, as Josephus the Jewish historian notes, “was on more friendly terms with Greeks than with Jews” (Antiq. 19:7:3:329), he had upset his own people with the heavy burden of tax that funded his opulent lifestyle and building projects. There were good reasons, perhaps, for members of his family to plot his succession. He had had, after all, ten wives and nineteen children, but none could feel safe while he lived. An increasingly relevant factor at the close of Herod’s life was the numerous illnesses that dogged him. In Josephus we read of the period shortly before his death: “Herod’s distemper became more and more severe to him, and this because these his disorders fell on him in his old age, and when he was in a melancholy condition; for he was already almost seventy years of age, and had been brought low by the calamities that happened to him about his children, whereby he had no pleasure in life, even when he was in health; the grief that Antipater was still alive aggravated his disease, whom he resolved to put to death

now, not at random, but as soon as he should be well again” (*War* 33:1.647). The incident with the golden eagle and the consequent bloody confrontation with the Jewish religious authorities occurred at this time.

Josephus continues ‘After this, the distemper seized his whole body, and greatly disordered all its parts with various symptoms; for there was a gentle fever upon him, and an intolerable itching all over the surface of his body, and continual pains in his colon, and dropsical tumours about his feet and an inflammation of the abdomen – and a putrefaction of his privy member, that produced worms. Besides this he had difficulty of breathing upon him and could not breath but when he sat upright, and had convulsion of all his members; insomuch that the diviners said those diseases were a punishment upon him for what he had done to his Rabbis’ (*War* 1:5:656).

It was to this sick, miserable and psychopathic king that the Magi came, six to eight months after the birth of Jesus. The rumour of their enquiry would no doubt have spread quickly through the city. No wonder Matthew tells us, ‘when King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him’ (*Matt* 2:3). Pretenders to this king’s throne had a habit of bringing down a curtain on more than just their own lives! Herod’s impression on hearing their news was, needless to say, vastly different from the piety of the Magi. The barest possibility of the advent of *the* Messiah – the One to whom all Israel looked for deliverance – must have struck a special note of terror into his heart. The mere thought of a pretender with such claims would fill him with suspicion, fear, and rage. Perhaps Herod also feared meeting his Maker – a day that could not be far off – and the judgement that he would face at the hands of the Almighty. Then his attempted bribe of God and the people, in lavishly rebuilding the Jerusalem temple, would be shown for the sham it was!

Why had these Magi come? They told the king plainly —they had come to find the new King and ‘to worship him’. We presume that the Magi did not know that the new King was of such obscure background. Their visit, as Paul Barnett suggests, may have been

primarily a diplomatic gesture and their gifts designed to create a favourable impression upon the court of the new monarch. These gifts may also have been intended to express some form of worship to the new ruler. Acts of reverence towards kings were not unusual in the Eastern world at that time.<sup>5</sup>

Herod reacted cunningly: calling together his chief priests and teachers of the law and without telling them of the Magis' mission, he simply put before them the question of the Messiah's birthplace. Having received the answer – Bethlehem – Herod *secretly* called back the Magi, no doubt having already settled on the idea that he would have Bethlehem and its people carefully watched with a view to isolating and eliminating the infant pretender. He enquired from the Magi the *precise* time that the star had first attracted their attention. This information enabled him to judge how far back he would need to take his own investigations, since the birth of the pretender could be linked to the appearance of the sidereal phenomenon. As long as any male lived who was born in Bethlehem between the earliest appearance of the 'star' and the time of arrival of the Magi, Herod could not feel safe. The later conduct of Herod (Matt 2:16) leads us to believe that the Magi must have told Herod that their earliest observation of the star had taken place two years before their arrival in Jerusalem. Herod now directed the Magi to Bethlehem with the pious request that, as soon as they had located the babe, they should let him know, so that he too, might go and worship the Messiah.

As they left Jerusalem, the star which had attracted them at its 'rising' and which, the narrative seems to imply, they had not seen of late, now reappeared and led them towards Bethlehem. It seemed to move ahead of them until 'it stopped over the place where the child was' —this, we may assume, means Bethlehem, not the actual house where Jesus lived. The reappearance of the star must have been a confirmation to these wise men that they were near journey's end and mission's accomplishment, for they could certainly not have needed the star to *guide* them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem —the distance is only six miles. It cannot have been difficult in such a small town, scarcely larger

than a village, to have located the Holy Family, around the birth of whose firstborn child some notable, and probably well-known, marvels had occurred.

The temporary shelter of the ‘stable’ had now been exchanged for the more permanent abode of a ‘house’ (Matt 2:11) where the Magi found the infant Jesus with his mother. (Joseph is not mentioned though it is likely he was there.) Only two things are recorded by Matthew of the visit of the wise men to Joseph and Mary’s home: their humble eastern homage, bowing down and worshipping the boy, and the gifts they brought. Viewed as gifts, the incense and myrrh would have seemed strangely inappropriate. These offerings were no doubt intended by the Magi as specimens of the produce of their country and their presentation was, we may assume, similar to diplomatic practice in our own day, a simple mark of homage of their country to this new king. In this sense the wise men were true representatives of the Gentile world—their homage was the first and ‘typical’ of the homage that would soon be accorded to Jesus by those who had hitherto been ‘far off’. Their offerings were symbolic, then, of the world’s tribute to the Lord Jesus.

But there was a deeper symbolic significance to the gifts themselves, of which the Magi may not have been completely aware. The gold was a clear acknowledgement of Jesus’ Kingship, the incense a symbol of prayer and of Christ’s Divinity, and the myrrh was symbolic of His humanity and the fullest evidence of that humanity—for myrrh was used as an embalming spice. Christians through the ages have recognised in these gifts a Spirit-inspired theological statement. Firstly, Christ’s position as King in their lives (for example, Luke 23:3; 1 Tim 1:17). Secondly, of the beauty of His life as a fragrant offering to God His Father (as indeed are our prayers a fragrant offering to God – Rev 5:8a), as well as His Divinity. Finally, the confirmation that He was fully man in His mortality: it should be added that myrrh was symbolic of the preservation of bodies from corruption, and that Jesus’ own body would see no corruption (Acts 2:31 and 13:37). This latter fact is taken by Christians as the guarantee of the

bodily resurrection from death of all those who are found in Jesus —see 1 Corinthians chapter 15 for the biblical explanation of the Christian’s understanding of the resurrection from the dead.

It may also be that in the gold there was a practical value in the gift. Very shortly, probably within hours of the Magi’s visit, Mary and Joseph were forced to flee with the infant Jesus to Egypt. Perhaps, in the gift of gold, God made provision for all the expenses that would inevitably be incurred in the escape and the subsequent period spent in exile. From Egypt, the family eventually returned to Nazareth where they began life afresh. These upheavals must have involved considerable expense and the gold would have provided the necessary means to ensure those expenses were met in full. Certainly God is, as one of His Old Testament titles suggests, *Jehovah jireh* —the Lord Who Provides.

### **The slaughter of the innocents**

We pause for a moment to look at how the Lord Jesus’ entry into this world was seen from the perspective of heaven. There is one biblical view of the Nativity that is never depicted on a Christmas card, and nor could it be. Found in the Revelation to John, the last book of our New Testament, “the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to John, who testifies to everything he saw” (Rev 1:1-2). John wrote his book to the churches of seven cities scattered across the Roman Province of Asia. In writing to the church across these widely dispersed cities, John, in effect, addressed the entire church of this Province. Revelation is the only part of the New Testament written to such a broad geographic area. It was written at a time when Christians were under severe and growing persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, and consists of series of revelations presented in symbolic language that would have been understood by Christians of that day, but would have remained completely mysterious to all others. The themes of the book are presented repetitively through a series of visions and, although there are to this day differences

of opinion about the precise interpretation of the book, its central theme shines through clearly. Through the Lord Jesus, God will defeat all His enemies, saving his faithful people and creating a new heaven and a new earth when that victory is complete.

Revelation chapter 12 gives us a glimpse of the battle waged in the spiritual realms as the infant Jesus was born. It gives us a different and more accurate perspective on Herod's motivation in seeking the new born King —the real power and impetus behind Herod is the devil himself. The coded story is given in verses 1 through 6. It does not mention Herod, wise men or shepherds. Instead it tells of a red dragon engaged in a bitter struggle in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun, and wearing a crown of twelve stars cries out in pain as she is about to give birth. Then an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns appears, and stands in front of the woman "so that he might devour her child the moment it was born" (Rev 12:4). But in the nick of time the child is snatched away, the dragon is foiled, and the woman flees into the desert "to a place prepared for her by God" (Rev 12:6).

So Revelation's perspective is a simultaneous view of events in heaven and on earth. As the Saviour is born a new and final phase of the heavenly battle begins. The devil's immediate counter to this invasion of his principality is to try to kill the new King. We take up the story again in Matthew's Gospel, just after the Magi have presented their gifts:

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what was said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard

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in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

*Matt 2:13-18*

It is a recurrent feature in the gospel of Christ, that glory and suffering often sit side by side. In the glorious announcement of the Lord's birth was, for Mary, the pain of being thought an immoral woman—even by her betrothed. Now, in the glory of the worship of the Magi, there was a bitter aftertaste. From God's vantage point, it could certainly not be that these Magi, representatives of the world's adoration of the Christ, should become unwitting instruments in His murder. Nor could it be possible that the Christ child should fall victim to Herod's psychopathic jealousy and fear.

The Magi, having themselves been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, went back to their country 'by another route'. Frustrated in his hope of attaining his objective through the Magi, the evil tyrant sought to achieve it by an indiscriminate slaughter of all the infant boys in Bethlehem and its surrounding countryside. Allowing that Jesus was born in 6 BC and Herod died in 4 BC, and allowing that it was no fewer than six to eight months, possibly even longer, after the Nativity that the wise men brought their disturbing tidings to Herod's court, it must have been towards the very end of Herod's life that his infamous order to destroy the male infants of Bethlehem was given. With the palace-castle of Herodium only a few miles from Bethlehem, the evil deed could have been ordered and executed in the space of a few hours.

Bethlehem, a small town, would have had relatively few male children of the necessary age—scholars have calculated that the number was probably not more than twenty boys. Despite this relatively small number, the deed was no less atrocious and the Christian church has long regarded these hapless and in every way innocent children as 'protomartyrs'—the first martyrs for Christ. The slaughter was entirely in accordance with the character and former measures of Herod. Josephus, for example, tells us

in Antiquities 15:8:4:290 of the slaughter of whole families that had defied the king. We should not be unduly surprised that the slaughter of the Bethlehem innocents remained unrecorded by Josephus, since on other occasions he omitted events which, to us, seem important. There are, in any case omissions, inconsistencies of narrative and chronology in and between the works of Josephus.<sup>6</sup> The murder of a few infants in an insignificant town might have seemed scarcely worth a mention in a reign steeped in so much blood. Besides, Josephus may have had an ulterior motive for silence; he carefully suppresses reference to Jesus as Christ, probably not only in accordance with his own religious beliefs, but because reference to a Messiah might have been dangerous and inconvenient in a work written by an intense self seeker, for a mainly Roman audience.

Anti-Christians have long sought to undermine the factual basis of the slaughter of the innocents. Before looking at their somewhat insubstantial objections, it is worth reminding ourselves of two powerful bodies of evidence which lend weight to the commonly held view that the account is true. Firstly, the Gospel writer affirms that it is so, and many serious and scholarly works have attested to reliability of the Gospel witnesses and the weight and age of manuscript evidence which gives us confidence in the modern Bible translations. Secondly, we have also seen the frankly disgusting personal history of Herod, and that life was held very cheap in those largely heathen times.

So what are these objections? Basically they revolve around the idea that the prophecy cited by Matthew in verse 18 of chapter 2, which is itself a quotation from Jeremiah 31:15, has been taken out of context and that Jeremiah was in fact referring to something quite different. So we read in Matthew: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." Readers with access to the modern internet may have picked up such objections in anti-Christian websites. They can be summarised as:

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- \* Matthew (who was not, the critics say, a contemporary!) scoured the Scriptures looking for verses that might be seen as being prophecies about Jesus;
- \* Matthew exercised poetic and literary license in order to reconstruct from Scripture what he believed to be a biography of Jesus;
- \* The Jeremiah text refers to Jews who had been exiled abroad during the great Babylonian exile, not to events six hundred years later;
- \* The Jeremiah text refers to children who are not dead but who will return to Israel (as suggested in Jeremiah's next verse);
- \* The 'alleged' murders took place in Bethlehem and 'not twenty miles away in Ramah';
- \* Only Matthew wrote about the slaughter of the young boys;
- \* There is no account outside the Bible of this event;
- \* Even some Christians do not see Jeremiah 31:15 as a messianic prophecy.

We will quickly look at these objections in turn:

\* *Matthew (who was not, the critics say rather sweepingly, a contemporary) scoured the Scriptures looking for verses that might be seen as being prophecies about Jesus.* Certainly Matthew, as other Gospel writers, drew on Scripture to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. We have already seen that something in excess of 450 Old Testament prophecies were viewed *in Jesus' own day* as being messianic. Various parts of Jeremiah 31 were so viewed—but not Jeremiah 31:15. The messianic application of this only became apparent to the Gospel writer after the event which, it might be argued, adds rather than detracts from its authenticity. Jeremiah 31:31ff is one of the most powerful messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. Critics who suggest that Matthew was not a contemporary would probably say the same for the other Gospel writers. Whilst the Gospel is not signed 'Matthew', scholars have long held that the disciple Matthew was by far the most likely author of this book.

\* *Matthew exercised poetic and literary license in order to reconstruct from Scripture what he believed to be a biography of Jesus.* This is countered by the reliability of the Gospel witnesses, a subject that may be explored in many serious and scholarly books on the Holy Bible. See also Appendix 5 in this regard.

\* *The Jeremiah text refers to Jews who had been exiled abroad during the great Babylonian exile, not to events six hundred years later.* Most assuredly, Jeremiah's book was principally a warning to the rebellious Jews that their sin against God would lead to national and religious disaster—and so it did. But it is obvious that all messianic prophecies are to be found embedded in narrative and contexts which refer firstly to a local audience contemporary to when the Scripture was written, and only indirectly, or secondarily to the Messiah of the future. Now that the Old Testament days have passed, their principal value lies in their foreshadowing of Jesus in many hundreds of messianic prophecies.

\* *The Jeremiah text refers to children who are not dead but who will return to Israel (as suggested in Jeremiah's next verse).* This may be true, although it has been suggested by some that there was bitter wailing in Israel at the prospect of parting for hopeless captivity and greater lament because those who might have encumbered the outward march were mercilessly slaughtered. Be this as it may, Matthew is evidently hearing the lamentations of Rachel as echoing those of the mothers of Bethlehem at the slaughter of the innocents.

\* *The 'alleged' murders took place in Bethlehem and not twenty miles away in Ramah.* Here biblical critics betray lack of knowledge of the geography of Judaea. Their criticism runs along these lines: If Matthew is right, then the mother's lamentations and cries of grief were so loud that they could be heard in the village of Ramah, twenty miles from the scene of the crime in Bethlehem! This matter was dealt with completely by Jack Finegan in his valuable book *The Archaeology of the New Testament*, from which the following helpful explanation is taken:

Gen 35:19 and 48:7 state that the burial place of Rachel was "on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)." The wording

suggests that Ephrath or Ephrathah was an older village that was absorbed into Bethlehem and in Micah 5:2 the two names are put together, Bethlehem Ephrathah. 1 Samuel 10:2, however, places the tomb of Rachel in the territory of Benjamin, and the site of er-Ram five miles north of Jerusalem probably corresponds with a Ramah at this place. Indeed the Madaba map shows another Ramah, north and slightly east of Jerusalem. It was presumably to the Northern Ramah that Nebuzaradan in 588 BC took Jeremiah and the captives of Jerusalem and Judah who were being exiled to Babylon (Jer 40:1). Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, and Joseph's son Ephraim became synonymous with northern Israel (Jer 31:9). So Jeremiah (31:15) hears a voice in Ramah and it is Rachel weeping for her children, perhaps with reference to the earlier deportation (722 BC) of the Northern Israelites by the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:11) as well as the present carrying into exile of the Babylonians. Between the two locations, Matthew is evidently thinking of Ramah and Rachel's tomb as near Bethlehem, and as he quotes Jer 31:15 he is hearing the ancient lamentation of Rachel echoing in that of the mothers of Bethlehem at the slaughter of the innocents by Herod (Matt 2:18).<sup>7</sup>

The location of Rachel's tomb is on the old Jerusalem–Bethlehem road, some two miles away from Bethlehem. Today a small building is constructed over the tomb, but the site has been venerated by Jews for over two thousand years. Apart from the fact that this Ramah is literally close enough for some sounds to be heard from two miles distant, we would speculate that Herod's slaughter almost certainly encompassed homes in the surrounding countryside.

\* *Only Matthew wrote about the slaughter of the young boys.* This is not altogether surprising. None of the Gospels sets out to be a biography of Jesus in the modern sense, as we have seen earlier in these studies. Only two of the four Gospels give any detail of the Lord's birth in any case and, although tragic, in the larger scheme of Jesus' life, the event did not shape or cause any subsequent events.

\* *There is no account outside the Bible of this event.* Again, in the

context of first century Judaea, such action by the ruler was not of sufficient importance to merit any comment. For various reasons it might have been politically more convenient to ignore it.

\* *Even some Christians do not see Jeremiah 31:15 as a messianic prophecy.* Without knowing who such Christians are, or what their reasoning, no useful comment can be made. In a world faith the sheer size of Christianity we would expect there to be a spectrum of views.

We will let the matter rest with a perceptive comment from Alfred Edersheim on both the slaughter of the innocents and on the associated prophecy in Hosea concerning the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, to which we will turn in a moment: "To an inspired writer, nay, to a true Jewish reader of the Old Testament, the question in regard to any prophecy could not be: what did *the prophet* mean – but, what did *the prophecy* mean? And this could only be unfolded in the course of Israel's history. Similarly, those who ever saw in the past the prototype of the future, and recognised in events not only the principle but the very features of that which was to come, could not fail to perceive in the bitter wail of the mothers of Bethlehem over their slaughtered children, the full realisation of the prophetic description of the scene enacted in Jeremiah's days. Had not the prophet himself heard, in the lament of the captives to Babylon, the echoes of Rachel's voice in the past? In neither one nor the other case had the utterances of the prophets (Hosea and Jeremiah) been *predictions*; they were *prophetic*. In neither one nor the other case was the fulfilment literal; it was Scriptural, and that in the truest Old Testament sense."<sup>8</sup>

### **The flight into Egypt**

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until

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the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what was said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

*Matthew 2:13-15*

Having fled their own country, refugees will settle if possible, somewhere where they will be among their own people. Anyone taking an infant will prefer a place of safety close to the border. On the road from Israel to Egypt, about six miles north of modern Cairo, lies the village of Al-Matariyah, not far from the right bank of the Nile. Here there is a church called ‘Sanctae Familiae in Aegypto Exuli’, the Church of the Holy Family, originally built by French Jesuits. Ancient tradition, and it must be emphasised *only* tradition as far as can be proved, has attached Al-Matariyah to the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt.

In the middle ages there was a famous herbal garden at Al-Matariyah which produced plants found nowhere else in Egypt. “Slender little trees which are no higher than the belt of your riding breeches and resemble the wood of the wild vine,”<sup>9</sup> wrote Sir John Maundeville, who saw them during his travels in 1322. He was describing balsam bushes —and how these valuable shrubs came to Egypt is recounted by the Jewish historian Josephus.

After the murder of Caesar, Mark Antony came to Alexandria, the important coastal city in Egypt, where the scheming queen Cleopatra had a liaison with him. She was secretly planning to recover some of Egypt’s old spheres of influence, including winning back the lands of Israel. Cleopatra visited Judaea several times and even tried to ensnare Herod ‘the Great’ in a relationship so as to win to her side this Roman client-king. Herod, no fool, recognised that any involvement with Cleopatra or her schemes would bring down on him the wrath of Antony, of whom Herod was, in any case, a personal friend.

Herod’s rejection of Cleopatra’s advances nevertheless nearly cost him his life. He had deeply wounded her feminine vanity and so she schemed with Mark Antony against Herod. Cleopatra arranged that the Jewish king should be summoned to Alexandria to answer grave charges, but Herod, anticipating the ‘lie of the

land' bribed Mark Antony at considerable expense. The scheming queen had lost this particular battle but did not come away completely empty handed. Herod was forced to cede the valuable coastal lands to Egypt, together with Jericho on the Jordan with its surrounding plantations. These contained large fragrant gardens of valuable herbs, said to have been reared from seeds presented by the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon some 800 years before. Among these plants were balsam bushes.

The new owner, Josephus, specifically tells us (*Antiquities* 15:4:2:96) took over these plantations and, it is believed, arranged for cuttings to be taken home to Egypt with her. These were planted on her instructions in the temple Gardens just outside Heliopolis (the 'On' of the Bible, Gen 41:50), a mile or so from today's Al-Matariyah.<sup>10</sup> Here, under the care of skilled Jewish gardeners from the Jordan valley, these rare shrubs thrived on the Nile—the 'herbal garden' of Al-Matariyah. Thirty years later Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus are said to have found safe refuge among the Jewish gardeners in the fragrant balsam gardens of Al-Matariyah. The idea is certainly plausible, but there is no external evidence of the Holy Family's whereabouts whilst in Egypt.

The Gospel writer Matthew, as we have already noted, saw the flight to Egypt by the Holy Family as the fulfilment of the prophecy in Hosea 11:1, "out of Egypt I called my son". The context of the verse to Hosea's *original* audience refers quite clearly to the rescue of the Israelites from Egypt by Moses. Hosea was assumed by the ancient synagogue to have been himself alluding to Exodus 4:22. ("Israel is my firstborn son .... let my son go, so that he may worship me.") Exodus 4:22 *was* seen as being a messianic prophecy, e.g. in the Midrash interpretation of Psalm 2:7, so for Matthew to have interpreted the events of the flight into Egypt as the fulfilment of Hosea's prophecy was both reasonable and appropriate.

The Holy Family's stay in Egypt must have been of short duration. Since the flight probably took place no more than a few months prior to the tyrant Herod's death, we may presume that Joseph's thoughts quickly turned to making the return journey and

to permanent settlement in Bethlehem. The period immediately before Herod's death in Judaea was, according to Josephus, frightening. Tormented by fears and prey to fits of remorse when he would shout out the name of his murdered wife Mariamme and her sons, even making attempts on his own life, Herod was on the verge of insanity. The most terrible diseases had affixed themselves to his body (see Josephus for the gruesome details) and he knew his final hour had come.

On return from his convalescence in Callirhoe and feeling death approaching, Herod summoned the nobles of Israel to Jericho and imprisoned them in the Hippodrome,<sup>11</sup> with orders to his sister Salome to slay them immediately upon his death, in the grim hope that the joy of the populace at his death would thus be changed to genuine mourning. (*Antiquities* 17:6:5:168 to 181). Five days before his death, Herod, on hearing that his son Antipater had tried to bribe his gaoler to release him, had him executed. Upon Herod's death, Salome released the noble Jews imprisoned in the Hippodrome, reckoning this would be a popular move and commence the new King Antipas' reign (Herod Antipas of the New Testament) on a positive note.

Herod 'the Great' had in fact divided his kingdom among several relatives. Archelaus, the elder brother of Antipas (both sons of Malthake, a Samaritan) was appointed to be king, Antipas tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, and Philip (son of Cleopatra, of Jerusalem) tetrarch of the territory east of the Jordan. Herod made these dispositions dependent on the approval of emperor Augustus —by no means a foregone conclusion. Although the army proclaimed Archelaus king immediately, he prudently declined the title, pending the emperor's confirmation, but was quickly challenged to use his royal powers to quell a rising which had been simmering since the execution by Herod of two important rabbis over the golden eagle incident. Three thousand insurrectionists were killed in the ensuing troubles, mainly in the temple area (*Antiq* 17:9:3:218). Archelaus was summoned to Rome at the same time as his brother Antipas, so each could press his rights to the throne. The Herodian family at large (excepting Archelaus and

his supporters) whilst each faction quietly pressed its own claims, were of the public opinion that they wanted direct rule from Rome but that, if they were forced to have a king, they preferred Antipas rather than Archelaus. Meanwhile fresh insurrections in Judaea were brutally put down. A Judaeen deputation of fifty went to Rome and, supported by eight thousand Roman Jews, argued for deposing the entire Herodian clan, on account of their crimes.<sup>12</sup> Their plan was for Judaea and Galilee to be incorporated into Syria —no doubt hoping for semi-independence under Roman rule, with the Sadduces and Pharisees holding effective power.

Before Augustus had made his decision on Herod's will, there came yet more bad news from Judaea. In the absence of the Herodians, unrest surfaced again in Jerusalem. As a security measure a Roman legion was despatched to the city. In the midst of this turmoil arrived one of the hated Romans in the form of Sabinus, a tax collector. Disregarding warnings, he took up residence in Herod's palace and proceeded to audit the tribute of Judaea to Rome. Thousands of pilgrims were streaming into the city for the Feast of Weeks. Bloody clashes ensued, again focusing on the temple. Roman legionaries were pelted with stones and in reply fired the temple arcades. Sabinus himself took 400 talents from the temple treasury, after which he was forced to retreat to the palace and barricade himself in. Rebellion spread throughout Judaea, where royal palaces were plundered and torched. The governor of Syria, one Quintilius Varus, hastened to reinforce the Judaeen garrison with a powerful army. The rebels fled when the Roman army appeared in sight of Jerusalem, but were captured in large numbers. Two thousand men were crucified.

Augustus decided to confirm the last testament of Herod with a few minor amendments. The most significant of these was that Archelaus would be given the title *Ethnarch*, which, if he performed the role well, would eventually be exchanged for that of king. His dominions would be Judaea, Idumaea, and Samaria. Alfred Edersheim takes up the sad story: "It is needless to follow the fortunes of the new Ethnarch. He began his rule by crushing all resistance by the wholesale slaughter of his opponents. Of the

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high priestly office he disposed after the manner of his father. But he far surpassed him in cruelty, oppression, luxury, the grossest egotism, and the lowest sensuality, and that without possessing the talent or energy of Herod. His brief reign ceased in the year 6 of our era, when the Emperor banished him, on account of his crimes, to Gaul.”<sup>13</sup>

It was to this terrifying situation in Judaea that Joseph first thought to return. We gather from the expression in Matthew 2:22 “when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judaea” that, at the time Joseph and his family left Egypt, the emperor had not yet decided whether or not he would confirm Herod’s succession plans. The first intention of Joseph seems to have been to settle in Bethlehem—we have already considered some reasons that may have encouraged him in this thought. But when, on reaching Judaea Joseph learned who Herod’s successor was to be, and no doubt in what manner he had begun his reign and the troubles since, Joseph wisely decided to remove his son from the dominion of Archelaus. Matthew tells us, moreover, that Joseph was given a Divine direction not to enter the territory of Judaea, as we read in Matthew 2:22-23: “Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets.<sup>14</sup> ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’” In this case we can presume that the Holy Family travelled along the Mediterranean coast almost entirely out of Judaeian territory, until they passed through Samaria and into Galilee. Alternative but more complicated routes would also have been possible.

So the account of the Nativity of the Lord Jesus draws to a close. For the purposes of this book we draw a line under the Gospel account with John’s theological summary in John 1:10-14, “He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. The word

became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

John, of course, was right. Jesus’ own generally did not receive Him, and in large measure have *still* not received Him. Similarly the world at large, that mass of humankind beyond God’s chosen race, still fails to recognise Jesus and prefers the ‘broad road’ that leads away from Him. (Matt 7:13-14.) This is a sad and sober fact, especially considering that God loves to save, even *yearns* to save and paid such a high price to ensure that salvation is open to all. This chapter, with its oppressive reflection on the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents, helps us to see just how high that price truly was. Before looking at the controversies that have surrounded the biblical account of the Nativity, the final piece in our Christmas ‘jigsaw’ is the star over Bethlehem, the Natal star followed by the Eastern Magi. It is to this which we turn our attention in the next chapter.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In titling the wise men ‘kings’, John Henry Hopkins (1820-91) may have had in mind the messianic prophecy of Psalm 72:9-11 where we read that kings from Tarshish, Sheba and Seba will bow down before the Messiah.

<sup>2</sup> The word ‘magician’ derives from the *magus*, an ancient Persian priest, and the cognate *maghdim*, a Chaldean term meaning wisdom and philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> There was a small Jewish community in Yemen as late as 1950.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Barnett *Bethlehem to Patmos* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* see p. 26

<sup>6</sup> See for examples *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah op. cit.* p. 149, footnote # 50.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Finegan *The Archaeology of the New Testament Revised Edition* (Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah op. cit.* p. 150.

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Werner Keller *The Bible As History* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), p. 338.

<sup>10</sup> Both sites are very close to today's Cairo (Almaza) Airport.

<sup>11</sup> A place for racing horses.

<sup>12</sup> These events may well have been the historical basis of the Lord Jesus' parable about the ten Minas, in Luke 19:12-27.

<sup>13</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah op. cit.* p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> Which prophecy Matthew had in mind is obscure. Nazirites were, among the ancient Hebrews, men who were consecrated to God, but this is unconnected with Matthew's comment. It seems that Matthew had in mind something in either Scripture or in the Talmud that in some way elevated the status of Nazareth. Nazareth, itself, seems to have been held in low esteem by some Judaeen Jews. So we read the incredulous comment by the disciple Nathaniel in John 1:46 —“Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”