

Secrets of the Christmas Story in Matthew

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Stories with Secret Meanings

Most people do not know that our Christmas stories are different from other stories about Jesus, what he said and did. We have two sets of Christmas stories, one in Matthew and one in Luke, and they are different except for a few details.

In those ancient times people loved to make up stories, legends, about famous people, especially how they were born. They told stories about famous Roman emperors and people like that. Often the stories they made matched something that happened to the person when they grew up.

So they told a story about Moses as a baby being put in a floating basket and left to float on a river because the ruler of Egypt wanted to kill all the baby boys born among the people of Israel who were living in Egypt at the time. He was rescued. When people heard the story, they recognised its meaning. It pointed to what Moses did as a man when he grew up. He rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, sometimes called the land of the river.



Matthew's Story

"I've heard that story before!" One of the favourite ways of telling stories in the ancient world was to tell a story which deliberately reminded people of a story they already knew. This could just be fun, but it could also have other purposes. If the story people knew was about someone special, then the new story and its hero must also be special, perhaps even more special.

When the writer of Matthew's gospel told his Christmas story, he was doing just that: deliberately echoing stories which people already knew. Matthew's story tells of a bright star which appeared when Jesus was born. Astrologers (star experts at that time) believed the star had a special meaning. It meant a baby was born who would become a king, so they set off to find the baby. They came to Jerusalem and their claims worried the king there, King Herod. He asked them to find out and tell him where the child was. Then the star moved over the sky and stopped just over Bethlehem, where Jesus was born.



They brought gifts for the baby Jesus and then instead of returning to report to Herod, they returned to their country. King Herod was so angry, that he ordered that all the children under two years of age in the region should be killed. Mary and Joseph managed to escape and went down to Egypt where they stayed until Herod died. They then returned, but Herod's son, Archelaus who was now the ruler was also very cruel, so they moved from Bethlehem to the town, Nazareth in Galilee, where Jesus grew up.

The Stories Behind Matthew's Story

Here are some of the stories behind Matthew's story.

There is the story of Joseph and his brothers who were jealous of him. He had dreams about being special. They sold him as a slave and he was taken down to Egypt. He rose to be a leader in Egypt.

There is the story of Joseph's brothers and their father, Jacob, who went down to Egypt to get food and then ended up staying there when Joseph took care of them.

Some centuries later the leaders of Egypt, the pharaohs, began to treat the people of Israel as slaves. They ordered that all boy babies, born among the people of Israel, should be killed. Moses' mother hid him in the reeds when he was born. The Pharaoh's daughter found him and adopted him, so Moses was brought up in the Pharaoh's family.

Moses learned about the cruel way in which the Egyptians were treating his people, so after a lot of conflict, he rescued his people, leading them out of Egypt and across the Red Sea and the Sinai desert area.



The Stories Behind Matthew's Story

While they were making their way through the desert areas they had many conflicts. Balak, king of Moab, tried to stop them entering their territory and asked his prophet Balaam to put a curse on them. Instead he did the opposite. He said that one day Israel would have a leader who would slaughter all its enemies. His words were: "a star shall arise from Jacob and a sceptre from Israel".

People in the ancient world believed in astrology, finding meaning in the stars. They read the night sky as being like a map and believed that stars were like lights on the ceiling, but also that had special powers to control events on earth. So it was common to find stories that at the birth of famous people there were signs in the stars which pointed to it.



Israel's most famous king was David. He was born to a family of shepherds in Bethlehem. The prophet Samuel anointed him king. Later, when people longed for a strong leader, they said he must be like David, a "Son of David", God's "Anointed", the "king of the Jews". In Hebrew, the language of Israel, their word for "the Anointed One" is the "the Messiah". In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for "the Anointed One" is "the Christ". He could also be called "the Son of God" because that was a title of kings.

The Stories Behind Matthew's Story

In the time of Jesus, whenever people hoped for the king like David, the Messiah, they thought of a king who would lead an army in revolt against the Romans. There were a number of leaders who claimed to be God's Messiah. One of them was even called the Son of the Star. So it was very dangerous to be called a Messiah, a king of the Jews. Their hope was that once the Romans had been defeated, Israel would live in peace and harmony and the king would make sure everyone was cared for.

Forty years after Jesus there was a major revolt by the Jews. The Romans crushed the revolt and destroyed the temple. They took captives to Rome, and celebrated their victory in a big parade, shown in pictures on the arch of Titus, the victorious general. They also made Jewish captives work as slaves to build the Colosseum building in Rome.



The Romans killed Jesus because people had begun to speak of him as a Messiah. He was not wanting to lead an army, but he was wanting to change things to make them more fair and just. In our earliest records we find very little about Jesus as a Messiah. They talked about him in this way only after his death.

There is, however, one incident where Peter said he thought Jesus was the Messiah. Not surprisingly Jesus told him to keep it quiet. It could so easily be misunderstood because he was not the kind of Messiah which most people, including Peter, imagined a Messiah would be like.

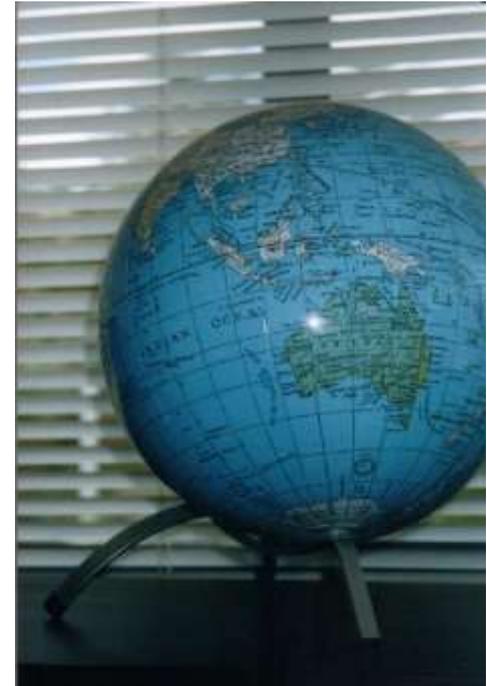
The Stories Behind Matthew's Story

After his death people started talking openly about Jesus as a Messiah, but a very different kind of Messiah. Pilate executed Jesus as “King of the Jews” along with two others who were seen as revolutionaries and even offered to swap him for Barabbas as one of the their leaders. What Pilate said was not true. Yet in another sense it was true. Jesus was the Messiah, but one who wanted to lead people to be generous and caring and just. They understood his resurrection at Easter as like God saying: he really was my Messiah and he will be the Messiah of all who hope for peace and justice. As a result people who followed the way of Jesus as the Christ came to be called Christians.

One of the other hopes which some people of those days had was that not just the people but all peoples would one day come together in peace. They imagined a day when people from all nations would come to Jerusalem to learn God's ways. They would bring gifts. In one place it speaks of their bringing gold and frankincense.

When Matthew and Luke put together their different stories of Jesus' birth, they were not really writing about a baby. They were writing about Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, and his importance.

All these stories and ideas helped Matthew make his story. See if you can pick up the clues as the story goes along.



The Story in Matthew

Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the Great. When he was born astrologers came to Jerusalem from the east, saying, "Where is the one who is born to be king of the Jews, because we have seen his star at its rising and we have come to pay him homage."

When Herod the king heard this he was troubled along with everyone in Jerusalem. He summoned all the chief priests the people's experts to find out from them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem in Judea."

*This fulfilled what was written by the prophet:
"And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are not at all the least among the leaders of Judah. For from you will come a leader, who will be a shepherd for my people, Israel".*

Then Herod brought the astrologers together in secret and tried to get precise information from them about the timing of the star's appearance, and then sent them off to Bethlehem saying: "Go and find out exactly all about the child. When you find out, tell me, so that I can also go and pay him homage."



After hearing the king they went off, and the star, which they had observed when it arose, went on ahead of them until it came to a stop over the place where the child was. Seeing the star they were extremely happy. So they came to the house and saw the child with Mary his mother and bowed down and gave him homage and opened their treasures and gave him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh (scented ointment). And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back home to their country via a different route.

The Story in Matthew



Once they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: “Get up and take the child and Mary his mother and escape to Egypt and stay there till I tell you. For Herod is about to search for the child to kill it.”

So he got up and took the child and his mother by night and came down to Egypt, and stayed there until Herod died. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Out of Egypt I have called my son”.

Then Herod, realising that he had been tricked by the astrologers, was really furious and sent order to kill all the children 2 years of age and younger in Bethlehem and surrounds, based on the timing he had learned from the astrologers. Then was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Rama, weeping and much wailing, Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted, because they were no more.”

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in Egypt in a dream and said: “Get up and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, because those who were seeking the child’s life have died.” He got up and took the child and his mother and arrived in the land of Israel.

However when he heard that Archelaus was ruling in Judea in place his father Herod, he was afraid to return there and being warned in a dream he set off to the Galilee region and came and settled down in a town called Nazareth. Thus was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophets: “He shall be called a Nazarene.”



Did you pick up the echoes of the other stories?

1. Bethlehem, King David's city?
2. The star as image of the Messiah?
3. The star and astrology?
4. "King of the Jews"?
5. Joseph the dreamer?
6. Israel going down to Egypt?
7. Israel coming out of Egypt?
8. The nations coming?
9. Pharaoh killing the infants?
10. Moses the saviour of his people?
11. Killing the King of the Jews?
12. Gifts of gold and frankincense?



Matthew wanted people to know that in all that Jesus did later in his life God was with us, just as he had been in the past, and Jesus is the one who tells us what God really wants.

Some more information

Luke dates Jesus' birth to the time of a census, which we know took place in 6 C.E. His sources must have got it wrong because in another place Luke shows that he knows that Jesus was born near the end of the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C.E. So Jesus was not born in the year 0 B.C.E or C.E., but four or five years earlier. That was a slight miscalculation from later centuries.

Matthew's story doesn't just re-use old stories and images. It also points to the future. By Matthew's time, writing about 50-60 years after the events, many people from nations outside of Israel had joined the community of followers of Jesus. They would have seen themselves following in the footsteps of the astrologers. It also refers to the future when it points to Jesus' execution as "King of the Jews": Pilate did what Herod wanted to do.



The story about astrologers is interesting for two reasons. Followers of Jesus have never really believed in astrology (horoscopes), but there was freedom to tell such a story, especially because "Star" was one of the terms being used for Messiahs, and people understood that stories of people's birth could be playful in their use of images.

Four times Matthew refers to fulfilment of what the prophets had said. This was another way, beside using the Bible stories, of suggesting a connection between Jesus and his story and the story of his people, Israel. The pieces that are cited had originally nothing to do with Jesus, but people liked to see patterns and liked to think of Jesus as fulfilling the hopes and dreams of his people.

Traditionally the story of the star is the focus of the last of the 12 days of Christmas, sometimes called Epiphany (Appearance), 6 January. Legends built up about the astrologers, who came to be called the wise men and because three gifts are named, people guessed there must have been three. Later people even invented names for them.