The Tenth Day of Christmas: Balaam and the Magi

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 January 2019

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Welcome back for this, the 10th day of Christmas. Today I'm returning to my study of echoes and parallels and symmetries within the stories of the Nativity and the infancy narratives of the Gospels.

Today I'm going to be looking at Matthew chapter 2 again, the characters of the Magi, and the connections that they have with characters in the Old Testament. So I've already discussed the way that they are related to the magicians of Pharaoh's court, and maybe we can broaden out that connection a bit further, because the magicians more generally are significant characters.
We see them in the court of Pharaoh, but we also see them later on in the story of Daniel. These magicians who fail to interpret the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, but then also the Belshazzar's feast and events like that, and the fact that Daniel is set above the soothsayers, the Chaldeans, the magicians, and these other diviners of the court.
And so we have in the East this group of magicians that are taught by a faithful Jewish saint, someone who's a righteous and faithful worshipper of the Lord, and who gives them presumably some knowledge concerning the truth, some knowledge concerning Israel's history, some knowledge concerning God's purpose and prophecy, and all these bodies of literature that came down to Israel.
I presume he would have acquainted them with some of that. What is the significance of this as a background? Well, it helps us to understand in part how these people might have known about what was going on in the star, and what that might have meant, the significance of someone coming from Judah, these sorts of things.
[1:46] It gives us some sense of a background for these people, why they might have come, what tradition they were from, how they got the knowledge that led them to that place.

Because seeing the star, presumably they knew that there was a meaning when they saw a star in a particular place, and that presumably came from, in part, Old Testament prophecy.
Another significant background that we haven't looked at to this point is the background in the story of Balaam and Balak. Balak is an opposing king, the king who seeks to curse the people of Israel as he sees them coming into his region, and he wants to summon this prophet Balaam to speak against them.
And Balaam resists, and then he's pushed, and then he goes along, and then he fails to perform what he was supposed to do. And there's this struggle between Balak and Balaam.
And Balaam eventually just bears the words of God and speaks those words that are given to him by God, even against his own intent. And we read this alongside the weird story of Balaam and his ass.
[3:01] If you read the story of Balaam and his ass alongside each other, you'll see, if you're paying attention, that Balaam's ass is a picture of Balaam himself. That Balaam is like Balak in relationship to his ass, and that relationship, that struggle to get the ass to do what he's supposed to do, and then the ass speaking to him with words that are put on his lips by God.

It's the story of Balaam and Balak. But it's played out on that miniature scale as a sort of parable of what this really means. Now, when we read the prophecy of Balaam, we'll see some significant details.
What we see, for instance, is chapter 23 following of Numbers. There's statements like, particularly in his fourth prophecy.
The utterance of Balaam, the son of Beor, and the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened, the utterance of him who hears the words of God, and who knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down with eyes opened wide.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-17 00:15:13

I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob. A scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of Tumult.
[4:28] And Edom shall be a possession. Seer also his enemies shall be a possession. While Israel does valiantly, out of Jacob one shall have dominion, and destroy the remains of the city.

So it seems to be a significant parallel. There's a reference to a star that will come out of Jacob, a significant star. And then there's also this reference to the enemies of Edom and Seer, which presumably we could associate with the Idumean king Herod.
He's a king from that region. That struggle is also something that helps us to understand some of the events that are taking place here.
This evil king Herod, that tries to destroy the people of God, and tries to get these people with diviners, soothsayers, magicians, this group of people to go on his side against this son that has been born.
And as in this case, in the story of Balaam, the prophet does not cooperate. However, in the second case, in the case of the wise men, they are faithful.
[5:42] They are not like Balaam, who's an unrighteous prophet, who ends up speaking the words of God despite himself. Rather, these are faithful men who are warned in a dream and do not help Herod.

And so there's a similarity, but there's also significant differences. But more generally, what we see is that relationship between Israel and the magicians and the diviners and the prophets of other nations.
These are not figures who are simply written off, who are simply dismissed. There is a way in which God uses them to achieve his purposes. God overcomes them in certain cases.
They are adversaries. And in other cases, they are submitted to the wisdom of Israel. That's what we see in the story of Daniel. At the end of Daniel's struggle with these figures, he's placed over them.
And so he's the leader of this group. And so what we see is even the magicians can be tamed to God's purposes. And even someone like Balaam can be subdued to make him speak God's word.
[6:47] And this great prophecy of the Messiah that's going to come. Now, the Messiah, the description is perhaps interesting. We have, for instance, he bows down, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion who shall rouse him.

And that should be fairly familiar to us from the story of Genesis, where in Genesis we read, Judah, you are he whom your brother shall praise.
Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies. Your father's children shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's well. From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down. He lies down as a lion.
And as a lion, who shall rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet until Shiloh comes. And to him shall be the obedience of the people, binding his donkey to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine.
He washes his garments in wine and his clothes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine and his teeth whiter than milk. And so we see a reference to this prophecy that refers to Judah.
[7:56] And so this ruler that's about to come, this ruler that's going to come, is going to come from Judah. He's one who's associated with a star, with a scepter, and he's someone who's in this struggle with these other kings, whether it's Balak or whether it's the king of Edom, in this case Herod.

There are a lot more things that we could say about this, but this is significant background, I think. And as we take these things together, what we see is it's not just one thread of typology. It's not just one echo.
There's a number of these things working alongside each other in a musical way so that sometimes there are contrasts, sometimes there are similarities. And as these things are explored, we get a rich and delicately drawn portrait of who Christ is, how he relates to these other figures.
And we have rich characterisation of characters. We often think of characters in purely good or bad frames. So, for instance, when we think about the magicians, we think about the magicians of Pharaoh's court as pure opponents.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-17 00:15:13

But yet, within Scripture, we see these pictures being developed in very careful ways, where characters can have negative traits, and yet those negative traits can end up being turned for good later on.
[9:13] And so it's worth paying attention to the way that some things are reversed, inverted, some things are developed and fleshed out. And characters are rich and multifaceted, not just flat characters that serve one particular narrative purpose as mere antagonists or protagonists.

Characters like Joseph, for instance. Joseph is a complex character. He's not a pure ideal. There are ways in which Joseph has negative characteristics to him.
Or Judah as well. Judah has negative and positive characteristics. And characters such as the Magi, when they're understood in the light of this, we can connect them to the magicians.
We can connect them to Balaam. And we can see inversions and similarities. And we can see the way that there's a continual thread of God's work throughout. I hope that this helps.
And if you have any questions on these videos or anything else, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and other videos like it, please do so using my Patreon account and my PayPal account.
[10:16] The links to all of those are below. Thank you very much for listening. I've enjoyed doing these and I have two days left to go. I haven't quite decided what I'm going to do. There's a number of different ideas I have.

And it's choosing which ones I'll be most interested in exploring. Lord willing, you'll be back again tomorrow with me. And I hope to see you then. God bless.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-09-17 00:15:13