The significance of dreams and the star in Matthew's infancy narrative

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Abstract

The phenomena of dreams and the star of Bethlehem in Matthew's birth narrative have intrigued scholars through the ages. Scholarship in this regard went through the stages of identifying the origin of the material and of arguing the historicity of these events. Currently scholarship is moving into a new stage of investigating the meaning of these narratives. Without engaging the arguments developed by the first two stages mentioned, I investigate the significance of these unusual forms of revelation in this article.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on the infancy narrative in Matthew has passed through two stages. The first stage was in recognizing that the birth material probably had a different origin than that of Jesus' ministry and passion. It is commonly assumed that the birth narrative represent a mosaic of parts, all combining to celebrate the birth of the Messiah. The second stage focussed on the historicity of the infancy stories. The overall striking fact is that Matthew and Luke tell two very different stories that agree in very few details, almost contradicting one another. Furthermore, the concept of dreams as portrayed in Matthew's narrative does not correlate with the modern view of dreams. Another complicating factor is that reportedly startling events such as a moving star in a totally irregular way left no astronomical record (Brown 1975:575). This has lead some scholars to believe that the story of the dreams and the star of Bethlehem were simply fiction invented by the author. Such an option is opted for especially by those engaged in the so-called Quests for the Historical Jesus.[1] But scholarship has now entered a third, more positive, stage by investigating the meaning and significance of this

[1] Significantly two very prominent nineteenth-century scholars writing on "the life of Jesus" ignore the Star of Bethlehem without any comment: Ernest Renan, *La Vie de Jesus* and D F Strauss, *A new life of Jesus*. In spite of widespread hesitancy concerning the historicity of this narrative there is no insuperable reason why one must deny that the tradition used by Matthew is historical in core (Hagner 1993:25).

narrative. What role does this narrative play in the gospel of this specific Christian community?

In this article I function within this third stage and do therefore not engage the discussion of the origin or historicity of Matthew's infancy narrative. My intention is rather to investigate the meaning and significance of the startling phenomena of the dreams (with their angelic appearances) and the star in this narrative. Though it need not be denied that a historical tradition underlies this passage, the narrative reveals traces of *haggadah* wherein the historical narrative finds its primary purpose in the conveying of theological truth (Hagner 1993:25). Read in context with the declaration of the author of Hebrews: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" (Heb 1:1), these phenomena in Matthew become even more noteworthy. The modes of revelation in the Old Testament varied in external phenomena, such as visions, voices and dreams. Matthew apparently links up with such Old Testament forms of revelation, and then transcends to the revelation in Jesus.

2. DREAMS

2.1 Matthew's dream reports

Of all the New Testament writers, Matthew especially deals with revelation through dreams. The rest of the New Testament has few dreams or visions: Paul has a vision of a man of Macedon (Ac 16:9), Cornelius saw the angel of the Lord (Ac 10:1-8), Peter heard a voice with a vision (Ac 10:9-20) and Paul received encouragement from the angel of the Lord (Ac 18:9, 23:11 and 27:23). However, these visions can hardly be considered as real dream reports.[2] This list of visions is nevertheless short when compared with the distinct references to dreams in Matthew.

Matthew contains six references to dreams, five in the infancy narrative[3] and one in the passion narrative:

- "But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream (κατ᾽ ὄναρ)[4] and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be

[2] Scholars delineate dream reports according to form-critical elements: Situation provided by the narrative, an introduction to the dream report, a theophany, a dream reference, a recipient, mentioning of the place, the auditory address formula, the message, termination of the dream and the fulfilment of the command (Gnuse 1990:107). The dreams or visions in Acts lack most of these significant elements.

[3] Full accounts are given of three of these (1:20-25; 2:13-15 and 2:19-21), distinguished not only by the presence of the message, but also by reference to the angel of the Lord.

[4] Ὄναρ and ὄνειρος are the most common dream-vision terminologies (Dodson 2006:40).

afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit ..." (Mt 1:20-24).

- "And having been warned in a dream (κατ' ὄναρ) not to go back to Herod, they (the magi) returned to their country by another route" (Mt 2:12).

- "When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream (κατ' ὄναρ). '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'" (Mt 2:13).

- "After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream (κατ' ὄναρ) to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead ..." (Mt 2:19-21).

- "But when he (Joseph) heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream (κατ' ὄναρ), he withdrew to the district of Galilee" (Mt 2:22).

- "While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream (κατ' ὄναρ) because of him'" (Mt 27:19).

The five dreams in Matthew's infancy narrative are very similar in presentation and function and can be considered as a cluster of dreams (Dodson 2002:50). Commentators have noted that the language of these dreams, especially the fuller reports, is quite stereotypic (cf Knox 1957:122; Malina 1967:122; Conrad 1985:656; Soares Prabhu 1967:185). An angel of the Lord appears in a dream to deliver an oral message; the message carries both warning and command to travel somewhere; the end of the dream is mentioned and the fulfilment of the command by the dream recipient is described in the following narrative.

Even deeper structural similarities between the dream reports can be recognized based on the component parts of the Matthean dreams (Gnuse 1990:107):

1) Situation (1:18-19; 2:9-11; 2:13; 2:19; 2:22).
2) Introduction to the dream report:

    2.1) Participle and post-positive participle δε (genitive absolute with full dream reports and aorist participle with dream references) (1:20; 2:12; 2:13; 2:19; 2:22).

    2.2) "Behold" (ἰδού) with full dream reports (1:20; 2:13; 2:19).

3) Theophany (angel of the Lord) (1:20; 2:13; 2:19).
4) Dream reference (κατ' ὄναρ) (1:20; 2:12; 2:13; 2:19; 2:22).
5) Recipient (1:20; 2:13; 2:19).
6) Place (optional as the narrative often provides this) (2:19).
7) Auditory address formula (λέγων) (1:20; 2:13; 2:19).
8) Message (1:20b-21; 2:12; 2:13b; 2:20; 2:22).
9) Termination of the dream (1:24; 2:14; 2:21).
10) Fulfilment of the command (1:24b; 2:12; 2:14-15; 2:21; 2:22).

According to the five dream reports in the infancy narrative, human recipients are directed to do something so as to protect the infant Jesus. This kind of divine intervention in the course of human affairs reminds of parallels with the patriarchs in Genesis, for example Abraham's and Jacob's night visions (Gn 15; 28) (Gnuse 1981:170; Hagner 1993:25). Scholars often analyze Matthew's dream narratives in terms of biblical and *midrashic* traditions which Matthew appropriated for his purposes (e.g. Brown 1993:45; Soares Prabhu 1976:223-225). Contemporary Jewish *midrash* used dreams as a mode of divine revelation due to respect for God. Matthew might have followed this trend for the sake of sentiment it would bring forth from his audience. Based on form-critical comparison, it seems that Matthew has mainly used the Elohist's[5] dream reports of Genesis as model. In Genesis the dream theophanies are connected to the angel of the Lord in Elohist texts – exemplifying the transcendence of God (Gnuse 1990:116). The Elohist source tends to underscore the aloofness of God to creation and is inclined to employ intermediaries like angels and dreams (Green 2000:402). Appropriate human response to Elohist reports is a fear of God and reverence. The Elohist multiplies episodes where sons were endangered. The Elohist is also critical of power excesses. Noteworthy is also the use of the introductory participle "behold" in the Matthean dream reports. This corresponds with *hinneh* that introduces the dream messages of the Elohist. The very clear statements in

[5] The Elohist as one of the four sources or strata underlying the Pentateuch is far from assured, nor do those who acknowledge these sources agree on their features. Nevertheless some coherent portrait of the Elohist emerges from scholarship.

terms of the fulfilment of the commands also correlate with the Genesis reports.

Scholars have also recognized remarkable resemblances with the Old Testament narratives. The annunciation to Joseph (Mt 1:20-24) follows the pattern of the typical annunciations of birth in the Old Testament, for example the birth of Isaac (Gn 17:15-21) and of Samson (Jdg 13). Matthew's portrayal of Joseph who receives revelation in dreams (Mt 1:20; 2:13, 19) and who goes down to Egypt (Mt 2:14) also reminds the reader of Joseph in the Old Testament, the dreamer (Gn 37:19), who went to Egypt, escaping an attempt on his life (Gn 37:28). Jesus' escape from Herod is also reminiscent of Moses' escape from the Pharaoh.[6] Later in his life Moses fled to Sinai and returned only when he heard from the Lord: "All those who were seeking your life are dead" (compare Ex 4:19 with Mt 2:20).

According to Jewish traditions God revealed Himself in dreams to biblical heroes, for example Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gn 28:12), Josephus's dreams (Gn 37:5-9) and Daniel's dream (Dn 2:19). According to Josephus Antiquites of the Jews 2.216-19 God promised Moses' father in a dream that He would keep the infant Moses safe (comparable with the dream Joseph as father of Jesus had).

Dreams experienced in sacred places were especially believed to be sacred. The Old Testament describes practices of incubation – receiving dreams by sleeping in a temple (e.g. Abram [Gn 15:12-13]; the calling of Samuel [1 Sm 3:3-4] and Solomon's dream [1 Ki 3:4-5]). Later rabbis believed that revelatory dreams could be secured through fasting (e.g. Ketub 12.3) or their ill pronouncement revoked through fasting (Pesiqta de Rab Kahana 28:2) (cf Keener 1999:96). In Matthew's narrative dreams do not occur in such sacred places. It probably signifies that God communicated to people beyond places as was commonly expected. This could echo something of the tension and "parting of the ways" (cf Dunn 1980, 1991; Stanton 1992:99-116) between the synagogue and the Matthean community as well as Matthew's openness to the Gentiles (Carter 2000:34; Sim 1998:15).[7] From emphases and distinctive linguistic and cultural features it seems that Matthew belongs to a Jewish Christian context (Ellis 1991:82; Viljoen 2007:320), while he reveals

[6] The Biblical narrative of Moses' birth had undergone substantial expansion by the first century AD as can be seen in the writings of Josephus (Ant 2.205, 206). In the expanded narrative Pharaoh was warned by his scribes that a child was about to be born who would threaten his crown, and he and his advisers decided to kill all the Hebrew male children. At the same time Moses' father had a divine revelation in a dream that his pregnant wife would bear a child who would save Israel – the child who escaped Pharaoh's massacre (cf Brown 1975:577).

[7] However, to assume that Matthew is unqualified pro-Gentile reveals that not all evidence is taken into account. Sim (1995:19-48) convincingly indicates that Matthew portrays Gentiles both positively as negatively.

hostility towards non-Christian Judaism, together with an approval of gentile mission (Saldarini 1994:43; Viljoen 2006b:245).[8]

2.2 Dreams in the Greco-Roman world

Dreams were also of great importance in the Greco-Roman world. Commentators have pointed to the popularity of dreams in writings contemporary to Matthew (Gnuse 1990:114). When compared with Greco-Roman dream narratives, it is clear that the dream narratives in Matthew formally correspond to those in the Greco-Roman world: (1) scene-setting, (2) dream-vision terminology, (3) dream-vision proper, and (4) reaction and response (Dodson 2006:46). Based simply on these formal correspondences it is probable that an ancient reader of Matthew's dream narratives would have the same literary expectations as he would expect from Greco-Roman dream narratives.

It is important to realize the difference between the modern conception of dreams and that of the ancient world. The modern notion is that dreams originate from within one self as a product of one's subconscious. The ancients believed that dreams were objective means through which the spirit world could communicate to human beings. Ancients therefore gave considerable attention to the interpretation and categorization of dreams[9] (Dodson 2002:40). Apparitions from the spirit world were regarded as the characteristic of dreams. While dreams of the pagans (e.g. Iliad of Homer 23.65, 83-85) and Jews (e.g. 'Abot de Rabbi Nathan 40A) also included apparitions[10] of deceased persons, Matthew only describes apparitions from angels.[11]

Dreams were often regarded as grounds for faith. In Greece and Macedonia (e.g. Iliad of Homer 1.63; 5.150), Rome (Tacitus' *Annales* 2.14), the East (e.g. Herodotus' *History* 1.34, 107, 127), Carthage (e.g. Dio Cassius' *Roman History* bk. 13), Palestine (e.g. Josephus' *Jewish War* 1.328; 2.116), among later rabbis (e.g. 'Abot de Rabbi Nathan 40 A) and in magical papyri (*Papyri Graecae Magica* 4.2076-80) people believed that dreams conveyed divine messages (Keener 1999:95).

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[8] Matthew's Gospel implies a reader who is rooted in the traditions of Israel Viljoen (2006a:152). Jesus' mission is to Israel. However, converts from all nations are welcomed and expected (Viljoen 2006b:259).

[9] Artemidorus divided dreams into five categories; enigmatic dreams, prophetic vision, oracular dreams, nightmares, and apparitions (Dodson 2002:40)

[10] Miller (1990:401-4) thinks that early Judaism blurred the older distinction between dreams and night visions.

[11] In Matthew's narrative angels only appear in dreams until the appearance of the angel at the empty grave after Jesus' resurrection (Mt 28:2).

2.3 Function of dreams in Matthew's infancy narratives

Generally commentators observe that the New Testament authors are critical of dreams, for the authors wish nothing to intrude into the centrality of Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation (Gnuse 1990:117). Some have therefore called the Matthean dreams as the lowest form of revelation found in the New Testament. Yet, when dreams do occur they are clear auditory message dreams, for God must be understood clearly. The simplicity of New Testament dreams reports contrasts with the bizarre Hellenistic reports which required further interpretation. The stereotypic simplicity of Matthew's dream reports may be a deliberate form of respect for the divine.

Dreams prompt direct action in the plot. They provide the tool by which God clearly direct human affairs:

- Joseph planned to divorce Mary quietly, but because of a dream he took Mary as his wife (Mt 1:19-24).

- Because of a dream, the wise men did not return to Herod who intended to harm the child (Mt 2:12).

- Joseph took Mary and the child and escaped to Egypt because he was informed in a dream that Herod was about to kill the child (Mt 2:13-14).

- When Herod died, Joseph was informed in a dream that it was safe to return, and so he took Mary and the child and returned (Mt 2:19-21).

- Joseph is warned in a dream that Archelaus was ruling, and therefore he went and lived in Galilee (Mt 2:22-23).

The immediate command-execution sequence indicates that human obedience to divine will is blessed. "Obedience brings deliverance" (Gnuse 1990:119).

These dreams also function as mediums for divine action. As vehicles of divine action, the dreams correlate with the Holy Spirit and the star. Through these dreams God protected the child Jesus. Three of the five dreams prompted action that would fulfil prophecy (Mt 1:23; 2:15, 23). God leads his people to their ultimate destiny.

These dreams function structurally in Matthew's Gospel. Five dreams are placed in the beginning (in the birth narrative) and one at the end (of Pilate's wife in Mt 27:19)[12].

[12] The parallels between Matthew's infancy and passion narratives are remarkable. Both have formula quotations, Gentiles (Magi and Pilate's wife) who have dreams and Jewish leaders with Herod and Pilate respectively.

Having observed that the Matthean dream reports are probably form critically dependant upon the Elohist dreams in Genesis, the function of the Matthean dream narratives becomes even more remarkable. Dreams occur almost exclusively in the Elohist source in Genesis. They serve as a form of revelation which assumes a distant deity. Dreams are indirect forms of divine theophany signifying the distance between God and the human reality. Matthew utilizes this connotation of dreams to deliberately contrast the distant revelation of God in dreams with the immediate incarnation. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God because of his immanent presence as Immanuel.

Another reason why Matthew may have used dreams has probably resulted from the Jewish inclination of the gospel. Jewish Christian would have been familiar with penteteuchal dreams and their associations. Dreams were a form of theophany that regarded God respectfully as a distant deity similar to what the expression "Kingdom of Heaven" tended to do. The five dreams may allude to the five books of the Torah.[13]

3. STARS

3.1 Matthew's report of the Star of Bethlehem

The second type of divine theophany comes in the form of a significant star. Magi from the East arrived in 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" (Mt 2:1-2). What exactly they meant by "his star" remains unsaid. Matthew simply tells that "the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them (προῆγεν) until it stopped over the place where the child was (ἕως ἐλθὼν ἐστάθη ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον)" (Mt 2:9).

The star of Bethlehem was strange, even surreal. The great astronomer Johanes Kepler speculated in the early seventeenth century that the star was in fact a thrice repeated conjunction (nova or supernova) of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of Pisces that occurred in 7 BC (Rosenberg 1972:105). Some scholars suggested a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars followed by a temporary bright star in 7-6 BC (cf France 1985:82). Davies & Allison (2004:234) argues that the star refers to an angel referring to the angelic character in Jewish thought. Three explanations of the star are commonly proposed: (1) A supernova, which, however, is not documented for that time. (2) A comet, but the often mentioned Halley's Comet of the year 12/11 BC came too early. (3) The conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which appeared three times in 7/6 BC fits the situation quite well, as Jupiter was

[13] This allusion could be another example of how Matthew views Jesus as the "new Moses" (cf Allison 1993:137-270).

considered as the royal star and Saturn as the star of the Sabbath and the star of the Jews. However, philologically ἀστήρ means an individual star, not a group of stars (ἄστρον). At the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn in 7/6 BC the planets did come that close to each other to be considered as one star (Luz 1989:132). Matthew speaks of the star appearing, disappearing, and reappearing. And the idea that a star high up in the sky could guide people below on earth to a specific place does not make sense to the modern reader.

In the current scholarship, little debate is going on about the historicity of the star, which was typical of the traditional exegesis. The explanation of the star as endorsed by many scholars nowadays is that it is a story: it is not a historical fact, nor scientific data (e.g. Brown 1975:574; Paffenroth 1994:79). Therefore, the appropriate question to ask of the text is not what really happened, but rather what the recorded events mean? What does is mean for Jesus to be the Christ?[14]

3.2 Traditional exegesis

Traditionally exegesis was focussed on what happened factually with the star of Bethlehem, though little attention was paid to the significance of the event.

Chrysostom proposed the solution that the star came down (κάτω κατέβη) and stood over the head of the child (ὑπερ αὐτῆς ἔστη τῆς κεφαλῆς τοῦ παιδίου) (*Hom Mt* 6.2(3)) (PG 57.64-65). Several centuries later Theophylact had a similar explanation; the star descended (κατέβη) from the heights and came closer to the earth (προσγειότερος) to show the spot where Christ was. The star descended and stood over the head of the child (ἐπανω τῆς κεφαλῆς τοῦ παιδίου ἔστη) (*Comm. Mt Ad* 2:9) (PG 123.165B-C). The *Protoevangelium* of James (second century) also mentions that the star came down and stood over the head of the child (ἔστη ἐπι τὴν κεφαλὴν τοῦ παιδίου) (21:3). The interpretation of Chrysostom, Theophylact and the *Protoevangelium* of James according to which the star came down from heaven to the earth, was common among the church fathers (Irenaeus, *Dem* 58 (SC 406); Origen, *Hom. Num.* 18.2[4]; Ephraem, *Comm. Diat.* 20-21).

Calvin (1979 [1563], 132) went further in his explanation. He commented that the star of Bethlehem was not a natural star. It was a real phenomenon, but unique and miraculous. Thus the star was a grand and impressive herald of Christ's birth.

[14] As stated above, I do not engage the argument about the historicity of the events, but discuss the significance of the narrative.

3.3 Stars in antiquity

To get a better understanding of the meaning of the star of Bethlehem, it is important to recognize the significance of stars and astrology in antiquity. Most scholars identify the Magi with a priestly class of Eastern astrologers[15] coming from Persia or Babylon (Davies & Allison 2004:227). The Chaldeans or Persians were known for astrology, prediction of the future, dream interpretation and special wisdom (cf Philo's *Dreams* 1.53; Herodotus' *History* 1.107, 127; 7.12-19; Josephus' *Antiquites of the Jews* 10.195-203). Astrology was also known in Greco-Roman paganism (cf *Horace Ode* 2.17.17-25). Reference to comets or other phenomena of light related to the birth of great men were widespread in antiquity. A star allegedly guided Aeneas to the place where Rome was to be found (Virgil's *Aeneid* 2.694) (Keener 1999:99). Romans respected astrological confirmation of its rulers and emperors feared astrological predictions of their downfall (Oster 1982:220). Magi reportedly predicted the fall of rulers and the rise of new rulers (Pliny, *Natural History* 1.47; 30.6). Contemporary ancient writers often linked heavenly signs to foreshadowing major events (e.g. Tacitus' *Annales* 14.22). Because of these wide spread believes, Rabbis commonly described Gentiles as "worshippers of the stars" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanh 59a; 'Abod Zar 3a; Sipra on Lv 20:7) (Davies & Allison 2004:228).

The formulation αὐτοῦ τὸν ἀστέρα (Mt 2:2) refers to the widespread idea that each person had a star; important and rich people had bright stars, the stars of the others were insignificant. According to then popular astrology such a star appeared at birth and was extinguished at death (Luz 1990:135). The astrologers in Matthew's gospel probably were actually not watchers of the skies, but calculators of mathematics of the position of heavenly bodies. "Seeing his star" signifies that "running through calculations, the Magi saw something auspicious ... that revealed the newborn king of Judea" (Molnar 1999:42). Regal horoscopes were developed that would reveal a royal birth in Judea. According to Matthew the magi were led by this (imperfect) guide of astrology, to meet the Messiah.

3.4 Stars in Jewish literature

Although the Hebrew Bible forbade astrology (Dt 4:19; Is 47:13), it had also infiltrated much of Jewish thought and practice of that time. Observant Jews affirmed God's sovereign rule over the stars (cf Josephus' *Antiquites of the Jews* 1.156; Philo's *De Opificio Mundi* 46). Yet in folk belief some Jews accepted the star's relative authority over nations (cf Philo's *Creation* 58-59).

[15] Astrologers studied the relative movement of celestial bodies and interpreted their findings as having influence on human affairs and the natural world.

Astrological speculation persisted from the earliest days of Israel's history. Jewish sources attributed significance to periodic conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn. Such conjunctions heralded earthly events such as the impending wars, the births of kings, great prophets, miracle workers, revealers of secrets and even the Messiah (Rosenberg 1972:105).

Herod thus had much reason to be upset by the magi's report (Mt 2:3). An astrological signal of another ruler obviously indicated his own downfall. In those days celestial signs were commonly interpreted as signalling the death of one ruler and the consequent rise of another (Malina & Rohrbach 1992:32). News of a star signalling a new ruler would undoubtedly have upset a ruler as paranoid as Herod.[16] Other rulers were reportedly also paranoid about astrologers and some were even prepared to kill their own descendants to keep the throne (Herodotus' *History* 1.107-110) (Keener 1999:102). A star also occurs in the story of Abraham's child who is chased by Nimrod (Luz 1989:131). Thus the opposition between the king of the Jews, Herod, and the royal child, Jesus, is emphasized by the star.

3.5 Function of the Star of Bethlehem in Matthew's infancy narrative

Matthew's audience would most likely have recalled the Magi whom Daniel's narrative depicted as enemies and pagans (Dn 2:2:10). However this group of people who were part of the court of the Persian ruler whose role it was to honour their Persian ruler as "king of the kings" (cf Suetonius Caligula 5)[17] came to honour Jesus instead (Hagner 1993:27; Keener 1999:99). Without condoning astrology, Matthew challenges his audience to also accept outsiders as even the most pagan of pagans approached and honoured Jesus (cf also Mt 8:5-13; 15:21-28). This narrative fits Matthew's well known theme of the Gentile mission (Viljoen 2006b:246). "For one special event in history, the God who rules the heavens chose to reveal himself where pagans were looking" (Keener 1999:100). The astrologers were the first Gentile converts of the Gospel, a conversion echoed and extended throughout the Gospel and climaxing in the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations" (Mt 28:19).

The star in Matthew is also reminiscent of the star referred to in Numbers 24:17: "A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.

[16] The Moses *haggadah* is very close to the Matthean story. Magi (TgJ pn Ex 1:15; ExR 1:18 on Ex 1:22) or scribes (Josephus, *Ant* 2.205) predict for Pharaoh the birth of Moses that would become its conqueror. Pharaoh is very upset (Josephus, *Ant* 2.206) and orders the infanticide (cf Luz 1989, 131). The same cast of characters is present: the wicked ruler, the chief priests and scribes that aligned against the newborn King.

[17] Earlier texts apply "King of kings" to the Babylonian ruler (cf Ezr 7:12; Ezk 26:7; Dn 2:37).

He will crush the foreheads of Moab ...". The Matthean narrative echoes the LXX version of Numbers 22-24 more closely than the Hebrew. According to Numbers 22-24 Moses was leading Israel through the Trans-Jordanian region on his way to the Promised Land when he came across another wicked king, Balak. Like the Pharaoh of Egypt, Balak the king of Moab also tried to destroy him. He summoned the seer named Balaam from the East (Nm 23:7) to use his skills against Moses and Israel. Balaam was an occult visionary that would have been called in Matthew's time a *magus.*[18] But instead of cursing Moses and Israel, he had a positive vision for: "There shall come a man out of Israel's seed, and he shall rule many nations ... I see him, but not now; I behold him but not close: a star shall rise from Jacob, and a man shall come forth from Israel" (Nm 7:17 (LXX)). The passage refers to the emergence of the Davidic monarchy. David was the star that Balaam had foreseen. In later Judaism this passage was interpreted as referring to the Messiah, the king of Davidic descent (Brown 1975:578). As Balaam saw the Star of David rise, the New Testament magi saw the star of the King of the Jews rising (Davies & Allison 1988:235).

Yet even the supernatural guidance of the star could bring them only to Jerusalem. The Magi must have assumed that they would find the new born king in the palace of Herod in Jerusalem. They needed more specific direction to where the King was born (Mt 2:2). Celestial revelation was incomplete. They finally needed God's revelation in the Scriptures. Herod not knowing himself where the king would be born, gathered religious experts for advice (Mt 2:4). They immediately identified from Micah 5:2 Bethlehem as the place where the Messiah would be born (Mt 2:5-6). Nature and Scriptures combine to direct the magi to Jesus (Viljoen 2007:315). Thus Matthew contrasts the naive belief of the pagan Magi with the murderous deceit of Herod and unbelief of the religious experts who know the Scriptures. He also contrasts the usurper Herod with Jesus, the real King of the Jews.

The Magi left for Bethlehem and Matthew reports that "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" (Mt 2:9-10). The specific movement of the star and its ability to locate the specific place where the king was born sounds implausible. Some modern artistic portrayals of the event suggested that the star had a tail pointing to the specific location. Such a suggestion obviously is highly speculative. Soares Prabhu (1976:280) fittingly suggests that this described movement of the star should be seen as

[18] In New Testament times the word μάγοι covered a wide range of people who practiced occult cults: astrologers, fortunetellers, magicians of varying degrees of plausibility (Brown 1975:577). Matthew refers to astrologers.

alluding to the pillar of cloud guiding Israel in the wilderness. While the magi followed the star, God used it in a manner reminiscent of the salvation of Israel from Egypt. Accordingly some early Christian readers identified the star with "a pillar of light" (cf *Syrian Chronicle of Zuqnin*) (Keener 1999:104). The Magi travelled by night so that they could be led by the star. The reader realizes God's guidance which is at work in the entire event.

The Magi's adoration of Jesus probably alludes the homage of nations in Ps 72:10, Is 60:6 and/or to the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon (1 Ki 10:1-13) (Davies & Allison 2004:230). A *midrash* on the Queen of Sheba includes a miraculous star. If Matthew has these texts in mind, his narrative depicts Jesus as the King for Solomon's greatest Son (cf Mt 12:42: "The Queen of the South will rise at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here"). Matthew is exhorting his audience to be as receptive to Jesus as the Magi were.

Matthew writes his gospel in a time when many Gentiles had been taken up in the church. According to the evangelist there was a twofold reaction to the birth of Jesus as Messiah. The Christological news draws believers and these believers are the magi, who are Gentiles. The Gentiles did not have explicit revelation as was given to the Jews, but God revealed God self to the magi through astrology. This revelation is imperfect; it tells them of the birth, but it does not tell them where they can find the newborn King. The special revelation is found in the Scriptures (Mt 2:2-6). The Gentiles come to worship, but they must learn from the Jews with their knowledge of the contents of Micah 5:2 where to find Him (Hagner 1993:25). But paradoxically some of those who have the Scriptures are not willing to worship Jesus as King. King Herod and the chief priests and the scribes conspire against the Messiah and the wicked king orders the killing of the boys. God spares Jesus and eventually brings his Son victoriously back from Egypt. Even people who have the Scriptures reject Jesus, while Gentiles come, and with the help of the Scriptures, find and worship Him.

4. CONCLUSION

When comparing the phenomena of the dreams and star of Bethlehem with the significance of such reported phenomena in the ancient world, the intention of Matthew with the infancy narrative becomes more meaningful.

When Jesus was born, dreams (in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds) were regarded as indirect forms of divine revelation signifying the distance between the spiritual and human reality. Matthew's dream reports are comparable with those of the Greco-Roman world. However, they are

specifically reminiscent of dream reports found in the alleged Elohist source of Genesis, which regarded God respectfully as a distant deity. Matthew deliberately utilizes contemporary connotation of dreams to accentuate the immediate incarnation. Jesus became the ultimate revelation of the immanent presence of God as Immanuel. With the earthly ministry of Jesus dreams therefore faded in importance since Jesus is the new and final revelation of God. Matthew begins the description of Jesus with dream reports in his infancy narratives, but once Jesus, the new Moses, starts his ministry and teaching, dreams are no longer needed (cf Heb 1:1-2). Dreams were preludes to the final revelation in Jesus Christ. Dreams gave way to the One who was greater.

With their use of augury related to the remarkable star the magi are directed to the Christ child. Guided by the imperfect astrology, the pagan Magi became the first Gentile converts. Based on astrological speculations in Hebrew folk lore Herod planned his murderous deceit of the newborn King of the Jews. Jewish religious experts fail to act upon Scriptural guidance and do not acknowledge Jesus as Messiah.

Matthew has functionally utilized the reported dreams and star of Bethlehem as a sophisticated literary feature in celebrating the birth of Immanuel and Christ. He is recognized by both Jews and gentiles. The magi are regarded as the *primitiae gentium* (the first fruits of the Gentiles).[19] After the death and resurrection of Jesus, God would be worshiped in all parts of the then known world (both by Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles) according to the pattern of the worship of the baby by the magi.

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[19] This formulation as interpretation of the text probably was first used by Augustine, Serm. 200.1 and 202.1.

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