Welcome back for this, the tenth day of Christmas. Today I am returning to my study of echoes, parallels, and symmetries within the stories of the Nativity and the infancy narratives of the gospels. Today I am going to be looking at Matthew 2 again, the characters of the Magi, and the connections that they have with characters in the Old Testament.

I have already discussed the way that they are related to the magicians or 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—the magicians who fail to interpret the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar. We see them at Belshazzar’s feast and events like 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 is a righteous and faithful worshiper 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 Judea, these sorts of things. 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 have not looked at to this point is the background in the story of Balaam and Balak. Balak is an opposing king, a 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. Balaam initially resists, and then he is pushed, and goes along, then he fails to perform what he was supposed to do. And there is this struggle between Balak and Balaam. 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 all of this alongside the weird story of Balaam and his ass. If you read the story of Balaam and his ass alongside each other, you will see—if you are paying attention—that Balaam’s ass is a picture of Balaam himself. Balaam is like Balak in relationship to his ass, and that relationship—that struggle to get the ass to do what he is supposed to do, and then the ass speaking to him with words that are put on his lips by God—is the story of Balaam and Balak, but it is 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 will see some significant details. What we see, for instance, is—following Numbers 23—there are 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 has the knowledge of the Most High,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Who falls down, with eyes wide open:

“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.

“AndEdom shall be a possession;
Seir 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.”

This seems to be a noteworthy parallel: there is a reference to a star that will come out of Jacob, a significant star. And then there is also this reference to the enemies of Edom/Seir, which, presumably, we could associate with the Idumean King Herod, 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, tries to destroy the people of God and tries to get diviners, soothsayers, magicians, and other such people to join 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. They are not like Balaam, who is an unrighteous prophet, who ends up speaking the words of God despite himself. Rather, these are faithful men who were warned in a dream and do not help Herod. And so, there is a similarity but there are also significant differences.

More generally, what we see is the relationship between Israel and the magicians, 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 can be adversaries. And in other cases, they are submitted to the wisdom of Israel. That is what we see in the story of Daniel, at the end of Daniel’s struggle with these figures. He is placed over them. And so, he is the leader of this group. 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, and this great prophecy of the Messiah that is going to come.

Now, concerning 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?” That should be fairly familiar to us from the story of Genesis, where we read,

“Judah, you are he whom your brothers 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 whelp;
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 washed his garments in wine,
And his clothes in the blood of grapes.
His eyes are darker than wine,
And his teeth whiter than milk.

We see a reference to this prophecy that refers to Judah. This ruler that is going to come is going to come from Judah. He is one who is associated with a star, with a scepter, and he is someone who is in the struggle with these other kings, whether it is Balak or whether it is 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 is not just one thread of typology. It is not just one echo. These are a number of these things, working alongside each other in a musical way, so that sometimes there are contrasts and 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 characterization of characters.

We often think of characters in purely good or bad frames. For instance, when we think about the magicians, we think about the magicians of Pharaoh’s court as pure opponents. 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.

It is worth paying attention to the way that some things are reversed or inverted. Some things are developed and fleshed out. And characters are rich and multifaceted—not just flat characters that serve one particular narrative purposes, as mere antagonists or protagonists. Characters like Joseph, for instance. Joseph is a complex character. He is not a pure ideal. There are ways in which Joseph has negative characteristics to him—Judah as well, for that matter. Judah has negative and positive characteristics. And characters such as the Magi, when they are 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 is a continual thread of God’s work throughout.