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# The News of Jesus' Birth

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-15

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Wisemen, Christmas,

## Introduction

This morning we will consider the news of Jesus' birth. That news brought wise men to Jerusalem not long after his birth. The story of Jesus of the wise men is a fairly well known part of the Christmas story. However, Matthew is the only gospel writer to include this part of the story. This causes the reader to wonder why. What does Matthew want us to know? What truth is he aiming to communicate? How does he want us to respond. The story unfolds in four different locations;

- 1) the streets of Jerusalem (v.1-2),
- 2) the assembly room of the king (v.3-8),
- 3) the house in Bethlehem (v.9-12), and
- 3) the dream of Joseph (v.13-15).

## The Streets of Jerusalem (v.1-2)

We begin with a scene that takes place in the streets of Jerusalem.

**Matthew 2:1-2 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

It is interesting to consider what Matthew does *not* tell us about the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. He tells us nothing about the census, the travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the angelic announcement in the fields, nor the visit of the shepherds. He does tell us about the miraculous conception of Jesus (1:18-25), which we considered last week, and then he fast-forwards to events that took place about two years<sup>1</sup> after the birth of Jesus. What is evermore interesting is what he *does* tell us. Only Matthew tells us about this incredible visit of these

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 2:16.

"wise men from the east." No other gospel writer recounts this portion the story. This begs the question of why?

## Eastern Visitors in the Streets

As the story of Jesus' beginning continues, Matthew takes us straight to the streets of Jerusalem where newly arrived eastern visitors begin asking questions that stir up the whole city, including the local king. These visitors are called "**wise men from the east.**"

## Wise Men

The phrase '**wise men,**' translates one plural Greek word, *magoi*, which has been transliterated into English as, *magi*. From it we have our word magician. The ancient word *magoi* most broadly referred to "men of wisdom who studied the stars."<sup>2</sup>

The word is plural in Greek, thus there were more than one, but Matthew does not tell us exactly how many magi there were. Tradition has assumed there were three which most likely results from the three different gifts given to Jesus, gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Mt. 2:11).

Prior to the first century, "the term was used for a priestly caste of Medes who enjoyed special power to interpret dreams."<sup>3</sup> The word is used several times in the book of Daniel<sup>4</sup> and there is translated as *magicians*, which in that context, referred to men of understanding "in the Babylonian Empire."<sup>5</sup> A earliest uses of the word "referred to priests and experts in mysteries in Persia and Babylon," but by the first century "it applied to a wide range of people whose practices included astrology, dream interpretation, study of sacred writings, the pursuit of wisdom, and magic."<sup>6</sup> Thus, these men were among the most educated, intelligent, highly esteemed, and wealthiest men of their day.

## From the East

Matthew tells us that they were "**from the east.**" This means that their home was either in Persia, Babylon, or Arabia.<sup>7</sup> Many scholars believe that Babylon is the most likely country of origin given the Babylonian connection to the origin of the term *magoi*, the historical interest in astrology rooted in Babylon, and the fact that "a large Jewish community lived there as a result of the exile."<sup>8</sup> However, other scholars see Arabia as the better option since this was the belief

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<sup>2</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 384.

<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 84–85.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 85.

<sup>6</sup> ESV Study Bible note at Matthew 2:1.

<sup>7</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Alexander E. Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 2015), 66.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

of the early church and the oldest “extant commentary about the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, written about A.D. 160 by Justin Martyr,” states, “The wise men from Arabia came to Bethlehem and worshiped the child and offered to him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”<sup>9</sup> The fact that these men were from Arabia is five times mentioned in this commentary and is also affirmed by the early church fathers, Tertullian and Clement of Rome.<sup>10</sup>

### Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh (v.11)

The gifts they brought also may point to an Arabian origin since “gold was mined in Arabia” and “frankincense and myrrh are harvested from trees that only grow in southern Arabia.”<sup>11</sup> However, the origin of the gifts do not dictate the origin of the givers. These wise men were certainly men of considerable wealth and thus, would have had sufficient means to purchase imported spices even if they did hail from Babylon.<sup>12</sup>

### Isaiah's Prophetic Vision

Another clue that these men may have come from Arabia is found in Isaiah.

Isaiah 60:1-3 (ESV) <sup>1</sup> Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

<sup>2</sup> For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.

<sup>3</sup> And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Many have seen here the glory of God shining in the fields outside Bethlehem that was seen by the shepherds. Handel chose these words to open his musical *Messiah*.

Isaiah 60:6 (ESV)

<sup>6</sup> A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 53.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew*, ed. Leon Morris, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 86.

"Midian and Ephah are tribal lands in northern Arabia, and Sheba was the name for the part of southern Arabia from which the Queen of Sheba came with 'much gold'"<sup>13</sup> and spices to visit king Solomon (1 Kings 10:2). Perhaps the Lord was here granting Isaiah a prophetic vision of the events that would surround messiah's birth. Perhaps these wise men were part of the fulfillment of this vision? It is also v.3 of Isaiah, which has given rise to the notion that these wise men were kings, though Matthew himself does not tell us this.

## Gentiles in Jerusalem

Regardless of from where exactly these magi came, in any case *they undoubtedly were Gentiles*.<sup>14</sup> These men were not Jews. They do not arrive in the streets of Jerusalem asking, "Where is he who has been born *our* king," but rather they inquired, "Where is he who has been born *king of the Jews*?" Furthermore, Jewish law forbade the practice of both magic<sup>15</sup> and astrology<sup>16</sup> and in several places in the OT astrologers are mocked by the prophets of God.<sup>17</sup> However, Matthew neither condones nor condemns these Gentile wise men for their use of the means that brought them to the streets of Jerusalem, but he is certainly commending the impulse that motivated their travel and which is revealed at the end of v.2.

## We Saw His Star (v.2)

These wise men came to the streets of Jerusalem seeking him "*who was born the king of the Jews*." They then explained why they came.

**Matthew 2:2 (ESV)** "For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him."

This evokes a host of questions. What do they mean by "his star?" How exactly did it "rise?" And how did they make the connection between astrological phenomenon in the heavens with the birth of a Jewish king in Palestine?

Historians, astronomers, and theologians have done a lot of homework to answer these questions and to figure out what might have been happening related to this "star." Evidently around this time there may have been a series of astronomical events which may have gotten the attention of these men, such as comets, supernovas, and planetary conjunctions of Jupiter, Saturn, and Pisces. However, answering these questions is not Matthew's concern, since he offers us no help in this regard. However, given Jewish influence throughout the eastern regions beyond Jerusalem as a result of the exile, it should not be inconceivable that eastern

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<sup>13</sup> Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 52.

<sup>15</sup> Ezekiel 13:18-20; cf. Acts 8:9-11; 19:19.

<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah 10:1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Is. 47:13-15; Dan. 1:20; 2:27; 4:7; 5:7.

wise men would come into contact with Jewish prophecies of a future king and messianic deliverer.<sup>18</sup>

The best that can be surmised is that the Jewish Scripture and teaching had found its way into the lands from which these wise men came and they had access to them, studied them, and believed what they heard. This is not beyond imagination. We know from the time of the period of the exile, that Jewish settlements continued in Babylon and elsewhere in the region.

Babylonian, Mede, and Persian kings often invited Jewish representatives to explain Jewish law and practice. We see this in the case of Daniel, who was among the highest ranking officials in the Babylonian empire.

Cyrus issued a kingdom wide proclamation throughout the entire **Persian Empire**, which extended from Greece in the west, to Egypt in the south, to India in east, aimed at rebuilding the Jewish temple and reestablishing the entire Jewish religious practice, including daily sacrifices (Ezra 1:2-5). Scribes like Ezra were given permission to teach God's law (Ez. 7:6).



Esther, queen of Xerxes I, who ruled "from India to Ethiopia," was granted permission to protect Jewish history and heritage and observe Jewish law throughout 127 provinces of the Medo-Persian empire. All of these ancient kingdoms at one time or another had either direct or indirection governance over the areas from which these wise men would have hailed. Thus, we should not be surprised that educated men who sought to understand Jewish history and/or God's work in this world, or who may have been astrological book-worms digging through the ancient archives, would have come across ancient prophecies that spoke about the coming king of the Jews. For example, Jews held onto all the ancient prophecies that predicted messiah, just as the one spoken by Balaam, which is recorded in the book Numbers.

**Numbers 24:17 (ESV)** ...a star shall come out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;

Matthew does not make an explicit connection with this particular prophecy, but the Jews never forgot it. Thus, we could certainly imagine that God would have used such prophecies and news of Jewish teaching to draw Gentile seekers to Himself. This kind of drawing is not without precedent.

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<sup>18</sup> Köstenberger and Stewart, *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation*, 68.

## We Have Come to Worship Him

This is what happened to the **Queen of Sheba**. News reached her ears of the wealth and wonder of king Solomon and came to see for herself if all that she heard was true.<sup>19</sup> She came to Solomon bring gold and spices. She came and payed homage to Solomon, just as these wise men came to pay homage to *"him who has been born king of the Jews."*

These magi report that they *"... have come to worship him."* The word translated *worship* (*proskyneō*), simply means "to bow"<sup>20</sup> before one worthy of paying homage, such as in a king or dignitary. However, when the word is used in the NT "the object is always... divine."<sup>21</sup> While it is difficult to know fully what was in the heart and mind of these Gentile magi, clearly they understand God to be mightily at work since He had granted them external and observable signs that pointed them to this new born king.

Even if they did not fully understand exactly who this new born king was, they understood him to be significant and worthy of making a long trip and going to great expense. Whoever he was, the child was worthy of recognition and reverence, if not also worthy of divine worship. Matthew has already informed his readers that the origin of this baby is owing to the divine power of the Holy Spirit. Certainly Matthew wants the reader to conclude that what is unfolding here is infinitely more than the result of mere human effort. God is work and thus, worship is the proper response.

## The Assembly of the King (v.3-8)

The next scene is in the assembly hall of the king. The Gentile wise men had traveled long to come and worship the new king, but worship was not the response on the streets of Jerusalem.

**Matthew 2:3-5 (ESV)** <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

These foreign magi came to the city of Jews seeking to worship the king of the Jews, but the capital of the Jews knows nothing about it. The wise men arrive ready to celebrate, but their presence *troubled* Herod, along with the whole city.

The word 'troubled,' means to bring about "acute emotional distress or turbulence—"to cause great mental distress."<sup>22</sup> King Herod is the first person mentioned who is "distressed-out" by

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Kings 10:6-7.

<sup>20</sup> Heinrich Greeven, "Προσκυνέω, Προσκυνητής," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 760.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 314.

this inquiry. Soon “all Jerusalem” joins him in his distressed-out state. It’s easy to understand why this news would have caused Herod “great mental distress,” but it’s a bit more perplexing as to why “all Jerusalem was troubled with him.” Perhaps it was because Gentile foreigners knew something before Jewish locals did. How could this be?

Herod’s response to this news was to call an assembly of the Jewish leaders to find out where this birth was supposed to have taken place. Herod calls the religious leaders together since he understands that this new born king the magi are seeking is same as “*the Christ*.” Herod has enough Jewish heritage in him to know that the Scripture points to a promised deliverer. And if Gentile foreigners had somehow discovered that God was up to something, then Herod wanted to know where. Surely the chief priests and scribes could tell him where the Christ was to be born.

## A Troubled King

Herod was a complicated man. He was appointed to be king of the Jews by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. Ethnically he was an Edomite, whose race descended from Esau, Jacob’s twin brother. The Edomites lived in the Arabian desert in an area known as Idumea. Religiously he was raised as a Jew. Herod’s grandfather had been appointed governor of the region by the Jewish ruler John Hyrcanus who had forced all Idumeans to convert to Judaism or be killed. Thus, by necessity rather than by choice, Herod was raised within the Jewish religious tradition. Culturally Herod was Greek. His native language was Greek<sup>23</sup> and he embraced the Greek culture as it spread through the land. Politically, he was Roman. In all major military conflicts that happened under his reign, he sided with Rome each time.

Herod was a brilliant builder and a brutal leader. He was responsible for the building of the temple complex in Jerusalem, which took 46 years to complete. He also built theaters, palaces, and fortified city walls. He is called Herod “the Great” because Israel and Judah experienced great prosperity under his reign. However, in his later years he suffered from physical illness and mental instability. He grew paranoid of many around him. In his paranoia, he ordered the death of many of his close associates, his Jewish wife Mariamne, and two of his own sons.<sup>24</sup>

Herod knew that he was hated by almost everyone and no one would mourn his death, so his final order was that hundreds of Jewish leaders be gathered into the stadium in Jericho and executed at the moment of his death so that there would be mourning in the land when the king died.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately, this order was not carried out. This is the same man who will order the death of the baby boys in Bethlehem.

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<sup>23</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 57.



**Bethlehem** was the answer that chief priests and scribes gave Herod. The answer is found in the scroll of the prophet Micah (5:2,4). In 2:6, Matthew summarizes Micah 5:2, and 4.<sup>26</sup> Essentially he concludes, "Out of Bethlehem will come a ruler of Israel who lead like a shepherd." Micah ministered in Israel from 750 - 700 B.C. He wrote these words in the future tense under the guidance and revelation of the Holy Spirit. Now they had now been fulfilled during the days of Herod the king. Matthew is alerting us for the second time to the fulfillment of another messianic prophecy.

### A Private Interview (v.7-8)

After learning the location of the birth of messiah, Herod secretly called the magi aside into a private interview in order to discern the time the star had appeared (Mt. 2:7). Given that he later commands the death of all male children in Bethlehem 2 years old and under, we know the arrival of the wise men took place not at the time of Jesus' birth, but about two years afterward (see 2:16).

We will several more clues that this is the case in the following verses. So the Christmas cards that have the wise men standing beside the shepherds at Jesus' manger side, are not historically accurate. After learning the time of when they first saw the star, Herod then sent them to Bethlehem to find the young king.

**Matthew 2:8-9 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way.

Herod pretends, as we shall see, to desire to worship the young king also, but he is pretending and lying. After deceiving them, he sent them on their way to Bethlehem.

### The House in Bethlehem (v.9-12)

The next scene centers around **the house in Bethlehem**. Bethlehem was about six miles south of Jerusalem. The Lord supernaturally guided them to the right spot.

**Matthew 2:9-10 (ESV)** <sup>9</sup> And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

This specific and particular guidance cannot be explained by planetary alignments, supernovas, or comets. The same star that inspired them to begin this journey no leads them to the conclusion of this journey. The star that rose before them in the east now led them "**to the place where the child was**" (2:9). Evidently the star so clearly indicated where the magi were

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<sup>26</sup> The shepherd language of this verse may also allude to 2 Samuel 5:2.



to look for the young king, that they knew they had finally found him whom they had been seeking, for *“they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”* (2:10). Their long journey had finally brought them to their goal. They had found him whom they sought.

**Matthew 2:11-12 (ESV)** <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Notice that the family is now settled in a *house*. They are no longer in a stable, thus some time has elapsed. Jesus is referred to as a “child” rather than a “babe,”<sup>27</sup> which further clues us in that these events do not immediately follow Jesus’ birth.

The immediate response of these wise men was to fall down and worship this child. One can only imagine what was going through the mind of Mary as she watched this scene. Then they opened their chests and gave to Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This they did willingly and gladly. No doubt they then had a delightful evening together, for Joseph and Mary invited them to stay the night. Surely these men would have then told them all about the star, their journey, and everything that had unfolded in Jerusalem.

That night, as they dreamed (v.12), God warned them that Herod had lied to them. He told them not to return and tell Herod what Jesus was. When they awoke, they obeyed. They went home by a different route. On their GPS, they selected the option that said, “Avoid Kings.” This added 30 minutes to their return time, but they were fine with it.

## The Dream of Joseph (v.13-15)

The final scene seems to take place the night after they departed. Joseph has another dream.

**Matthew 2:13-15 (ESV)** <sup>13</sup> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” <sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

God providentially intervenes to safeguard his son. He does so through Joseph. The angel in the dream specifically warns Joseph that Herod is about to attempt to kill this two year old boy whom Joseph has been caring for as his own son. He commands him to flee to Egypt and remain there until this angel appears to him again. Joseph immediately obeys. In fact, he didn’t

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<sup>27</sup> France, *Matthew*, 85.

even wait until daybreak. Rather, as rose as soon as he awoke, and while it was till dark, he told Mary to pack up for they were leaving on about an 80 mile journey to Egypt.

Fleeing to Egypt for political asylum was quite common in OT, but God was doing something in addition to saving their lives. God was also fulfilling more his word. Matthew tells us in v.15 that the reason for the angel directing them to Egypt rather than some other safe place, was because God was fulfilling something he spoke through Hosea (11:1). The passage in Hosea also speaks of God's love of his son, Israel. However, here God is demonstrating his love and protection of his Son, Jesus. But he is also now putting Jesus in the place of Israel.

***Jesus is here beginning to represent Israel so that he can redeem Israel.*** Jesus will now walk where his father's walked. He will live there they once lived. He will dwell where they once dwelled. Just as God delivered Israel from Egypt, so He will deliver Jesus from Egypt. However, unlike Israel's failure in the wilderness, in the wilderness Jesus will succeed. Unlike every failure of Israel, Jesus will never fail. In Jesus, God was beginning a new creation; one that would be victorious in every way that Israel experienced defeat.

## Conclusion

Jesus is the one savior of both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is the king of the Jews, but through this king of the Jews, Gentiles too find a king who loves and receives them.

God both draws and leads people who seek him to a face to face encounter with him. These Gentile wise men were seeking God. These men stood out in the night looking up into the skies knowing that there was an unseen God there behind those amazing stars, and they watch for him and waited for Him. Then, He got their attention and led these men to a place where they personally met the savior whom God had sent. If you seek God, then you will find Him. If you are willing to loose some sleep in order to meet God personally, then you will discover that is possible. Jesus is the Christ whom God sent to bring the blessing of God's presence to us who seek him.

We ought not be surprised when the world is troubled by that which brings us joy. We who know Jesus and have surrendered our lives to him, are granted the sweet goodness of experiencing His joy. The world finds this troubling. That we could wholeheartedly follow Christ and obey his teachings is troubling to world. But, we must remember the words of Jesus. "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33).

Therefore, the appropriate response is the response of the wisemen. "Where is he who was born king of the Jews? We have come to worship him." Is Jesus the king of your life? Do you delight to surrender to his kingship? Will you worship him?

For some the news of the birth of king Jesus brought exceedingly great joy, but for others it brought great trouble. Which does this news bring you?

## Questions

1. Who is Herod the king?
2. Who are these wisemen?
3. From where in the east did they come? How long did they travel?
4. How did they know a "king of Jews" had been born?
5. What do they mean by "his star?" What was different about it from all others?
6. Why were these wise men from the east so willing to travel so far to worship a newborn king of the Jews?
7. Why was Herod and all Jerusalem "troubled" at this news?
8. Why does Herod ask where "Christ" was to be born rather than using the phrase "king of Jews," which the wise men had used?
9. The prophecy foretold the birth in Bethlehem, but why is "the ruler" to be born said to be one who would "shepherd my people Israel?"
10. How did the "star" lead the wise men to the "house" where Jesus was?
11. Why were they so joyful at finding him?
12. Why is their response instant worship?
13. Was it Gabriel who warned them not to return to Herod?
14. How old was Jesus when this happened?
15. Was it Gabriel who warned Joseph to go to flee to Egypt?
16. How long did they stay in Egypt?
17. Why did God want Jesus to spend time in Egypt, just as he son Israel had done?
18. What does the prophecy in Hosea 11:1 tell us?
19. Where does this story bless my soul and encourage my faith?