

Shewing the Several Circumstances Which Attend the Messiah's Birth.

by John Gill

John Gill explains the fulfillment of various prophecies in the Old Testament at the birth of Jesus, including the star in the east, the slaughter of the infants at Bethlehem, and Jesus' dwelling in Nazareth.

Scripture: Numbers 24:17, Isaiah 9:1-2, Isaiah 11:1, Jeremiah 31:15, Hosea 11:1, Matthew 2:2-23, Revelation 22:16

Topics: "Fulfillment of Prophecy", "The Birth of Christ"

Description

John Gill preaches on the various prophecies surrounding the birth of the Messiah, emphasizing how these prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus. He discusses the significance of the star that guided the wise men, the flight into Egypt, the massacre of infants, and Jesus' upbringing in Nazareth, all of which align with Old Testament predictions. Gill highlights that these events were not mere coincidences but divine fulfillments of prophecy, showcasing Jesus as the awaited Messiah. He draws connections between the prophecies and their realizations, reinforcing the belief in Jesus' identity as the Savior. The sermon serves to deepen the understanding of the miraculous nature of Christ's birth and the fulfillment of God's promises.

Transcript

The Prophecies Respecting the Messiah

CHAPTER VII.

Shewing the several Circumstances which were to attend or fallow upon the Messiah's Birth, according to the prophets; and how the; were punctually fulfilled in Jesus.

From inquiring into the place of the Messiah's birth, I proceed to consider the several circumstances which were to attend it, or very quickly follow upon it, according to the prophecies of the Old Testament, and show how exactly they had their completion in Jesus; the principal of which are cited and laid together by the evangelist Matthew, in the second chapter of his gospel; I shall begin, First, With that uncommon and unusual appearance of a star in the east, at the birth of Jesus, the account of which we have in Matthew 2:2, 9, 10, and though no prophecy is there referred to, as fulfilled by this phenomenon; yet I shall attempt to prove, that there was a prophecy went before of it; that this was agreeable to it, and that accordingly the Jews expected such an appearance at the time of the Messiah's birth.

The prophecy which, I suppose, points out this circumstance to us, is in Numbers 24:17. There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab and destroy all the children of Sheth. That this is a prophecy of the Messiah, is acknowledged by many Jewish writers: both the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan interpret it of him and Aben Ezra says, that is, of their Rabbis, expound it of the Messiah; nor have other writers any just reason to understand it otherwise.

That Balaam spoke this by a prophetic spirit, is manifest from verse 16, that he speaks of a person, whom he should see at a distance in future times is no less evident, from the former part, of this verse, which seems to be no other than he whom every eye shall see, when he comes in the clouds of heaven: and that this person is the Messiah, may very easily be evinced, not only from the title which is here given him, a scepter, that is scepter-bearer, whose throne is for ever and ever; the scepter of whose kingdom is a right scepter; as also from whence he was to arise, which was out of Israel; but likewise from the work he was to do, which is to smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth; which never had its completion in any one else of the posterity of Jacob: hence a learned Jew was obliged to confess; that Balaam spake this concerning the Messiah, "whose coming says he, we are waiting for, that this prophecy might be fulfilled:" which has been fulfilled in and by Jesus, who has spoiled principalities and powers, and has obtained an entire conquest over all his enemies, signified here by the corners of Moab, and now rules over all the children of men, as Onkelos renders the last clause of the verse; his dominion being from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth: though by the children of Sheth, are rather meant the people of God, the Sethites, as distinguished from the Cainites, who are not so, whom the Messiah, in a peculiar manner, was to rule over and not destroy; or rather whom he was to gather together to himself; for the word signifies to cluck together, as a hen does her chickens, which simile Christ makes use of Matthew 23:37.

Having thus proved that the Messiah is prophesied of in this text, it may be proper to inquire whether the star here mentioned, is to be considered as one of the Messiah's titles, or as one of the signs of his coming. It must be acknowledged, that some of the ancient Jews looked upon this as one of the Messiah's titles; hence one, who set up for a Messiah among them, and was for a time received by them as such, was called [the son of a star](#); the son of a star, with a view to this prophecy; though when he was discovered by them to be an impostor they called him [the son of a lie](#); and perhaps it may be with a regard to this prophecy, that Jesus is called the bright and morning star, though I am rather inclined to think, that the star, here spoken of is to be considered as a sign of his coming, and not as one of his titles; that as there will be a visible sign in the heavens of the second coming of the son of man, so there was to be one of his first coming; and that the words should be rendered thus, when a star walks [or steers its course from Jacob](#), then a scepter, or scepter-bearer, shall rise out of Israel; and there are two things which confirm me in this sense of the words. 1.

The conclusion of the wise men, that the king of the Jews was born, from an appearance of a star in the east; and their coming to Jerusalem to worship him upon that account; for what could direct them to make such an observation, or draw such a conclusion, but this prediction of Balaam's which had been some way or other conveyed to them, or rather had remained among them, ever since the times of Balaam, who was one of their countrymen. Abulpharagius, an Arabic writer, tells us, that Zoroastres, who lived four or five hundred years before Christ, foretold to his magicians the coming of Christ; and that at the time of his birth, there should appear a wonderful star, which would shine by day as well as by night; and therefore left it in command with them, that when that star appeared they should follow the directions of it, and go to

the place where he was to be born, and there offer gifts and pay their adoration to him: And that it was by this command, that the three wise men came from the east, that is, out of Persia, to worship Christ at Bethlehem.

Now supposing all this to be true, it is very easy to guess where Zoroastres had his information; for, by the accounts given of him, he appears to be a Jew, both by birth and religion, was a servant of one of the prophets of Israel, and well versed in the sacred writings; and therefore may well be supposed to have learned all this from the prophecy of Balaam, which he informed his magicians of. 2. The Jews themselves have expected such a star to appear at the time of the Messiah's coming; for thus they say, more than once, in the book of Zohar, that "when the Messiah shall be revealed, a bright and shining star shall arise in the east."

Now what could lead them to such an expectation, but this prophecy of Balaam, which is cited by them in the very same place? for surely the account which our gospel gives of the appearance of a star at the birth of Jesus, could never be the foundation of such a thought; they would never pay such a deference to the evangelic history, and to our Jesus, as to form a notion, or ground an expectation of their Messiah, agreeable thereunto; but would rather, as in other cases, either stifle their former generally received notions of a Messiah, or deny plain matters of fact relating to Jesus so that this expectation of theirs, that a star should appear at the coming of the Messiah, must be founded on this prophecy, which had its fulfillment in Jesus.

But I proceed, Secondly, To consider another circumstance that was to follow upon the birth of the Messiah, which, very agreeable to ancient prophecy, had its completion in Jesus, and was brought about after this manner: Herod having given in charge to the wise men, who were directed into the land of Judea, by the star before mentioned, that when they had found the young child they inquired after, and paid him their adoration, they should return and give him an account thereof; but they being warned of God in a dream not to do as he had commanded them, returned another way; and immediately an angel is dispatched to Joseph, to order him to take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt, who accordingly did so.

Now all this was done, says the evangelist (Matthew 2:15), that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my Son. Now the question is, what prophecy is here referred to, and whether what is referred to, is a prophecy of the Messiah, and may be justly applied to Jesus. There are some who have thought that the prophecy referred to, is either Numbers 23:22 or else chapter 24:8, though the more generally received opinion is, that it is Hosea 11:1, When Israel was a child then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt; which words, at first view, seem solely to regard the deliverance of the people of Israel out of Egypt; wherefore different ways have been taken to make a just and proper application of them to the Messiah, and are by some considered either by way of accommodation of phrases to a like event, or by way of type, which has a fresh completion in its antitype, or as a proverbial sentence which might be adapted to any remarkable deliverance out of hardship, misery, and destruction.

Now though it may be granted, that Israel was a type of the Messiah, and is therefore one of the names by which he is called in the Old Testament, particularly in, Isaiah 49:3, and that there is a very great resemblance between Israel's going down into, and coming out of Egypt, and that of Christ's, as also, that the deliverance of the people of Israel out of Egypt might be used proverbially to express any remarkable deliverance from imminent danger, yet I apprehend that the words are to be understood of the Messiah in

their first, literal, proper, and obvious sense, and of him only; and so the evangelist Matthew must be supposed to understand them, whose manifest design is to produce direct proofs of Jesus' Messiahship, out of the Old Testament, which mere allusions, types, allegories, and accommodations of phrases cannot be allowed to be.

Now, in order to fix the literal sense of these words, as applicable to the Messiah, let it be observed, that the scope and design of the preceding chapters is to set before the people of Israel their many provoking sins and transgressions, in order to bring them to an acknowledgment of, and repentance for them; and to declare, that upon their non-repentance, divine judgments would be executed upon them, to the utter ruin of their kingdom and nation, which account is continued to the end of the tenth chapter: but God being rich in mercy, in wrath remembers mercy, and for the sake of his own people, which were among them, mitigates this sentence, and in the eleventh chapter declares the yearnings of his heart towards them, and his very great affection for them, notwithstanding all their ingratitude to him; the true causes of which kindness of his, are laid together in this first verse, which may stand connected with the latter part of the last verse of the preceding chapter; in a morning shall the king of Israel be utterly cut off, the true reason of which is because Israel is a child, that is, a rebellious and disobedient one, therefore he shall be many days without a king and without a prince; nevertheless I love him; and have therefore determined to call my son out of Egypt, who will be obliged to retire there for some time, and will set him upon the throne of his father David, who shall reign and prosper and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth or else the words may be considered, as giving the reason of God's merciful dealing with the people of Israel, notwithstanding all their rebellions against him, and the many provocations he had received from them, because Israel is a child, that is, weak, helpless, and cannot govern himself; foolish, ignorant, imprudent, and needs instruction; and I love him, therefore I have determined to call, or I will call, the past tense for the future, which is common in the Hebrew language, especially in the prophetic writings, my son out of Egypt, who, through Herod's rage and malice, will be obliged to abide there for a while, yet I will bring him from thence into the land of Judea, where he shall be brought up, and shall help my child Israel, shall instruct him in the precepts of the law, and in the doctrines of the gospel, and at last, by suffering death, shall procure the pardon of all his transgressions; for notwithstanding all his ingratitude towards me, of which a particular account is given in verses 2-7, yet I cannot but have a regard for him, and show compassion to him, and therefore he says in verse 8, How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.

Now this appears to be the natural and unconstrained sense of these words, which sufficiently justifies the evangelist Matthew in his citation of them, on the occasion of Jesus' going into Egypt and his return from thence; they being a literal prophecy of the Messiah, which had its exact fulfillment in Jesus. But, Thirdly, The next circumstance we meet with, which followed upon the birth of Jesus, agreeable to ancient prophecy, is the slaughter of the infants at Bethlehem, the commission of which barbarous action, the Jews themselves acknowledge; and was on this wise: Herod finding himself disappointed by the wise men, fell into a very great rage, and immediately orders all the infants in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, to be slain; which orders were accordingly obeyed, and then, says the evangelist (Matthew 2:17, 18), was fulfilled, that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

The prophecy referred to, is in Jeremiah 31:15, which, upon examination, will appear to be a literal prophecy relating to this fact, and this only; for that it cannot be understood of the Babylonish captivity, and of the mourning of the Jewish women upon that account, is evident, if it be considered, 1. That in such a general calamity the mourning is general, as undoubtedly that was, and not confined to mothers only, as this is. 2. That there is no reason to believe that the mourning for the captivity was confined to a particular place, much less that Ramah should be that place, since there is no manner of evidence that the captives were gathered together there, and there deplored their miserable condition.

Besides, 3. The cause of this mourning is not captivity, but death; Rachel is introduced weeping for her children, not because they were carried captive, but because they are not; which is a phrase by which death is frequently expressed, as in Genesis 37:30 and chapter 42:3, but every thing well agrees with the slaughter of the infants at Bethlehem, and there are several things in the context, as well as in the text, which serve to confirm this sense. 1st.

The preceding verses manifestly speak of the blessings of the Messiah's kingdom, and of the joy and comfort which his people should partake of; but lest any should imagine that that dispensation should be entirely free from the usual sorrows, distresses, and afflictions of life, it is declared, that the people of God would at some times, not only be attended with distress in their own consciences for sin, and the chastisements of God upon their persons for the same, as in verses 18, 19, but also with bitter persecutions from the world, and that, even almost as soon as the Messiah was born, Satan would begin to exert his rage, and the most tragical and barbarous action be committed, that ever was heard of, which is expressed in the prophecy under consideration. 2dly, The tender and

sorrowful mothers mourning over their slaughtered infants, in and about Bethlehem, may very well be represented by Rachel; not only because Bethlehem was the place of her sepulchre (Gen. 35:19, 20), but because of her eager desire and overmuch fondness of having children (Gen. 30:1), and therefore a very fit person to represent tender and affectionate mothers bewailing the death of their children; and though Bethlehem was in the tribe of Judah, where Leah's, and not Rachel's children lived, yet Ramah was in the tribe of Benjamin, who was Rachel's child; which two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, bordering on each other, the prophecy well agrees with the evangelist's account of this matter; for though Bethlehem of Judah was the principal seat of this tragical action, yet it was not confined

there, but was extended to all the coasts thereof; so that the voice of lamentation was heard in Ramah of Benjamin: Thus the objection of the Jews against the citation of this prophecy in Matthew, and its application to Jesus, is removed. 3dly, The comfort administered from the consideration of a better resurrection, is suitably adapted to the case of those sorrowful mothers (vv. 16, 17), Thus saith the Lord, Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall he rewarded, saith the Lord, and they, that is, the children which were slain, shall come again, in the resurrection, from the land of the enemy, the grave, for the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death; so that there is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their

own border, and stand in the latter day upon that very spot of ground where their blood was shed. 4thly, The miraculous conception and birth of the Messiah, are predicted in verse 22 as has been made appear in a preceding chapter. 5thly, An account is given of the new covenant in verses 31-34, which peculiarly belongs to the times of the Messiah, as is acknowledged by the Jews themselves; so that from the whole it appears, that Jeremiah 31:16 is a literal prophecy of the slaughter of the infants at Bethlehem, justly cited by the evangelist Matthew, and properly applied to that case, which happened quickly after the birth of

Jesus.

Fourthly, The next circumstance to be considered, is Jesus' dwelling in a city called Nazareth, whereby the evangelist says (Matthew 2:23), was fulfilled that which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene. Here the enemies of Christianity mightily triumph, and charge the evangelists with manifest falsehood, in citing a passage out of the prophets which is not to be found in them and it must be acknowledged, that there are some seemingly considerable difficulties attend this place, and perhaps greater than any passage which occurs in the whole controversy about prophecy.

Bishop Kidder has observed several things which considerably abate the difficulties thereof; as that the evangelist does not quote any particular prophet for these words, but says, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets; so that he seems to regard rather the sense of many, than the words of any particular prophet. Again, that the expression, he shall be called a Nazarene, imports no more than this, he shall be one, which is the frequent use of the Hebrew word קָרָא ; to call; so that if it can be proved, that it was the sense of the prophets, that the Messiah should be a Nazarene, the evangelist will be sufficiently justified in this passage; besides, as the same learned prelate well observes, the evangelist only says, that it was spoken by the prophets, he does not say that it was written by them; so that we lie under no obligation, from hence, to find out a passage in their writings where those words expressly occur, for the writers of the New Testament assert many things as matter of fact, which they received by tradition, and which cannot reasonably be denied; as that Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses (2 Tim. 3:8), that Moses said, he exceedingly feared and quaked (Heb. 12:21), at the giving of the law on mount Sinai, &c.

And I would add, that these words, he shall be called a Nazarene, seem rather to be the words of the evangelist, than any citation out of the prophets; or allusion to any words of theirs; what Matthew says, is, that he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets; he does not tell us in express words, what that was which was spoken by the prophets, though he very plainly hints it to us, which is that he should be despised, condemned, and reproached by men, which was not only foretold by one, but by many of the prophets; and then assigns a reason to prove, that what was spoken by the prophets, was fulfilled in his dwelling at Nazareth, *oti NazwraioV klhqnsetai*, because he is, and will be called a Nazarene, from his dwelling there, which name was given to him and his followers by way of reproach: and as to the two instances produced by Mr.

Whiston, of Christ's being called by Pilate and Philip, Jesus of Nazareth in a contrary sense; he would do well to observe, that the former used this title with a design to reproach, and the latter to show that he was not ashamed to own him under one of his most contemptible characters; and it may not be amiss to observe, that the word *legontwn*, saying, is not here used by the evangelist; he does not say, which was spoken by the prophets, sayings as he does in verses 15 and 17, where he cites plain and direct prophecies; though, supposing that the evangelist regards some passages of the prophets, the sense of which is, that the Messiah should be called, or be, a Nazarene, it will not be a very difficult task to undertake to find them out; for not to insist upon Isaiah 11:1, where the Messiah is called *Netzer*, as the Targum on the place explains it, which is the very name of the city of Nazareth, as David de Pomis observes, and signifies a branch, by which name the Messiah is well known in the Old Testament, as the Jews themselves acknowledge; I say, not to insist upon this passage, which some think the evangelist had in his thoughts, in Jeremiah 31:6, it is said, there shall be a day that the watchmen קָרָא ; the Nazarenes, upon the mount Ephraim shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion, unto the Lord our God; by which name of Nazarenes, it is well known the

followers of Jesus were called, as appears from Acts 24:5, and this being a prophecy of the means of the Jews restoration well suits with them.

R. Abarbanel says, that the prophet, by the Holy Ghost, foresaw that the Romans would believe in Jesus of Nazareth, and therefore would be called Nazarenes from him: now, if the prophets foretold that the followers of the Messiah would be called Nazarenes, then he himself must be called so, from whom they take the denomination, and, by some way or other, this must be brought about, which was by his dwelling in the city of Nazareth. Besides, in Isaiah 9:1, 2, which, by comparing with verse 6, appears to be a prophecy of the Messiah, there is mention, not only made of Galilee of the nations, as the place of the Messiah's habitation, where that f wV that great light, was to appear, but also of the land of Zebulun, in the midst of which was the city of Nazareth; but this text I shall more fully consider hereafter in its due place; from the whole it appears, that it may be collected from the prophets, as their sense, that the Messiah was to be a Nazarene, which had its exact completion in Jesus.

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