

What is Real? Seeking realities in understanding faith: Astronomy, astrology and the Kingdom of Heaven

Merrill Kitchen

Principal, Churches of Christ Theological College, Mulgrave,
Victoria, Australia

Abstract

Theological reflection and scientific understanding have been partners in the journey that searches for transcendental meaning in the context of human life experience. In the midst of earthly uncertainties, the observed continuity of cosmic realities has provided religious and philosophical frameworks of understanding from ancient times to the present day. Light and darkness, day and night, sun and moon, the transport of stars, the seasons, the weeks, the months and the years have been seen as emanating from the Divine. Zodiacs on the floors of recently excavated ancient synagogues were clearly important in some expressions of early Formative Judaism. Some Jewish scholars attribute it to Christian contamination. What is real in all of this? Where does careful scientific observation inform healthy faith understanding about concepts such as the 'kingdom of heaven'?

Key Words

Kingdom of heaven, ancient astronomy, Gospel of Matthew, synagogue

As someone who has been living, working or visiting in Israel over the past thirty years I am intrigued by the presence of centrally placed zodiac images alongside more readily recognisable symbols of the Israelite tradition on the mosaic floors of some of the earliest synagogues that have been excavated recently in the region. It is also interesting that most European languages continue to use the names of gods and cosmic symbols in our days of the week and months of the year. Discussions on astrological symbolism in Christian circles is disparaged frequently as irrelevant superstitious nonsense compared with the study of astronomy which arose out of early astrological understandings but is based on careful scientific observation and mathematical analysis, but as Lester Ness notes:

Astrology is one of the most remarkable practices to come to us from the ancient world. Born in ancient Mesopotamia, reared in the Hellenistic world, it was at once a science and a religion. It quickly spread throughout the known world, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, and is with us still. Its appeal was and is varied. An important factor is the awe-inspiring beauty of the heavens. The developed system also had an intellectual beauty, which many still find appealing. Another factor was the belief that the planets were manifestations of important gods. If one could predict the gods' plans from the planets' movements, one could make plans for the future. Likewise, one could appeal to the planet gods to smile on one's goals. Thus, astrology was at once beautiful and practical.

Ness 2000 p. 1

I suggest that we pause for a moment and consider the extent to which the Judeo-Christian tradition has carefully plotted the trajectories of stars and planets since time immemorial (Westermann 1984 p. 67), and then embedded their observations of the heavenly cosmic movements into the myths that have provided us with identity and meaning.¹

So how did the zodiac symbol find a place in the Hebrew traditions? There is literary evidence that pre-biblical ancient communities looked to the heavenly bodies as dependable gods who provided control, direction and judgmental authority. For example, the Mesopotamian creation narrative (~2000–1300 BCE) the *Enuma Elish* states,

He determined the year by designing the zones:
He set up three constellations for each of the 12 months.
By defining the days of the year (by means) of (heavenly) figures...
The moon he caused to shine, the night (to him) entrusting.
He appointed a creature of the night to signify the day.

Pritchard 1955 pp. 67–68

The orderly Mesopotamian design of the zodiac, with its stable mapping of the seasons that developed in time, was an affirmation of the cycle of agricultural production, and cyclic rhythm of lunar sequences.² It seems to have created meaning for the exiled Judeans in Babylon. They were in a place and at a time where 'an interrelation of science and religion' was being developed. It was a time when 'the Babylonian study of the heavens was attaining the status of real science' and so it is argued that these exiles from Judea were 'exposed to a world of immensity, of wonder, and of regularity' (Irwin 1977), thus challenging their presuppositions of a parochial Israelite God and offering a new framework that permitted the embrace of broad new inclusive elements within their worshipping traditions (Westermann 1984 p. 127; Miller 2000). The sun and moon took on divine personae and, in time, they were worshipped alongside

¹ For examples of relevant ancient texts see Thompson 1904.

² Lee Levine describes the 'overwhelming impact of the outside world on every conceivable aspect of ancient Judaism.' (Levine 1999 p. 111)

other deities whose names varied from place to place throughout the Middle-East, but most of whom were linked to cosmic elements, particularly planets and stars³. Consequently, in the literary tapestry of the Hebrew Bible there are threads of cosmogenic understandings that emerge from prophets such as Amos who 'reflects international wisdom thought' (Brueggemann 1997 p. 624) in his proclamation of the cosmic God:

who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night.

Amos 5:8

But, as von Rad notes, many of the concepts that developed within Israel's post-exilic community were:

formulated in a cultural and religious atmosphere that was saturated with all kinds of astrological false belief.

von Rad 1972 p. 55⁴

The heavens became a tethering point of reality, a dependable indicator of the mind and actions of the highest God whether that God was named, Baal, El Elyon or Yahweh and these understandings continued to inform the frameworks of meaning imported by the re-settling Judean community that informed the Second Temple period of Judaism.⁵

By the first century BCE, astrological understandings had permeated some streams of Judaism to the extent that each of the twelve tribes of 'Judah' had a place in a reconstructed divine order and each was assigned to a calendrical month-based roster that promised the orderly provision of sustenance to their unsettled population (Freyne 2001 pp. 293–294 citing Wacholder 1974 pp. 4–21). Evidence of this Judaic astrological concept can be found in the apocryphal *Book of Jubilees*, as well as in the Dead Sea Scrolls⁶. In fact, the Calendar Texts left by the Qumran community portray a heightened, almost obsessive, concern with cosmic measured time and astrological signs⁷. The signs of the Zodiac were given specifically Jewish

³ 'All ancient Oriental (not Old Testament!) thinking with regard to time was determined by the cyclical course of the stars. Man's (*sic*) world down to each individual destiny, was determined by the working of the powers of the stars.' (von Rad 1972 pp. 55–56)

⁴ See also Westermann 1984 p. 127.

⁵ 'Israel had no single fixed set of symbols and metaphors . . . the metaphorical process in Israel was an open-ended, ongoing one, through which new noun-metaphors for Yahweh were always being generated.' (Brueggemann 1997 p. 265)

⁶ The book of Jubilees was written in Hebrew around 160BCE and represents itself as a record of the revelation from God to Moses of the true calendar in the context of the proper observance of the Israelite festivals. (*Jubilees* 6.30–32). See the discussion in Collins 1995, also VanderKam 2000. It contrasts the solar and lunar calendars, the latter regarded as 'corrupt.' (Jub. 6.36)

⁷ 'Calendars, or writing that presuppose them, comprise a very substantial percentage of the Dead Sea caches. . . . More than any other single element, the calendar binds these works together. The

meanings and associations: the lion became the royal lion of David, the twins became Cain and Abel, and so on. Clearly, the Judeans adopted calendrical understandings from neighbouring societies both before and during the Second Temple period, 'the ancient Egyptian solar calendar, the Babylonian lunar calendar, and the Israelite seven-day week' undergirding the temporal rhythm of Judaism (Stegemann 1998 p. 166).

Josephus, in the mid to late 1st century CE, also uses astrological language to describe the symbolic meaning of a number of material elements in the Holy Place of the Jerusalem temple.

The seven lamps, such being the number of the branches from the lampstand, represented the planets; the loaves on the table, twelve in number, the circle of the zodiac; while the altar of incense, by the thirteen fragrant spices from sea and from land, both desert and inhabited, with which it was replenished, signified that all things are of God and for God.

Josephus c. 75⁸

In appreciating this, it needs to be remembered, that Judaism was never a monolithic entity. Alongside the dominant Jerusalem Temple-based form of Judaism were several other expressions based on wider concepts of the presence of God, and these included the early Jesus movement⁹. In fact, some recent Jewish scholarship asserts that it is Christianity that was the predominant influence that led to the zodiac depictions on the mosaic floors of the Palestinian synagogues (Hachlili 1996 p. 121).

So how relevant might all of this be to a 21st century New Testament proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ? I will argue that the authors of the four Gospels each proclaim this good news within distinctive contexts that are relevant to particular frameworks of community understanding. For example, the Gospel of Luke is heavily focused on Jerusalem as a place of significant revelation while the Gospel of Matthew employs a literary framework that appears to distract the reader from a Jerusalem focus in order to point to the heavens as a wider canvas in which a faith community could find salvific meaning.

Let us look at the evidence for this latter assertion.¹⁰ Matthew's Gospel consistently describes the reign of the God in terms of 'the kingdom of

Qumran community, who relied on the sun for their calendar calculation, were in conflict with most Jews of the time who used a lunar calendar.' (Wise 1996 p. 297)

⁸ .See also Josephus, *Antiquities* c. 80.

⁹ For a description of this phenomenon see Boccaccini 1998.

¹⁰ It must be noted that this intricate narrative thread that weaves the concept of the kingdom of heaven throughout the Matthean text and into the imagination of the reader exceeds the parameters of historical-critical studies and draws the interpreter into the methodology of socio-rhetorical analysis thus allowing connections with non-textual contemporary expressions such as public religious art, particularly the art of the synagogue

heaven', a term never employed in any of the other Gospels. Most scholars explain this usage in terms of the apocalyptic nature of the Matthean discourse and/or as a paraphrase of the words 'kingdom of God' so as to avoid offending Jewish readers.¹¹ There are others who ignore the difference altogether assuming that the terms 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven' are synonymous.¹² By examining the mosaic carpet of an ancient synagogue in Sepphoris, the capital of the Galilee in the time of Jesus¹³, an interesting parallel with the structure of Matthew's Gospel can be seen and an hypothesis developed that provides a new paradigm for understanding God's all-embracing creative presence 'on earth as it is in heaven (6:10)'¹⁴.

Cosmic elements unique to Matthew feature in the birth and infancy narratives. In the same way that Abraham heard the good news of the impending birth of a son to his barren wife, Sarah, angelic messengers from God bring good news to Joseph of the birth of God's Son through a fertile, but virginal, Mary¹⁵. This good news is detected in the heavens by astrologers from the East, who follow a significant heavenly star to Judea in order to honour the birth of the King of the Jews and in doing so prove that they understand more than do the religious leaders in Jerusalem. This news of an impending new king threatens the dominant Roman and Judean power brokers of the time who believe the truth of it enough to instigate an assassination that will protect their own need for earthly power.

The implicit in-breaking of a new cosmic paradigm is then articulated by John the Baptist as the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven on earth. It is first proclaimed not in Jerusalem but at the Judean-Gentile border, the River Jordan. In the midst of water and light the voice from the heavens is heard affirming that Jesus is indeed the Son of God (Matthew 3.2, 16–17), and a period of significant Spirit-inspired discernment occurs as the Son of God is confronted by the human temptation of self-gratification, religious manipulation and political power (Matthew 4:1–11).

¹¹ See the formative historical critical approach of Bornkamm, et al 1963; and in the last decade, Davies Allison 1988 – 1997; Harrington 1991; Stock 1994; Hagner 1993 (Jewish sense); Hagner 1995; M. Boring 1995; Stanton 1995; Senior 1988.

¹² For example Beasley-Murray does not discuss the difference at all (Beasley-Murray 1986).

¹³ Sepphoris has been inhabited by humans since 1550BCE, and the largely Jewish city was renamed Autocratis by Herod Antipas when establishing it as his capital in 3BCE. Although Antipas moved his capital to Tiberias for a brief period, Agrippa II re-established Sepphoris as the Galilean capital in the 60'sCE and it continued as such for several centuries. Its importance in Formative Judaism and in understanding the earliest Jesus movement is being recognised increasingly by New Testament scholars. In fact, it is mentioned in rabbinic literature more often than any ancient city except Jerusalem. See Miller 1996; Batey 1992. Also note the reference to Sepphoris in Josephus c. 80 *Ant* 18.27.

¹⁴ Note that this phrase is particular to Matthew and not present in Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2–4).

¹⁵ Note that in Luke's Gospel the annunciation is to Mary and not Joseph (Luke 1:26–38).

While the twelve signs of the zodiac feature 12 symbolic figures, Jesus chooses twelve¹⁶ ordinary human people to follow him, learn from him and pass on his proclamation of Good News. They are people of little faith, and they struggle to understand the ethics of the kingdom of heaven where the faithful but dispirited and persecuted not only find a welcome (5.3, 10–12) but will be trusted as community leaders in the kingdom of heaven, and who will salt life appropriately and bring light into the world (5.13–16). They discover that the kingdom of heaven is an ordered place embracing all reality under the permissive rule of God (5.34–48) where the often costly continuity between words and deeds is applauded, and although words alone will never be enough (5.14–20) explicitly prescribed appropriate actions will give them life and credibility (6.1–10). The kingdom of heaven proclaimed by Jesus has an economy in which goods are shared in a spirit of mutuality and interdependence (6.20–33; 7.11; 19.21–23).¹⁷ It is as productive as the global vegetation (13.24–32), as permeating as yeast (13.33), as valuable as fine possessions (13.44–46) and it provides abundantly for all (14.17–18).

The genealogy that introduces Matthew's Gospel (1:1–17) includes Gentiles as well as Jews, women as well as men, the enslaved as well as the liberated and this narrative thread also persists throughout. In continuity with Israel's story, the new paradigmatic kingdom of heaven is inclusive of race, status, gender and sexuality as great faith is demonstrated by a Roman Centurion and a Canaanite woman (8:10–13), Gentiles and Jews, men, women and children. The pure and the impure all experience the healing touch of Jesus. Paradoxically, God's truth disclosed in Jesus is better understood by the innocent young than the experienced elders (11:25; 18:1–5, 10, 14; 19:13), and this good news is to be shared with all humanity; it is to be proclaimed and demonstrated unconditionally throughout the nations (10:7–8; 28:18–20). A special place is reserved for the faithful who share this good news beyond their tribal boundaries (10:32; 11:11) so that cosmic boundaries are established and a new tribe or kinship is inaugurated (12:50; 16:1–19; 18:18–35; 23:8–12). It exists in the midst of antagonism and threat but no attempt is to be made to eliminate the strange or the different; ambiguity will always be a present reality (13:47–51; 15:13–14)¹⁸. But this Kingdom of Heaven is also a realm in which judgment will be exacted, bringing both rewards and penalties depending on the faithfulness shown

¹⁶ Initially the Gospel tells of four fishermen (4:18–22) and then later eight others are named (9.9; 10:1–4).

¹⁷ Gerd Theissen, *Social reality and the early Christians* writes, 'In Matthew, the *imitatio dei*, the imitation of God, is the central reason for loving one's enemies. Love of enemies is sovereign behaviour, behaviour that makes human beings godlike. It elevates them far above their situation – as high as the sun, which shines on good and evil alike'. (Theissen 2007 p. 117)

¹⁸ See Seneca *De beneficiis* 4.26.1 'If, he says, you would imitate the gods, give benefits even to the ungrateful, for the sun shines even on the wicked, and the seas are accessible to pirates too.' (Si deos, inquit, imitatis, da et ingratibus beneficia, nam et sceleratis sol oritur et pirates patent maria.)

to the divine ethos that has been disclosed in the person of Jesus (7:21; 10:33; 11:12–15, 22–23; 22:11–14; 23:13, 29; 24:36).

The cosmic dimensions of the kingdom of heaven are described in terms of 'clouds of heaven' (24:30; 26:64), 'the four winds from one end of heaven to the other' (24:30,31) and the place of 'power' (26:64). It is a place where angels dwell (24:36; 28:2), along with the Son of Man (26:64). At the crucifixion and death of Jesus a moment of cosmic darkness is described by all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44), but only Matthew describes a significant associated seismic event (Matt. 27:51–53).

The challenge in reading Matthew's Gospel for today's church.

The 21st century Christian church proclaims Jesus in a globalised context never before realized in human history. The realities of religious conflict, widespread human poverty, and global warming are challenging all of humanity. Localized ethnocentric understandings of the Abrahamic God are fuelling the current cycles of violence, and Christian communities are taking sides over and against each other as well as over and against those who are different. The implications of global warming are threatening some Christians while exciting others. There are those who willingly support global initiatives to modify the amount of carbon emissions for the common good, while others rejoice that destruction of the earth is a sign of the second coming of Christ.

The Christ proclaimed in Matthew's Gospel embraces all that his Heavenly Father has created and confronts those who seek to contain his Father in an ethnocentric, locally focused Torah observance that puts adherence to ritual above compassion (9:13; 12:7; 23:23) and personal identity above love for the other. The reign of God is as wide and deep as the heavens. The community that follows the Risen Christ first hears the good news from faithful women who were the only ones to truly understand. Trusting their words, others then dared to explore the possibility that, in spite of the shame of crucifixion, God continued to be present and accessible. The very fact that doubters, in search of truth, gathered on the mountain alongside believers affirms Matthew's understanding that the testing of a well founded hypothesis will lead to the revelation of truth.

Conclusion

The textual and non-textual components that form the basis for this study suggest that the Jewish voice reflected in Matthew's Gospel is one that stands firmly in the cosmic tradition of the post-exilic communities such as that from which the book of Jonah developed, and at a time of dislocation and reestablishment when the cosmic dimensions of the 'God of heaven', offered a theological basis for the kind of mutuality and interdependence necessary if people of diverse backgrounds were to gather as a worshipping community. In the period after the destruction of Jerusalem,

a similar social milieu confronted the resettling faith communities that had fled the city. Whether the Sepphoris synagogue mosaics are a reaction to the Matthean theology that profoundly impacted a section of the Jewish faith community in the late first century, or whether the Matthean leaders used the synagogue mosaic carpet as a contextual template through which to proclaim the story of Jesus, the promised Messiah, is open to speculation.

With the possibility of space travel still a dream and having recently experienced the realities of human conflict in the First World War, Alfred North Whitehead stated almost eighty years ago:

The theme of Cosmology, which is the basis of all religions, is the story of the dynamic effort of the World accomplishing its purpose of completion by absorption of the World's multiplicity of effort.

Whitehead 1929

The potential of the Matthean text to stimulate relevant theological reflection for the gathered Christian community in the 21st century is profound. At a time when the three dominant monotheistic religions are increasingly captive to nationalistic agendas and a clash of civilisations is being experienced, the embrace of the reign of God in the kingdom of heaven offers hope that truth and acceptance can be found beyond national boundaries and that, in spite of our doubts, it is possible, as Dalrymple asserts, that the 'clash' can become a 'clasp'.

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