

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

Season 2 - Episode 13

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The Almah Matter

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois - Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Easter Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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The Almah Matter

Season 2; Episode 13

12/4/2024

Host: Jim

Some reflections on Matthew's and Luke's different stories of Jesus' birth, with a look at "almah." Young woman? Or virgin?

JIM: You know, kids, back in the day, the Christmas season started *after* Thanksgiving, but in our neighborhood, come early November, you can watch one neighbor putting up Christmas decorations while the guy next door is still taking down Halloween. But now that we're safely in December some Christmas Podcasts are in order and we'll begin here with something I call "The Almah Matter."

[Music]

JIM: I'm looking at a nativity set displaying all the usual suspects. There are bleating sheep and lowing cattle; there are shepherds from their fields, and wise men from somewhere back east; there's the Holy Family in the middle, while an angel hovers overhead. We all know the Christmas story very well. Even Linus can recite it from memory. But as I've made my way from childhood to wherever I am now, my view of the Christmas story, or rather my awareness of all that it contains, has grown. This Christmas story, which comes to us like a gift wrapped in leather binding with gold edged pages and a tag that reads "Holy Bible" - this story still surprises me.

The first surprise: there is not one nativity story here, but two. The shepherds got here by way of Luke. That's the part Linus recited. The wise men arrived courtesy of Matthew. If you ask your Sunday school teachers why there are two stories, they'll say something like, "There's only one story, but different authors give different details - some from one some from another." Could be. If instead you ask a religious studies professor why there are two stories, you'll get a different answer, one that your Sunday school teachers, and maybe even your parents, warned you about.

And this is the part I want to know about, and I'll set it up this way.

Remember that time in Jesus' life when he cleared the temple? Cleansed it? A friend of mine - and this is over 40 years ago now - this friend expressed surprise at learning Jesus had cleansed the temple twice. "Twice? What do you mean twice?" "Once, he said, "was the time we all know about during Jesus' last week before his crucifixion. But in John's gospel, Jesus does it at the beginning of his ministry, so there must have been two times." "Well," I said, "maybe there was only one time, and different authors put it at different points in Jesus life." But that didn't go over very well. "If the Bible writers arranged things any way they liked, how can you trust that what they say is actually what happened?" You know I hear that a lot. "God said it. I believe it. That settles it."

Okay.

Take another example: the raising of Jairus's daughter. Mark and Luke tell it this way. Jairus comes to Jesus to ask him to heal his sick daughter, which Jesus agrees to do. En route, they meet a woman who has been sick for 12 years, who touches Jesus's garment, and is healed. Then some appear from Jairus's household to tell Jairus not to bother Jesus anymore because his daughter has already died. But Jesus tells Jairus not to be afraid, but to believe. He proceeds to Jairus's house, goes inside, and raises Jairus's daughter to life.

In Matthew, though, there is a key difference. When Jairus first comes to meet Jesus, he tells him his daughter has already died, but also that he believes that Jesus can yet restore her, and this Jesus does, after the woman touches his garment and is healed.

For ages interpreters have grappled with this contradiction, and have come up with solutions worth considering. Others, however, cannot tolerate any hint of a contradiction and so reach for an improbable solution, and that is: Jairus's daughter died twice, and was raised twice. This works for some, but not for me. I think the catalog of events in Jesus's life record only one raising of Jairus's daughter, and only one cleansing of the temple, and if biblical writers differ on when, where, and how things happened, that's our opportunity to learn something about the author, and their community, and their message.

I've learned that the Bible scales to the person reading it, from simple stories accessible by children to nuanced narratives that attract the most seasoned readers. The Bible is an ever expanding horizon of study, and here's how I see the landscape unfolding in two aspects of the Christmas story.

From its outset, the movement that claimed Jesus as the Messiah had a PR problem. Hebrew Scripture says the Messiah will come from Bethlehem, the city of David. Jesus, however, was known to come from Nazareth. This is a problem that Matthew and Luke both solve, but in different ways that I didn't always see it first. That there is a difference between these two stories will not sit well with some, but this is the way I see it.

Luke solves the problem this way. He starts off with Joseph and Mary both living in Nazareth. Mary is expecting a child, much to Joseph's surprise, when a decree is issued directing everyone to travel to their ancestral home so Rome can conduct a census. Joseph's ancestral home is Bethlehem, so off they go. One can imagine the lonely couple trudging across miles of desert with Mary seated on a donkey. That's good for the movies, but I think they would have traveled in a caravan for safety. They arrive in Bethlehem. Mary gives birth, and that's how the Messiah comes from Bethlehem.

Matthew though tells a different story. He has Bethlehem as Joseph and Mary's hometown. That's where the wise men will find them eventually, but they first stop to ask King Herod for directions. Herod, displeased with the news of a newborn replacement, plots to rid himself of the boy. Joseph is warned of this in a dream and flees with his family to Egypt. When in another dream he learns that it's safe to go home, he begins the journey back to Bethlehem, but then learns that Herod's son is king. So, instead of returning home, he heads north into Galilee and makes a new home in Nazareth.

So Luke has Joseph living in Nazareth and leads him to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth. Matthew, though, has Joseph living in Bethlehem where Jesus is born, then leads him to Nazareth for Jesus' upbringing. Both boxes are checked. Jesus was born where the Messiah was supposed to be born, but grew up where Jesus was known to live.

These origin stories are different They are. And if you read them separately without blurring them together into one idealized nativity scene, it's clear they are different.

Is that a problem for us?

At one point, it would have been a problem for me, but I see things differently now. My study now looks for the point of each author's story, the way each author presents his narrative.

As a side note, this discrepancy between Matthew and Luke is useful in a way neither of them could have anticipated. This might sound weird, but stay with me.

Have you heard the idea that Socrates might never have actually existed? That he was created by Plato as a vehicle for Plato to spread his own ideas? Socrates, after all, left no writings himself, so everything we know about him depends on writers like Plato. In like fashion, there are those who believe that Jesus never actually existed, that he was created by Paul as a vehicle for Paul to spread his own ideas. Jesus left no writings, so everything we know about him depends on writers like Paul.

I don't agree with that idea for several reasons, but I've just laid the groundwork for my favorite one, and here it is. If Jesus were an invented figure, why have him come from Nazareth in the first place? I mean, if the Messiah is supposed to come from Bethlehem, why not just invent Jesus of Bethlehem, instead of Jesus of Nazareth? I think they call him Jesus of Nazareth because, historically, there really was a Jesus of Nazareth, whom everyone knew, and Matthew and Luke are relating two different traditions of how Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem.

If you're still listening, by the way, congratulations! And, does your family put you at a special table at Thanksgiving, too?

Now, I haven't even gotten to the Almah Matter yet. First though, "The Egypt Matter," and these two matters both involve Matthew.

Matthew claims that Joseph's flight to Egypt fulfills a prophecy. Quoting Matthew, chapter 2, verses 14 and 15: "Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt, I have called my son.'" The prophet that Matthew is quoting there is Hosea, and the passage is Hosea, chapter 11, verse 1. The problem is, that passage from Hosea is not a prediction about the Messiah. And how do I know this? Well, whomever is the subject of verse 1 is also the subject of verse 2, which reads, "The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to the idols." Sacrificing to Baal and making offerings to idols are not usual activities for the Messiah.

So what is Matthew doing here? Does he catch the words "son" and "Egypt." and think Hosea was talking about Jesus? Let's park that idea for a moment and move on to "The Almah Matter." Trust me. The two of these relate.

When Joseph receives the rather surprising news from Mary, he has a dream. Quoting from chapter 1, an angel is speaking: "'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place," says

Matthew, "to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him "Emmanuel " which means "God is with us?.'" Here, Matthew is quoting Isaiah, chapter 7, verse 14, but again, as with the Hosea passage, this is not a prediction about the Messiah. What is it about? In the mid 8th century, B.C., Jerusalem was under attack from two kings, and Ahaz, who was king of Judah, called on the prophet Isaiah to tell him what was going on, and what would happen. Isaiah assured Ahaz that Jerusalem would stand, and invited the king to ask God for a sign to confirm this. Ahaz refused to test God in that way, but Isaiah offered him a sign anyway, and I'm paraphrasing: "There is a woman who is with child," says Isaiah, "who will give birth to a boy, and before that boy knows right from wrong, the lands of these two kings will lie deserted." Historically, that's just what happened.

So what is Matthew doing here? Did he know of Mary's condition, and catch that word "virgin" in Isaiah and think Isaiah was talking about Jesus?

Here's the problem. Matthew was reading the Greek translation of Isaiah, and the Greek there uses the word "parthenos" [παρτηενος] which indeed does mean virgin, but the Hebrew word it translates is not the Hebrew word for virgin, which is "betula" [בְּתוּלָה], but is instead the word "almah" [עַלְמָה] - this is "The Almah Matter" - and the grammar of this passage in Isaiah (so I'm told by people who actually speak Hebrew) is very telling. Not only does the word "almah" not specify a virgin, but the passage itself is saying a young woman *has already* conceived a child, which is different from the Greek that Matthew is reading.

So what's up with Matthew?

These prophecy fulfillments don't really sound like prophecy in the traditional sense, which leads me to my last point.

There's a difference between prophecy and prediction, and it's not as subtle as that might sound. You know, I like good mystery stories, like those that contain some sort of Nostradamus type message, whose wording is strange, and whose meaning lies hidden from everyone until the time of its fulfillment. Think Dan Brown, or "National Treasure." Now, some might casually call that prophecy, but on reflection, I think it's better to call it prediction. Prophecy is not so much about crystal balls that see events hundreds of years in the future, but prophecy is more about seeing through contemporary events to discern God's will for the moment.

Of course, since obeying or disobeying God's will can have consequences, prophecy does point us to consider the future, but more to our immediate future as a result of our covenant with God.

So, no, Mary was not the woman in Isaiah 7, and Jesus was not the son in Hosea 11, But these passages tend to vibrate to the Jesus narrative, and are filled with a new and fuller meaning when placed in consideration of him. When quoting these prophets, I don't think Matthew had prediction in mind. I think he is viewing a larger arc of history, and sees in the person of Jesus an echo of Israel's Covenant history, a sort of Covenantal archetype, if you will. He sees Jesus as the fulfillment of God's covenant with humanity, and given this orientation, several passages begin to speak to us in new ways.

"For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;

authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” [Isaiah 9:6, NRSV^{ue}]

“A voice cries out:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’” [Isaiah 40: 3-5, NRSV^{ue}]

“Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.” [Isaiah 53:4-6, NRSV^{ue}]

These passages all have specific, identifiable, historical contexts, and we cherish them for that shared history. In a new, prophetic, and mysterious way, however, they also prepare us to receive Jesus, which is why we celebrate this Advent.

Here, then, is a fragment of the Wexford Carol, which Deanna recorded for her album “Nativity,” which you can find at our website, were I to make an advertisement for it. That is cheynemusic.com.

Until next time.

[Music]