



Wise Men From the East

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 2:1-12

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Matthew is the only one to record the visit of the Magi, the Wise Men from the East, to Bethlehem to see the Christ child. It may seem strange that the most Jewish of all of the gospels would be the one to record the visit and the worship of these Gentile wise men, but from the very beginning of this gospel we have been told that not only is Jesus Christ the Son of David – the one true Messiah of the nation of Israel, the King to end all kings, but He is also the Son of Abraham – the one through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Immediately as we read this text, Matthew brings us face to face with the truth that coming of Christ and the revelation of His person casts people into three camps, into three divisions of people – one group full of hatred and opposition, one group filled with those that are curious perhaps but ultimately apathetic and unresponsive and the third group characterized by faith that breaks forth in praise and worship. Herod and the scribes and the Magi in this text stand in stark contrast to one another. Herod displayed an open hatred and hostility toward Jesus. The chief priests and the scribes, though perhaps up to speed on the prophecies were ultimately indifferent toward Jesus, all the while retaining their religious respectability. The wise men, however, sought out Jesus, and worshipped Him - even at great cost.

The events that we are reading of probably occur several months to a year after the birth of Jesus. The family is now in a house rather than in a stable. When the Magi come to Christ, He is no longer a tiny baby but a small child. Pick it up with me in verse 1 and let's see how Matthew sets the scene for us.

1) Setting the Scene – Herod and the Wise Men (v.1-2) Matthew sets the time and the place for us, telling us that Christ was born in Bethlehem, during the reign of Herod when certain wise

men from the east came to Jerusalem looking for the one who had been born the king of the Jews. Matthew introduces us here to some of the main players in this drama.

First let's consider Herod. This Herod that is referred to here is the one known as Herod the Great and there are some things we need to know about him. He was not a Jew, his father being an Idumean, an offspring of the unbelieving Esau, and his mother probably being an Arabian. Still the Romans had made him the king over Judea in 40 BC. He was wealthy, politically savvy and gifted enough to stay in the good graces of successive Roman emperors. He was a capable warrior and a good administrator and handled well the famine that plagued Judah and was responsible for the erection of the temple in Jerusalem, the building of racetracks and theatres, the construction of a fortress at Masada as well as other things. But he was a power hungry tyrant and who held jealously to his kingship by might of arms and bitter repressive measures, fully aware that many in Jerusalem saw him as a usurper of the throne. He was incredibly jealous, suspicious and afraid for his position and power and as a result no one was truly safe around him. Herod in his paranoia put to death the two sons of Mariamne, his wife, Mariamne herself, and another son by another woman, besides the brother and mother of Mariamne and her grandfather. One of the greatest displays of his wickedness is seen in the way that he had the most distinguished and well-respected citizens of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned not long before he died. Knowing that no one would mourn his own death, he gave orders for those prisoners to be executed at the moment that he died to guarantee that there would be mourning in Jerusalem at his death. The only thing more barbaric was his murder of all the male children two and under in the hopes of killing the Messiah.

Then we meet the wise men. The wise men were students of the stars. For centuries the Magi had been a tribe of priests in Medo-Persia and Babylonia who were brilliant and highly educated scholars trained in medicine, history, religion, prophecy and astronomy. They were also trained in what we would call astrology. Because the Magi were experts in both astronomy and astrology, they claimed to be able to divine the future. Expecting a king to be born in Israel, they had their eyes to the sky, looking for some sign that he had come. The great question, of course, is how they would have been expecting a coming Jewish king, the Messiah. The answer to that is found in the book of Daniel. Daniel 2 tells us that after Daniel gave to Nebuchadnezzar the proper interpretation of his dream: (Daniel 2:48, ESV)

Daniel, because of his high position and great respect among the magi, it seems quite certain that the magi would have learned much from the prophet concerning one true God, the God of Israel, and about His will and plans for His people through the coming glorious King. They must have known of the coming King, the one whom Daniel described as “one like the Son of Man” to whom “was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. ” (Daniel 7:13–14, ESV)

Moreover, a star formed part of the Jewish messianic expectation. The prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. ” (Numbers 24:17, ESV) – was very dear to Jewish hearts and was one of the Messianic proof texts which was pointed to in expectation of the coming of the Messiah.

Having seen the star, the Messiah’s star, they have come to Jerusalem to see Him. Now what exactly the star may have been is open to much debate. Some suggest that it was a supernova in the sky, others will say a special conjunction of the planets, and still others think it was a meteor or comet or something like that. (Psalm 19:1–6, ESV) It could have been any of those things I suppose, some interpreters see this star as the Shekinah glory of God, the same glory that shone around the shepherds when Jesus’ birth was announced to them by the angel. That certainly is a possibility. Still others believe that this star was an angel, the angels are sometime referred to as stars.

While it may be fun to speculate about all of these things but we have to remember that whatever the specific sign that God used to alert the wise men to the birth of Christ is not the main issue here. What is clear regarding this star is that it serving God’s purpose to alert the Magi to the birth of Christ and then later leads them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem so that they can worship Christ the King. God is behind this. So whether it some strange celestial occurrence or the Shekinah glory of God or an angel or some combination of the three, God is guiding these Gentiles to Christ to worship him. God has appointed Christ as the one true Savior of the world and not only the Savior of Israel. He is not merely the hope of Israel. He is the only hope of the world. And from far off, he brings worshipping Gentiles to Bethlehem to worship His Son. This is the glorious work of God to draw men from every tribe and nation and tongue to exalt and magnify and glorify and worship His Son, the Savior-King. And we see it played out

before our very eyes in this text. God will have His people from all over the world. He will draw them to come and worship Christ as Lord.

Asking around Jerusalem, they are interested in finding the one “born king” of the Jews. From the moment of His birth, Jesus reigns as King, that is the idea being communicated here. The shocking thing is that no one knows anything about this momentous birth. So far as we can tell, they went up and down the streets of the city of Jerusalem asking the question where is he that is born King of the Jews, and the city of peace, the city that is David’s great city, could give them no answer. They were asking, and they could gain no response.

2) A Troubled King and a Prophecy Revealed (v. 3-6) Matthew continues: (v. 3-4)

Of course Herod was troubled. Herod was troubled because being an Idumean; he knew that his claim on the throne was illegitimate. The news that the Magi were bringing sounded like the birth of a genuine descendant of the royal line of David as a rightful heir to the throne. If Herod was troubled, all of Jerusalem was troubled with him for they knew the atrocities that he was willing to commit to hold on to his power.

So Herod assembled an ad hoc quorum of the high priest and some who had served in that office in the past – primarily Sadducees -- as well as some of the teachers of the Law, the scribes – primarily the Pharisees -- who would have knowledge of the Scriptures and of the traditions surrounding the birth of the Messiah. The interesting thing is that this collection of men would have been theologically at opposite ends of the spectrum. The scribes were the conservative teachers of Scripture, bent on preserving traditional Jewish culture. The Sadducees were the theological liberals who were willing to accommodate the culture to retain wealth and power. Still, they are able to give the right answer to Herod’s inquiry. He asked where Christ was to be born and they told him (v. 5-6). It was not difficult for the religious experts that Herod assembled to discover where the King of the Jews was to be born. I want you to notice that their failure to believe was not due to ignorance. The leaders in Israel knew precisely where the King of the Jews, the Messiah, the one chosen of God to shepherd His people Israel would be born, but they were unmoved.

This ancient prophecy from Micah 5:2 was written in the eighth century BC. The original prophecy, loosely quoted by Matthew, declared the deity of Israel’s Messiah: (Micah 5:2, ESV)

If you compare Micah 5:2 with what Matthew writes here, you can see that it's not an exact quotation but is instead a loose quotation of Micah with some scripture commentary thrown in and the reason that Matthew is freely quoting from Micah like that is that he is making an explanation and application of the text. Matthew's words which combine Mic. 5:2 and 2 Sam. 5:2, emphasize Matthew's conviction that the King who is born is a Shepherd-King, one who will feed and care for and lead and guide God's people. He would be a Savior and the True Shepherd of His people. Matthew is drawing a clear distinction between a ruler like Herod, appointed by men, and the one born to rule who is appointed by God -- Jesus Christ.

Then we read: (v. 7–8) Why the quiet audience? Herod wants to avoid publicity and wants to avoid giving any legitimacy to the report of the Magi, so he summons them quietly, privately in order to determine when the star had appeared so that he can determine the age of the Child. Herod shares the information that he has regarding the whereabouts of the birth of the Messiah and seeks to use the Magi to find the Christ-child. He is certain that the Magi will report back to him. From the Magi's perspective, at this point, it seems that Herod is on board with the desire to find the newborn king having expressed his desire to offer to him worship as well.

3) The Wise Men Behold and Worship the Christ (v. 9-11) The very star that had brought them to Jerusalem now went before them to Bethlehem. The response of the Magi to seeing the star is one of exceeding joy and delight. Again the miraculous nature of all of this is emphasized because the same star that shined and led the Magi to begin the trek to see the Christ, now goes before them and stands just over the place where the young child was. Because Mary and Joseph had set up house in Bethlehem and probably it had been between six months to 2 years after the birth of Jesus until they laid eyes upon Him, they did not come into the stable and find the Child in a manger like the shepherds, but now he was in the humble surroundings of a peasant family. It was not what the Magi thought they would have found when they set out on their journey – they expected a child king in a palace, honored and exalted. But it was not to be.

They saw the child with Mary His mother. Note that. They saw the child with Mary, His mother. The child is the center of the story, the center of the vision. And seeing the Messiah, these men who had traveled so far and traveled so long, prostrated themselves before the child in lowly worship. The word that is used for worship here is a word that expresses the idea of falling down, prostrating oneself, kissing the feet or the hem of a garment. Their faith, their

wholehearted searching and adoring worship is utterly amazing. It is a picture of Isaiah 60:1-3: (Isaiah 60:1–3, ESV) The fulfillment of this promise began in that day and has continued like a swelling tide to this day.

And, the wise men who came to worship the Christ child came bearing gifts, specific gifts, prophetic gifts fit only for Jesus Christ, gifts which indicated the true identity of this child. The wise men came bringing gold, the metal of kings, speaking of the royalty of Christ – this One born King of Jews but who is in reality, the King of all kings.

They brought frankincense, the highly fragrant resin used in temple worship, where it was burned as a pleasant offering. It was mixed with the oil used to anoint the priests in Israel and was mixed into the grain offerings that were offered as thanksgiving and praise gifts to God. Frankincense was used to worship God. For that reason, this frankincense speaks of the deity of Christ, that this is no mere child, but God in human flesh, and therefore worthy of worship.

Last, the wise men presented to the Christ-child a gift of myrrh, a burial spice. It was used for embalming. By any measure it would be odd to present such a gift to a young child, yet that the wise men would present to Jesus the gift of myrrh testifies to Christ's humanity and prophetically speaks of His death which was required to save sinners from hell and death, the cost to create a new people for Himself -- (Romans 4:25, 1 Peter 3:18, ESV)

When viewed together, we see what these offerings of worship are intended to convey. This king, born in Bethlehem, is a King like no other. He is both God and man. He is the King who would die to fill His Kingdom, the King who would die to save His subjects, the King who would die to deliver His people from the tyranny of sin and the reign of death, the King who would deliver His people from their just condemnation for their sin by dying in their place and extinguishing the wrath of God the Father against their sin forever, making rebels into worshippers of God. This is the great King; this is God's King, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The King who is worthy of worship, of praise, of submission, of adoration and of love. The Magi worshipped Him.

What a massive contrast between the Magi and Herod and the scribes. As we will see next week, Herod's plan is not to worship Christ but to kill Him. Herod's response is hatred and fear. His plan is kill all of the male children in Jerusalem that would fit the age range of the one born king. Do you see the irrationality of Herod's response? Just think about it. If the Magi were wrong about this Child, why bother with him? But on the other hand, if they were right, why try to resist the will of God? Does he really think that he can thwart the plan and the power of God? This is the policy of a madman. This is the plan of a man who is insane. Rebellion against God is entirely irrational. It is folly to fight against God, but sin makes people fools.

The Jewish chief priests and the scribes' attitude is almost as amazing as that of the Herod, but in a different way. They knew the Scriptures and could readily identify the birthplace of God's promised Messiah, but they did not respond to the truth at all. Their apathy is shocking and makes clear that they were hirelings and not true shepherds in Israel called by God.

Matthew, in his account of the nativity, means for us to be struck by the fact that, though Jesus is the Messiah, born in David's line and certain to be Shepherd and Ruler in Israel, it was the Gentiles who came to worship Him first and that's the point. That is the only right response. The coming of Christ is not simply an occasion for sentimentality; He is not simply a person to be admired. This Christ child is to be worshipped.

The pilgrimage complete, God intervened to protect His Son. Matthew tells us: And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:12) So home the Magi went, the first fruits of the Gentiles that would come to worship the Christ, and Pastor Eddie will pick up with Herod's massacre of the children next week.

Beloved, clearly Matthew contrasts for us three distinct responses to the coming of the Christ. Where do you fit in these three groups?

4) Things we learn from this text...

1) It is not always those who have the most religious privileges or advantages that give Christ the most honor. The scribes and the priests who had the Scriptures wouldn't go five miles to lay eyes on the Messiah. They were unimpressed with Jesus. The wise men, on the other hand, would trek nearly 1000 miles to come and not only see Jesus, but to worship Him and give Him the honor and worship of which He was worthy. That is a lesson for us. Many times it is those who live closest to the means of grace who neglect them the most. How careful we must be to

guard out hearts against a familiarity that breeds contempt – the failure of treating the things that are holy as if they were common.

2) Head knowledge without heart knowledge is deceitful and deadly. This text shows us how it is possible to have a ready knowledge of the Scriptures and still have a graceless heart. The priests and scribes were quick with a Scriptural answer to the location of the Messiah's birth but they had desire for Christ. They could tell where Christ was born, knew the prophecies associated with the Messiah, but they would not receive Him. We cannot be satisfied with head knowledge no matter how great it may be. It is a good thing when it enflames the heart to devotion, to obedience and the true worship but by itself it is worthless. You can have much head knowledge and still perish forever.

Charles Spurgeon captured it well when he said: True salvation is not to be found through the mere reception of any creed, however true or scriptural. Mere 'head notion' is not the road to heaven. "You must be born again," means a great deal more than that you must believe certain dogmas. The study of the Bible cannot save you! You must press beyond this; you must come to the living, personal Christ, or else your acceptance of the soundest creed cannot avail for the salvation of your soul. Salvation lies in Jesus only!

3) Spiritual diligence and perseverance is a blessed thing. The wise men show us the value of the diligent and urgent pursuit of Christ. What a challenge to us this is. Where is our self-denial and our diligent pursuit of Christ? What are we willing to endure to lay hold of the means of grace? What does our pursuit of Christ cost us...what are we willing to lay down to have Christ? These are serious questions and they deserve serious reflection.

4) True faith is pleasing to God. These wise men believed in Christ when they had never seen Him. They believed in Christ when the scribes and the priests were unbelieving. They believed in Him when they saw him as a little Child on Mary's knee and worshipped Him as a King. They saw no miracles to convince them, heard no teaching to persuade them, saw no signs of divinity and greatness to awe them. They saw nothing but a Child, the child whose star they had seen, whose coming they had expected and when they saw Him they believed they saw God's Messiah and they bowed down and worshipped Him. This is the kind of faith that God delights to honor. We have overwhelmingly more evidence than the wise men had...but what we need

is a believing heart. What the Magi did with very little understanding, we are able to do with great light. What are you doing with the revelation of Scripture that God has given you?

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