

Text: Matthew 2:1-23

Title: The Wise Men, Herod, Joseph, Mary, and the Messiah

Truth: Matthew tells us about the early months of Jesus' life.

Date/Location: Sunday December 23, 2018 and January 10 and 17, 2021 at FBC

I. Mixed Reaction to the Newborn King, 1-3

- A. Herod the Great was king from 37 BC until 4 BC when he died. He was a great builder, including of the temple facilities in Jerusalem. Jesus was born in 6 BC or so. It was “after” Jesus was born that the following events occurred. It was not the day after His birth. Joseph and Mary probably settled for a few months into Bethlehem to get their feet under them with a new baby. Traveling a long distance was likely not high on mom’s priority list at the time.
- B. Wise men. The exact number is unknown. Three is a guess based on the number of gifts. They are identified as “magoi” which is not “kings” but rather magicians or astrologers. Likely we can connect them to the magicians of Daniel 1:20, 2:2, 2:10, 2:27, 4:7, and they probably knew of the Hebrew Scriptures because of the influence of Daniel (5:11), and also the other Hebrews who lived in Babylon from centuries earlier. These magi were originated from a group of pagan religionists who had some connection to the God of the Hebrews and they had some insight—now lost to us—about a star pointing out the birth of Israel’s king.
 - 1. These were dwellers in the east, probably Babylon or Susa or nearby. They could have been Persian, perhaps Zoroastrian priests. We just do not know enough to pin down their identification. They saw the star while they were in the east, and they traveled west to follow the star.
 - 2. Logically they came to Jerusalem, since that is the capital of Israel. They may have expected great fanfare and celebration to already be underway when they arrived. Think of when a new heir to the throne is born in Great Britain—only this was a much more important occasion because the birth was predicted centuries earlier, of a world-wide king. Yet there was no fanfare.

“Where is He?” would be the natural reaction of these king-seekers.

3. Sadly (given their religion), they were more up to speed than the Jews on the arrival of the Messiah. So it is today, with many foreigners (Gentiles) knowing about the first coming of Messiah more clearly than many Jews.
 4. Note that the wise men came to *worship* him. The wise men had good intent, though perhaps a bit off base if they were just worshipping the king in a syncretistic way with all their other religious practices. This, coupled with *joy* at being near to the end of their journey, was the proper reaction to the arrival of the baby king of Israel.
- C. What was the star? Many have tried to suggest that it was a natural phenomenon that happened to occur at just the right time. But its timing and movement seem to prohibit this conclusion. It seems to have been a supernatural indicator from God about the Child, perhaps a kind of angelic appearance. It was like the Shekinah glory that had left Israel so many centuries earlier (Ezekiel 9:3, 10:4, 10:18-19). In the end, we cannot say with dogmatic certainty.
- D. But there was another reaction, v. 3. Herod and a notable majority of the population of Jerusalem were not joyful. They were *troubled*. Why?
1. This announcement was a threat to the power of Herod and his family dynasty. Herod would soon die, and his domain would be split into several smaller realms. But he did not want an outsider taking over the kingdom. He wanted power.
 2. Why does one want power so badly? Our fallen condition damages any benevolent pursuit of power so that it is most often dangerous and selfish. Sometimes it is to “help the society” but even that is often a self-centered thing instead of a civil service thing. The benevolent dictator feels good about helping the poor souls who cannot help themselves, having better ideas than them, etc. The un-benevolent dictator does not care. The power, money, pleasure, and all that comes with those things is inebriating and satisfying to the flesh.

II. Predicted Birthplace of the Newborn King, 4-6

- A. Herod gathered the priests and scribes and asked where the prophesied Child was supposed to be born. He obviously asked with ill intent, unlike the wise men.
- B. The Jewish leaders did know the answer to Herod's question. That is interesting. They were up to speed enough to connect the dots that the king of the Jews was the Christ (= Messiah), and that the prophet Micah in 5:2 had told them where he would be born. Micah wrote between 750 and 686 B.C.
- C. This was not just common knowledge among the Pharisees. It was commonly known among the people. Consider John 7:41-42. The people knew Jesus came from Galilee, and they were also right that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem. They simply missed the obvious possibility that he was born in Bethlehem and moved to another place for his early years! Maybe such movement was not common, i.e., many people probably grew up near their birthplace and did not venture far off.
- D. Remember that Micah was written centuries before the events of Jesus' birth. The events surrounding his birth, life, miracles, death, resurrection and all the rest would be so impossible to "force" that the easiest and most logical conclusion is that Jesus is in fact the fulfillment of prophecies written long before the events occurred.

III. Seeking and Worshipping the Newborn King, 7-12

- A. Herod inquired next about the time of the star. This would tell him when the birth occurred, and foreshadows what he would do in 2:16 by ordering the murder of all boys under two years old. Probably the star had appeared a year before around the time of Jesus' birth, and Herod was making sure by going back two years and forward to the present.

Herod was troubled: that is problem #1 that shows his sin. His fallen condition also had him plotting. That's expression of sinfulness #2.

- B. Herod told them to search for the young Child and bring back word. I can only speculate why he did not send a representative

with them to make sure the job was done. He either trusted them enough because of their earnestness, or he thought they might be a bit crazy in their religious speculations and so it was unlikely they would find anything of value to him. Actually this latter speculation doesn't seem to fit his murderous rampage through Bethlehem. Note that "Scholars agree Herod suffered throughout his lifetime from depression and paranoia."¹

- C. Herod had no compunction about lying concerning his purpose. He said, "that I may worship Him also." What a sad lie. That is sinful expression #3. Like many people today, including leaders, politicians, etc., lying seems to be more common than truth-telling. In service of power (politics in government or corporations) or money (sales) or pleasure (adulterous affairs), lying is seen as a tool to accomplish a desired end. But this is not so for the people of God. Bearing false witness in a court and misleading people in general is wrong and should strike our conscience with guilt. It requires confession, repentance, and amending our ways so that we stop lying (Col. 3:9).
- D. At verse 9, the magi left Herod and followed the moving star, toward the south just a short distance—half hour or less by car today. When they saw the star ceased moving, they were very happy because their long journey—a thousand miles or so—was over. They had reached their goal. This was perhaps for them a pilgrimage of a lifetime. Maybe patrons and fellow magi back in Persia were relying upon them to bring back a report of the exciting things these representatives found.
- E. They saw the child and Mary, and worshiped the child, but not Mary. As any good guests of this sort would do, they brought gifts to celebrate the birth of the child and as part of their worship of him. They gave him gold, fit for a king (Rev. 1:13); frankincense like that offered before God in the incense offering (Exodus 30:34,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great. The article goes on: "Josephus stated that Herod was so concerned that no one would mourn his death, that he commanded a large group of distinguished men to come to Jericho, and he gave an order that they should be killed at the time of his death so that the displays of grief that he craved would take place; but his son Archelaus and his sister Salome did not carry out this wish."

Isaiah 60:6, Psalm 72:10), and myrrh. These gifts were not only kingly, but practical as provisions for the impoverished family that would soon have to flee for their lives as aliens to a foreign country. More subtly, the gifts connect Jesus' birth to his death and burial, particularly regarding the myrrh (Mark 15:23, John 19:39).

- F. After their seeking became finding, God warned them in a way that they could understand—a dream—that they must return home another way. That is, they would have to travel east again, to their homeland in Persia or thereabouts, but via a different route so as to avoid Herod. This special revelation through dreams is very rare; it is even more rare to Gentiles. But it was warranted because God had to protect His Son, who was enfleshed in a baby's body, from a murderous dictator.

So, Herod sought the king with murderous intent; the magi sought him with worshipful intent.

IV. Fleeing with the Newborn King, 13-18

- A. Another special revelation instructed Joseph as to the protection of his child. There was no other miracle, however. Joseph had to *move* his young family far away to save the life of the Messiah. It is notable that Joseph obeyed God's word *immediately*. There must have been stress, grief, and fear in that little family that night and the days ahead as they moved quickly away from Bethlehem. Think of the fear and anxiety that parents have in the early years of their children's life, that the normal child is not even aware of: the late nights; the breathing problems; the hospital and doctor visits; the fevers that never seem to end. But then they do. Thank God. But "your baby is to be assassinated by the king." What do you do? You are a fugitive! You flee for your child's life, and yours.
- B. In almost an afterthought, Matthew comments that this going down to Egypt made Jesus like the nation of Israel before Him. That is, God called Israel, His national son, out of Egypt. He would call Joseph to bring Jesus, the divine Son, back to the land of Israel in v. 19. The quotation of Hosea 11:1 is a well-known difficulty in Matthew. But it should not at all be a difficulty or occasion for

strange interpretation. Hosea's word was not a predictive prophecy at all. Rather, Matthew is suggesting fulfillment in another sense, that is, by analogy, whereby he notes a similarity between Jesus and the nation of Israel. Reading farther in Matthew will reveal more analogies that are "fulfillments" of a sort. It is no surprise that Jesus is like Israel. After all, he is the perfect Israelite!

- C. Herod's plan was implemented after he realized the magi had not obeyed his orders. He was so enraged that he ordered the murder of all the baby boys under 2 years of age to ensure there would be no usurper to his throne (in two decades). But he did not account for the possibility that the child moved out of the area already. His butchery is as brutal as what Pharaoh did nearly 2 millennia earlier when he ordered the male Hebrew children to be thrown into the Nile.

Our "modern" society has not advanced at all compared to 2000 and 3500 years ago. In 2017 there were 862,000 abortions; 18.4% of pregnancies end in abortion. No Pharaoh or Herod is ordering this slaughter—the depraved nature of individuals and society is responsible.

- D. Matthew again cites an OT prophecy (Jeremiah 31:15) that likens the present distress of the mothers of Israel to a past distress where Israelite mothers were grieved because their children were killed during the invasion of Babylon—or, that they were taken away, kidnapped in essence. In Jer. 31:16-17, God encourages His own who have lost children in these ways that they will be delivered from their tears in the future. In the Babylonian captivity, the children would come back (maybe in the fourth generation, as we learned in our Daniel studies).

For those who are believers today who have lost a child in infancy, or a believing child later in his life, there is only the need for patient continuance in doing the will of God while we await to see that loved one again.

V. Returning with the Newborn King, 19-23

- A. Another change of situation, another dream to Joseph. This is the fourth of five dream revelations recorded in Matthew (1:20, 2:12, 2:13, 2:19, 2:22). Herod was dead. Jesus's stay in Egypt was fairly short, since Herod died in 4 BC and his kingdom split between three sons: Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip II, and Herod Antipas. The latter is the Herod we are familiar with from later in the gospels ("that fox" in Luke 13:31-32).
- B. Once again, Joseph obeyed immediately. Joseph is often lost in the shuffle of the busy history of Jesus and of course the importance of Christ and His ministry. But think of how God used this faithful man to protect and provide for the Messiah and his mother, and the other siblings as well. He was consistent, reliable, obedient, just. In some ways he was an insignificant man, but he was a hero behind the scenes.
- C. He wanted to avoid Judea and Bethlehem. In fact, he was afraid to go there. That was a good, healthy fear. It was too close to Herod's son, who may feel likewise threatened by the child-king. Archelaus was brutal and incompetent. The throne upon which Herod and his son sat belonged to Jesus. He is king in the line of David. Another dream came to Joseph in which God directed him to Galilee. This way, He would live in Nazareth.
- D. The prophecy that Matthew mentions in v. 23 is nowhere to be found in the OT. Several interpretations have been offered:
 - 1. Nazareth could be a loose translation of "branch," from Isaiah 11:1 (stem of Jesse);
 - 2. Matthew could be referring to some spoken but not written prophecies mentioned the Messiah as from Nazareth; or
 - 3. Since Nazareth was a despised place (John 1:46), it is an indirect way of quoting the prophets who predicted that Jesus would be despised (Psalm 22:6, Isaiah 53:3, 49:7).

Although the third possibility (c) makes good sense, I tend to take the second (b) because it seems there has to be some explicit

mention of Nazareth, not through a round-about way of expression. Possibility (a) is OK as well, but not very convincing.

Conclusion

Here we have godly parents and a unique Child. The eternal fate of all of humanity rests on that Child, and humanly speaking, upon the obedience of his parents to the revelation of God regarding His safety.

Your eternal “fate” is determined by your response to this Child. As Simeon said to Mary, the Child is destined for the fall and rising of many (Luke 2:34). Many will speak against Him and fall. Others will receive Him and rise. And to those who receive Him, God gives them the privilege and right to become children of God (John 1:12). Without the right response to Christ, Christmas is meaningless. Make it meaningful this Christmas!

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