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Christmas 2019

### **The Magi, a Murderous Maniac, and the Master** **Matthew 2:1-23**

Earlier this week I did something that I haven't done in 30 years and that I seriously doubt I'll ever do again. I read my horoscope. It read as follows: "Today will be a bad one for business investments, but it will mark the beginning of an exciting new romantic relationship." Needless to say, it was wrong on both counts. I don't have any business investments and I've been happily married to Ann for nearly 48 years! So much for horoscopes.

I have to confess I don't know why any right-thinking Christian would ever consult a horoscope or believe that the stars and planets and their movements control or in some way affect human destiny. Nevertheless, notwithstanding my own personal misgivings about astrology, for centuries people from all walks of life have looked to the stars and to the planets for counsel and comfort. I hope and pray you are not one of them!

In any case, there is no escaping the fact that it was a group of Persian astrologers, some 2,000 years ago, whom God sovereignly chose to play a crucial role in the events surrounding the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We don't know exactly how it happened, but perhaps one night as these men sat gazing into the heavens, there suddenly appeared a star of such vast proportions and unique quality that they knew immediately it was a sign of profound importance. How or on what basis they made the connection between this star and the birth of a Jewish king, we do not know. Perhaps God or an angel spoke to them in a dream. What we do know is that they packed their bags, mounted their camels, and headed west to find him whose birth the star proclaimed.

The contrasts between the wise men and Herod in terms of how they viewed the birth of Jesus are striking. The wise men came to *extol* him. Herod sought to *exterminate* him. The wise men sought to *magnify* Jesus. Herod sought to *murder* him. In the wise men there arose a spirit of *adoration* while Herod was only *angry*. We see *faith* in the wise men and *humble praise* of Jesus. In Herod we see *fear* and a *homicidal plot* to destroy the child.

#### *The Four Primary Features of the Story*

Before we dive into the text, a few things should be noted about the four primary features of our story.

**First**, of course, are the so-called **Wise Men**. The Greek word is *magos*, from which we get our English word Magi, a term used in ancient times to describe a priestly caste who allegedly had special powers that enabled them to interpret dreams. We first encounter such people in the book of Daniel. You may recall that when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had several dreams, he sought the interpretation from "the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers" (Dan. 2:2; 4:7). Of course, they were unable to interpret the dreams accurately, but Daniel did. The term was eventually applied to a variety of individuals engaged in the magical arts, astrology, and even prediction of the future (cf. Acts 8:9; 13:6,8).

In all likelihood they were from Persia, or what is today Iran. Tradition tells us that they were kings (cf. Psalm 72:10-11), although nothing is said explicitly in Matthew in this regard. Tradition also says that there were three of them, most likely because there are three gifts mentioned: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In fact, there may have been only two or as many as twenty. The text doesn't tell us. Tradition also gave them the names: Melchior, Balthasar, and Caspar. They supposedly came to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and were baptized by the apostle Thomas. Their bones were allegedly deposited behind the high altar at the cathedral of Cologne in Germany. There is actually an obituary written of them, and reads as follows:

"Having undergone many trials and fatigues for the Gospel the three wise men met at Sewa (Sebaste in Armenia) in a.d. 54 to celebrate the feast of Christmas. Thereupon, after the celebration of Mass, they died: St. Melchior on January 1<sup>st</sup>, at the age of 116; St. Balthasar on January 6<sup>th</sup>, aged 112; and St. Caspar on January 11<sup>th</sup>, aged 109."

Of course, we have no way of knowing if any of this is true.

One more thing of monumental significance is that *these men “from the east” were Gentiles!* Remember that Matthew’s gospel, unlike Mark’s and Luke’s, was written primarily for a Jewish audience. It is more than a little striking that the first people Matthew describes as searching for and worshiping the new-born Messiah are Gentiles. This is Matthew’s not so subtle way of declaring that the people for whom Jesus would eventually die includes men and women from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. The gospel, from the very beginning, has a universal reach.

**Second**, there is *Herod the Great*. I must say that there are a lot of things he should be called, but “Great” isn’t one of them! He was half Jewish, born in 73 b.c. He died in 4 b.c. He was wealthy, politically gifted, a somewhat capable administrator, but insanely cruel and suspicious of everyone. If he only slightly suspected that someone was a threat to his power, he killed them. He murdered his wife, Mariamne, his mother-in-law, Alexandra, one of his uncles and his brother-in-law. On top of it all, he murdered three of his own sons!

Herod’s warped and savage nature is seen not only in the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem, but also in the barbaric provisions he made just before his death. When he was certain he was about to die, he worried that people would not mourn his passing. So he ordered that a large number of the more prominent citizens in Jerusalem be arrested on trumped-up charges and imprisoned. He then ordered that they all be executed at the moment that he himself died. He did this because he feared people would celebrate his death and he wanted to make sure that tears would flow when he finally passed away, even if they were tears over the death of others.

**Third**, there is the “*star*” that signaled to the Wise Men that the “king of the Jews” was to be born. I find it ironic that some who have no problem acknowledging the supernatural nature of the conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary hesitate to concede the supernatural nature of this star. The theories surrounding it are many.

Some believe it was a *supernova*. This was first suggested by the astronomer Kepler who died in 1630. A supernova was a faint star that explodes suddenly and gives off an enormous amount of light for a few weeks or months. But that doesn’t account for what we read in Matthew 2:9.

Others have argued that this may have been an appearance of *Halley’s comet*. We know that it appeared in the year 12 b.c., but this would have been several years before Jesus was born. Another theory is that the star was in fact the *planetary conjunction* or alignment of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars as they crossed orbits. This supposedly took place in 7-6 b.c. But again, it fails to account for Matthew 2:9.

The most probable explanation is that this was *a special, supernatural phenomenon*, similar to the pillar of fire at night and the pillar of cloud by day that guided the Israelites in the wilderness. Nothing in the text suggests that the star served to guide them to Jerusalem. They went to Jerusalem because that was the most logical place for a Jewish king to be born. The star then re-appeared, according to Matthew 2:9-10, to guide them to the place in Bethlehem where they found the child.

We aren’t told how the Wise Men knew that this was “his” star (v. 2). We can only assume that God somehow communicated this to them. And note that when they arrived, they *didn’t* ask, “where is the one born who *will become* king of the Jews,” but “where is he who has been born king of the Jews.” The kingly status of Jesus was not conferred on him later in life. It was his from birth! He wasn’t born to become King when others attributed this royal position to him. He was born the King!

One more thing should be noted. *There is no indication in either Matthew or Luke that a star appeared on the night Jesus was born and hovered over the manger.* Virtually every nativity scene or Christmas play that you have witnessed will usually display a star over the manger. Instead, we know that when the angels appeared and announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in the fields, they weren’t told to look for a star. They were given another sign on how to identify Jesus. We see this in Luke 2:12 – “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” The star was the sign given to the Wise Men, the Magi, not to the shepherds.

**Fourth**, the most obvious and important feature of this story is the child *Jesus*. It is at this point that I am forced to shatter some of your long-held and cherished traditions about Christmas. I don’t do this because I enjoy bursting your

bubbles. I do it because I am obligated to be faithful to the Scriptures. After what I have to say some of you may prefer to re-entitle this sermon, “Bah Humbug!”

(1) The first thing to point out is a misconception about *where* Jesus was born. We read in Luke 2:7 that he was laid “in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” The traditional portrayal is that Joseph and Mary were turned away by a cruel inn-keeper who was devoid of compassion for a woman who was about to give birth. They subsequently were forced to take up residence in a barn or stable or cave.

But nothing in the text of Luke’s gospel even mentions an inn-keeper. Recent studies indicate that the word translated “inn” in Luke 2:7 is better rendered a “place to stay” and most likely refers to a *guest room* that was adjacent to the central living area in a typical home. The same Greek word is found in Luke 22:11 and clearly refers to a guest room in someone’s house. And in the parable of the Good Samaritan, you may recall that the man who had been severely beaten was indeed taken to an “inn,” but the word used in that verse is different from the one here in Luke 2:7.

Thus, most scholars now believe that they stayed in the home of Joseph’s family in Bethlehem, most likely in this adjacent guest room which, evidently, proved to be too small for a child to be born.

It is, therefore, quite unlikely that Jesus was born in a stable or in a barn or in a cave. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a nativity scene that didn’t have Jesus being born in a barn and the shepherds visiting him there, surrounded by sheep and goats and cows and the like. But there is no reference in Luke’s narrative to a stable or barn. The typical home in those days was rectangular in shape with a large central room. On one side of the central room was a guest room, significantly smaller. At the other end of the central room was an attached area for animals. Therefore, it was not at all unusual for there to be a manger or feeding trough under the same roof where the family would live.

Luke’s point is not so much any lack of hospitality extended to Joseph and Mary but rather that their place to stay was too small to accommodate a newborn and all those present to assist in the birth. The problem wasn’t that they were turned away into the night and had to find shelter in a barn or stable. Rather, the place where they were staying in Bethlehem was probably the guest room or marital chamber attached to the house of one of his relatives, perhaps his father, and was too cramped to make room for everything associated with giving birth. So they placed the newborn Jesus in a feeding trough, a manger, that was close at hand.

There is one more indication in Luke’s narrative that Joseph and Mary had not been turned away by a heartless inn-keeper and were forced to take up shelter in a stable or barn or cave. We read in Luke 2:6 that “while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.” Most believe this indicates that they arrived in Bethlehem some time before the birth of Jesus. Even if they had initially taken up residence in a barn or cave, they would eventually have moved to more hospitable surroundings.

(2) Yet one more misunderstanding about the birth of Jesus is that the Wise Men, the Magi from Persia, arrived on the night Jesus was born and were themselves present in what has traditionally been thought of as a barn. But look again at Matthew 2:11,

“And going into the *house*, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him” (Matt. 2:11a).

***The Wise Men in all likelihood arrived a year or two after Jesus was born.*** The reason for this is that when Herod gave orders to kill the young boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding region, he demanded that all of them who were “two years or under” should die. According to Matthew 2:16 this was based on “the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.” Evidently the Wise Men told him when they first saw the star. Given the time needed for travel, Herod concluded that Jesus had been born somewhere between one and two years before the Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem.

So, to sum up, what do the narratives of Matthew 2 and Luke 2 tell us about the birth of Jesus? They tell us that no star appeared to the shepherds and no star hovered over a barn or stable the night he was born. They tell us that Jesus was likely born in the home of one of Joseph’s relatives. However, since the guest room was too small to accommodate everything necessary for a childbirth, the newborn infant was placed in a manger that was located in another adjacent room where the animals were being kept. And they tell us that the Wise Men, how many we don’t know, arrived

anywhere from one to two years after Jesus was born and first saw him, not in a barn or stable but in the house where the family had been living for some time.

I'm so sorry if I just ruined Christmas for you! But my allegiance isn't to your traditions but to Scripture!

### *The Story*

Now let's back up to Matthew 2:1 and follow the unfolding of this remarkable story.

Bethlehem of Judea was about five miles south of Jerusalem. It was the ancestral town of King David where he was anointed by the prophet Samuel as king over God's people. It is here specified as "of Judea" to distinguish it from the Bethlehem of Zebulun.

All this took place "in the days of Herod the King" (v. 1). When the Wise Men informed him of their reason for making this long and arduous journey, the text says, "he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" (v. 3). The word translated "troubled" is the same verb we find in Matthew 14:26 that describes how the disciples were "terrified" when they saw Jesus walking on the water. This was no mild case of the jitters but **a combination of fear and paranoia**. The fear that also struck the citizens of Jerusalem was undoubtedly due to their concern over what Herod might do in the face of a legitimate threat to his throne. If he murdered his wife and children for little or no reason, what might he do if a "king" really had been born? They were justifiably afraid.

When Herod made inquiry of the chief priests and scribes, his worst fears were confirmed. Yes, they told him, the OT had prophesied a "ruler" who will "shepherd" the people of Israel and would be born in Bethlehem in the land of Judah.

Matthew doesn't make much of the response of the chief priests and scribes, but I can't help but see in their reaction a pattern that is present in our day as well. These men knew the OT Scriptures. They knew of the prophesied Messiah. They even quoted the prophecy from Micah 5:2. And they couldn't have cared less! "Yes, Herod. We know of the coming of Messiah. Here's the text that speaks of it. Now, if you don't have anything else for us, we'd like to get back to business as usual." Their indifference is breathtaking! Their silence and inactivity in the face of the most monumental event yet to occur in human history is almost beyond belief. The Wise Men had made it known that a supernatural celestial light signaled the birth of the king of the Jews. And what did the Jews do? Nothing! I can only pray and hope that this is not your response with each passing Christmas.

### *The Journey to Bethlehem*

Although Herod was a paranoid sociopath, he was also as sly as a fox. He summoned the Wise Men and ascertained when the star had appeared and then sent them to Bethlehem with the idea that once they located the new-born king he would come and join them in worshiping him. Some contend that this was historically implausible. They ask why Herod made no effort to have the Magi followed on their five-mile journey to Bethlehem.

It's a good question, but on the other hand Herod had no reason to doubt the willingness of the Magi to cooperate with him. After all, they were Gentiles and could not possibly have any real religious interest in a Jewish king. They had no reason for wanting to protect a Jewish baby. And it is highly questionable that Herod would have anticipated God's intervention to protect the child.

Others argue that the presence of exotic Wise Men in such a small village as Bethlehem would have made quite an impression on the people. Yet, when they go away Herod cannot find out anything about the child that was to be a king. But it cannot be assumed that the local population would be eager to supply information to a tyrant as hated as Herod.

When the Wise Men departed Jerusalem the star evidently reappeared and guided them to the place where Jesus could be found. Some believe it hovered directly over the house where Jesus and his family were living. Others suggest that the star merely indicated the town where Jesus was located, namely Bethlehem. They would have made inquiry of the people to locate the precise home where he was living. We can't be certain of either. Four things occur.

**First**, they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (v. 10b). Although many doubt if the Magi were actually converted to belief in the royal stature of Jesus, one wonders why they would have rejoiced with such exuberance upon finding him. Maybe it was due to a feeling of accomplishment on having been successful in the purpose of their journey. But I sense that something deeper and more meaningful is involved.

**Second**, they “fell down” in the presence of Jesus and Mary, his mother (v. 11a). One might think it would have been the other way around. Try to imagine the surprise for a humble family in Bethlehem to be the focus of a visitation by Wise Men from the east!

**Third**, they “worshiped him” (v. 11c). This word translated “worship” can mean something along the lines of to pay homage or to honor. It was the proper response of anyone in the presence of a dignitary or a ruling official. But it is hard to believe that Matthew doesn’t intend for us to see in their response an act of genuine worship and adoration and praise that is due unto God alone.

**Fourth**, “they offered him gifts” (v. 11d). Gold is a gift typically reserved for a king. It is given in recognition of Christ’s royalty. Frankincense was a white, gummy substance used most often as a perfume. It was a gift ordinarily reserved for priests. Myrrh was a fragrant spice often used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Could it possibly have been prophetic of the death that awaited Jesus?

Let me make one more observation about the way in which God chose to accomplish his purposes in the birth of Jesus.

Did you notice how often *angels and dreams* are mentioned? The angel Gabriel first appears to Zechariah with the news that his wife, Elizabeth, would conceive and give birth to a son who would proclaim the coming of the Messiah (Luke 1:8-23). The angel Gabriel appears yet again to Mary and tells her that she, a virgin, is going to conceive and give birth to the Messiah (Luke 1:26-38). An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and tells him to proceed with his marriage to Mary, that she is not pregnant because of sexual immorality but because the Spirit has performed a miracle (Matt. 1:18-25). The shepherds in the field have a multitude of angels appear to tell them of the birth of Christ (Luke 2:8-14). The Wise Men are informed in a dream not to go back and tell Herod about Jesus (Matt. 2:12). An angel of the Lord appears yet again to Joseph and tells him to flee to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15). Yet again, an angel of the Lord appears once more in a dream to Joseph to tell him to return to Israel (Matt. 2:19-21). Finally, in yet another dream Joseph is warned about Archelaus, the son of Herod, and so returns to live in Nazareth where the family would be safe (Matt. 2:22-23).

#### *The Tragic and yet Triumphant Aftermath of the Birth of Jesus*

I will only make a few, short observations about what happened after Jesus was born.

The **first** thing that occurred is the flight of the family into Egypt, described in Matthew 2:13-15. This was in fulfillment of Hosea 11:1 –

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

But wait! The passage in Hosea refers to God delivering his “son,” the nation Israel, *out of* Egypt. But here in Matthew 2, Jesus, God’s “son,” flees *into* Egypt. How does the latter fulfill the former? It all comes down to how the word “fulfill” (v. 15) is used and intended. The point Matthew is making is that Jesus is himself the true and perfect Israel. Where God’s child “Israel” failed to fulfill his purposes, God’s child “Jesus” succeeds. Jesus re-enacts and recapitulates Israel’s experience in his own life. One author put it this way:

“Jesus is often presented in the New Testament as the antitype of Israel; that is, the true and perfect Israel who does not fail. If Israel is likened to a vine that produces disgusting fruit (Isa. 5), Jesus is the true vine who brings forth good fruit (John 15). If Israel wandered in the wilderness 40 years and was frequently disobedient in the course of many trials and temptations, Jesus was sorely tempted in the wilderness for 40 days, but was perfectly obedient (Matt. 4:1-11). Israel in the OT is the Lord’s son (Exod. 4:22,23; Jer. 31:9); but Jesus, himself a son of Israel, indeed a son of David, was supremely *the* Son of God; and therefore he re-enacted or recapitulated something of the history of the ‘son’ (nation of Israel) whose very existence pointed forward to him.”

The **second** thing to note is the slaughter of the innocent male children in Bethlehem described in Matthew 2:16-18. Both the Magi and the family of Jesus would have departed immediately, as it would not have taken Herod long to issue and implement his murderous command.

If Bethlehem's population was approximately 1,000, as most scholars agree, there would have been no more than 15-20 boys under the age of two. That doesn't make Herod's action any less barbaric or horrific, but it does put in perspective what many have thought was a widespread holocaust of the young. And in a day and time when atrocities like this were somewhat commonplace, few would have given it a second thought, except for the parents of course.

This event is said to have "fulfilled" Jeremiah 31:15 (vv. 17-18). Rachel, in the OT was portrayed as the mother of Israel. When the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon in the sixth century b.c., she is depicted as weeping for her children. Now, once again, Rachel is portrayed as weeping, for her children are being persecuted and Jesus himself is being forced into exile in Egypt.

**Finally**, when the family of Jesus discovers that it is safe to return to Israel, they settle down in Nazareth, the town where both Joseph and Mary were raised. This too is said to be a fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophets. This is not meant to suggest that any particular individual prophesied that he would live in Nazareth. Rather, Nazareth was a despised and lowly town, obscure and often belittled (see John 1:46). When Matthew says that the OT prophesied that Jesus would be a Nazarene, he is not saying that a particular text predicted where he would live. Rather he is saying that the OT foretold that the Messiah would be despised, scorned, and ridiculed.

#### *The Point of it All!*

So why is the birth of Jesus of such monumental significance? The answer is found in ***the meaning of his name***. Back in Matthew 1:21 when the angel appeared to Joseph to tell him not to be afraid to take Mary for his wife, he said, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

It is all for the purpose of salvation, of deliverance from divine judgment. It is all for the purpose of securing for us by his life, death, and resurrection, the forgiveness of our sins. It is all for the purpose of giving us what we don't deserve: eternal life! That is the point of it all. That is the meaning of Christmas.