

## THE WISE MEN AND THE KING'S STAR

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Ben Janssen | **Matthew 2:1-12** | November 29, 2020

<sup>1</sup> Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> " 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' " <sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

In our "enlightened" day where scientism rules, it is surprising to hear so many people still refer to their zodiac sign, so many taking guidance from their daily horoscope. It seems that humanity has an insatiable thirst for the mysterious and the supernatural, the possibility that there just might be a message out there that can give us wisdom and direction for how we live our lives.

Christians should not be influenced by such things, but not because we don't believe that God can speak through signs in the sky. The story of the wise men tells us that God has done it before. The problem is not so much the desire to seek supernatural wisdom, but the refusal to follow the supernatural wisdom that God has already made known.

This is what we can learn from the story of the wise men, one of the familiar but mysterious stories of the Advent season. I'm not so concerned about the details of the story that we do not know: *How many wise men were there? When exactly did they come to Jerusalem?* We can see in the only reported words from the mouths of these wise men the message that we need to hear. The wise men had come to Jerusalem from their country in the east, asking, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Matt 2:2). In other words, Jesus is the king. The sign of the star is that Jesus is the king of the ancient prophecy. And, therefore, we must come and worship him.

### THE BIRTH OF THE KING

First, the story of the wise men is the announcement that Jesus is a king. Not just any king; this was the king of the Jews. Not just any king of the Jews; *the* king of the Jews.

## Herod Is Troubled

But there's already a king on the scene. All this took place "in the days of Herod the king" we read in verse 1. Verses 3 and 9 also refer to Herod as the king.

This is Herod the Great, whose family were not Jews by birth. They were converts to Judaism but ruled over the region as loyal servants of the Roman empire. Herod was run out of Jerusalem in 40 B.C., but he went to Rome and was there officially crowned as the king of Judea. He then returned to Judea with more authority and ruled the land for the next 33 years.<sup>1</sup>

So when Herod was told about some other king of the Jews, he was troubled, to say the least. He would have been more irked than President Trump is right now when he is asked about President-elect Biden. This is also why verse 3 says "all Jerusalem" was troubled along with Herod. Herod was known to be paranoid about threats to his throne, and when he got "troubled" like this, heads were sure to fly. He had once murdered his favorite wife and two sons because he thought they were plotting to kill him.

## The One Born King

And notice also what the wise men have said. This is not just a king of the Jews they had come to see, but the one "who has been born king of the Jews." To be "born" king means that you are from the royal family; Herod had no such ancestral claim to his kingdom.<sup>2</sup> If anyone would be a threat to Herod, it would be someone from the royal family. There is no way Herod is going to take this news lightly.

Still, the weight of this news may not be settling on us quite like it would have on Herod and, indeed, on all Jerusalem. For Herod knew what was meant by the one "born" king of the Jews, the one coming from the royal family. This was not just another king. This was *the* king. The one all Jews knew was sure to come.

Verse 4 says that Herod assembled "all the chief priests and scribes" and asked them to tell him "where the *Christ* was to be born." The *Christ* is of course a reference to the promised Jewish deliverer, the Messiah, the Anointed One. We know the story too well, we know who this *Christ* is, so we can miss the sense of anticipation and expectation and hope that surrounded the arrival of this Messiah.

The Jewish experts know of a text, found in Micah 5:2, which foretold that this Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. It would be out of Bethlehem that "a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" would come.

## The Kingdom of God and His Christ

As we begin this Advent season, I want us to consider more deeply the significance that one has been born *king of the Jews*, that Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah. I want us to consider what it means that *the* king has been born.

Specifically, I want us to consider not just the *king* but also his *kingdom*. If Jesus is a king, then what is his kingdom? *Where* is his kingdom? In what sense is Jesus really a king?

So we are pausing our study of the letters to the Thessalonians for the next several weeks to consider these questions. We are doing this not only because of Advent, but also because we're going to need to have some answers to these questions before we can proceed with our study in 1 Thessalonians which will deal with issues about the "end times," about the Second Coming of Christ, about the day of the Lord. There's so much confusion about these things, mainly because there is so much confusion about the kingdom of God. How we understand the kingdom of God will impact virtually every aspect of how we understand the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

So where shall we begin? Let's start with a star.

### **THE SIGN OF THE STAR**

The wise men claimed that they knew the king of the Jews had been born because they "saw his star when it rose" (Matt 2:2). All kinds of theories and speculations about this star abound. But the place to start is not astronomy but biblical prophecy.

#### **The Prophetic Star**

You can read about the different ideas about what the wise men saw, perhaps a comet, or some alignment of the planets, or even a nova—the explosion of a star. But we simply cannot say for sure. But what we can say is that we are dealing here with the fulfillment of a Messianic prophecy.

Numbers 24:17 speaks of "a star" that will "come out of Jacob." The star in this text is clearly referring to a king, because the next line of the verse refers to "a scepter" that will "rise out of Israel." So whatever the wise men saw in the sky, they understood it to mean that the prophesied messianic king had come.<sup>4</sup> And this messianic king is not just any king. Because of the prophecies about the Messiah, his arrival would have been readily understood to mean that the prophesied kingdom of God had arrived with him.<sup>5</sup>

If true, this is not something that can be easily ignored. The kingdom of God according to the Old Testament means the universal rule of God. It is God's "sovereignty in action."<sup>6</sup> To speak of the arrival of God's kingdom means the arrival of God's sovereign reign. We often speak of God's sovereignty as a concession. We speak of God being sovereign to encourage us when we feel defeated, when things do not go the way we think they should go. But the kingdom of God means that God's will is done on earth just like it is in heaven. The kingdom of God is a reference to the end of the age, when God's sovereignty is no longer opposed, when God rules and reigns over earth exactly as he does in heaven.

#### **Two Kingdom Forms**

This would be a kingdom worth seeing. So that's why the wise men have come all this way to welcome this king of the Jews. They understood that the birth of *this* king meant the promise of a kingdom like no other was now being fulfilled.

We should understand what they understood. The Old Testament speaks of the kingdom of God in two forms, what Old Testament and Hebrew scholar Bruce Waltke calls “a universal kingdom” and “a particular kingdom.”<sup>7</sup> God’s universal kingdom refers to his sovereignty over absolutely everything. God rules and reigns over the universe. Always has, always will. He is the king of all there is.

But it doesn’t quite seem that way, and that’s because God has given Satan a restricted—albeit powerful—rule over this universal kingdom. He has done this, not because Satan defeated God or dethroned him, but because God intends to reveal the sublimities of his glory,<sup>8</sup> “to make himself known to all humanity as he is in himself.”<sup>9</sup> And the way he will do this is by “the irruption (the breaking in from without), not eruption (the breaking out from within), of God’s” universal kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

The promise of God—indeed, the entire storyline of the Bible—is the story of how God breaks into Satan’s restricted kingdom from without, through his particular kingdom. His particular kingdom is his direct rule and reign over his particular subjects, those “who, out of their faith in him and love for him, serve only him.”<sup>11</sup> You can see this story playing out on virtually every page of the Old Testament.

## **The Rising Star**

Yes, but as you read the Old Testament with this kingdom perspective, you have to wonder if the particular kingdom of God will ever prevail? Every victory is followed by crushing defeat and failure. The faith of Abraham and the patriarchs ends with enslavement in Egypt. The victorious exodus ends with 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The conquest of the Promised Land is never quite completed, and the pagan nations and their gods became a snare to the chosen people (Judg 2:2-3). Even the powerful monarchy of David and Solomon caves to idolatry and ends up in exile in Babylon.

Will the battle ever end?

Yes, the end will come. That is the promise of God and the hope of the Old Testament. A star will come out of Jacob, the prophecy says (Num 24:17). A king will come, bringing with him a kingdom that will “exercise dominion” and destroy all opposition once and for all (Num 24:19).

One day, certain “wise men” from the east “saw his star when it rose” (Matt 2:2). We don’t know exactly *what* they saw, but no matter. We know the meaning of what they saw. The king has come. He is here. And so is his kingdom.

## **THE WORSHIP OF THE WISE MEN**

And so, these wise men from the east came to Jerusalem asking where they could find this new-born king. They saw his star and knew what it meant. And they wanted to be among the first to welcome him, indeed, to *worship* him. The worship of the wise men is perhaps the most instructive message of the story for us today.

## The Boast of the Wise Men

Just consider who these men were. The Greek word for them is *magoi*; its basic meaning is “the possessor and user of supernatural knowledge and ability.”<sup>12</sup> In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it occurs twice, referring to the “enchanters” of Babylon (Dan 2:2, 10). They are “wise men” not because of their astronomical knowledge, but because of their astrological beliefs and speculations. They are the ancient practitioners of the horoscope.

These are not the kind of people that God encourages us to listen to. Our English versions traditionally call them “wise men,” but Matthew’s readers would have thought of them more as fools because of their devotion to the dark arts.<sup>13</sup>

But that is just the point Matthew wants us to see about the king and his kingdom. One commentator observes, “The fact that God chooses such men to receive his revelation is a sign not of their wisdom but of their foolishness and ignorance.”<sup>14</sup> The kingdom of God will not unveil its riches to the wise but to fools. The wise man will not be allowed to boast in his wisdom, Jeremiah 9:23-24 tells us, but in his acceptance of who God has revealed himself to be.

## The Foil of Herod

Contrast these sophomores (*wise fools*) with the senior, King Herod. The *magoi* have come to know about the birth of the Messiah not only by the sign of the star but by their acceptance of the Scriptures. They undoubtedly came from Babylon, where the presence of the Jewish captives several hundred years earlier had left the memory of their sacred texts promising the birth of this great Jewish king. They didn’t know everything. They were not familiar with the prophecy about where this king would be born. But they believed what they did know.

But then there’s Herod, a convert to Judaism but one who ends up rejecting the true king and enacting a murderous plot to eliminate him. Herod believes the Old Testament prophecy, so much so that he acts in deliberate defiance of it.

Herod is a foil to the story of the *magoi*, used to accentuate the grace of God toward sinners. This king and his kingdom opens wide its borders to outsiders, to foreigners, to the nations who have lived in idolatry and pagan worship. To you and to me who “were dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air.” To us who “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph 2:1-3).

## Jesus Now Reigns

The story of the *magoi* is the story of the gospel. It is the story of Christmas. The king has come. He is here, and so is his kingdom. And to all who will receive him freely, to all who will come and worship him, he will give to them his kingdom and all its eternal benefits.

Of course this is also just the beginning of the story. We have much to learn from the king himself about his kingdom, because it still is not quite what you think it is. As we will see, the kingdom has

truly come already, but it has not yet fully come. So what do we do now as worshippers of the king and citizens of his kingdom?

This is why the king calls us to come and be his disciples, to learn how to live in this time between the times. The wise men, after being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, “departed to their own country” (Matt 2:12). So we too are to live in our own places to which God has called us, but with a good grasp on the doctrine of the kingdom of God which teaches us how we are to live in our day.

This is the point for Christians today to consider. Following Jesus, being his disciples, must never be separated from his teaching on the kingdom of God. If we do, we will end up following the horoscope or some other means of self-improvement rather than being transformed by Jesus himself who has already made us full citizens of his eternal kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> L. I. Levine, “Herod the Great,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD), ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), [3:161](#).

<sup>2</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), [70](#).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, “The Kingdoms of God,” *The Kingdom of God*, *Theology in Community*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [31](#).

<sup>4</sup> D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), [86](#).

<sup>5</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), [312-13](#).

<sup>6</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), [24](#).

<sup>7</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament: Definitions and Story,” *The Kingdom of God*, *Theology in Community*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [49-50](#).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, [51](#).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, [61](#).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, [57](#).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, [50](#).

<sup>12</sup> Gerhard Delling, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964–74), [4:357](#).

<sup>13</sup> See, M. A. Powell, *New Testament Studies*, 46 (2000), 1–20, cited in France, *Gospel of Matthew*, [66 note 29](#).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*