

Waiting for the King

King of Heaven: The (Un)expected King

Matthew 2:1-12

Pastor Josh Black

December 13, 2020

Our passage this morning is Matthew 2:1-12. The story of the Magi who travel to Bethlehem to bring Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. When you think of this passage, what Christmas carol comes to mind? “We Three Kings of Orient Are” was written about this passage. The heart of the hymn is spot on, but there are a number of questionable historical references that have clouded our imagination about this story.¹

For one, our passage doesn’t say there were *three* kings who traveled to meet Jesus. We know they brought three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—but that doesn’t mean there was one person for each gift. It’s quite possible for one person to give more than one gift. I know my kids are counting on that on Christmas morning! Or it’s possible for many people to pool their resources to give just one gift, like we do from time to time as a church staff. So, just because there are three gifts doesn’t mean there were three kings. We simply don’t know.

The second questionable fact is the reference to *kings*. The text doesn’t say they were kings. The ESV calls them wise men. But the Greek is simply *magi* and that’s how the NIV translates it. I think these guys are like the wise men and enchanters in Daniel 2. They were interested in dreams, astrology, magic, and predicting the future. They were certainly men of means, otherwise, they couldn’t afford the extravagant gifts. But the text doesn’t tell us they’re kings.

But while the passage doesn’t mention three kings, it does mention two kings. And these two kings are critical to a right understanding of this passage. That’s why Doug O’Donnell titled his sermon on this passage, “We Two Kings.”

Herod is the first king. He’s called the king three times in this passage. In verse 1 we read, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king ...” Herod the king is also mentioned in verses 3 and 9.

And he stands in contrast to Jesus. In verse 2, Jesus is called the king of the Jews. And the Christ in verse 4, which is a reference to the Messianic king. Verse 6 calls him a ruler and a shepherd, which was another title for a king.

Clearly, this passage is about two kings. So, what role do the Magi serve in this story? Well, God not only led them to Bethlehem. God is using them to lead us as well. He’s using them to lead us to see who the true king is and how to respond to him.

Matthew 2:1-12²

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, 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.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and

¹ What follows comes from Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®] unless otherwise noted.

assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶“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.”

⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And 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.” ⁹After 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. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And 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. ¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Like I said earlier, this passage is about two kings. But it’s also about two ways to respond to the true king. So, we’ll begin by looking at the two kings in verses 1-6, then the two responses in verses 7-12.

TWO KINGS (1-6)

Let’s begin with the two kings in verses 1-6. The Magi come to Jerusalem and begin asking around. “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.” Remember, these guys are likely astrologers. And they’ve been studying the stars and have seen something in the sky that piques their interest.

They saw this star in the east, which is probably Babylon. Following the return from exile, there was still a large Jewish community in Babylon. So, the Magi may have been studying Jewish texts that predicted the coming of a ruler in Judah. In fact, in Numbers 24, Balaam, another man from the east, made a prophecy: “A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (v. 17). It could be the Magi connected the stars in the sky with the star that would come out of Jacob.

There are a number of scientific explanations for what the Magi would have seen in the sky.³ Some say it was a comet. Others a collusion of planets, like Jupiter and Saturn. We’re actually getting ready to have another collusion of Jupiter and Saturn on December 21st. Others, like the scientist Kepler, thought it was a supernova.

Others say there’s no explanation from the constellations; instead, it was a supernatural work of God that led them to Jesus. We don’t know for sure, but we do know that God was leading them. And so they come and ask. Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?

This question piques Herod’s interest. Why? Well their question calls into question the legitimacy of Herod’s reign. Herod wasn’t *born* the king of the Jews. He’s no son of David! Herod was *appointed* king by the Roman senate in 40 BC. Now these guys from Babylon are poking around, asking about

³ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament

someone who has legitimate birth rights to the throne. So Herod is troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Why would Jerusalem be troubled by these guys asking questions about someone born king of the Jews? Because they know Herod!⁴ Herod did many great things in his early years. Especially some of his building projects. But in his later years, he did some horrible things. He became quite paranoid about usurpers to his throne. And when he felt threatened, he started killing people. He's like a mob boss. We know from historians like Josephus that he even killed his wife and two of his sons. He killed three hundred court officials. And at the end of his life, when he was on his deathbed, he gathered all the notable Jews to his palace. And when he died, he had them all executed so Jerusalem would mourn their deaths instead of celebrating his!⁵

So, Herod's troubled with their questions. And you can see why all Jerusalem is also troubled. So he brings in all the chief priests and scribes of the people to get intel on the predictions for the Messiah. He asks them where the Christ was to be born. And they immediately give him his answer. They quote two texts from the Old Testament. One from Micah 5:2 that predicted the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. And the other from 2 Samuel 5:2 which speaks of David as the shepherd of God's people.

Bethlehem was David's hometown. So it only makes sense that the Messiah, the son of David, would be born in Bethlehem. That's where the ruler comes from. That's where the shepherd of God's people would come from.

Like I said earlier, the word shepherd was an ancient way of speaking of a king. But it also speaks of the *kind* of king the Messiah would be. A shepherd not only rules, he rules with compassion and kindness. He cares for the flock. And this is quite a contrast to Herod.⁶

Everything we've covered in Matthew has showed us that Jesus is the long-expected Messiah. The one the Scriptures pointed to. And that's what this quotation is doing as well. Herod is an illegitimate, tyrant king. Jesus is the legitimate, shepherd king. The Magi's journey and their questions lead us to this conclusion.

TWO RESPONSES (7-12)

But that's not all. They also lead us to see whom this king is for. They help us to see the right way to respond to King Jesus. There are two responses to the prophecy in verse 6. The response of Herod and the response of the Magi. Herod's response is rejection. But the Magi receive Jesus. These are the two responses offered up to us today as well. We can either reject Jesus or receive him.

Herod

When Herod hears the prophecy of Micah 5, he summons the Magi secretly. And he sends them to Bethlehem to find the child. He's already gathered intel from the chief priests and scribes. Now he's sending the Magi on a reconnoiter mission. He says he wants to worship Jesus, but we know from verse 16 that was never his aim. He wanted to kill him. The Magi are warned in a dream to not

⁴ D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary

⁵ O'Donnell

⁶ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary

return to Herod, but it doesn't keep him from murder. Instead he calculates the time from when they saw the star to the present day. Then has all the boys in Bethlehem under two killed.

Why does Herod respond with such hostility? As I've already said, he felt threatened by Jesus. And so he's removing all threat to his rule. Anyone who gets in his way has to be dealt with.

But this isn't only the response of a paranoid madman. This is exactly what the chief priests and scribes do as well. The chief priests and scribes reject Jesus throughout his ministry because he was a threat to their authority. And eventually, when Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, they killed him (cf. Mt. 16:21).⁷

But Jesus is not only a threat to kings and people in positions of authority. Jesus is a threat to all people who want to live their lives according to their own rules.

A number of years ago, I did work with the atheist and agnostic club at WSU. I participated in two public debates and a number of private conversations with students. We spent a lot of time on intellectual and theological questions. But as I got to know them better, I began to wonder if their intellectual objections to the Christian faith were more of a smoke screen for a deeper issue. Was Jesus really a threat to their intellect or a threat to their way of life?

When I was in the car business, I had a colleague I shared the gospel with from time to time. He too had a few intellectual objections to Christianity. One night I just asked him point blank, "Are your theological questions the real issue or are you afraid Jesus will call you to change the way you're living?" It got really quiet for a while. But then he admitted that was part of the problem for him. Praise God, he eventually surrendered his life to Christ and is following him today.

Herod rejected Jesus because he felt threatened by Jesus. There can't be two kings. What about you? Is Jesus the true king? Or are you threatened by Jesus because you've set yourself up as king?

Magi

Let's look now at the Magi. How do they respond to Jesus? They give the polar opposite response. Instead of hostile rejection, they rejoice and worship Jesus. Verse 10 tells us that when they saw the star over Jesus' house in Bethlehem they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. They're not troubled by this king. They're over the moon! And so when they see the one God was leading them to, they fall down and worship him (v. 11).

This is a remarkable response. But in some ways, it's not unexpected. They announced their intentions to find the child and worship him when they showed up in Jerusalem. What's more surprising to me is not so much *how* they respond. It's really *who* is responding with worship.

The chief priests and scribes are experts in God's Word. They would kill it during quizzing at kids' camp or Awana. They know all the answers to people's questions about the Bible. When Herod asks them where the Christ is to be born, they hit the buzzer in a second, ready with their answer. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But what do they *do* when a group of men from another country show up looking for him? Nothing! All they have is Bible knowledge. And now that the real person the whole Bible pointed to is living five miles away, it does nothing to move them. A lot of knowledge about the Messiah, but not interest in the actual Messiah.

⁷ O'Donnell

But these Magi, who have very little knowledge of the Bible, go to find him, rejoice when they see the front door of his house, and bow before him when they see him.

These guys weren't raised in a believing home. And it's likely that they were into some really dark stuff back in Babylon—paganism, astrology, magic, maybe the occult. Milton calls them star-led wizards. When we think of wizards, we think of modern-day science fiction where there are good wizards and bad wizards. But for a believing Jew, there were no good wizards. A godly person would have nothing to do with the magic arts.⁸

But these are the guys that give the right response to Jesus. Not Jews, but Gentiles. Not the pious, but pagans. Not the Bible students, but the astrologers.

Friends, your knowledge of the Bible and your Christian family or school will do nothing to save you. The only way to be a Christian is to acknowledge that Jesus is the true king and Savior of the world and to fall down at his feet and worship him; to surrender your life to him.

And if you haven't grown up in the church, or maybe you've spent a lot of time in some pretty dark places, that doesn't mean you can't be saved. The Magi are proof of that!

One pastor says that before we take our nativity scene down this year, we should take a closer look at the cast of characters gathered around the newborn king. It's a motley crew. You have a teenage mother who conceived this child out of wedlock. Granted, she had done nothing wrong, but this whole scene was still marked by scandal. Then you have shepherds who were about as low as you can get on the socio-economic ladder. They were the sailors of ancient Palestine, foul-mouthed and rejected by the broader society. And you also have powerful pagan astrologers, Gentile sinners.⁹

This is who King Jesus came to save. People like you. People like me.

But it's not only the people gathered around Jesus that are unexpected, Jesus himself is unexpected. Think about the scene in Bethlehem. You've got these Magi that are pagans, but they're also clearly high-powered people in society. They are able to get an audience with Herod. They have the means to travel afar. And they bring very costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gifts fit for a king. But they don't offer these gifts at the palace in Jerusalem, like the queen of Sheba did to Solomon.

No, instead they bring these gifts to a humble house in Bethlehem. Many scholars today don't believe Jesus was born in a stable. When they got to Bethlehem they would've stayed with family. They likely stayed in a typical two room home. There would've been a guest room (or an inn) and a living room. The living room also had feeding troughs or mangers at the back of the room for the livestock. Since the guest room was full with other guests, Jesus was born in the room where they fed the animals. I think this is probably the house the Magi find Jesus at. My point is to say the king of the Jews was found and worshiped in a very unlikely place.

Even here in Matthew 2, we're beginning to get a picture of the reversal of the world's values and God's values. The reversal of the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven.¹⁰ The people who receive Jesus are not who you'd expect. And Jesus is not the king you'd expect.

⁸ O'Donnell

⁹ O'Donnell

¹⁰ Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*

Jesus is not like the kings of this world. He's not like the power-hungry, murderous Herod. No, he's a shepherd king, born in Bethlehem.

And this shepherd king, who was born in humility, also died in humility. In fact, the next time we hear the language king of the Jews in Matthew is when Jesus is on the cross. He is mocked as "King of the Jews" (27:29), because nobody can understand how a true king could be crucified. If he really was the King of Israel, he would come down from the cross (27:42).

But here's the great irony. Jesus shows that he is the true king because he goes to the cross! This is how he would save his people from their sins. The only way for his people to come into his kingdom was for him to pay the price for their sins.

The shepherd king is worthy of our worship, because he laid down his life for the sheep. That doesn't call his kingdom into question. He is the true king.

And the true people of this king are those who see his work on the cross as the only way to be saved from our sins. It doesn't matter who you are. Whether you were raised in a Christian home or spent your life raising hell. The only way to be saved is to repent of your sins and receive Jesus as King and Savior.

So how will you respond to the king born in Bethlehem? Will you reject him as a threat or receive him with joy?