

The Characters of Christ's Birth

Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

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Magi

Introduction

The account of the Magi, also called wise men, who came from afar to worship the one who was born king of the Jews, is a familiar one. The account is recorded only in the Gospel of Matthew. While it is a familiar story, it is also a fascinating account of men about whom we know very little. Nevertheless, their appearance in the story of Jesus' birth causes me to wonder for several reasons.

First, there is the wonder of the *incredible zeal* of the **Magi**, whose search for the “**one...born king of the Jews**” compelled them to travel from a distant land to worship a foreign king, who was still in his mother's arms. And so far as we are informed by our text, this search was prompted by the appearance of a star.

Second, I am appalled by the *irrational jealousy* of **King Herod** the Great toward an infant, born in an obscure little village. I am horrified by the cunning cruelty of **Herod**, who was willing to kill all of the infants in the vicinity of Bethlehem to eliminate the threat of one child to his kingship.

And third, I find myself struck by an even greater wonder at the *indifferent response* of the entire city of **Jerusalem**. The Magi diligently searched for the infant king to present him with gifts and to worship him. Herod the Great also eagerly sought to find the child, so that he could put him to death. But the vast majority of those living in Jerusalem were seemingly unwilling to travel five short miles south of Jerusalem to Bethlehem where they could find their promised Messiah.

This text has much to say to us about our response to the king of the Jews who has come as the Savior of the world. Our response will undoubtedly be like that of either the Magi, Herod, or Jerusalem. And how we respond has eternal implications.

Scripture

Let us read Matthew 2:1-12:

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying, “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.” ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and 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 Magi 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. (Matthew 2:1-12)

Lesson

Today, let us consider three responses to the birth of Jesus. Let's use the following outline:

1. The Response of the Magi
2. The Response of Herod
3. The Response of Jerusalem

I. The Response of the Magi

First, let us consider the response of the Magi.

Matthew's account of the Magi is garbed in a cloak of mystery. While there is much we would like to know about them, we are often left to speculate on those matters that are not elaborated on in the text.

We are not certain about the precise meaning of the term **"Magi,"** nor do we know where **"from the east"** they came. It is necessary to set aside almost everything we think we know about the mysterious Magi, because our thinking has been shaped almost entirely by Christmas carols and cards that are based more on imagination than revelation.

If what we can know for certain is that which is contained in Scripture, we know very little indeed about the Magi. We do not know the number of the Magi, their names, or the size of the party that traveled to Jerusalem. We do not know the source of their information, other than the fact that they saw some unusual phenomenon in the sky, which may or may not have been a star.

However, what little we do know is all that we *need* to know. It seems that the mysteriousness of the Magi is by design, piquing our curiosity and at the same time highlighting the depth of their understanding and commitment to finding and worshiping the Christ.

The Magi were men who had an interest in astronomy, which is consistent with the stage of scientific development in the east, including the Babylonians and other nations. Something unusual was observed, which is described as though a new star had suddenly appeared. We cannot know precisely what phenomenon took place, nor does it matter. What we can be assured of is the fact that God arranged this astronomical oddity to signal these Magi to a very significant birth—the birth of a child who was born as the king of the Jews and Savior of the world!

Matthew's account begins with the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem. Contrary to popular conception, the Magi did not seek out Herod to learn the birthplace of the **"king of the Jews."** They knew that a baby, not king Herod, was the **"king of the Jews"** they sought. If Herod's reputation was as well-known as we would expect, the Magi

may very well have sought to avoid him. Matthew's Gospel leaves us with the impression that the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, asking whomever they met where the **"king of the Jews"** could be found. The Magi must have marveled at the shrugged shoulders and bewildered looks on the faces of the Jerusalemites as they were asked about the Messiah's whereabouts.

Word must have traveled quickly about Jerusalem. The arrival of this group, the zeal of their search, and the certainty that the Messiah had come caught the Jewish people off guard. How could foreigners from afar have received such information without Jerusalem first learning of the Christ's coming? How could a Jewish king be sought by those who would be considered Gentiles, so that they might worship him? The worst part of all was that those who considered themselves the spiritual elite of Israel could do no more than shrug their shoulders when asked about the Messiah's residence.

Herod soon became aware of the Magi's arrival and their search for Israel's king. Regardless of Herod's motives, his secret meeting with the Magi supplied them with the name of the village—Bethlehem—where the Christ could be found. Herod thus unwittingly served as a channel of divine revelation to the Magi who sought to find and worship Jesus.

It was not until after they were headed south from Jerusalem that the **"star"** reappeared, this time leading them to the very house where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were staying. The **"star"** then stood still over the place where Jesus was. From the fact that the text tells us that the Magi entered **"the house"** (2:11), we know that the stable provided only emergency quarters for Jesus and his parents. Not only had the place changed from a stable to a house, but a certain time had lapsed as well—the amount of time necessary for the Magi to travel from the east to Bethlehem. The Magi should not, therefore, be envisioned as standing around the babe in the manger in the stable, presenting him with their gifts.

The eagerness of the Magi to find the **"king of the Jews"** is amazing. While Herod and all of Jerusalem were disturbed by the news of the birth of the king, the Magi eagerly sought him, rejoicing greatly at the return of the star (2:10). They **"bowed down and worshiped"**

The Characters of Christ's Birth

Jesus and gave him expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (2:11).

The wonder of the Magi is inescapable. God revealed the Messiah's birth to a Gentile people far away, and while all of Jerusalem seemed uninformed and apathetic, they sought him to worship him.

II. The Response of Herod

Second, consider the response of Herod.

Many marvel at the cunning cruelty of Herod the Great, as it is described by Matthew. But those who are familiar with history will not be as startled, for Herod was a cruel man. While I am surprised by the response of the Magi and that of the people of Jerusalem, I find Herod's actions true to form.

At the time of our Lord's birth, which probably occurred in 4 BC, Herod the Great would have been nearly 70 years old, in very poor health, and destined to die within a short time (later in 4 BC). Matthew tells us that after the death of Herod, Mary and Joseph returned from hiding in Egypt (2:19-23).

The cunning and cruelty of Herod displayed in the slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem and its vicinity is not without precedent. Herod never hesitated to use his power to destroy anyone who might get in his way.

Herod's life history reads like a cheap novel. One can hardly keep track of his wives, children, and victims. Herod had no less than 10 wives and 12 sons, although many of these were killed in one way or another. Repeatedly he changed his will and thus the heirs to his throne. His position and power were a matter of paranoid fear and sudden retaliation.

Herod's response to the arrival of the Magi is therefore totally consistent. The news of these influential easterners asking about the child who had recently been born as **"king of the Jews"** would have immediately kindled intense concern for his kingdom.

If Herod's reputation was at all known in the east, which it probably was, it is no wonder that the Magi avoided Herod's palace in their search for the **"king of the Jews."** It was not long, however, before

reports reached the ears of Herod.

So far as I can tell, there was never any question about what Herod intended to do. Herod's inquiry, first with the chief priests and teachers of the law, and then with the Magi, was regarding only two matters: the place and the time of the infant king's birth. There was never any question as to what he would do, only the necessity of gaining the information so that the "kill" could be done with precision.

The slaughter of the children of Bethlehem (2:16-18) is horrifying, but not surprising, given an understanding of Herod's character and conduct. Herod's cruelty extended to the point of leaving himself a fairly generous "margin of error," killing not only the children of the village of Bethlehem, but the surrounding vicinity as well, and not just killing the very young children, but those up to two years of age. Our parental emotions cause us to feel that the fires of hell cannot be too hot for such a man as Herod.

But let us remember that the depravity of this man is but the depravity of any person, given the right soil in which to develop more fully.

III. The Response of Jerusalem

And third, let us consider the response of Jerusalem.

The most shocking response to the birth of Jesus is not that of the Magi, and not even that of Herod. The greatest wonder in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth is that of Jerusalem's citizens. The most significant statement is in Matthew 2:3: **"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."**

Some have suggested that the city of Jerusalem was disturbed because they feared the reaction of wicked Herod to the news of the birth of Messiah. I find this explanation implausible. Jerusalem is said to have been disturbed **"with him."** This suggests that there was a common concern, a mutual apprehension, while perhaps different in some particulars, the same in general.

That the Magi would travel hundreds of miles to find and worship a Jewish (and thus a foreign) king because of the appearance of a star is amazing in itself. But in contrast, all of Jerusalem failed to find

The Characters of Christ's Birth

the announcement of the birth of her king sufficient reason to travel the five short miles south to Bethlehem. Here is the greatest wonder of all in our text.

The arrival of the Magi, with their announcement of the appearance of the star and the birth of the **“king of the Jews,”** could hardly have caught the city by surprise. Jerusalem was the site of the temple that contained and communicated the Old Testament prophecies foretelling the birth of the Messiah. This was but the consummation of those events that were understood as imminent by those who were looking for the coming of their king.

In and of itself, the announcement of the Magi could not be overlooked. The whole city of Jerusalem could not have failed to have heard of their arrival, or of their zealous search for the newborn king. All of the chief priests and teachers of the law had been summoned and questioned by Herod, and the prophecies concerning Messiah's birth had been reviewed. Matthew is hardly exaggerating when he says that all of Jerusalem was disturbed with Herod.

This is a very troubling statement. Against the backdrop of the diligent search for Messiah by the Magi is the apathetic disregard of the whole of Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem is more like Herod than it is like the Magi. In fact, we could even say that Herod is, in one sense, more understandable than the rest of the city of Jerusalem. Herod must have believed that the child really was a king, or he would have gone to a great deal of trouble for nothing. Who would summon all the chief priests and teachers and secretly call the Magi, and then kill small children if he were not genuinely threatened?

Jerusalem's apathy is much harder to comprehend than Herod's annihilation of the small children of Bethlehem and the surrounding vicinity. Why would Jerusalem be so apathetic? Let me suggest some reasons.

For one thing, a “helpless babe” could hardly fulfill Israel's expectations of a mighty Messiah, who would throw off the shackles of Rome and throw out a madman like Herod.

In addition, the object of the Magi's visit was vastly different from the desire of Jerusalem's population. The Magi came to give the Messiah their earthly treasure and their worship. They came to the one

who would save them from their sins. Israel, however, wanted a Messiah who would give them political freedom and power. A babe in a manger could hardly meet Israel's expectations. To put the matter plainly, the babe in the manger had little to offer the Jerusalemite.

And furthermore, Jerusalem, at the time of Jesus' birth (like today) was filled with unbelief and thus was unwilling to seek or worship him. I am reminded of Paul's description of all people in Romans 3:10-11: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God."

Unbelieving Jews are just like all unbelievers—they refuse to seek God or to worship him (*cf.* Romans 1:21ff.). Being Jewish no more inclines one to recognize God's salvation than being raised in a Christian home does. Proximity to truth is not enough. Ultimately it is those to whom God chooses to reveal himself who come to him (*cf.* Matthew 11:27; John 8:42-47; 10:22-3).

And so it is not shocking to remember that when our Lord publicly presented himself to the nation some thirty years later, accompanied by signs and wonders, the Jews failed (as a nation) to accept him as their king, and it was in Jerusalem that Jesus was eventually crucified. Remarkable, isn't it?

Conclusion

The three responses of the Magi, Herod, and Jerusalem typify the responses of people to the Messiah, who has come to redeem fallen sinners and to reign over all the earth as king.

Throughout history, there have always been those who, like the Magi, have sought God's Messiah and found him. Often they have not been those whom we would have expected to find worshiping Christ. But it has always been God's way to draw some from "afar," whether that distance is geographical, racial, or cultural, to worship Christ. We who are Gentiles should have a very special place in our hearts for the Magi, for we are, in many ways, like them. For, as the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2:11-13: "Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth...remember that at [one] time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the

The Characters of Christ's Birth

covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.”

Then there are also those, like Herod, who take the claims of Jesus seriously, but who, for selfish reasons, actively seek to rid themselves of his sovereign rule. Fortunately, although history does record the fact that some earthly rulers have zealously sought to overthrow the rule of Christ and his church, few have been as aggressive as Herod in resisting the reign of Christ.

Finally, there are those, like the vast majority of those who dwelt in Jerusalem, who are so apathetic to the claims of Christ that they will not bother to make the minimal effort required to respond to the fact that he has come. On Sunday, millions will not make the effort to travel a mile or two to a church where they may adore the Christ who came to save us from our sins. In both America and Jerusalem, it is not because they were not told of his coming and his claims, but simply that people do not really care to bother themselves to respond to him. The apathy of Jerusalem (or America) may be more socially acceptable than the atrocities of men like Herod and others, but it is, in some ways, more abominable. At least those who have committed atrocities against our Lord and his people have taken Christ's claims seriously.

But apathy and indifference do not remain. The city which could not care less about the birth of their king did, but thirty years later, in Herod-like fashion, seek the death of Jesus Christ. Rather than repenting of their sins and receiving him as Messiah, that city cried out, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” (Luke 23:21).

The controversy over Christ was whether or not he was the “king of the Jews” (*cf.* Matthew 27:11; Luke 19:37; John 18:33; 19:1-2, 19-22). And rather than bowing down in worship before him as their king, they shouted, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15).

Apathy has its way of turning into animosity. Those who, at first, ignore the Christ who has come, will eventually attempt to eradicate the world of him and his rule.

May I ask you very honestly as we enjoy another Advent season, “Which response most accurately reflects your response to the coming of the king, our Lord Jesus Christ?”

Many of you here today are like the Magi. You worship Christ for who he is—your king and your Savior.

I doubt that there are any Herods here today, for they would probably be trying to burn the church building down.

But is it possible that some of you have become so preoccupied with your holiday celebration that you have failed to do what is most important of all—to seek him and to worship him? You have become apathetic and indifferent to the Lord Jesus Christ. Learn from the apathy and indifference of the city of Jerusalem. Repent of your sin, receive Jesus as your Savior, and worship him! Amen.

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and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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