

The Birth of Jesus

Part 2

Matthew 1:18-25

With Study Questions

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12/23/2012*

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Part 1

Matthew 2:1-12

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, ² saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." ³ When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ⁶ *'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'* " ⁷ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." ⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

The Story

We concluded last week by discussing the hornet's nest into which Jesus would be born. We often ponder the shepherds, the angels and the nativity scene when we think of the birth of Christ. But there is also controversy, scandal and devastation which accompany the birth of the Christ. The passage above is the first half of a story that goes something like this:

- Wise men from the east come to worship the baby Jesus.
- Herod, who had been made king over the Jews by the Romans was not particularly excited about this event, nor were the people of Jerusalem.
- Herod begins to make inquiry of the wise men and his own priests and scribes regarding the time and place of the Christ's birth in order to destroy Him.
- The wise men find the newly born King, worship Him and give Him gifts.
- They are warned, in a dream, of Herod's true motives and depart for their own country another way.
- Joseph is also warned, in a dream, to take Jesus to Egypt.
- Herod, in a fit of rage (something common for him), engages in the stomach-turning massacre of every male child, two years and under, in Bethlehem and all its districts.
- Eventually Herod dies and Joseph, in another dream, is told to bring the baby back to Israel.
- But the new king, Herod's son, is still a danger so Joseph is warned that he should go to Nazareth.

Introduction

So much can be said of these events. I will seek to highlight the following as we examine this story:

1. What is Matthew's main point in this portion of the text?
2. What is the significance of the wise men?
3. What was Israel's response to Christ and why?
4. Why was all the evidence useless to save?
5. Why did the wise men worship Christ?

1. Matthew's Point

What is Matthew's point in conveying this story? What are we to learn? Before we make some specific observations in this story, let's look at the big picture.

The gospels are the good news; the good news that Christ has come to save that which was lost (Matthew 18:11). In Matthew it is emphatic that Christ is the promised King who will bless the world by the advancement of His kingdom. We've already seen this is brought forth in His royal genealogy and by what the angels conveyed to Joseph regarding Jesus' mission to save His people (Matthew 1).

In chapter two of Matthew we will continue to be made aware of who Christ is. Matthew will make numerous allusions to Jesus as the promised Christ by virtue of fulfilled prophecy. For example: 1) He was born in Bethlehem (verse 6—Micah 5:2). 2) He would be called out of Egypt (verse 15—Hosea 11:1). 3) His birth would be accompanied by the tragic death of children (verse 18—Jeremiah 31:15) 4) He would be called a Nazarene (verse 23—Judges 13:5).

It would appear that Matthew's point is that the hornet's nest which surrounds the birth of the King is according to God's holy design and confirms that He is indeed the Promised One. No master conspirator could possibly orchestrate the series of events necessary to fulfill these, and the numerous other, prophecies

concerning the Christ. It would never be a matter of whether or not this was the Christ but what man's response would be to this undeniable truth. Now we have man's response to this King.

2. The Significance of the Wise Men

What is the significance of the wise men? Why are they part of this story?

A Rare Anthem

So how would God the Father introduce His Son into the world? God had promised (He had made a covenant) that through the seed of Abraham—the Jewish nation—the Savior would come. The covenant making, covenant keeping God has now kept His promise. Now how would He be received? Would the blessed nation receive Him with trumpets and fanfare? Their long-awaited Messiah was here!

The response of Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the announced birth of Christ should have been the national anthem of Israel when she sang,

And His mercy *is* on those who fear Him From generation to generation.⁵¹ He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered *the* proud in the imagination of their hearts.⁵² He has put down the mighty from *their* thrones, And exalted *the* lowly.⁵³ He has filled *the* hungry with good things, And *the* rich He has sent away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of *His* mercy,⁵⁵ As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and to his seed forever” (Luke 1:50-55).

Mary certainly appreciated the gravity of the event! But she was a minority. This was a rare anthem. The introduction of Christ into the human race was anything but regal. He was either

ignored or despised by the very people to whom the promise was made (John 1:11). It may not be very realistic to expect that people will be immediately excited about Jesus. The announcement assumes a great deal of fault in the human race—not the least of which that man is sinful, incapable to overcoming his own sin and is required to abdicate lordship over his own life—albeit true but not terribly popular ideas. These ideas require the grace to embrace. Yet Jesus, even as an infant, does find worshipers.

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, ² saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him” (Matthew 2:1, 2).

Where Is He?

There are those who would worship the newborn King but they can't seem to find Him. Keep in mind that it is likely that a substantial amount of time had passed since the birth of the child. He was no longer in the stable (Luke 2:7) but in a house (verse 10). By the reckoning of Herod the child could have been up to two years old; but even if it had only been months, why the difficulty in finding the King? Was not the glory of the Lord revealed to the shepherds (Luke 2)? Did not Anna and Simeon proclaim that this child was the Consolation of Israel (Luke 2)? How true was John's indictment, **“He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11)**. But He was extolled by foreigners.

Extolled by Foreigners

The regal splendor due the King would be rendered, not by His own people, but by gentiles—magi. There is endless speculation as to who these magi were and how many. There is no certain answer to those questions. We know they are not Israelites, and that they were from the East—perhaps Persia or Arabia.

One wonders if they were astonished at Israel's lack of faith. Their questions must have been fairly public (Herod knew of them). Where is the King? We have come to worship Him. Perhaps they thought there would be a procession. How long must they stand in line to offer their gifts? Their problem wasn't the length of the line; their problem was finding the King.

Aliens will often travel long and hard to the shores of America; arguably the freest nation ever. How vexing it must be to see Americans exercising their freedom by burning the flags which symbolize that very freedom. How vexing it must have been for these magi when they came to realize that the glory of the King was obscured by men's complacency at best and hostility at worst.

Yet they were undaunted by the humble surroundings of the King. They did not wait to see what riches this King might provide, nor did they wait for the King to reach their own land. Impatient they were to become acquainted with Christ the King. Early we see the King's ministry would extend beyond the borders of Israel. We know little of the magi but Matthew Henry profoundly explains,

Well, whatever sort of wise men they were before, now they began to be *wise men* indeed when they set themselves to enquire after Christ.¹

Not so with Herod and Jerusalem!

3. A Troubled King and People

What was Israel's response to Christ and why?

When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him (Matthew 2:3).

A Wicked King—A Wicked Generation

¹Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 2:1). Peabody: Hendrickson.

Why would Herod the king be troubled? Why would Jerusalem be troubled? Herod was an Edomite (descendant of Esau). Although he held the office of a religious man, he didn't demonstrate an iota of genuine faith. Similarly the people of Israel had no genuine faith. Numerous times throughout this gospel Matthew will record Jesus' indictment against this wicked generation (Matthew 12:39-45; 16:4; 17:17).

Troubled by Nothing?

But why would they be troubled if they had no faith? If I don't believe in lightning why would reports of lightning be bothersome to me? The answer is that Herod and the Israelites—and all men—have a knowledge of God (Romans 1:18-23); not saving but a knowledge nonetheless. You might call it a disturbing knowledge. They know there is a God and there will be a day of reckoning.

The atheist argues that there is no God. But even in the shortest conversation with an atheist one can detect, not merely disinterest, but hostility toward God. I am neither mad at nor do I fear purple dragons. They simply get none of my attention. I am certainly not going to form an anti-purple dragon society. If there is no God, why do atheists hate Him so much?

Herod and the people of Jerusalem were troubled because they were living in open rebellion against a God who they knew existed. And they were aware of His Son/King who would perform those actions which Mary sung of earlier. He will scatter the proud and put down the mighty. He will fill the hungry with good things and exalt the lowly.

A Kingdom of Impact

Herod knew his very throne was at stake, the people of Jerusalem knew that rebellion against the King Jesus would be followed by decimation. They were, no doubt, familiar with Psalm 2.

Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth.¹¹ Serve the Lord with

fear, And rejoice with trembling.¹² Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish *in* the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him (Psalm 2:10-12).

But Herod would not kiss the Son. Instead he gathered priests and scribes and used the knowledge of God he had to seek to kill the Son. A loving, gracious, wise, sacrificial, Prophetic/Priest/King is an unwelcome intruder in the affairs of man. Israel preferred Herod to Jesus. It retrospect it seems insane. Yet it is fair to ask ourselves to what extent we do the same.

4. Evidence

And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:⁶ *‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’* ”⁷ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also” (Matthew 2:4-8).

All the Evidence but no Verdict

This seems to argue very strongly against the value of evidence to convert men! Herod, the priests, the scribes, this whole generation saw the fulfillment of Scripture (Micah 5:2); they

saw wondrous things. These magnificent evidences, instead of converting them, merely became a testimony against them. Christ's reprimand is seen later in Matthew.

Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: ²¹ "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes (Matthew 11:20, 21).

Truly faith comes from above—yet another testimony that it is God who **"grant (s)... repentance, so that they may know the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25).**

5. They Worshiped Him

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way (Matthew 2:9-12).

Worshiping Jesus

Not much explanation is given regarding the star so we won't go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6). That it stood over the house indicates that it probably wasn't what we commonly understand as a star. We do not know that there were three wise men; this is usually deduced from there being three gifts but it cannot be positively shown. Nor do we know the significance of the gifts. It is often postulated that the gold was

for His royalty, the frankincense for His deity and myrrh for His death but these are only guesses.

It is significant that the expression used to convey their presentation of gifts to Jesus is **“in the New Testament employed seven times, and always in a *religious* sense of offerings to God. Beyond doubt, therefore, we are to understand the presentation of these gifts by the Magi as a *religious offering*.”**² If Jesus were not God, this behavior by the wise men would have been worthy of a rebuke. For as we will learn in this very gospel,

Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve” (Matthew 4:10).

Worthy of Praise

But it was God incarnate who these wise men worshiped; and wise men still worship Him. The faithlessness of Israel seemed to have no effect upon them. They did not say “I will not worship Jesus because the church is full of hypocrites.” The faithlessness of man has never been an indictment against God. We learn through the apostle,

Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? ⁴ Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar (Romans 3:3, 4).

There are many reasons why people might walk into a church—serious reasons, reasons that should not be ignored. People may be sad, lonely, shackled by sins or addictions, depressed, in need of direction or wisdom or material help. People who care about and love other people don’t belittle or ignore disregard these things. The church may make an effort to address these types of things through the counsel of their elders,

²Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 2:11). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

the service of their deacons, programs designed by staff and members to address all these things. One would be hard-pressed to find anything wrong with that.

But these wise men worshiped Christ, not because of any program or offer of offer of assistance, or addressing of any specific political, social or psychological need. The manger, or the house, where the baby lay had no strategies for church growth, no slogans or small groups where people could address their current and valid hardships.

The wise men worshiped Christ because He was worthy of worship. The wise men attended this worship service because they had been given a message that there was a glorious King who deserved their praise, faith and allegiance. This is the message that attracts wise men—this is the message that makes men wise.