

The Visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-15)

Introduction

Why Did Matthew Include This Event?

Matthew is the only gospel writer to include the visit of the magi in his account of Jesus life. Why did he chose to include it? Or better yet, why did the Holy Spirit, through Matthew, include this passage in this book?

One thing to keep in mind when you study any passage is the context. Context is critical to a proper understanding. And one of the things you think about when you think about context is the argument of the author when he wrote the book - or the part of the book, that contains the passage you are studying.

So – since the passage we are covering today is from Matthew – what is Matthew’s purpose in writing his book? According to Stanley Toussaint:

“Matthew has a two-fold purpose in writing his Gospel. Primarily, he penned this Gospel to prove Jesus is the Messiah, but he also wrote it to explain God’s kingdom program to his readers.”

Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King*, Page 18

Matthew was written with a Jewish audience in mind. So – Matthew had two main goals – first, to prove to his Jewish audience that Jesus is the Messiah. Second, to explain to his Jewish audience what God’s plan was for His Kingdom. These are inter-related – if you were a Jew – even if you were presented with the fact the Jesus satisfied all the qualifications of the prophesied Messiah - what would be a big question you would ask? – Well, if Jesus was the Messiah, why didn’t the Kingdom come? You would think - he couldn’t have been the Messiah because the Kingdom didn’t come. Matthew wrote to explain to them what happened.

So, if we understand that the two main purposes of Matthew’s book are – one – to prove Jesus is the Messiah – and two – to explain what happened to the kingdom - and we understand that he is primarily writing to a Jewish audience who would be well versed in the Old Testament – including all the prophecies and qualifications Jesus would need to satisfy to be the Messiah - we have to conclude that Matthew included the visit of the magi in his gospel because it advances those purposes. Once we go through the passage, we will be able to see how.

This is an historical account – actual real history – and we are going to divide this history into 4 Acts – The Arrival of the Magi, The Investigation, Finding Jesus, and Flight To Egypt.

First, Act 1 – Arrival of the Magi.

Act 1 – The Arrival of the Magi

Matthew 2:1–3 - ¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ² “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw 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.

Time has passed since the day Jesus was born – we don’t know how long but at least a few months, if not over a year. There are several indications that months may have passed – here are a couple of them - when Jesus was born, He was laid in a manger (like a feeding trough”) - which means that He was born in a place that animals were kept – in that area, this was commonly a cave. However, when the magi found Him, He was in a house. So, by this time, Mary and Joseph had moved Jesus from the cave (or wherever He was born) to a house. Another thing - when Herod decreed the slaughter of the male babies in Bethlehem - he slaughtered all of them that were two years old and under. He knew when the magi had seen the star and so – by the time he issued his decree – up to 2 years might have passed since the star appeared. So, don’t think the magi made it to Jesus at the time He was born. They didn’t. It was probably several months after that.

As far as the year and political situation at the time of the visit, verse 1 says that the visit occurred during the reign of “Herod the king”. Herod the King is the Herod known as Herod the Great - who reigned over Judea at this time. He died in 4 BC. We are going to talk more about Herod later. This also indicates that Jesus was born not later than 4 BC, and probably earlier than that.

So, the visit of the magi probably occurred several months after Jesus was born and before Herod died sometime in 4 BC.

Who were these “magi”? These guys were not “kings” – they were “wise men”. Here’s a good general description of what “magi” in this area of the world were. Arnold Fruchtenbaum said:

“According to Holdcroft, these Gentiles were experts “in astrology, the interpretation of dreams, and other secret arts.” Their studies of the stars included both astrology and astronomy, science and superstition.”

Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua – The Life of Messiah From a Messianic Jewish Perspective* (Vol 1), page 416

These guys were the professional counselors and advisors of the times. They are considered to be very wise with special insight. They were the guys that royalty, military commanders and other important people consulted to make decisions. Now these particular magi - they have come to worship Jesus, the Jewish Messiah – and this makes you think they might have been believers – which makes you wonder if they participated much in the “secret arts”. And there’s something important to notice about the magi – don’t ignore this point – the magi were Gentiles. They were not Jews, they were Gentiles.

Matthew doesn’t tell us how many magi showed up in Jerusalem. We know there were more than one because the word “magi” is plural. So – there’s for sure more than one. People sometimes think that there were 3 because Matthew mentions 3 gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – but just because there might have been three gifts given doesn’t mean that there were only three givers. Also, there could have been more gifts than those given, but just not reported by Matthew. We do know that the arrival of the magi caused Herod and all Jerusalem to be stirred up – so I’m kind of thinking that there were more than 3 – there were enough magi in the caravan to make an impression at the highest levels in Jerusalem.

The magi came “from the East”. This is somewhat ambiguous - according to Arnold Fruchtenbaum:

“As to the origin of the magi, there are multiple suggestions, including Persia, Arabia, and Babylon..... However, from the wider biblical record, Babylon is preferred as ‘the localization most favored by the astrological implications of the rising star’. After the Babylonian Exile, a large group of Jews remained there, ‘so that Babylonian astrologers could have learned something of Jewish messianic expectations and might have associated a particular star with the King of the Jews’.”

Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua – The Life of Messiah From a Messianic Jewish Perspective* (Vol 1), page 417

So these magi from the East arrive in Jerusalem. So far, not a big deal. But why did they come? Verse 2 – they were saying “**Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.**” These Gentile “wise men” have come to worship the Jewish Messiah - who they believe to have recently been born. How did they come to this belief? They saw His star. Ok – but they were Gentiles and they weren’t from Israel. How did they know to associate the appearance of a “star” with the Jewish Messiah? Why would they care about worshipping a Jewish King?

Matthew doesn't answer these questions. All we know from Matthew is that they were magi from the East. He doesn't say where they got their knowledge. We can tell what they knew – they knew that a Jewish King would come, they knew His coming would be associated with a “star”, they knew they were looking for a child recently born, they knew the timing was right for the coming of the King, and they knew that this particular Jewish King was worthy of Gentile worship. They must have had some knowledge of the Old Testament. How did they get this knowledge?

We aren't told, but there are some things in the Old Testament that could explain where they got their information. First – the star. How could they have known to associate a star with the Jewish Messiah?

For a possible answer to this question, look to Numbers chapters 22-24. This is the story of Balaam. After the Exodus from Egypt and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, God has taken the nation of Israel to the border of Moab and God is once again about to allow them to enter the promised land. Everybody in the regions of Moab and Midian were afraid of the Israelites. So, Balak – the king of Moab – joined together with the Midianites and came up with a plan. They are going to call in a very famous “wise man” named Balaam and pay Balaam a lot of money to curse the Israelites. Now – remember this - **Balaam was a Gentile astrologer who came from the region of Babylon**. He had a very powerful reputation – Numbers 22:6 says this about him – “he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.” He would bless and curse for pay. He was a professional. It is possible that the magi in Matthew 2 were from the same region that Balaam worked.

So, Balak calls on Balaam to come curse the Israelites and promises he will pay Balaam a lot of money. And if you remember the story, Balaam at first refuses to go. Then he goes and his donkey saves him from destruction by an angel God placed in his path to prevent him from going. Then, when he gets there, God does not allow him to curse the Israelites but in fact causes Balaam to bless them three times. Balak gets really frustrated after this and tells Balaam to leave and – by the way - there's no way he's paying him. So, Balaam leaves, but before he does, he says he's going to leave them with something to think about – and he tells them what the Israelites will do to the Moabites “in the days to come.”

So look at Numbers 24:17 – this is part of Balaam's parting oracle before he leaves Balak. Here's what it says:

I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near;
A star shall come forth from Jacob,
A scepter shall rise from Israel,
And shall crush through the forehead of Moab,
And tear down all the sons of Sheth.

The “scepter” in this oracle represents the right to rule – a king. But this king is not immediate, he is “not now” and “not near”. He’s coming in the distant future. And a “star” is associated with the “scepter”. Both are references to a king. A king is going to “come forth” from Israel.

Remember where Balaam came from and where he returned to after his visit to Moab - The region of Babylon. Where might the magi have come from? The region of Babylon. So, it’s possible that Balaam took the prophecy of the star back with him and later generations of Babylonian “wise men” remembered the prophecy. And that may be how the magi came to associate a star with the birth of the “King of the Jews”.

But what about the timing? Could they have known something about the timing of the coming of the King so that they would have been expecting to see “his star”? Yes, they could have. For this, let’s look at some things in the Book of Daniel.

First, who was Daniel? Daniel was one of the young Jews who were taken to Babylon from Judah during the Babylonian Exile. If you remember the story in Daniel, Chapter 2, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. The dream troubled him and he really wanted to know what the dream meant. So, he called in his “wise men”. But, Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t sure they hadn’t been scamming him for all these years – he had serious doubts that they could do what they claimed they could do, so he decided to put them to a test. He told them that he wasn’t going to tell them his dream – he wanted his “wise men” to tell him what he dreamed - and then give him the interpretation. So, he says – you guys tell me what I dreamed and what it meant. They tell him that there is no way any human being can do that, and Nebuchadnezzar says “fine now I know you guys are frauds” and he issued a decree that they all be killed. By this time Daniel has become one of the wise men and would have been killed, too, except that God told Daniel the dream and its interpretation. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar who promptly made him the head over all the wise men of Babylon. So, at this point, Daniel, a faithful man of God, is head over all the wise men in the Babylonian Empire.

Now, after the Babylonian Empire fell to the Medio-Persian Empire, Daniel so impressed Darius the Mede, that Darius appointed him as one of 3 commissioners who ruled over his empire and was even planning on putting Daniel in charge of all of them. At this time Daniel was over 80 years old. So, for over 70 years – in the Babylonian Empire, as well as the Medio-Persian Empire - Daniel was a very influential and powerful person, recognized to be a man of extraordinary wisdom and insight, as well as a faithful man of God. He would have been a man people would listen and pay attention to – particularly the “wise men” of his times over whom he had direct authority and influence.

Now, over his 70 year career, God had given Daniel a lot of information about the progression of history. Daniel 2 outlines the succession of the Gentile empires that will rule over Israel until God brings in the Kingdom – first Babylon, then Medio-Persia, then Greece, then the two phases of the Roman Empire. Daniel 7 is another description of the succession of these empires. And, toward the end of Daniel’s career, during the reign of Darius the Mede, Daniel was praying – confessing the sins of Israel and asking God to end the Exile and allow them to return to the Promised Land. An angel – Gabriel – came to him and revealed a very specific timetable for the coming of the Messiah. Look at Daniel 9:24–25:

²⁴ “Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy *place*. ²⁵ **“So you are to know and discern *that* from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince *there will be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks*; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress.”**

The passage goes on to talk about the 70th week – and we don’t have time to go through this prophecy in any detail, or what happens in the 70th week, but – for our purposes - verse 25 tells us that the Messiah will come 69 “weeks” after the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. The word translated “weeks” in the New American Standard Bible is actually the word “sevens” – and it means a period of 7 years. So, Messiah would come 69 times 7 = 483 years after the issuance of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. By the time the magi saw the star, there might have been a little more than 30 years or so remaining to go in the timetable. It was getting about time for things to start happening.

The point I am trying to make is that it is very possible, due to the power and influence Daniel had during his career in two empires – Babylon and Medio-Persia - as well as Daniel’s character as a faithful man of God, that Daniel would have repeated the divinely revealed progression and timeline of history to others, including the “wise men” who served under him – particularly, the prophecy about the 483 years. I don’t think he would have kept it a secret.

It is also very possible that these men would have passed this information down to their successors – who would pass it on to their successors – all the way down to the magi who arrived in Jerusalem looking for the “King of the Jews”. Remember, it is very likely the magi came from the same area that Daniel governed.

So, to summarize. Scripture doesn’t tell us why the magi associated the star that appeared to them with the birth of Christ. So, anything we say about it is an educated guess. But – it is very possible that they associated the star with the Messiah because of some specific

prophecies in the Old Testament that were passed down to them - Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:5-6 about the star and scepter, and Daniel's prophecies in Daniel 2, 7, and 9.

Another question - why did they go to Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem? I think you can look at this from two perspectives – the perspective of the magi and the perspective of God's plan. From the magi's perspective, it is possible that they did not know about Micah 5:2 – the prophecy that revealed that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Or maybe they thought that the religious leaders in Jerusalem could give them specific directions about how to find Jesus when they got to Bethlehem. From the perspective of God's plan – I think that God brought them to Jerusalem for this purpose – **to announce the birth of the Messiah to the Jewish and Gentile leadership** – the religious and political leadership in the land. The arrival of the caravan of magi in Jerusalem looking for the Child born "King of the Jews" – not only looking for Him, but looking for Him for the purpose of worshipping Him – Gentiles wanting to worship the promised Jewish King – was THE announcement of the birth of the Messiah to these religious and political leaders. They did not get any direct announcements from God – like the shepherds in Luke 2. Apparently, the star had not appeared to these leaders. God, as part of His plan, directed the magi to Jerusalem to announce the birth of Christ to the Jewish and Gentile leadership.

So, the announcement is made. What happens? Verse 3 - **When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.** Ok – the word translated "troubled" has the sense of turmoil, distress, being stirred up. It is understandable why Herod would be distressed by this news – he was king and he didn't want to give it up. It help us if we know Herod a little better – so here's very brief biography.

As I said earlier, the Herod in this passage is known as Herod the Great. He was not a Jew – he was Idumean – the land inhabited by descendants of Esau from the area of Edom south of Judea. He might have been a Jewish proselyte. When Julius Ceasar was slain in 44 BC, his successor, Marc Anthony, appointed Herod and his brother as tetrarchs of Judea. A "tetrarch" was a ruler over a Roman province – not a king, but a ruler appointed by Rome over one of its provinces. In 40 BC, the Parthians – a competing power to the east of Judea – backed a successful attempt to attack and seize Jerusalem and Herod barely escaped and made it to Rome. The Romans didn't like this attack on their province and the Roman Senate formally appointed Herod – get this - "King of the Jews". Herod then took two Roman legions and ran the Parthians out of Jerusalem. This was in 37 BC. Herod was "King of the Jews" for 33 years – from 37 BC to 4 BC.

There were some good things about Herod. He was a very successful military leader. He maintained order. He was a builder. According to Harold Hoehner:

It cannot be denied that Jerusalem enjoyed prosperous and peaceful years during his reign.

According to Josephus the most noble of all Herod's achievements was the building of the temple in Jerusalem.... Rabbinic literature claims: "He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building" Prior to this he had built theaters, amphitheaters, and race courses for both men and horses.... In 24 BC. Herod built himself a royal palace and built or rebuilt many fortresses and gentile temples, including Strato's Tower, later renamed Caesarea....

Harold W. Hoehner, "[Herod, Herodian Family](#)," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 966

On the other hand, Herod was a consummate politician - paranoid and suspicious - who would act ruthlessly to protect his power. He would not hesitate to execute anyone who he thought might try to take his throne – including his own flesh and blood. Augustus Caesar said – and you see this quote quite often when you read about Herod – “It is better to be Herod's pig than his son.”

Nevertheless, Hoehner said this about him:

Herod reigned for about 33 or 34 years. Although his rule was characterized by violence, it was really not much different than the reigns of most of his contemporaries. Violence was the order of the times.

Harold W. Hoehner, "[Herod, Herodian Family](#)," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 968

If this was par for the course back then, then I'm really thankful that we are in America now. We think the intrigue in Washington is bad – it doesn't hold a candle to what these politicians did.

So, knowing what we know about Herod the Great, you can understand why he was distressed – HE was the “King of the Jews” – he had been “King of the Jews” for over 30 years – he had ruthlessly kept his throne through skillful political moves, intrigue and murder of his own flesh and blood. Now, this caravan from the east has shown up in town asking for someone who has been actually born – not appointed by Rome – born – the King of the Jews. He probably knew about the Jewish expectation of the Messiah. If the Messiah has been born, it's a huge threat to him and his dynasty.

We can see why Herod would be distressed, but why would this news distress Jerusalem? Well – they knew Herod. If Herod was disturbed and distressed, things would not go well for those he considered to be threats. That would particularly trouble the Jews – who he would expect to follow their Messiah.

So -to sum up Act 1 – It’s just another day in Jerusalem – business as usual. Then a caravan of magi shows up and they start asking where they can find the one who has been born the King of the Jews. They claim to have seen a star that announced His birth and they want to find Him because they want to worship Him. The word gets around pretty quickly and Herod the Great – the current “King of the Jews” - hears about it. He gets really upset at this existential threat to his power, and all the rest of the town – particularly the political and religious leadership - gets really concerned about it. It’s like we see all the time in Washington – something happens and the whole place gets stirred up - and it dominates the news for days – all the important people are talking about it.

So what happens next? Herod’s investigation.

Act 2 – The Investigation

Look at verses 4–8:

⁴ Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’ ” ⁷ Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found *Him*, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.”

Ok. I want us all to try to put ourselves in Herod’s shoes for a minute – get into his head. I know it will be hard because we don’t think like him – I hope. But let’s try. You are king Herod, you have worked hard at great risk – schemed, bribed, murdered – to get and keep your throne, you are paranoid about any threat, you are willing to do anything to keep your throne. You aren’t going to sit back and wait for something to happen. You are going to be proactive. You are going to come up with a plan to eliminate the threat quickly. Herod hasn’t kept his throne for 30 years by being passive or politically naive. So - he comes up with a plan that is both proactive and politically expedient. First, he gathers together all the “chief priests” and “scribes of the people”. These are the Jewish religious leadership – the “chief priests” were mainly Sadducees and the “scribes” were mostly Pharisees.

So, Herod begins his inquiry with the Jewish religious leadership. Notice what he asks them – pay attention to this – he asks them where the Messiah is supposed to be born. This tells us something – he correctly understood that the magi were looking for the Messiah. It is clear that Herod knew the magi were asking about the Messiah. So, Herod is not plotting against just any run of the mill threat to his throne – he knows he is plotting against the Jewish Messiah. He hasn’t had a great relationship with the religious Jews – so he’s got to

be real careful here. He's a politician, he doesn't want to stir up the Jews if he doesn't have to.

So Herod asks them where the Messiah is to be born. Apparently, his question is a generic question about prophecy – it doesn't sound like he connects his question to the appearance of the magi. This may be intentional – there is no indication that the Jewish leaders have been paying much attention to the magi, so Herod doesn't want them to start paying attention to them. So he asks them “where” and they tell him - Bethlehem. And they quote Micah 5:2 - **‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’** I'm sure this quote really got to him – he's the ruler of Israel. Apparently, that's all he wanted to know from them and they disappear from the story.

Ok – so now he's determined where the Messiah is supposed to be born. He has a place. Now, he has to figure out which child born in Bethlehem is the Messiah. And he's got a really good plan in mind for that. He summons the magi. But notice this – he does it secretly. He “secretly called the magi”. Why secretly? Because he is plotting against the Messiah and he doesn't want to involve the Jewish leaders. He wants to avoid getting the Jews riled up when he eliminates their Messiah. At this point, everyone in Jerusalem knows about the magi and their quest for the Messiah, including the Jewish leaders. But apparently the Jewish leaders aren't paying much attention to it. Herod, on the other hand, is paying some serious attention to it. So Herod calls the magi secretly – without the knowledge of the Jewish leaders – he's going to use the magi to lead him to Jesus. And we know what Herod does with threats to his throne. This is ominous.

Herod's plan is to use the magi to get to Jesus. Notice how he manipulates them. From the magi's perspective, they are summoned to a meeting with Herod the Great – the reigning “King of the Jews” – that's a big deal, an important meeting, an huge honor. The king, himself, tells them what they have been wanting to know – where to find Jesus. They've come a long way and I'm sure they were grateful. They would want to return a favor with a favor. And Herod knows they would want to return a favor with a favor.

So Herod tells them what favor they can do for him. He gives them an important mission – he sends them to Bethlehem to find Jesus – “search carefully” for him - and report back–tell Herod who the child is and how he can be found. This changes things – at first, their search is on their own behalf, but now, they are on a mission for Herod the king. They have additional incentive to “search carefully” and not give up the search until they find Jesus. Herod tells them that he wants to know because he wants to go worship Christ, too. One thing we know about Herod – he's a smooth politician – very convincing. And the magi bought his story.

Now from Herod's perspective, he finds out from them exactly when the star appeared. And then he gives them their mission and sends them on their way to Bethlehem. At this point, Herod's investigation has revealed where the Messiah is and how old He is. Herod has co-opted the magi into a mission to tell him exactly who the Messiah is. Now, all he has to do is sit back and wait for the magi to return. Then Herod can move to assassinate Jesus. I'm sure Herod thought he had a great plan. Once the magi report back, it's gonna be easy to take out a poor little baby in a small town - without much fuss at all.

The magi leave Jerusalem and head to Bethlehem.

Act 3 – Finding Jesus

Let's read on – verse 9:

⁹ After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over *the place* where the Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Bethlehem is about five miles south of Jerusalem. It's not far. It probably would have taken them a few hours to get there. So - they leave Jerusalem and they know Jesus is somewhere in Bethlehem. But where? Once again God intervenes. The "star" that had appeared to them in the East reappears. Not a different star. The same star. It shows up again and it went ahead of them and stood over the exact house where Jesus was. This was not some natural star, comet, conjunction of planets or other explainable stellar phenomenon. Stars don't stand over a place in a way that will pinpoint a place. In fact, the "star" is a very special "star" – according to verse 2, it is "His star", the Messiah's star. And this star can appear and reappear. And it can move. And it can hover over a particular house. It is possible that this "star" was the Shekinah Glory – a visible manifestation of the glory of God. Arnold Fruchtenbaum said this:

If this was not a literal star, then what was it? As mentioned, there have been all kinds of attempts to explain this astronomically; however, all such explanations fail. Neither comets, nor conglomerations of planets nor constellations can do what this star did..... In Greek, the root of the word *star* means "radiance" or "brilliance". This brilliance is the Shekinah glory. Just as the Shekinah glory was used to announce the birth of the Messiah to Jewish shepherds, it was also used to announce the birth of the King of the Jews to Gentile astrologers.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Yeshua – The Life of Messiah From a Messianic Jewish Perspective (Vol 1), page 420

So – this supernatural star – possibly the Shekinah glory of God – reappears and supernaturally leads the magi directly to the exact house that Jesus is in.

Now - when they see the star, what do they do? It says - **they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.** They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Now that’s some joy. Think about it - how many times can you say you have “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”. That doesn’t happen much. This is – I won the lottery type of joy. This tells us how much they anticipated the coming of the Messiah. And I guess until they actually found Him, they really couldn’t be sure that they had interpreted the appearance of the star correctly. They traveled to Jerusalem – the capital – the location of the Temple - and He wasn’t there. The Jews who supposedly would be happier than they were about the birth of their King didn’t seem to care about it. I think they had to start wondering if they were wrong – their hopes for the Messiah would be crushed. Now, the star reappears and leads them straight to Christ. Now they know they are right. The Messiah has been born! Their trip is not in vain. Their hopes are not in vain. The King of the Jews – the Savior of the world has been born.

When they find Him, they do what they came there to do. They “**they fell to the ground and worshiped Him.**” These Gentile “wise men” have come all this way to worship the “King of the Jews”. And – they may have had some understanding of the divine nature of the Jewish Messiah from their knowledge of the Old Testament. Toussaint said:

“It is highly significant that the Magi came to “worship” (προσκυνέω) Him. This verb is a favorite with Matthew and it occurs thirteen times in his Gospel. It may refer to the homage one pays to men or to God. However, it is affirmed by Moulton and Milligan that it is “... generally used of a god”. That it is employed in this sense is seen in the fact that the Magi seem to be completely cognizant of the Messianic implications of the One Who was born King of the Jews. If they were ignorant of this, why would they bother to come to a tiny nation under the recognition of supernatural occurrences? A final proof that the Magi worshipped Jesus in the true sense of the word is seen in the New Testament usage. Προσκυνέω usually refers to the worship of a deity in the New Testament...”

They worship Him and they present gifts to Him – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Tom Constable said this about the gifts:

It was customary in the ancient Near East to present gifts when approaching a superior The wise men produced these from their “treasures” or coffers. The expensive gifts reflected the great honor the Magi bestowed on the Christ child.Frankincense is a gum obtained from the resin of certain trees that was particularly fragrant. Myrrh was also a sap-like substance that came from a tree that

grew in Arabia. People used it as a spice and as a perfume often in embalming as well as in other applications. Many commentators, ancient and modern, have seen symbolic significance in these three gifts. Some have said gold suggests royalty while others have seen deity. Some say incense represents deity while others believe it better represents perfect humanity. Most expositors view myrrh as prefiguring Jesus' death and burial. It is unlikely that the Magi saw this significance, but Matthew may have intended his readers to see it....

Tom Constable, [*Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*](#) (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 2:9.

There has apparently been a lot of speculation about the possible symbolism of the gifts and what they may mean. However, Matthew does not tell us that the gifts have some symbolic significance – so it may be reading too much into the Scripture to presume that they do – not to mention the difficulty in correctly figuring out what the symbolic meaning is. It's nice to think about it, but it may not be real helpful to dwell on it much.

One thing for sure we know about the gifts is that they were very valuable. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were very valuable. This is another indication of the mindset of the wise men. They presented these gifts to Jesus in recognition of His authority as King – valuable gifts presented to the ultimate King. And Joseph and Mary were poor. After Jesus was born, they had to sacrifice 2 doves instead of a lamb for Mary's purification because they could not afford a lamb. These gifts made them wealthy. More about that later.

So – after the magi have done what they traveled so far to do – after they have worshipped the King of the Jews – the Messiah – and have presented their treasures to Him, they are ready to leave and return home.

Act 4 – Flight To Egypt

Reading further – verse 12:

¹² And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way. ¹³ Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." ¹⁴ So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. ¹⁵ He remained there until the death of Herod. *This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."*

Apparently, the magi bought Herod's story and were intending to return to Jerusalem and report back to Herod. Had they done this, Herod would know exactly who to look for and could possibly have tracked them down before they could get very far out of Bethlehem. Remember, it is only 5 miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. It wouldn't take the magi very long to get back to Jerusalem and Herod would probably be able to mobilize against Jesus within hours after the magi identified him. So, God created some time for Joseph and Mary to take Jesus out of the country. God warned the magi in a dream not to return to Herod. It would take several days for Herod to figure out that they weren't going to report back to him. This would give Joseph and Mary time to take Jesus out of danger.

But, so far, Joseph and Mary are oblivious to the fact that their lives are in very real, imminent danger. A lot of very wonderful, remarkable things have happened to them over the past year. Not only are they trying to get used to taking care of a baby, but they are also having to wrap their heads around who the baby is and all the incredible things that have happened to them. It probably hasn't crossed their minds that, at that very moment, they are in grave danger.

So, God sends an angel to make Joseph aware of the danger and to tell him where God wants him to go – Egypt. He says - **“Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.”** God is omniscient – He knows what Herod is planning to do. God is also sovereign – Herod's plans won't work against God. Egypt is outside Herod's jurisdiction – Herod can't touch them there. Jesus will be safe there.

Joseph is asleep and the angel has appeared to him in a dream. But, when Joseph hears this, I'm sure it startles him out of his sleep. It must have terrified him. He's immediately wide awake and he doesn't wait. As soon as he gets the message, even though it is the middle of the night, Joseph hustles everyone up and they pack up and take off to Egypt. It is at least a 3 day trip for them to the border. But because the magi had not reported back to Herod, they have time to get there safely. Herod would not be able to overtake them.

Joseph knows they are going to stay in Egypt until the danger passes; but he doesn't know how long. All he knows is that the angel is going to tell him when it is time to return. Verse 15 tells us that the angel didn't tell Joseph to return to Israel until after Herod died in 4 BC. By that time, Joseph and Mary and Jesus may have been living in Egypt for several months or even one or two years. It's hard to tell.

According to Arnold Fruchtenbaum, there might have been “one million Jews living in Egypt at the time of Jesus birth, some of whom might well have been relatives or friends of Mary and Joseph.” But even though they might have had some friends or relations in Egypt, how was Joseph supposed to pay for the trip, and provide for Mary and Jesus while they were there? That's a very practical problem. They are in a new country, Joseph hasn't

had time to set himself up for any sort of work, and they had to pay for things. Where were they going get the money? Well – God had already taken care of that problem. They already had the money. Remember the very valuable gifts the magi presented to Jesus. The gifts given before anyone knew anything about an extended trip to Egypt? These gifts funded their escape and living expenses in Egypt. That’s another remarkable thing about the gifts – the rest of the story, so to speak. Not only is it remarkable that God would announce the birth of the Messiah to a bunch of Gentile wise men, and direct them to Jesus to worship Him and shower Him with valuable gifts, it is remarkable that we get to see what else these gifts were for. Their significance doesn’t stop with the fact that Gentiles worshipped and honored the Jewish Messiah with some gifts. There is more to their significance - God orchestrated the visit of the magi to provide funding for their stay in Egypt. I love it when the Bible lets us see how God connect things like this. Things that demonstrate how multifaceted His works are. And lots of times you will not really see them until you really think about a passage and what is going on – if we read too quickly and don’t sit back and think about it.

Matthew ends this passage with verse 15 - **He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.”** Notice what Matthew has done here. He has connected Jesus’ return to Israel from Egypt with something in the Old Testament. But, this connection could not have been made unless God had first brought Jesus into Egypt. So – I mentioned how multifaceted God’s works are – this tells us another remarkable thing about this whole account of the magi, Herod and the flight to Egypt – that God was orchestrating all of it because there was something in the Old Testament that He wanted to connect to Christ’s life. That something is described in the second half of Hosea 11:1 - **“OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.”**

Now, Hosea 11:1 is not a prophetic passage. Hosea is describing an event that occurred well before his time - the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. He is referring back to the Exodus – when God called Israel out of Egypt. At Exodus 4:22, God is talking to Moses and calls Israel His son – it says, “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.”’” Hosea picks up on this in Hosea 11:1 in his description of the Exodus - **“OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.”**

So – reading Hosea literally and in context – this is not a prophecy – it is a description of the Exodus, and God is calling the nation of Israel His Son. So how can it be said to be fulfilled? Well – Jeremy has taught several times about the four ways the New Testament authors refer to Old Testament passages as being “fulfilled”, and we don’t have time to go over them in detail today. But – basically – there are 4 ways. And interestingly, all 4 ways occur in Matthew chapter 2 – there are two of them the passage we are covering today. The 4 ways are:

- **Literal Prophecy/Literal Fulfillment (Micah 5:2/Matthew 2:1, 5-6)**
 - There is a literal prophecy of future event in the Old Testament and the New Testament refers to a direct fulfillment of that prophecy
 - Example – literal prophecy in Micah 5:2 that Messiah will be born in Bethlehem -fulfilled by birth of Christ in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1, 5-6)
- **Applicational Fulfillment (Jeremiah 31:15/Matthew 2:16-18)**
 - The New Testament author will cite an Old Testament text, derive a principle from that text, and apply that principle to his own day and time.
 - Example – In Matthew 2:16-18, Matthew cites a principle in Jeremiah 31:15 – just as Jewish mothers wept for their sons killed or taken into exile by Babylon, so also did the Jewish mothers in Bethlehem weep for their baby boys killed by Herod.
- **Summary Fulfillment (Old Testament/Matthew 2:19-23)**
 - The New Testament author will summarize the teaching of several passages of the Old Testament and show how that teaching is fulfilled.
 - Example – the Old Testament prophets taught in many passages about how the Messiah would be despised. The town of Nazareth was a poor despised town, and its citizens were generally despised, as well, and Matthew is saying that Christ being from Nazareth would epitomize the derision He would receive. He was “Nazarene” – a derogatory term.
- **Typological Fulfillment (Hosea 11:1/Matthew 2:15)**
 - Something in the Old Testament is intended by God to correspond to something that will happen in the New Testament and is said to be fulfilled when the corresponding thing in the New Testament occurs.
 - Example – God intended that some of the things that happened to Israel would correspond to some to the things that would happen to the Messiah. That is our passage here – just as God called Israel out of Egypt to set up His kingdom, God called Christ out of Egypt to establish His Kingdom.

So – just to make things clear – Hosea 11:1 - **“OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.”** - is not a prophecy of a future event. It’s a typological fulfillment. The Old Testament teaches that Israel is a “type” of the Messiah – there is a pattern in God’s direction of Israel and there is a corresponding pattern with God’s direction of Jesus. Specifically, just as God called His son, Israel, out of Egypt, He called His Son, Jesus, out of Egypt. This correspondence of Jesus with Israel would be another powerful argument to Matthew’s Jewish audience that Jesus really is the Messiah.

So, to sum things up – In Act 1, we see Jerusalem carrying on business as usual when all of a sudden a caravan of wise men from the East show up and start asking where they can find the Messiah. They say they have seen a star – His star – and this star means that the Messiah has been born. Even though they are Gentiles, they have come to worship Him. This announcement really concerns Herod – Herod is “King of the Jews” and this is a threat to his power. Jerusalem gets all stirred up because they know Herod and are afraid of what Herod might do. In Act 2, Herod starts an investigation to identify the Child so that he can eliminate the threat. First, he calls in the religious leaders and determines where the Messiah is to be born – Bethlehem. Then, he calls the magi in secret, tells them where the Messiah is, and gets them to tell him when the Messiah was born. And then he sends the wise men on to Bethlehem with a mission – find the Child and report back. Herod tells them he wants to worship the Child, but we know what he really wants to do – assassinate Him. In Act 3, the magi leave Jerusalem and the star reappears and leads them directly to the house that Jesus is in and they worship Him and give Him their valuable gifts. In Act 4, the magi apparently do not suspect Herod’s motives and are intending to return to Jerusalem and report back to Herod when God warns them in a dream not to return to Herod. They obey God and go home another way, which buys some time for Joseph to take Mary and Jesus out of the country. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells Joseph of their imminent danger from Herod and Joseph immediately gets his family on the road to Egypt. They escape before Herod has time to track them down. They return to Israel after Herod dies. And at the end of this passage, Matthew points out that Christ’s return from Egypt corresponds to something God had done for Israel – just as God had called Israel out of Egypt to establish His nation, He had called Christ out of Egypt to establish His kingdom.

Conclusions and Applications

Ok – at the beginning of this lesson we talked about how there are two main reasons Matthew had written his gospel - one – to prove to his Jewish audience that Jesus is the Messiah – and two – to explain what happened to the kingdom. So, how does this account of the visit of the magi and escape to Egypt help with these two goals?

First, here are some things that would help prove to a Jewish audience that Jesus is the Messiah –

- Jesus was born in Bethlehem – satisfying the requirement in Micah 5:2.
- God announced Jesus’ birth by a supernatural star – corresponding to Numbers 24:17.
- The magi were led by God to Jesus by the same supernatural star.
- Even Gentiles recognized the birth of the Messiah, called Him the “King of the Jews”, and traveled to Jerusalem to worship Him and give Him gifts – according to Tom Constable “This act by Gentile leaders also prefigures the wealth that the Old

Testament prophets said the Gentiles would one day present to Israel's Messiah." A Jewish audience would pick up on this.

- God protected Jesus from harm by direct intervention – warning the magi in a dream and sending an angel to Joseph to direct him by a dream.
- God brought Jesus into Egypt and when God brought Him back, His return completed something in Christ's life that God intended to correspond to a pattern God had established with Israel - just as God called His son, Israel, out of Egypt, He called His Son, Jesus, out of Egypt.

So, a Jewish audience should understand all these things to support the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. And by way of application, we can use them, too – not only if we ever have the opportunity to talk seriously about Christ to a Jewish person, but we can use them with anyone we talk to. Also, personally – I know that thinking about passages like this help me stay strong in my faith. God's plans are so intricate and multifaceted, He does what He says He will do, nothing can thwart Him, and even the evil acts of Satan work toward the accomplishment of God's plans.

How about Matthew's second purpose – to explain what happened to the Kingdom. If Jesus is the Messiah, then why didn't the Kingdom come? What does this passage do to help explain what happened to the Kingdom? Well – it does, but in a more subtle way – it foreshadows what we will see play out in history once Jesus begins His ministry.

To think about this – think about how the Jewish religious leadership respond to the magi's announcement of Jesus birth. Complete apathy. Contrast the Jewish leadership response with the response of the Gentile magi when they see the star. How do they respond? They pack up, travel a long way, worship Him and bring Him gifts. They "rejoice exceedingly with great joy" because they had found the Messiah.

Contrast the response of the Jewish leadership to Herod's response to the news of Jesus birth. Herod is not apathetic. It gets his attention. He's so paranoid about losing his throne, he's intent on finding out who this baby is so he can assassinate Him. He doesn't care if Jesus is the Messiah – Herod is going to get rid of Him. This foreshadows how the political leadership in Judea is going to respond to Jesus when He begins His ministry.

But the Jewish leaders – it is a very striking part of the passage that they apparently don't do anything. Nothing. They know what the Scriptures say far better than the magi. They heard the magi talk about the appearance of "His Star". They heard how the magi had interpreted the appearance of the star – the Messiah – the King of the Jews had been born. They knew about Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24. They knew about the timing of His appearance in Daniel 9. They knew He would come from Bethlehem. They knew about how the Gentiles would ultimately honor the Messiah. They knew all this – sure, the announcement was coming from a bunch of Gentile "sinners" – but you would at least have

thought the Jewish leadership would make some inquiry. But they didn't. This foreshadows how the Jewish religious leadership is going to respond to Jesus when He begins His ministry. Their apathy at His birth is going to grow into outright rejection and murder.

So, Matthew uses the response of the Jewish leadership to explain why – if Jesus was the Messiah, the Kingdom didn't come. It didn't come because the leaders of the Jews rejected Him as their King. And this rejection began to take root in their apathy at the announcement of His birth.

And this gets to one application I'd like to suggest about this passage – out of the very many that can be made. It should warn us. Why were the Jewish leaders – the religious experts who knew every jot and tittle of the Old Testament - so apathetic? Why didn't they pay more attention to the announcement of the birth of the Messiah? They had been anticipating the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom for hundreds of years. This was the most significant thing that could happen in their entire history – bigger than Moses, bigger than David. Now, what the Jews have been longing for all these years is beginning to come to pass. Yet, they don't do anything. How can this be? There are a lot of reasons, but a big one is that they had blinded themselves. They gave lip service to Scripture, but had exalted their own made up traditions above Scripture. Christ said this about them quoting Isaiah 29:13:

⁸ 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. ⁹
'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' "

What had they done? Even though they knew God's Word, they made up their own rules and these rules became the authority – above even the Word of God. What happens when we do this? We remake God in our own image. And when we remake God in our own image, we re-define who God is and what He says. And when we do that, we can't recognize God or His works because they don't fit the image of our made-up God. That's what happened to them. They had created a God in their image and they did not recognize Him – even when He was right there with them in the flesh.

This isn't just their problem. It is very easy for us to do the same kind of thing – make ourselves the authority over Scripture – because our flesh really really really wants to be the authority. And the times that we let that happen, we begin to distort who God is and what He says. Whenever we do something like this, we begin to lose our way. That's why it is so important to do everything we can to interpret what the Bible says correctly, and having interpreted correctly, faithfully obey it. There may be times that we start to get off track, but we can be diligent and pray that we have the humility to recognize when we go wrong and get back on track before we go blind.