
The Worship of the King

Matthew 2:1-23

Introduction

Where are you from?

The constant response in foreign countries to the oddness of my passport...

The response of my elementary school classmates to my stories of Africa...

Through this text run prophecies about Jesus and places...

What to do with hard bits of text on Sunday morning around advent when people want easy listening?

May the simplicity of the story and the complexity of the writing point us to our great Savior and Sovereign, the Lord Jesus Christ with new motivations for worship and wonder.

The Wise Men Seek the Infant King (v.1-12)

Our story opens with the stark contrast between the honest, searching Gentile wise men and the cunning, wicked toad who sits on Israel's throne.

Their Journey to Jerusalem (v.1-8)

With Innocent Inquiry (v.1-2)

¹ 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 saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

In a simple sentence, Matthew reminds us of where we are in time, space and history. It is the days of Herod who is the king of Israel. It is some time after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Now Bethlehem is less than 6 miles from Jerusalem.

Matthew stands in his book and points with one word to a caravan trailing its way into the gates of Jerusalem. "Behold" – look. See it! Here are magi, wise men, who have come from the east. Hit the pause button a moment. Turn off your videos, your flannel graph, your cartoons, your nativities - just about everything you have heard about these men. First, we do not know how many there were only how many kinds of gifts they brought. They are not kings. We do not know their names. They are court wise men. They were probably astrologers. The simple matter of the fact is beyond this, *we don't know*. The Bible does not describe them any further. Why? Because it doesn't matter. It is not the point. This is a delicious bit of irony from God through Matthew. Here are Persian or Babylonian court astrologers *who know better who Christ is than the current Jewish leadership*.⁶

The point is that God has brought these men to Jerusalem. They have been led by a miraculous heavenly event they call a star. This heavenly light had appeared around two years before (v.7). Its appearance was interpreted to herald the arrival of a great king in Israel. We do not know how God had shown this to them; we do know that God was behind their understanding. In Numbers 24:17 Balaam, the hireling prophet, connects the rising of a star out of Jacob with the rise of scepter in Israel.⁷ It is safe to assume that the star had gone ahead of them to Jerusalem since it goes ahead of them to Bethlehem later.

So, they appear, these wise men, in Herod's court and drop a bomb shell of a question. "Where is the newborn king of the Jews?" They have seen his star and are here to worship. Imagine Herod's shock and dismay. He has enough religious training to know that the Scriptures promised a great, future king over Israel. And if that king is here, Herod is done. We also get a glimpse into his irreligion – it does not appear to dawn on him to ask how it is that wise men from a foreign country know something in his own backyard that he doesn't.

Can't you just see the almost innocent aplomb? Here they are, after all these miles. Some great personage, some king has been born. It is such an auspicious event that it has been accompanied by a heavenly miracle. They are here to worship him.

With Fearful Research (v.3-6)

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They 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.' "

Doesn't this have the feel of, "We'll get back to you, later?"

Troubled, yes troubled, Herod is. The news runs like wild fire. Oddly, the whole city is troubled. What? Yes, Jerusalem is just like its king. Instead of joy, there is anxiety in the heart at the announcement.

But give him some credit; he knows where to get the answer. So he gathers the religious experts of his day. He summons the chief priests who serve in the Temple and the scribes who study the Scriptures. Matthew now puts forward what is probably one of the most important phrases in this chapter. "Where is the Messiah to be born?"

OK, he gets it. This newborn babe, wherever he is and whoever he is, is the Messiah, the promised One. Don't miss this. What is going to happen is astounding when you think about it. But further, these chief priests and scribes know what is being asked. Maybe Herod has misled them as well. But Matthew makes it clear that the religious leaders of Israel have been informed that the Messiah has been born. This sets the stage for their rejection thirty or so years later when Jesus emerges as the One claiming to be the Messiah.

I love the way Matthew brings in the Old Testament. At the same time that it answers Herod's question, it accuses him. The future ruler who will be born in Bethlehem will shepherd His people. The obvious reference is to David, the King. So they know this text is referring to the Messiah. They know that He will be born in Bethlehem.

The quote from Micah 5:2 draws from 2 Samuel 5:1-5. Listen to this amazing text about David the King and how it prefigures the Lord.

¹ Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and flesh. ² In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the Lord said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.' " ³ So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel. ⁴ David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. ⁵ At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years. 2 Samuel 5:1-5 (ESV)

They know that He will be the fulfillment of the promises to David and will be like Him – He will be a true Shepherd-King.

With Wicked Deceit (v.7-8)

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

Suddenly the story turns ominous. The music darkens and slows. Herod is leaning over the throne a sly look in his eyes. He dismisses everyone so that he is alone with the wise men. "So, gentlemen, tell me. I am fascinated by your understanding of stellar and heavenly phenomenon. When did this star first appear?" From such an innocent question a darkened heart plots death and destruction.

How like a politician to tell people what they want to hear in order to get what they want. Herod is no different. He has no intention of going to worship the Messiah. No, this slimy toad is going to kill the One who has been promised all through the Scriptures. From His birth, Jesus' life was at risk. All through the gospel accounts we find people trying to kill Him. Make no mistake – Satan does not want the cross. He does all he can to prevent Jesus from getting there. His tools were people like Herod willing to snuff out the life of Jesus.

Their Joy in Bethlehem

(v.9-12)

So the Magi leave Jerusalem.

With Wondrous Joy (v.9-10)

⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

So they head out to their caravan. O my, there in the sky is the star, shining bright. It rose up and led the way down the 6 mile road to Bethlehem. It stopped over the roof top of the house where Jesus and his family were staying. This is no ordinary star or a scientifically explainable phenomenon. This is quite simply God pointing the way. Like the luminous cloud of the glory of His Presence in the wilderness lighting the way for Israel, the star lights the way for these Gentile Magi.⁸

And they are full of joy and gladness as they go. They rejoice that the star is now piloting them along the road. They have come to the house. In breathless anticipation, they crowd to the door.

With Worshipful Giving (v.11)

¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Can you see them? Knocking. Calling out. Maybe Joseph opens the door to see the warm smiles of foreign faces all trying to peer into the quiet of the home. “May we come in?” “Welcome.”

Surely they relate the story of the star and the long journey. They may even tell of the visit to Herod and the illuminating search through the Scriptures for the birth place of the Messiah. But, there He is. Maybe in Mary’s lap. Maybe crawling in His pack-in-play. But there is the Messiah, the King.

They fall down and worship Him. Can you see it? This meant on bended knee. This meant with face to the ground. Then servants are summoned carrying in small chests loaded with treasures. Here they open lid after lid. They pour out on the floor wealth beyond imagining. Here is gold. There are flasks of incense. The top is opened and the aroma fills the room. Here is priceless myrrh. What do we see here? Do we see gold for a king, incense for His worship and anointing and myrrh for His burial? Yes.

But let us not miss an important lesson Matthew brings to us. Worship always means giving. It may mean the giving up of our own pride and humbling ourselves to bow before the King. It may involve the sacrifice of time and effort and long personal journeys. But most importantly, worship involves our treasures. Where we put our treasure, our heart will run after. Here are men who knew they were coming to worship a King announced from heaven and foretold in the Scriptures. They have come prepared. They have brought themselves. They have brought their treasure. Gold, frankincense and myrrh are laid at Jesus’ feet. So, what about you?

With Warned Obedience (v.12)

¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Interesting, isn't it? A star leads them to Jesus, but not home. They know the way home. But God warns them in a dream not to return to Jerusalem. So, they set out along another road that will take them east, but not north.

The Loving Father Shields the Infant King (v.13-23)

The Magi have left. The house has quieted down. The little one has been fed and the gifts all put away. Time to rest/

Its Reason in Egypt

(v.13-15)

As Prudent Flight (v.13-15a)

¹³ Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod.

Once again an angel glimmers in the night watches of Joseph's sleep. This time, a dire warning is issued. Through the angelic messenger, God warns Joseph of danger that Herod poses and the destruction he plots. He is to take the family and flee to Egypt. The idyllic, quiet years of early childhood are now interrupted. Loading up goods and family, he heads south on a long trek to Egypt. Why Egypt?

As Prophetic Fulfillment (v.15b)

This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Here it is: so as to fulfill Scripture. The providence of God has raised up Herod, has brought inquiring wise men, has exposed His son to danger and death, has warned Joseph to flee. This so that what the Scriptures prophesied might come to pass.

Now, this brings up an important question. Is the Old Testament text fulfilled with the just the bare trip home, later? Is this what the Scriptures are envisioning? Do we imagine God ticking through the Old Testament pulling fulfillment rabbits out of the prophetic hat?

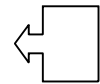
No, there is something so large here. Jesus is taken down into Egypt and comes back as part of a physical fulfillment of a larger spiritual fulfillment. To see what is going on here, we have to go back and take a look at Hosea 11:1 which reads, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (ESV).

In the context, this is part of a rehearsal of Israel's sins, rebellions and departures from God. Throughout Hosea 10 and 11, Bethel is mentioned. This important place is where God is – they have rejected God right in the very house or place of His presence. God refers to Israel as a beloved child and out-of-

Egypt called son. Yet this is an unusual way for God to refer to Israel; Israel, my child, my son.

But Matthew reads this and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, picks up and sets the stage for an amazing fulfillment. He knows that Jesus truly is God's son and God's child. What he sees here is Jesus fulfilling what Israel was a type of. So Matthew brings together a series of prophetic texts and narratives of Christ's life that are parallel to the history of Israel. Jesus, like Moses, was spared the slaughter of babies in his infancy. Jesus comes up out of Egypt, later passes through the waters in baptism, is tested in the wilderness, calls out his twelve disciples⁹, and begins Messianic kingdom ministry, conquering the Promised Land, not by the sword, but as the new Joshua, by the gospel of the kingdom.

Thus, Jesus is the fulfillment of the exodus. He is our new exodus out of sin through His redemption.



Its Retaliation in Bethlehem

(v.16-18)

We see the dust settling along the road to Egypt as the scene now fades into the throne room of Herod.

With Dreadful Slaughter (v.16)

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

In a furious tirade, Herod orders the slaughter of all the male babies, two years or younger, in the immediate environs of Bethlehem. This is not out of character for this tyrant. Herod had a reputation for two things: he was involved in massive construction projects including the massive renovation and expansion of the Jewish Temple and he had killed a number of sons and at least one wife. He had destroyed any aspirant to his throne. Killing a number of babies would hardly make the top of his do-do list.

Now remember, Bethlehem is only 6 miles away. What terrible grief would on the part of the affected families. Without mercy, the soldiers killed every single boy baby under two. While we do not want to minimize the terrible impact of this, since the area was so small, it is likely we are only talking about 10-20 deaths.

With Biblical Fulfillment (v.17-18)

¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

Matthew says that the grief expressed over this slaughter fulfills Jeremiah 31:15 which he quotes in his text. Or does he? Is that really what he says? That Matthew makes this connection has befuddled and strained many a commentator! To make sense of this, we have to look at what is surrounding this text in Jeremiah 31. I won't do an exposition of that whole text, but just a brief outline to show you something surprising.

- Jeremiah is the book prophesied to Israel on the eve of her final destruction by Babylon and deportation into captivity. It is a whole book of preaching to a people who were not submitting to God's chastening hand. It is a whole book about Matthew 1:11, "at the time of the deportation."
- Jeremiah 30:24-31:1 sets up the chapter with these words: ²⁴ The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intentions of his mind. In the latter days you will understand this. ¹ "At that time, declares the Lord, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people." (ESV) In the latter days, which begin with the first coming of Christ, God's full intentions will be made clear/
- The whole chapter 31 is about God's promise to bring about the redemption and restoration of His people. It culminates in the promise of the New Covenant which will be the formation of the new people of God including the elect remnant of Jews.
- Throughout the chapter even in view of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and final deportation into captivity, Israel is called to rejoice in the long view of what God is doing.

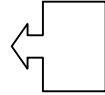
In the middle of this chapter are verses 15-16: ¹⁵ Thus says the Lord: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." ¹⁶ Thus says the Lord: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. (ESV) Now, observe carefully what is said here.

- Ramah is a city 6 miles north of Jerusalem, while Bethlehem was 6 miles south of Jerusalem. It is on the northern route taken by the captives on their way to Babylon. Rachel, the favorite wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, was buried just outside of Ramah on her way to the Promised Land.
- As a literary device, Rachel is pictured as weeping for the destruction of the people of Israel in captivity. There is great mourning over the death and destruction of Israel as a nation.
- However, the weeping mothers *refuse* to be comforted. Do you see it? In spite of the revealed purposes of God's wrath and the sure promises of future redemption and restoration, they are comfortless.
- Verse 16 is significant for God commands them to stop weeping because there will yet be a future reward.

So then, what is being fulfilled? There are certainly enough clues in the text that it is not the weeping mothers of Bethlehem which are the fulfillment. They are a device for Matthew to locate the birth, life, ministry and eventual death of Christ *in Jeremiah 31*. What is transpiring here is the very fulfillment of the end of God's purposes for wrath, that is, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of the redemption and restora-

tion of God's people. It connects the redemption motif of the *exodus* out of Egypt with the restoration motif of the *exile* into Babylon.

You see, Israel refused to believe what God was doing in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. She, like Rachel, refused to be comforted through faith in God's great purpose and plan. So this text is an indictment on those who would reject Christ. It is a great encouragement for those with eyes to see that Jesus is not only the Promised One, but also the One bringing the Promises. So His people would come up out of the Egypt of sin through the redemptive exodus at the cross and who would live in exile in the Babylon of this world as citizens of heaven, the Promised Land, until He returns again with His reward in His hand!



Its Return to Nazareth

(v.19-23)

Living quietly in Egypt, news comes one day that sends the family home.

With Divine Instruction (v.19-20)

¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead."

Now it is not likely that this was very long. Jesus was probably born in 7-6 BC (yes it is actually 2015 after Jesus' birth). Herod died in 4 BC of complications of several diseases. His son, took the throne. Rome did not allow him to rule the whole country, just the portion associated with the two southern tribes (note verse 22). An angel once again appears to Joseph and authorizes his return to Israel. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus' whole life is totally ordained by God.

With Careful Consideration (v.21-22)

²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

Once again, we see the obedience and careful maturity of Joseph. He gathers up his family and heads north out of Egypt and crosses into Israel. But he is fearful of returning to Judea. Herod's son, Archelaus, was much like his father. Wisely cautious and warned, he does not settle in his home town.

With Prophetic Fulfillment (v.23)

²³ And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: He shall be called a Nazarene."

Joseph takes his family to Nazareth. Nazareth was a small, backwoods village on the "wrong side of the tracks." Jesus would grow up there in relative obscurity. Coming from this town would eventually place a question mark over his credentials as a Rabbi and the Messiah.

Matthew records that this was done in fulfillment of prophetic writing stating that the Christ, the Messiah, would be called a Nazarene. ¹⁰ The problem here is that scholars have been unable to find, in the prophetic literature of the Bible, any specific reference connecting the Messiah with Nazareth. Matthew

however does not reference a particular text. He refers to the prophets in general. So there is general theme running through the prophets that is fulfilled.

What then is Matthew referring to? Does he mean, “Jesus will be known as coming from a certain town?” or does he mean “Jesus will be known by what people from this town are known?” Here I think is the solution. There was a well-known saying in Israel, “Can any good thing come from Nazareth?” It was meant to show the lowliness, the inferiority, of those who would have made Nazareth their home. This is a theme all through the prophets. The Messiah will come in lowliness and humbleness. He will not be known as one from the right-side of the street or from the Hampton Barrows.

Like the rest of these geographical prophetic references, the fulfillment then is not in the geographical location. The fulfillment is in the larger theme.

In Bethlehem	Jesus is identified as the shepherd-king over God’s people
Out of Egypt	Jesus is identified with the exodus out of Egypt and the redemption of God’s people
In Ramah	Jesus is identified with the exile into Babylon and the restoration of God’s people
From Nazareth	Jesus is identified with the humble estate and lowliness of God’s people

Ah, what a glorious and magnificent book we have, the Word of God. How marvelous the writing of Matthew as he takes the spotlight of the Old Testament and illuminates glory after glory of Christ.

Reflect and Respond

So Christ in His birth is revered and reviled, loved and despised, believed in and rejected.

Through this wonderful text we learn that Jesus Christ:

Was born to be our shepherd-king, to be our ruler.

Was born to deliver us out of sin and save us, to be our redeemer.

Was born to lead our exile in this world until the next, to be our restorer.

Was born in our humble and low estate until glory, to be our reputation.

Like the wise men of old, bring your worship as you kneel before such a wondrously glorious One, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Notes

- ⁶⁶ The line “We three kings of Orient are” belongs to the same vast collection of legendary Yuletide lore to which belongs also “But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes,” and many similar bits of fancy. Add also the mythical names of these wise men: Melchior, Balthasar, and Caspar; the belief that one came from India, one from Egypt and one from Greece; that they were subsequently baptized by Thomas; and that their bones were discovered by Saint Helena, were deposited in the church of Saint Sophia at Constantinople, were later transferred to Milan and were finally brought to the great cathedral of Cologne. One must be gullible, indeed, to accept all this! Cited from *Baker NTC: Matthew*, William Hendriksen, p. 152.
- ⁷ “The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, ¹⁶ the oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered: ¹⁷ I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. Numbers 24:15-17
- ⁸ Now let me pause for a moment. What about astrology? Why would God bring astrologers as representatives of Gentiledom to the nativity? First, this is not affirmation that astrology is OK. God placed the heavenly bodies in their locations in the heavens for earth-centric reasons (see Genesis 1:14-19). There were two purposes, for signs and for seasons. Their function for seasons is obvious. But God also placed them there as signs. Just as sinful man has taken the sun and moon which are for seasons and worshipped them as gods, so they have taken the stars which are for signs and have assigned them control over history. Both are perversions. So, in my reading of the Scriptures, Matthew refers to this mobile luminary guiding the wise men, a star. Thus, he connects it with God’s intended use of stars, that is, as signs to God’s own purposes and plans in history. *We can only know what those are when the Scripture tells us and interprets them for us.*
- Here is an example: the star may be more akin to the pillar in the wilderness. But it is a sign and it is recognized and used by Gentiles. It brings them, not to understand their own personal lives, but to worship the Christ.
- ⁹ Some commentators see the twelve disciples as possibly fulfilling the twelve sons of Jacob and maybe even, by extension., the twelve tribes.
- ¹⁰ It is important to distinguish between Jesus being a Nazarene and a **not** being a Nazirite. Jesus was from this little village. He was **not** this special, ascetic person, like Samson, who took special vows not to cut his hair, touch a dead body or drink alcoholic beverages.