

Matthew 2:1-12
Worship the King
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Sovereign Grace Fellowship: Sunday, December 20, 2009

Introduction

I thought it would be appropriate (and conducive for job security) for me to preach a sermon on the birth of Christ considering the fact that Christmas is only 5 days away. This morning I will be focusing my attention primarily on the narrative of Matthew 2:1-12 (where the magi come to worship the Christ child). I will first lay forth the flow of the narrative in simple terms so that we get the big picture of what took place in Matthew 2:1-12, then I will discuss in a bit more detail the sociological, historical, and cultural setting of the events in Matthew 2 surrounding the birth of Jesus, and then I will close with a few words about the significance of these events.

The Flow of the Narrative

Before we begin discussing the significance of the events that took place in Matthew 2:1-12, it will be helpful for me to simply lay forth for you the sequence of events lest we get so caught up in the details we lose the flow of the narrative. We begin our exposition this morning in Matthew 2:1. Jesus has already been born (see Matthew 1:24-25), and so the events that we will be discussing this morning did not happen on Jesus' actual birth date. This fact is solidified by the first 6 words of the first verse that we will be considering; "***After Jesus was born in Bethlehem***" (Matthew 2:1). This is how the events unfolded (I have laid them forth in 6 steps):

1. ***Magi Come***: After Jesus was born, foreign men called "magi" came to Jerusalem seeking a baby born King of the Jews.
2. ***Magi Seek***: When they arrived in Jerusalem they began to ask where they could find this baby born King of the Jews.
3. ***Herod Inquires***: When Herod, the King of Judea, heard that magi had come looking for a baby born King of the Jews he consulted the Jewish scholars in Jerusalem (the scribes and chief priests) to figure out where this promised King of the Jews was to be born. They reported their findings back to the Herod. Herod then told the magi that this baby was to be born in Bethlehem.
4. ***Herod Sends and Commands***: Herod then sent the magi off to find this baby born King of the Jews, and instructed them to come back to him after they found him so that he could worship this baby born King of the Jews as well.
5. ***Magi Find***: The magi went to Bethlehem as the scholars of Jerusalem suggested and found this one born King of the Jews. They 'worshipped Him' and gave him the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
6. ***Magi Flee***: They were then warned by an angel not to return to tell Herod where this baby born King of the Jews was. This is the chronology of what happened.

Gospel Ironies

There is one main point that I want you to see from this passage. It is a principle: **those who you think would get it don't, and those you think wouldn't get it do**. This principle will become sufficiently clear when we consider first the identity of the Magi and then second the response of Herod and the Jews in Jerusalem to the magi and their quest to find and worship this one born King of the Jews.

1. ***The Identity of the Magi***

We must first understand who these magi were. First of all, let it be known that there were not necessarily three of them. Surely, they may have bore three gifts, and our famous “We Three Kings” hymn may suggest that there were exactly three, but the text simply doesn’t tell us how many magi there were. We just know that there were more than one. There could have been three, but there is no way of knowing. Second, the magi were not kings. Some of your translations render them as ‘wise men.’ That is a common translation because the term *magos* was “originally the title of a Persian priestly caste who played an important role in advising the king.” In other words, they were Persian priests who often acted as consultants to kings, but they were not kings themselves. In fact, you see the same word (*magos*) used in Daniel 1:20; 2:2, 10 as a reference to the magicians whom king Nebuchadnezzar was consulting because of a dream he had. King Nebuchadnezzar expected them to be able to interpret this dream. Notice that the same word used for the magi in Matthew 2:1 is used in the LXX (or Septuagint), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, as reference to the magicians who were expected to interpret the king’s dream.

In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. So the king summoned the magicians (magos), enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. (Daniel 2:1-2)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi (magos) from the east came to Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1)

The magi were also known for being astrologers (not astronomers!) as well. We have a clue from the text, Matthew 2:2, that this must have been one of their marks. After all, what led them to seek out this one born King of the Jews was the rise of ‘his star.’ In other words, they involved themselves in the art fortune telling. They looked into the night sky believing that clues about the future could be given. They looked into the starry sky in the same way that Deon Warwick and those at the once-Psychic Friends Network looked into crystal balls, studied the lines in a palm, and read tarot cards to figure out the future. In a similar way these Magi read the stars and would even study animal entrails to give them clues about the future.¹

Although these magi were widespread in the ancient world, their activity was most centralized in Babylonia. Notice that these magi are identified as men from the east. Interestingly enough, Babylon is east of Jerusalem. Now there is no telling for sure whether these magi were from Babylon specifically or not. However, the evidence seems to suggest that Babylon is the greatest possibility of where they came from (others seem to suggest that they were from Persia).

¹ For additional information on the magi see R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmanns, 2007), 66; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew: Sacra Pagina*, Vol. 1 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 42; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the aGreek Text*; New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmanns, 2005), 106-108 Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*; The New American Commentary, Vol. 22 (Nashville, Broadman Press, 1992), 62; John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 1121; Ben Witherington III, *The Individual Witnesses*; The Indelible Image Series: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 655; Ben Witherington, “Star-Studded Wise Men: Rethinking the Christmas Story”; <http://blog.beliefnet.com/bibleandculture/2009/12/star-studded-wise-men-rethinking-the-christmas-story.html>, 2009.

If these magi were from Babylon, they had to take a (roughly) 500 mile trek to get to Jerusalem. And we must remember that this was in the days before mass transit. There were no buses, air planes, cars, bikes, tricycles, mopeds, trains, or anything like this. Even if these magi rode on the backs of donkeys the journey would have taken nothing shy of a few months (and even if they did ride donkey's they would have had some major buttocks pains to get over after their 500 mile journey). Considering the value of the gifts they brought,² they were wealthy and thus most likely owned donkeys, which means that they most likely did not have to travel by foot.

Let me put it to you this way; it would be like traveling from here in Boscawen, NH to Cleveland, OH or from here to Washington D.C. Let me be nice to you for a moment and ask you what it would take for you to travel from here to Cleveland in a car? A good restaurant, a family reunion, the birth of a grandchild, the Super Bowl? What would it take to get you to travel from here to Washington D.C. on the back of a donkey? What about on foot? I must say that it would have to be something pretty spectacular to motivate me to make such a long trek. This trip would have taken the Magi weeks upon weeks. This was no 'hop in the car and drive to the local McDonalds for a \$1 large cup of coffee.' This would have been an exhausting trip; the sort you only take in the rarest of circumstances.

Why did these magi come? God must have broken in to them somehow. After all, look at the reason for their coming. When they got to Jerusalem they said,

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:2)

They came to worship. This word ‘worship’ certainly could mean that they simply came to pay homage to him as a king. However, to suggest that these magi made such a long trip, bearing such expensive gifts leads me to the conclusion that they did not merely come to exercise some sort of an earthly respect. **BDAG** suggests that this verb for ‘worship’ (*proskuneo*) means “to express in attitude or gesture one’s complete dependence on or submission to a higher authority figure, (*fall down and*) *worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully.*”³

These magi knew that this Jesus, born King of the Jews, was no mere human King. They understood that Jesus’ reign was going to eek outside the borders of Israel. They came to worship. They came to bow their knees and subject themselves under his rule, claiming themselves under His kingly reign. They knew that Jesus was not just a king, but the KING of kings. Jesus was the King to whom all other kings must bow.

2. The Response of Herod and the Jews in Jerusalem:

So here come these pagan fortune tellers strolling into Jerusalem for the purpose of celebrating the long-awaited birth of their Messiah. You must understand that Jerusalem was the very epicenter of Jewish religion and culture. What Hollywood is to entertainment and fashion, Jerusalem was to Judaism. Jerusalem was ‘the place to be’ if you were a Jew. It reminds me of what Nashville, TN or Louisville, KY, or Dallas, TX is in today’s Christian culture. Jerusalem

² Here are some modern day equivalents to the gifts that they brought with them: gold—Rolex watches, frankincense—a fully armored Cadillac Escalade, myrrh—a five bucket gallon of Armani cologne.

³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Edited by Frederick William Danker, 3^d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 882.

was the hubbub of everything Jewish. And here come these magi, these pagan (most likely Babylonian) astrologers, waiting with baited breath to worship the king of the Jews. They must have been shocked at the lack of commotion in Jerusalem. They must've entered the city inquiring; "Where is he?! Where is he?! We have traveled 500 miles to lay royal gifts at his feet; where is he?!" The Jews, as clueless as the day is long, respond, "Where is who? What are you magi talking about?" The magi respond, "Where is the one born King of the Jews?" Why aren't these people celebrating? Their long-awaited deliverer has been born! These pagans then began to go around the city looking for the Christ child while the Jews in Jerusalem looked at them like they had a hole in their head.

The ironic thing here is that these pagan magi knew of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah before the religious scholars in Jerusalem. Not only that but the announcement of the birth of their Messiah came through the mouths of these foreign fortune tellers.

These magi are the last people on the face of the earth that you would think would care about the birth of the king of the Jews. After all, the Babylonians and the Jews did not consider themselves best of friends. What would a Babylonian magician/fortune teller want with the King of the *Jews*? These magi come into town inquiring where they can find this new born King, and yet no one in Jerusalem had a clue as to what was going on.

Not only that, but look at how the Jews responded to the Magi's intense desire and motivation to find and worship this newborn King of the Jews.

"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." (Matthew 2:3)

And this is where it gets good because this is a theme that you see all throughout the Scriptures; **those who you think would get it don't, and those you think wouldn't get it do.** All reason would lead us to believe that the religious, the scholars, and the high priests would have been the first to bring gifts of honor to this newborn Messiah. And yet what do we find? Not only were the high priests clueless about the birth of their own promised Messiah, but they were actually disturbed by the excited and intense desire of the magi to find this newborn King of the Jews. Those who you think would get it don't, and those who you think wouldn't get it do.

This point is even further attested by the Jew's apparent lack of interest in following the magi to Bethlehem to actually see if this promised Messiah was born or not. Let me explain this for you. The magi traveled a minimum of 500 miles to come worship this baby born King of the Jews. After they arrived in Jerusalem, catching their breath from their multiple weeks long journey, they inquire about the precise location of this Christ child. The Jews inform them that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Now the magi, these pagan, Babylonian (most likely) fortune tellers have just traveled 500 miles to come visit this King of the Jews. Guess how far Bethlehem was from Jerusalem; 100 miles? Nope! 50 miles? Nope! 20 miles? Nope, not even 20 miles. Bethlehem was a measly little 6 miles from Jerusalem! Jesus was practically born in Jerusalem's back yard! Notice that the magi hiked the last six mile leg of their trip by themselves. The Jews were so unconcerned about the birth of this Christ child that they were not willing to take a mere 1-2 hour walk. The hope of the Israelite people was born in their own backyard and they missed it.

This contrast between the Magi and the Jews in Jerusalem becomes even clearer as we move throughout the narrative. You must understand that Herod himself was a Jew. In fact, he is the one credited with rebuilding the Jewish temple. Now I do not want you to get a wrong idea of

the guy. He was by no means a faithful worshipper of Yahweh. At first glance when someone looks at this text they may think that Herod had quite the good intentions. After all, did he not take the task of consulting the high priests and scribes about the location of this one born King of the Jews upon himself; did he not tell the magi to come back with the whereabouts of this Christ child so that he too could go worship (see Matthew 2:8).

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and make careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.

Herod just seems like such a likable guy. He is so willing to help the magi figure out the exact place of his birth, and then requests them to come make their way back to him as soon as they find him so that he too can go worship this child born King of the Jews. He just seems so sincere. But don't move too fast. Why was Herod so interested in the birth of this one whom the magi were seeking, and did he really want to worship this one born King of the Jews? Of course not! He was interested in the whereabouts of Jesus because he wanted to kill him. It really is not rocket science. Herod was **King** of Judea, the main province of the Jews. And now here are some foreigners tromping into town seeking out one who has just been born **King** of the Jews. Herod was a paranoid man. He saw Jesus as a threat to his throne, his power, his rule. He wanted to stop the fire even before it got started. He was afraid of being overthrown, dethroned.

This has been attested even historically speaking. Herod was a paranoid man. Consider the following quote regarding Herod by Everett Ferguson.

"Though it may be true that Herod was an extremely able ruler, it is also true that he was intensely jealous of his position. The story of his family and dynastic troubles would make a tragic opera. He killed the two sons of Mariamne [one of his many wives] when his suspicions were aroused that they might become the rallying point for Jewish patriotism. Mariamne herself was killed when his mind was poisoned against her by his sister. The slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem (Matt. 2) finds no independent confirmation in sources outside the New Testament, but the incident fits well the reign of terror of Herod's last years. A man who killed part of a large part of his own family and arrested large numbers of the most prominent citizens with orders for their execution when he died so there would be mourning at his death (Josephus, Ant. 17.6.5 [173-75]).... Knowing of Herod's conduct and the Jewish scruples about pork, the emperor Augustus was reported to have said that he would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son."⁴

In other words, Herod killed two of his own sons and one of his wives out of a fear of losing his throne. At the end of his life he ordered the execution of many so that there would at least be the appearance of grief at his funeral, giving the impression that they were mourning Herod's death when everyone knew that no one was actually mourning his death. Herod didn't give a hoot for Jesus. In fact, he wanted nothing less than to see this rival to his throne put to death.

Theological Significance

⁴ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*; 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 414.

I see the sovereignty of God in election written all over this birth narrative of Jesus. These Jews were in the pathway of grace, exposed to every means of God's voice known to man—they had their heads self-righteously dug deep into the word of God. They had the Scriptures, the temple, the scholars, the priests—they had it all. The magi, on the other hand, did not come seeking this child because they had their heads dug deep in the Old Testament. No, they came because they had their heads fixated on the stars, practicing their astrology. And yet, God broke in on the pagans while the Jews sat stupid in Jerusalem, blinded to the glory of what was going on in their back yard. I just cannot help but be reminded of Paul's words to the Romans; "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden... I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one." What glorious grace that God would open our eyes to the glory of His Son.

This same contrast is found in John 4. Jesus has an encounter with a defiled, adulterous Samaritan woman at the well, the last person on the face of the earth that anyone would have expected to respond to Jesus. And yet, she was quite possibly, apart from Jesus Himself, the most passionate and successful evangelist in the Gospels. And right after his dealing with the Samaritan woman, experiencing an unprecedented response to His Gospel, He steps foot back into Galilee and meets immediate opposition from His own people. *Those who you think wouldn't get it do, those who you think would get it don't.* We see the same thing in Mark 7-8 where Jesus clearly teaches the disciples that a blind man can see better than they. The blind man has clearer sight than those with 20/20 vision. Of course, Jesus' point is spiritual. Jesus is conveying to His disciples that the blind man sees better than they do—he has a clearer vision of faith. The blind man was able to *see* spiritual dimensions, evaluating things on a spiritual level and not just on a physical level. Those who you think would get it (the apostles who walked with Jesus) don't, and those who you think wouldn't get it (the blind) do.

This principle of the irony of grace is clearly visible in 1 Corinthians 1:26-30;

²⁶Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

3 Concluding Thoughts

I want to end with three concluding thoughts. I am going to discuss how you should and should not take Matthew 2.

1. *How you should not take this:* This narrative should in no way cause us to think that the problem with the Jews was that they were too learned. You can never be too learned. We are to never pit being learned against being open to God and the leading of His Spirit. The reason why the Jews in Jerusalem missed the birth of their own Messiah was not because of their great Scriptural knowledge, it was because of their own sinful hearts; they saw themselves as sufficient in and of themselves. Their problem was *not* an abundance of knowledge, it was self-sufficiency.

2. *How you should take this:* Humbly submit yourselves to the reign and rule of Jesus the King. If the Jews were truly shaped by the word in which they professed to believe, they would have been as passionate to seek their Messiah as the magi were. It takes humility to subject oneself under the rule of a superior. It especially took humility for Babylonian magi to subject themselves under the rule of one born King of the Jews. They saw that the rule and reign of this newborn King was endless; they knew that it was not bound by our earthly, finite boundaries.

Are you like the Jews in Jerusalem or are you like the magi? You may be coming from a far off, but if you seek this Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you can have assurance that He will save you. Embrace Him, cling to Him.