
Two Kings

Matthew 2:1-12

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There rose a king to the throne of Israel. He was a great builder, organizer and fund-raiser. He was a ruthless, crafty, murderous man. He long sought and curried the favor of a succession of Roman emperors. In 37 BC he was appointed to king over a section of Israel and later, the whole country. He was not a Jew. He was a Gentile for his father was an Edomite. He was almost universally hated. Herod had ten wives and had children by six of them. He had 14 children. But because he was ruthless, having murdered extended family and even having had several of his own wives and children killed for perceived disloyalty and plots against him, he was also universally feared. He was a great builder. He had building projects in Rome, Athens, Alexandria, Rhodes and of course, Israel. He filled his realm with massive fortresses and splendid cities. The two greatest were new, and largely pagan: the port of Caesarea on the coast between Joppa (Jaffa) and Haifa, and Sebaste on the long-desolate site of ancient Samaria. At Herodium in the Judaeian desert he built a great palace in which he was eventually buried. In Jerusalem he built the fortress of Antonia. His most grandiose creation was the Temple. To curry favor with the Jewish people, he took the temple that was built by Nehemiah and Ezra and did a massive and expensive expansion. He almost wholly rebuilt and expanded it to cover 35 acres. In history and even in the Bible, it was known by his name.

This vile, hateful, murderous, dangerous, charming, able man sat on the throne of Israel. He was known as Herod the Great.

In 11 BC, Halley's Comet was seen and recorded. In 7 BC, there was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the area of the sky known as Pisces. This happened three times in that year. It was seen on 29 May, 3 October and 4 December. A cuneiform inscription from the observatory of Sippar in Babylonia gives us this fascinating information. This conjunction of planets would have given the impression of one very bright star. The same conjunction took place in Kepler's day and highly impressed him. Pisces was reckoned by astronomers to mark the end of the sun's old course and the beginning of the new. Jupiter was the royal planet, and Saturn had long been the symbol of Israel. To a competent astronomer and wise sage this event would announce that a new age was beginning, in which the sovereignty of the world would shift to Judea. (adapted from O'Donnell, p. 68-69)

In that year, a caravan entered the environs of Jerusalem. Dismounting, the men of the caravan sought audience with the ruler of the Jews. The wise appeared in the court before the throne of the wicked.

We three kings of Orient are... So many myths surrounding Jesus' birth.

The fact that they presented the child with three gifts (2:11) has given rise to the theory that there were three men. There is no basis whatever for the notion that these men were "kings." 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. And now you have the full story which is largely if not wholly mythical. (Adapted from Hendrickson, p.152-154)

This is not a story about three kings from the far east. This is the story, true in all its parts, of Gentile wise men traveling far, believing the Scriptures who seek the true, heaven sent, human born King.

The narrative is in two major parts. It should be seen in that way. This text today is a part of a larger story. But to tell it well, we cannot do it all. It opens with a hope filled, worship intending journey to Jerusalem. It closes with the obedient, fear filled, life-saving journey to and from Egypt. In the first part, Jesus is highlighted as the new King. In the second part, Jesus is the fulfillment of and is highlighted as the new Israel.

In this story Matthew quotes from the Old Testament centered around places. These four OT quotations in Matthew 2 focus on key locations that played a significant role in Christ's birth and infancy: Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah, and Nazareth (Stendahl).

Matthew's Christological focus here is on Jesus as the messianic shepherd (Ezekiel 34). Our author contrasts Jesus' legitimate kingship and sovereignty with the illegitimate roles of Herod and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem,

Jerusalem - The Inquiry to the False King (1-8)

Matthew's writing is engaging. He simply skips over so many details that Luke's account gives. This is because he has his own purpose. So to understand what Matthew is aiming for, we have to study carefully what he actually wrote and not try to fill in even details we do know from other accounts.

2 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."

The Arrival in Jerusalem (v.1-2)

We are told right away that this happened after Jesus' birth in the days of Herod, the king. All nativity scenes which show the wisemen appearing at the manger are simply wrong. So we are in the early days after Jesus' birth. Verses 9-10 tell us that they are now in a house, not an inn's stable. Bethlehem was the birthplace of

David, the ancient king. It was also the registry for the Roman census. When the events of this text took place, it was at least a few days if not longer after Jesus' birth.

A few days after Jesus' birth, wise men showed up in Jerusalem. The Bible simply refers to them as *magi*. They are not magicians nor are they astrologers. Magi were wise men. They were students of the heavens or astronomers.

These wise men, astronomers were from the east. We do not know how Matthew knew that. Persia and Babylonian magi were distinctive in their dress. They may have announced it to Mary and Joseph who passed it on to Matthew. What we do not know is what country they were from. To the east of Israel are Persia and Babylon (think Iran and Iraq). Israel had been taken into captivity in Babylon which was later conquered by Persia. Both would have had a long history of Jewish presence among them. The Jews took the Scriptures wherever they went. It is fairly clear that the magi know the Old Testament Scriptures. The phenomenon they had seen in the heavens were being interpreted in the light of the Scriptures. Further, from their own words, they were seeking a special king of the Jews who was to be worshipped. This is not Zoroastrian lore. This is faith that believes the Scriptures and interprets the world accordingly. This event in the heavens means something to them. It means a special Jewish king has been born.

When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, they seem to have expected the whole city to be aware of its portentous event. They are asking all about in the city. They keep on asking, "Where is this newborn king whose star we have seen and whom we have come to worship?" As these Gentiles wise men move through the city inquiring for the newborn king's place, they are raising quite a stir.

The Religious Assembly (v.3-4)

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

Herod hears what is being asked. This is evidence that the wise men, the magi, were simply asking around Jerusalem. That they were doing so comes to the ears of Herod. Those closest to him certainly told him. Herod's reputation for protecting his throne was well earned. Matthew's statement, in the light of what Herod will do, is massive understatement. Herod is troubled. Herod being troubled was not a good thing. The whole city is not troubled at the inquiries of the magi. They are troubled because they know how dangerous and unpredictable Herod can be. His being troubled is troubling the city.

Herod assembles the chief priests and scribes of Israel. These are the religious leadership of Israel. Many of them he had appointed so as to keep control over them. The Sanhedrin, the seventy religious rulers of Judaism, had become deeply

corrupt. Matthew is setting the stage here for confrontations that would take place 30 years later.

Herod knows his Judaism well enough not to just ask for where a king would be born. He asks for where the Messiah would be born. He knows he has been appointed the king by a foreign power who has overthrown Israel. A natural-born king who would rise as the Messiah would be a deep threat to Herod.

Keep in mind that Herod came to power in 37 BC. He has ruled for 30 years. He is now 64 years old. His health is failing. His mind is starting to go. He sees plots everywhere. And now he wants to know the prophecies or predictions these magi may have read.

He summons the Jewish chief priests and scribes. Their attitude is almost as amazing as that of the magi. They knew their Scriptures. They had no problem in answering Herod when he wanted to know where the Messiah would be born. Their answer pointed Herod to Micah 5:2. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, of course. But did they go to greet him? Did they make any effort at all? No. Why? They knew what the Scriptures said. They just don't really believe them. How do we know they did not believe the prophecy they quoted? Because they did nothing.

Noting that, one writer warns, "That is a characteristic danger for clergy and scholars in any age. Their [the scribes and Pharisees] apathy hardened into outright opposition to Jesus as his ministry developed, and ended with frenzied lust for his blood – an awesome warning that knowledge is no substitute for obedience." (O'Donnell, p. 67-68).

The Answer from the Scriptures (v.5-6)

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.' "

This is a quote from Micah 5:2. Listen to the extended text from Micah 5:2-5.

² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me One who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.

⁵ And he shall be their peace.

Matthew is using the quote to point us to the full text. He is not merely quoting what the scribes and Pharisees said. They may have used only verse 2. But Matthew is highlighting all of this. Why do I say that?

The One who is coming birthplace is identified. It will be the small village about 5-7 miles from Jerusalem. Its name means House of Bread. It is the clan village of David. It is a small place from which a great thing will come.

The One who is coming is God-centered. His coming for is "for me", for the God who is speaking.

The One who is coming will be ruler in Israel. Some have noted the preposition being "in" not "over". His rule will be among and interior to the people of God.

The One who is coming is eternal and therefore is Deity. The two phrases here are consistently used to designate the eternalness of God.

The One who is coming will have an unusual birth. This is probably an illusion to Isaiah 7:14.

They answer the where of Herod's question. Matthew is beginning to open to so much more.

The final line of Matthew 2:6 very similar to 2 Samuel 5:2. According to the context there, the tribes of Israel come to David with the unanimous request that he be their king. To strengthen their appeal, they quote the words which God on a former occasion had addressed to David, "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel." By the Sanhedrin – and Matthew is in full agreement – these words are now applied to David's great Son and Lord, Jesus, the Messiah. According to Scripture, David was a type of Christ. David served as a type:

In his birth in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:4, 12, 13; cf. Luke 2:4, 7);

In his being "beloved," which is the very meaning of the name "David," (1 Samuel 13:14; cf. Matthew 3:17);

In his being God's anointed (1 Samuel 16:13; cf. Ps. 2:2; Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18, 21);

In his receiving royal position and honor, already implied in the anointing, (2 Samuel 7:13; cf. Luke 1:32, 33);

In the course each had to follow from bitter humiliation to glorious exaltation, (2 Samuel 15:23; 22:17-20; cf. John 18:1; Matthew 28:18).

Therefore, Matthew's application of 2 Samuel 5:2 to the Messiah was fully justified.

Micah 5 begins with this latter theme (v. 1), but the rest of the chapter returns to the more distant future, promising a ruler who will shepherd his flock in the Lord's strength and majesty and bring peace to the land (vv. 2-5a). Indeed, a complete cadre of rulers will one day destroy Assyria (5:5b-6), leaving the

remnant of Israel triumphant (5:7-9) and purged of their past idolatry (5:10-15). In this context 5:2 is most naturally taken as messianic. Micah consciously predicted that the tiny city of Bethlehem would produce an Israelite king “whose goings out are from aforetime, from ancient times [or, ‘from days of eternity’].” Though not as clear as Isa. 9:6, this final clause suggests a king who is more than a mere human (see McComiskey 1985: 427). (Carson and Beale, NT Use of OT, p.5-6)

The Audience with Herod (v.7-8)

Herod initiates a meeting with the magi.

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.”

He already has the answer as to where. Now he wants to know when. When was this child born? He seems to associate the birth with the appearance of the star (v.7). He asks them when they first saw the star. He thinks he will know how old the child is. He is already beginning to plot to destroy this child.

I am struck by the fact the religious leaders of Israel know what the Scriptures but don't believe. They have no obedience response. But Herod believes the testimony of the magi and the recitation of the Scriptures. But his acceptance of the truth does not stir up obedience worship, but rather fear, hatred and murderous plots.

It is unlikely that Herod would have associated the rising star with Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:15-19. But the way Matthew writes this is intended to send his readers to read and wonder.

¹⁵ And he took up his discourse and said,
“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.

¹⁸ Edom shall be dispossessed;
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed.
Israel is doing valiantly.
¹⁹ And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion
and destroy the survivors of cities!"

Balaam's prophecy has two important elements in it that tie to the events in Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

The rising of a star will be associated with the rising of a scepter.

At that time, Israel's Gentile enemies would be struck down. Edom will lose their place. The birth of the Messiah means the true king is here and the Gentiles will bow to Him in saving faith.

Herod is a wily old fox.: He says, "When you find the child, tell me, so that I can worship him, too." (v.8) This is an outright lie. He is manipulating the magi. He has no intention to worship this newborn king. But he is sure the magi will locate him. They can save him the trouble of a search. So he pretends to want to worship this newborn king. He asks them to report back to him so he can go as well.

Bethlehem - The Worship of the True King (v.9-12)

The audience with King Herod is over. The magi depart and return to their journey.

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

The Leading of the Star (v.9)

They know the way to go. They leave Jerusalem and surely head down the main road towards Bethlehem. There is where the Scripture prophesied. There is what they had been told. So, when they leave Jerusalem, they know which town to go to and therefore, which road to take.

The star now appears again. It was the star that they had seen at its rising. Now it appears again. The star goes ahead of them and leads them to the very house where Jesus is living. We are not told how this is possible. In my mind we move from the possibility of a natural phenomenon like the conjunction of the planets to something more supernatural. The star is leading them in such a way that when it stops, it is directly over the house where Jesus and his family were. This is not a natural event. This is something supernatural. This is a special star for a special season for a special sign.

I am reminded of what Moses wrote in Genesis 1:14–19:

¹⁴ And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs *and* for seasons, and for days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷ And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

Part of the purpose of the creation of the heavenly bodies is for earth-centric reasons. God’s purpose in this cosmos is earth centered. The stars and planets, the sun and moon, were created and placed where they were so that they would be seen from the earth. The light was created in-transit. When Adam and Eve looked up into the heavens on the first day of their creation, they saw the stars.

The stars are also for signs and for seasons. Down through history, people have looked up into the heavens and seen the signs and knew the seasons. Matthew is writing about the beginning of Jesus and His birth. This portion of Matthew is intentionally similar in language to Genesis. Now we have a star, a light in the heavens, not functioning in the normal ordained way. It is leading, guiding, and landing on a house on a street in the town of Bethlehem in the region of Judea in the land of Israel. This star becomes the ultimate for signs and seasons. It is a sign of Jesus’ birth. It is a light on the very particular place. It is signaling the beginning a new season, the age of grace and the time of the New Covenant.

The Worship by the Magi (v.10–11)

Matthew tells us that the magi were filled with joy when they saw the star’s leading and resting. Joy filled their hearts because they truly believed. The truly sought to worship. Their long journey was about to reach its culmination and its consummation.

The star has pointed them to a house in Bethlehem. We do not know how big this entourage was. But I am certain that what would have been entirely normal in Jerusalem would have stood out in Bethlehem. The magi are often pictured as riding on camels. We don’t know that. They could have ridden up on horses or even more likely, horse or oxen pulled wagons. Imagine the clatter of noise and excited voices underneath the heavenly spotlight.

They present him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Much should be made of the measure of these gifts. These are great treasures. Gold we would understand. Frankincense and myrrh were much coveted and highly prized spices from which perfumes and incenses were made. Make no mistake, these were gifts of great treasures.

Much has been made of the meaning of these gifts. Why these gifts? Matthew tells us what they were without much commend. Gold is often associated with royalty. Solomon's Temple glittered with gold. Frankincense was associated with worship. It was often mixed with olive oil to burn as incense in the Temple. Myrrh was associated with birth and death in the gospels. Myrrh was brought at Jesus' birth, offered him mixed with wine at the cross and was wrapped in myrrh at His burial.

With joy in worship their gifts are given. These magi bow low to honor this infant king. This newborn babe is both human and divine, God and man. He is the Jewish Messiah. He is the sovereign Lord. Gentile wise men have come to honor and worship Him.

The Warning from the Lord (v.12)

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

The wise men take their sleep. And during the night, in a dream, they are warned. They should not go back to Herod. They should make no report of where they found the infant King. They go home avoiding Jerusalem. They take another route heading off towards home.

Reflect and Respond

We have so many questions about this text. Hundreds of pages have been written to explain what the Bible simply does not tell us.

We are not given a detailed description of the star. We are not told how the magi connected this star with the birth. We are not told how many magi there were, how they dressed, how they died, or where they were buried. All that and much more is purposely left in the shade in order that against this dark background the light may shine forth all the more brilliantly. These wise men, whoever they were, wherever they came from, came to worship Jesus! In the present instance, as is clear from verse 11, this can mean nothing less than that it was their intention to fall down before the Messianic King in humble adoration. Matthew is telling all those who read this story or hear it read that they too must do the same. If even the world of the Gentiles pays homage to him, should not the Jews – who have received the oracles of God – do so? And for the Gentiles there is this encouragement: the king of the Jews desires to be your king also. (Hendrickson...)

How will you respond, not to the story itself, but to the One who is at center of the story?

Do you respond with hatred and a desire to destroy? Oh it may be carefully masked behind a smiling face and best wishes to others. You may even pretend to be

interested and desire to worship. But it is all fake. Let the warning of Psalm 2:10-12 ring in your ears.

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.

Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Do you respond with indifference? Yes, the Advent season reminds you of the Scriptures. You know that the stories of Jesus' birth are true. Yet, you don't really believe them. You are Ok in your religion. You have ticked all the boxes. Your righteousness is easily worn. But respond with obedience? Respond with worship? Why?

Do you respond with worship? You hear the Scripture. You know the story. You believe and are filled with a kind of joy. You submit to Jesus. You bow to Him. You will follow him.

Two kings... three responses. Whom will you worship and serve?