

Sermon for January 8 2006:

(Matthew 2:1-12)

“Seeing Jesus through the Magi’s Eyes” (Part 1)

*Behind the Scene*¹

The Magi's Journey to Jerusalem:

Setting the Stage

THE EVENTS MATTHEW is about to narrate take place “during the time of King Herod.” Palestine, the region of land comprising the biblical Israel and Judah, was one of the many regions that fell to the ever-expanding Roman Empire. A series of problems within the Hasmonean dynasty had left it fair game for the voracious appetite of Roman military expansion. The name derived (according to Josephus, in *The Antiquities of the Jews*) from the name of their ancestor Hasmonaeus (Hasmon).

In 63 B.C., the renowned general Pompey advanced on Jerusalem and captured the city as well as the rest of Palestine. The Romans installed local figures to rule for them, and eventually Herod, gained prominence and ruled under Rome from 37 to 4 BC. Herod, called “king of the Jews,” ruled firmly and at times ruthlessly. He most likely died in March, 4 B.C. Since Herod is still alive when

¹ I am thankful to Michael Wilkins for his commentary on Matthew in the NIV Application Commentary Series. Much of the material in this sermon was taken from his commentary. (Page 91-102).

the Magi arrive in Jerusalem as much as two years after Jesus was born, the dating of Jesus' birth is placed by most scholars at between 6 and 4 B.C.

The Persistent Pursuit of the Magi:

The universal significance of the birth of the child Jesus is heralded immediately because Magi from the east arrive in Jerusalem seeking to worship the one born "king of the Jews" (1:1-2). The term "Magi" (*magos*, "magician") originally referred to a priestly caste in ancient Persia, perhaps followers of Zoroaster (c. 607-550? B.C.), a Persian teacher and prophet. Babylonian elements were subsequently introduced, including astrology, demonology, wisdom, and magic. Magi were usually leading figures in the religious court life of their country of origin, employing a variety of scientific (astrology), diplomatic (wisdom), and religious (magical incantations) elements in their work.

The Magi were so powerful that historians tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king except under two conditions: he had to master the scientific and religious discipline of the Magi, and he had to be approved of and crowned by the Magi. In effect, they controlled who could be king—They were King Makers. Now that's power!

These Magi came from "the east" and were looking for the one born "king of the Jews." They probably traveled some 1400 kilometres, from Persia (Modern Day Iran) to the child Jesus in Bethlehem. They apparently had been exposed to Old Testament prophecies from Jewish colonies situated in the east.

Although many Jews returned to Palestine after the Exile, many remained in the east, especially in Babylon, in Parthia to the north, and in Arabia to the

southwest. There were significant Jewish centers of learning in Babylon at the time of the Magi. Gentile religious leaders in the east were regularly exposed to Hebrew Scriptures, prophecy, and teachers.

The Magi announce of the king whom they seek, "We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." While they were to the east of Jerusalem, the star rose, perhaps to the west of them, causing them to travel west to Jerusalem.

Through the Jewish community in their homeland, the Magi would have become familiar with Balaam's prophecy, "A star will come out of Jacob,- a scepter will rise out of Israel" (Num. 24:17). In many quarters within Judaism this prophecy was understood to point to a messianic figure. In Revelation, Jesus refers to himself in similar language: "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star" (Rev. 22:16)

There are several proposals as to the nature of this star. Many suggest that it was a natural phenomenon that can be traced back to some known astronomical event, whether a comet, a supernova, or a conjunction of planets. One widely discussed possibility is that the attention of the Magi was attracted by an unusual conjunction of planets that occurred on May 27, 7 B.C. In ancient Babylonian astrology, Jupiter represented the primary deity.

When Jupiter came close to Saturn (which represented the Jews), in the constellation Pisces (which represented Palestine), the Magi referred to Jupiter as the star of the king they were seeking, and the association with Saturn and Pisces showed them in which nation (the Jews) and where (Palestine) to look for him.

Another plausible suggestion is that the supernatural phenomenon was actually an angel sent to the Magi to announce the birth of Messiah and to guide them to Jesus so that they would be a witness to his birth through their worship. Good angels are commonly referred to as stars (e.g., Job 38:7,-Dan. 8:10; Rev. 1:16, 20,-2:1; 3:1), as are fallen angels (Rev. 8.10, and 11, 9:1; perhaps Isa. 14:12-13). Angels guided and protected Israel to the Promised Land (Ex. 14:19, 23:20), and they often appear in Jewish and Christian literature as guides. New Testament scholar Dale Allison cites the apocryphal Arabic *Gospel of the Infancy* which expands Matthew's account of the Magi to say, "In the same hour there appeared to them an angel in the form of that star which had before guided them on their journey."

This last view is consistent with the prominent place of the angel of the Lord in the overall infancy narrative: announcing to Joseph the virginal conception of Jesus (1:20), warning the Magi not to return to Herod (2:12), warning Joseph to flee with the family to Egypt (2:13), telling them to go back to Israel (2:19), and guiding them in a dream to Nazareth (2:22).

In any case, with their mixture of influence from paganism, astrology, and Jewish Scriptures, it is doubtful that the Magi knowingly come to worship Jesus in recognition of his incarnate nature as the God-man. They most likely desire to worship the "king of the Jews" in a way similar to how leading figures from a subservient country paid homage to the king of a ruling country. The Magi are giving rightful homage to Jesus as the promised ruler to arise in Israel, but their worship is far more than even they intended.

Herod's Cunning Duplicity (2:3-8)

APPARENTLY HEROD IS familiar with the star symbolism that was to announce the arrival of the Messiah, so he does not challenge the Magi. His reaction at first seems surprising: "He was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." Herod knows he is not the rightful heir to the Davidic kingdom; he has usurped the throne by aligning himself with Rome. So the Magi's announcement that they are seeking the one born king of the Jews, he probably perceives that invading forces from the east may perhaps join forces within Israel to oust him and place a king on the throne who is from the true line of the expected Messiah.

Herod has no fear of attack from the west, because that is where the Roman Empire lies, and he is the Rome-sanctioned ruler of Judea. However, he develops a profound fear of attacks from the east. During the Hasmonean struggle for supremacy between Antigonus and Hyrcanus II, Antigonus joined forces with the Parthians, an empire to the northeast of Israel, who invaded Judea and besieged Jerusalem. Herod fled to Rome, where he appealed for help to oust the Parthians and claim the throne. After recapturing Jerusalem in 37 B.C., Herod built a series of fortress-palaces to ensure safety from invading forces. Herod also dedicated his reign and resources to a number of magnificent architectural projects. These projects often benefited his Jewish subjects, such as the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, begun in 20/19 B.C. and completed in A.D. 63.

The final years of Herod's reign were characterized by constant domestic problems. His ten wives had produced offspring who contended against each other for his throne. As he became older, he grew increasingly paranoid, and he had a number of his own family members imprisoned and executed—

for example, his wife Miramne 1 and later her two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus.

Not only is Herod disturbed at the arrival of the Magi, but so also is "all Jerusalem with him," The word 'Jerusalem' is the designation for the holy city, but it also represents the religious and political leadership of Israel. The leadership may be disturbed along with Herod because they know the consequences they might suffer if he were to fly into a rage at the perceived threat of the arriving forces with the Magi. But more likely, their reaction gives a clue to the spiritual health of Israel's leadership. They have aligned themselves politically with Herod, and if his power base is threatened, so is theirs. One would expect the religious leadership to celebrate at the report of the birth of the king of Israel, but the arrival of the true king of the Jews presents a threat to Israel's corrupt religious and political power. From the outset of Matthew's story, Jerusalem is potentially negative toward Jesus and joins forces with those who will soon attempt to kill him (2:16, 20).

The central leadership of the Jews was lodged in the "chief priests" and the "teachers of the law" The chief priests were members of the Sanhedrin, joining the high priest in giving oversight to the temple activities, treasury, and priestly orders.

Herod's inquiry as to "where the Christ was to be born" demonstrates that the concept of "king of the Jews" (2:2) had become linked with "the Christ," the Messiah. The religious leaders cite the prophet Micah, who centuries earlier referred to Bethlehem as not least among "the

clans of Judah," because it would be the birthplace of the future ruler, the Messiah (Micah 5:2).

Herod's duplicity takes over as he secretly brings in the Magi and attempts to find out when the star had appeared to them (2:7). The need for secrecy may have been to keep the Jews, who were hoping for the arrival of Messiah from warning the Magi of Herod's treachery.

The Magi Worship the Child (2:9-12)

THE STAR THAT led them to Palestine now apparently reappears and leads the Magi the six miles to the child in Bethlehem.- The description of the activity of the star implies a supernatural phenomenon, since it is difficult to reconstruct how any form of star could go ahead of them and stop or remain over the place where the child was. Since the Magi have already been informed that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, the star doesn't so much guide them to the town but to the place in the town where the child and family are now located. This is consistent with some kind of supernatural angelic guidance.

The purpose of the Magi's pilgrimage to see the child is accomplished as they "bowed down and worshiped him" (2:11). Although they see both the child and Mary, his mother, they worship the child only. Joseph is not mentioned, even though he has, and will continue to have, a substantial role in the events recorded in this chapter. The true center of their attention is the infant Jesus.

The word used to describe the Magi's "worship" is one normally reserved for the veneration of deity. It is a clear principle in Scripture that God alone

is to receive worship, never an intermediary, not even an angel (e.g., Acts 14:11-15, Rev. 19:10). But it is doubtful that at this time these quasi-pagan religious figures understand Jesus' divine nature. Since it took even Jesus' closest followers some time to comprehend the nature of the Incarnation, it is doubtful that the Magi are knowingly worshiping Jesus as the God-man. Yet in spite of their blend of pagan religious background with Jewish influence, their worship is probably far more than even they understand. At the least they understand that this is God's Messiah, and they worship the God of Israel through him. At the same time, their worship is a clear indictment of the Herodian leadership in Jerusalem, who will soon attempt to kill, not worship, the infant king of the Jews.

When approaching royalty or persons of high religious, political, or social status, gifts were often brought to demonstrate obeisance (Gen. 43:11 – 15, 1 Sam. 9:7-8, 1 Kings 10:1 -2). This act of worship recalls Old Testament passages where leaders of Gentile nations presented gifts to the king of Israel, and it looks forward prophetically to the nations honoring the coming Messiah.

"Gold" is the most-often mentioned valued metal in Scripture,- as in modern times, it was prized throughout the ancient world as a medium of exchange as well as for making jewelry, ornaments, and dining instruments for royalty. "Incense" (or "frankincense",- is derived from the gummy resin of the tree *Boswellia*. The gum produced a sweet odor when burned. Frankincense was used for secular purposes as a perfume (Song 3:6,- 4:6, 14), but in Israel it was used ceremonially as part of a recipe for the only incense permitted on the altar (Ex. 30:9, 34-38)-³² "Myrrh" is the sap that

exudes from a small tree found in Arabia, Abyssinia, and India. It consists of a mixture of resin, gum, and the oil myrrhol, which produces its characteristic odor. Sold in either liquid or solid form, myrrh was used in incense (Ex, 30:23), as a perfume for garments (Ps. 45:8; Song 3-6) or for a lover's couch (Est. 2:13,- Prov. 7:17), and as a stimulant tonic (cf. Mark 15:23). The Jews did not practice full embalming of corpses, but a dead body was prepared for burial by washing, dressing it in special garments, and packing it with fragrant myrrh and other spices to stifle the smell of a body as it decayed (John 19:39).

There is a long history of interpretation that finds symbolic significance in these gifts in accord with Jesus' life and ministry: e.g., gold represents his kingship, incense his deity, myrrh his sacrificial death and burial. These three gifts indicate the esteem with which the Magi revere the child and represent giving him the honor due him as king of the Jews. More than the Magi know or intend, these gifts are likely used to providentially support the family in their flight to and stay in Egypt.

But the danger from Herod's paranoid jealousy of the infant king comes 'to the forefront as the Magi are warned in a dream not to return to him with their report (2:12). Dreams were commonly understood in the ancient world to be means of divine communication to humans. Joseph is the primary recipient of dreams: announcing the virginal conception of Jesus (1:20), warning the family to go to Egypt (2:13), telling them to go back to Israel (2:19), and guiding them to Nazareth (2:22). In most of these an angel is specifically mentioned as the one who engages Joseph. Therefore, it seems plausible that the angel appears also in this dream to the Magi, warning them of Herod's duplicity. The warning in a dream is con-

sistent with the view that the star guiding them was an angel, who now directs them back to their homeland.

Instead of retracing their steps through Jerusalem, where Herod awaits them, "they returned to their country by another route" (2:12). Behind the expression "they returned" is a word (anacboreo) that highlights a thematic pattern of hostility, withdrawal, and prophetic fulfillment that recurs in the narrative. Matthew emphasizes that in spite of recurring hostile circumstances, God's sovereign care surrounds Jesus' earthly life. Under the threatening cloud of hostility, the Magi avoid Herod in Jerusalem, necessitating a long detour back to their homeland.

They may have traveled south around the lower extremity of the Dead Sea to link up with the trade route north through Nabatea and Decapolis east of the Jordan River. Or they may have traveled south to Hebron and then west to the Mediterranean coast to link up with the trade route traveling north on the coastal plain. Herod's long arm of military security covered most of even these circuitous routes, so the Magi and entourage must have traveled swiftly and as secretly as possible. Their sacrifice and endurance is profound testimony to the impact of having seen and worshiped the infant Jesus, the true king of the Jews, and the hope even of Gentile seekers.