

Matthew 2:1-12

¹ When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ Assembling all the chief priests and the 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 thus it has been written through the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.” ⁹ After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ They were overjoyed at seeing the star, ¹¹ and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Context

This passage follows the story of Jesus’ birth (Mt 1) and precedes the inauguration of the public ministry in Mt 3. The gospel passage for Epiphany is part of a narrative structure that includes the escape to Egypt and subsequent return to Nazareth (Mt 2:13-23). Within this larger text there are four episodes each of which revolves around a place name: Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah, and Nazareth. The scenes in the chapter explain how Jesus, Son of David, was born in Bethlehem, was taken to the safety of Egypt, why he did not return to Bethlehem, and how Nazareth came to be his home. Each episode includes an Old Testament quotation that contains the name of a place and shows scriptural fulfillment against the backdrop of the travelogue. The appeal to the Old Testament is part of Matthew’s fulfillment theme showing that the Messiah’s itinerary was guided by the will of God.

This story, peculiar to Matthew, underlines several themes in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus the Messiah. It makes explicit reference to the detailed fulfillment of Scripture, in his place of birth (vv. 5–6), as well as alluding to another Messianic passage (Num. 24:17). It presents Jesus as the true ‘king of the Jews’ (v. 2) in contrast with the unworthy king Herod. It begins to draw a parallel between Moses and Jesus (in the escape and return from Egypt) which will be further developed in the rest of the chapter. And it shows Jesus as the Messiah of all nations, opposed by the leader of the Jewish nation but recognized as the fulfillment of the hopes of the Gentiles.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem – just as the prophets said; Jesus truly is Son of David (*cf* 1:1). The royal note runs throughout the story. Not only from the birthplace, but also the encounter with dignitaries in the person of King Herod the Great (considered an interloper king) and the *magi* (not actually kings at all). The contrasts also percolate with the narrative: to the true King of Israel, born in Bethlehem, come the foreign *magi* bearing gifts due royalty. This action echoes the Queen of Sheba coming to see David’s son Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-10) as well as text of the future Messiah (Ps 72 and Isa 60). It also points to the foreign prophet Balaam (Num 23) speaking of the “star’s rising in the east.”

Matthew 1 and its genealogy move in continuity with the OT story. It is here in Matthew 2 that the story is located as a present fulfillment in the world of the first century reader/listener. It is a merging of biblical worlds in which the promises of God to Israel are fulfilled. It is also a merging of other worlds. It is here

that the gentile world begins to come to pay homage to the King of Kings – it is now that God “appears” to them.

This text is the traditional gospel for the Feast of the Epiphany. In Greek *epiphaneia* derives from the verb “to appear” and means “appearance”, “manifestation”. In classical Greek it was used of the appearance or manifestation of gods. In Jewish texts (LXX) the word occurs for manifestation of the God of Israel (2 Macc.15:27). In the New Testament the word is not used concerning the birth of Christ or visit of the Magi, but is used to refer once to the revealing of Christ after the resurrection, and five times to refer to the Second Coming.

The traditional use of this text underscores the truth that Jesus is God’s revelation to the whole world and quietly sets the stage for the resurrected Jesus’ “Great Commission” (Mt 28:19) to the whole world.

Commentary

Jesus was born before the death of Herod the Great, which is dated *ca.* 4 BCE; the exact date of Jesus’ birth is unknown. The chapter contains several indications to suggest that the visit of the Magi took place some, not inconsiderable, time after the birth of Jesus: he is now a ‘child’ (vv. 9, 11), not a ‘babe’ (Luke 2:12, 16, though ‘child’ is used in Luke 2:27 of Jesus forty days after his birth). Verse 7 suggests that the appearance of the star, and therefore the birth, was some time ago; and Herod’s murder of all children under two (v.16) would hardly be necessary if the birth was known to be very recent. Against this backdrop, the *magi* arrive in Jerusalem.

The Magi

To understand the power of this story, the listeners must first come to a new understanding of the *magi*. Many English translations render this Greek word, “wise men.” That is being far too kind about these visitors. Perhaps, because these visitors from the East have been held up as such good models of faith, we have been afraid to really present them for what they were. Originally, in Persia, *magi* were dream-interpretors. By Jesus’ time, the term referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or even con-men. In fact, our word “magic” or “magician” comes from this word “*magi*”. They were not so much respectable “wise men” or “kings” but charlatans in a practice condemned by Jewish standards. This same word occurs in Acts 13. Barnabas and Saul meet Elymas, a Jewish *magi* (or *magus* in the singular). This is how Paul describes him in verse 10:

“You son of the devil, you enemy of all that is right, full of every sort of deceit and fraud. Will you not stop twisting the straight paths of (the) Lord?”

Magi in Jesus’ day were not models of religious piety but Matthew makes them the heroes in his first story following the Savior’s birth. The *magi* come from a group that don’t worship the right God. They are the wrong race, the wrong denomination, the wrong religion. They don’t practice orthodox worship. Certainly they give the child Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but those are elements used in their trade/magic. The *magi* would have been much better models of unbelief and false trust; than models of faith, trust and worship. Some would say “to good to be true.”

Objections to the historicity of this story have been made mainly on two grounds. First, it is regarded (like the rest of 1:18–2:23) as an artificial construction around chosen Old Testament texts. But while several Old Testament passages are apparently in mind, only one is explicitly cited, and that in what appears to be an insertion into the narrative (vv. 5b–6 could be removed without breaking the flow of the narrative), suggesting that it was fitted into an already existing story rather than the story was derived from it.

Secondly, the account is said to bear all the marks of pious legend. But in fact, with the exception of the moving star in v. 9, there is nothing historically improbable in the account (see Notes on Mt 2:2 below), and the fact of a comparable visit by eastern Magi to Nero in AD 66 (*Dio Cassius* 63.7; Suetonius, *Nero* 13) vouches for the probability of this story rather than otherwise. It may perhaps be added that a church

which soon found itself in serious conflict with astrology is not likely to have invented a story which appears to favor it.

The Star

Magi understood stars; they looked for and understood signs in the sky. A special star (new star? comet?) made sense to them. In addition, the text tells us that they came from the east and that they saw the star at its rising. The sign came to them where they were; in a way that they understood and in the place where they were at.

Brown (*Birth of the Messiah*, 170) writes:

Matthew's age would not have found bizarre the claim that a star rose to herald the birth of the King of the Jews and subsequently guided magi-astrologers in their quest to find him. Virgil (*Aeneid* II 694) reports that a star guided Aeneas to the place where Rome should be founded. Josephus (*Jewish Wars* VI v 3; #289) speaks of a star that stood over Jerusalem and of a comet that continued for a year at the fall of the city. He says (v 4; ##310, 312): "God has a care for men and by all kinds of premonitory signs shows His people the way of salvation," and relates this to the Jewish belief that "someone from their country would become ruler of the world" (see also Tacitus *Histories* V 13). It is true that Pliny (*Natural History* II vi 28) combats the popular opinion that each person has a star which begins to give light when he is born and fades out when he dies; yet the thesis that at least the births and deaths of great men were marked by heavenly signs was widely accepted.

Thus, much of what we might find strange in this text, would have been considered quite natural to the first readers of Matthew.

From time to time there are astronomers or other interested parties that begin to research the background and possibilities of the astrological phenomena that may be behind "*his star at its rising*." Given Matthew's overall motif in this passage – foreigners and leaders of a non-Jewish religious cult – and Matthew's use of "fulfillment" passages regarding the Messiah, one should first look to Number 24:17. This is the story of Balaam, a *magus from the east* who is suppose to curse Israel but instead bless it: "*I see him, though not now; I behold him, though not near: A star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel*" (Num 24:17). It here Matthew finds fulfillment.

Herod

Matthew is not concerned with the historical Herod (see *Note 2:1* below). Herod serves as a foil for the conflict against the kingdom of God. When the *magi* contact the king, "*King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled*." Matthews is not referring to the psychological turmoil of one man, but the clash of the two claims of kingship. The theme of conflict is one that occurs throughout Matthew's narrative. When we read that *and all Jerusalem* was troubled with the king, it is not in sympathy with Herod, but rather the tension that comes with messianic arrival. Just as at the end of the gospel when Jerusalem will be implicated in the passion and death of Jesus, those troubles are nascent even now.

Worship

Three times in this text (vv. 2, 8, 11) the phrase "*pay him homage*" is used. This is a single word in Greek (*proskuneo*) that refers to a posture of worship -- bowing down; and an attitude of worship. It seems clear that Herod expresses the desire to "worship" Jesus, but it would have been a false worship. His attitude is one of fear (v. 3) for his own position and status. Many ask, "If Herod and the religious leaders know where the king is to be born and if they really wanted to worship him, why don't they go with the Magi?" It is perhaps no more complicated that the powerful center resists God's purposes, while the lowly (Bethlehem) and marginal (the Gentile *magi*) embrace them."

There needs to be a willingness to act on what one believes. Getting people to go through the proper motions of worship does not mean that they have the proper attitude of worshiping God. Mark Allan Powell (*God with Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel*, 41-2) suggests what Matthew considers the proper response to Jesus – and it's not worship!

Still if worship is an appropriate response, it is not the ideal one. For Matthew, the ideal response to divine activity is repentance. ... Indeed, Jesus never upbraids people for failing to worship or give thanks in this gospel (compare Luke 17:17-18), but he does upbraid those who have witnessed his mighty works and not repented (11:20-24). We know from Jesus' teaching in Matthew that people can worship God with their lips even when their deeds demonstrate that their hearts are far from God (15:3-9). Thus, the responsive worship of the crowds in 9:8 and 15:31 is commendable but will be in vain if performed with unrepentant hearts.

The *magi* are not orthodox, yet they are obedient and respond to the mighty works of God – they are like the merchant in search of the pearl of great price (13:45) and the women at the tomb on Easter morning (28:8) – they are filled with joy.

And so the *magi* set a course for home. Their departure is no less supernatural than their arrival.

Notes

Matthew 2:1 in the days of King Herod: From the Anchor Bible Dictionary we know that Herod (the great) was born in the late 70s B.C.E. into an aristocratic family of *Idumean* descent. *Idumea* was the Hellenized name of Edom, one of the traditional enemies of Israel. When the land was conquered by Judas Maccabees (167 B.C.E.) and again by John Hyrcanus I (125 B.C.E.), all the inhabitants were forcibly converted to Judaism. Herod's father, Antipater, was adviser to Hyrcanus II and later held office in his own right when he was appointed *epitropos* (overseer) of Judea in 47 B.C.E. The rise to power of both Antipater and Herod was predicated first and foremost on their unswerving loyalty to Rome. Both father and son were convinced that, following the conquest of Judea by Pompey in 63 B.C.E., nothing could be achieved without the consent and aid of Rome. This principle was inviolable, and it guided their actions under all circumstances and at any price. At the age of 25 Herod was appointed governor of Galilee by his father and gained a reputation as a vigorous ruler by his aggressive campaign against brigands in the area.

By the late 40s, however, Herod's political fortunes took a turn for the worse. The murder of his father in 42 B.C.E. put him on the defensive with regard to Jerusalem's aristocracy. Taking revenge on what it considered a tyrannical usurper, this nobility attempted to have Herod removed through Roman intervention, only to be thwarted by the steadfast loyalty of the Romans to Antipater's memory and Herod's proven abilities. Nevertheless Herod was finally forced to flee Judea in 40 B.C.E. when the Hasmonean *Mattathias Antigonus* joined with the Parthian invaders to oust both Herod and the Romans. Herod then made his way to Rome, where he was formally crowned King of Judea. He returned to Judea in 39 B.C.E., and in the summer of 37, after a stay of some two years during which Herod and the Romans were pitted against *Antigonus* and the Parthians, Herod was finally able to claim his kingdom. He proceeded to rule for the next 33 years.

Herod's reign can be divided into three periods. The first was one of consolidation, lasting from 37 to 27 B.C.E. The second, from 27 to 13 B.C.E., was a period of peace and prosperity, marked by Herod's close relationship with Rome and her leaders on the one hand and an ambitious building program on the other. The third period, from 13 to 4 B.C.E., was marked by domestic strife and misunderstandings with Rome which greatly took its toll on Herod's health in his later years.

magi: Herodotus, the Greek historian, describes a priestly caste of *magi* among the 6th century Medes. They were reported to have special powers to interpret dreams. The *magi* survived the transition of power from the Medes to the Persians and the accompanying state religion of Zoroastrianism. Over time the term *magi* came to be loosely applied to men adept in various forms of secret lore and magic. The book of

Daniel describes *magoi* as flourishing in every corner of Bablylon. The *magi* are know to Philo of Alexandria (1st century C.E.) of knows them as both scientists as well as charlatans, astrologers and magicians. In *Acts 8:9-24* Luke recounts the story of Simon, a *magus* in Samaria, who was known as a magician; *Acts 13* condemns the magi. As well, the first century Christian writing, *Didache*, condemns the *magi* and warns the faithful not to engage in their occult arts. Matthew’s description seems to favor viewing them as proto-astronomers/astrologers. That they are gentiles is an assumption taken from their origin in the East. By this time in Israel’s history there were large Jewish communities living “in the East” as a result of the many diasporas. There are scholars that speculate the *magi* of Matthew’s story are Babylonian Jews, but most see them as Gentiles, thus introducing a theme Matthew will later take up. (Brown, 169). Most translations retain the term *magi* because modern alternatives are not accurate: “wise men” (too generic), “kings” (inaccurate), and “astrologers” (meaning is different in modern English).

Matthew 2:2 we saw his star: The idea that the birth and death of great figures were accompanied by astral phenomena was widely accepted in ancient societies. The “*star at its rising*” has been variously interpreted as a new start (supernova), a comet, or the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn. Matthew likely draws upon the Old Testament story of Balaam, who had prophesied that “*A star shall advance from Jacob*” (Numbers 24:17), though there the star means not an astral phenomenon but the king himself. The *magi* saw the star ‘at its rising’ (this is almost certainly the correct translation of *en tē anatolē*, which RSV renders *in the East*; the noun *anatolē*, ‘rising’, provides a verbal allusion to Num. 24:17).

Attempts to identify the ‘star’ as a regular astronomical phenomenon have generally focused on three possibilities: (1) A planetary conjunction (of Saturn and Jupiter) in 7 BC. (2) A comet, usually Halley’s, which unfortunately appeared too early, in 12/11 BC. (3) A nova (a star which, owing to an explosion, appears temporarily with extraordinary brightness). But no known astronomical phenomena account for the movement of the star as described in v. 9, and this indicates that what Matthew describes is guidance by a miraculous occurrence, even if the initial interest of the *magi* was aroused by a nova (or a planetary conjunction—or both).

Matthew 2:4 Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes: Herod’s consultation with the chief priests and scribes has some similarity to a Jewish legend about the child Moses in which the “sacred scribes” warn Pharaoh about the imminent birth of one who will deliver Israel from Egypt and the king makes plans to destroy him.

Matthew 2:5 the prophet: Some manuscript witnesses try to specific Micah or Isaiah. In fact the quotation is mostly likely a combination of Micah 5:1 and 2 Sam 5:2.

Matthew 2:6 And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah...: The text is considered a combination of Micah 5:1 and 2 Sam 5:2 – but it does not reflect exactly either the standard Hebrew (MT) or Greek (LXX) of the Micah passage (the 2 Sam portion is virtually exact). Compare the three:

NAB – Mt 2:6	LXX – Mic 5:1	MT – Mic 5:1[2]
“And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler [<i>hēgemōn</i>], who is to shepherd my people Israel.”	And you, O Bethlehem, house of Ephrathah, are too small to be among the ruler of thousands of Judah ; from you there will come forth for me a leader [<i>archōn</i>] of Israel . You will shepherd my people Israel.	And you, O Bethlehem, Ephrathah, small to be among the thousands of Judah ; from you there will come for me one who is to be a ruler in Israel . You will shepherd my people Israel

Micah 5:1 LXX translates the Hebrew quite literally, but adds “house of” before “Ephrathah” and changes “thousands” to “rulers of thousands.” Matthew follows the LXX verbatim for “and you Bethlehem,” replaces “(house of) Ephrathah” with “land of Judah,” adds “by no means,” changes the adjective to the superlative form “least,” replaces “rulers of thousands” with “ruler,” omits “for me,” but then reproduces “from you shall go forth” using LXX wording. The final clause in Matt. 2:6, perhaps inspired by the theme of Mic. 5:4, picks up the language of 2 Sam. 5:2: “*you will shepherd my people Israel*,” with the final five Greek words following the LXX verbatim.

“Land of Judah” could have been substituted for “Ephrathah” to clarify for Matthew’s audience that it was the Bethlehem five miles south of Jerusalem, not the one in Galilee (see Josh. 19:15) that was intended.

There is also another source that sheds some light upon this OT passage. *Targumin* are an Aramaic translation of the OT, often with added text and marginal notes indicating how a passage was to be understood. The *Targum* of the Minor Prophets very explicitly takes this text as messianic: “*And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, you who were too small to be numbered among the thousands of the house of Judah, from you shall come forth before me the anointed One, to exercise dominion over Israel, he whose name was mentioned from of old, from ancient times.*”

Micah prophesied in the eighth century BC, warning both Israel and Judah of impending judgment. As so often happens with the OT prophets, short- and long-range prophecies are starkly put side by side. Micah 4:6–13 alternates between predictions of the more distant return from exile (4:6–8, 13) and of more imminent judgment (4:9–12). 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 5:1 is most naturally taken as messianic. Micah 5:1 consciously predicted that the tiny city of Bethlehem would produce an Israelite king “*From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; Whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.*” Though not as clear as Isa. 9:6¹, this final clause suggests a king who is more than a mere human. Some scholars have seen Mic. 5:3 (“*Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne, And the rest of his brethren shall return to the children of Israel.*”) as then consciously alluding to Isa. 7:14: the woman who gives birth, ending the time of Israel’s abandonment, is the virgin who will supernaturally conceive.

This is the only OT text in Matt. 1–2 not explicitly described as “fulfillment” text. If 2:6 is the continuation of the Jewish leaders’ words, it could be that Matthew was unwilling to attribute the fulfillment formula to the hostile high priests and scribes. This is also the only text of the five in the infancy narrative that can be viewed via a very straightforward scheme of prediction and fulfillment, with

¹ “For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, From David’s throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains By judgment and justice, both now and forever” (Isa 9:5-6)

no multiple or deeper levels of meaning or use of typology. Micah prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, and now it has happened.

Matthew 2:9 *the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place*: The word preceded (*proēgen*) could mean that it ‘led them on’ without itself moving, but the words *came and stopped* mean literally ‘came and stood’, and can mean only that the star itself moved to guide the Magi. It is not said to indicate the precise house, but the general location *where the child was*. How it did so can only be left to the imagination.

Matthew 2:11 *house*: Matthew reports the Holy Family resident in a house in Bethlehem. Despite popular tradition it is not necessary to read Luke 2:7 as referring to a cave or stable. It is as likely a reference to the part of a private house set apart for animals that could be used also as a guest quarters if needed.

They prostrated themselves and did him homage: The verb *worship* (*proskyneō*) need mean no more than to pay homage to a human dignitary, but Matthew frequently uses it in contexts where Jesus’ more-than-human status is recognized (e.g. 14:33; 28:9, 17), and the same implication may be present here.

gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh: Two of the gifts are specifically mentioned in Psalm 72:15 (gold); Isaiah 60:6 (gold and frankincense). They are gifts fit for a king, as is also myrrh (Ps. 45:8; Song 3:6), and they remind the reader of the homage of the Queen of Sheba to the son of David, with her gifts of spices and gold (1 Kgs 10:2). The use of *myrrh* in the crucifixion (Mark 15:23) and burial (John 19:39) of Jesus has led to the tradition that it symbolizes his suffering, but in the Old Testament it is rather a symbol of joy and festivity (Brown, 187–88). Further, some find a possible Jesus/Solomon typology here too, in part because gold and frankincense were firmly associated with the temple that Solomon built (1 Kings 10:2, 25; 1 Chron. 9:29; 2 Chron. 9:24; Neh. 13:5, 9).

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