

## Jesus: A Worshipped King

Matthew 2:1-12

*“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.”*

**Introduction:** One of my great hopes is that in our resurrected bodies, in reigning with Christ one day, I’ll be able to sing with the power and range of a Jubilant Sykes or the high end vibrato of Andrea Bocelli. If I were given the ability to sing one song like these talented men, it would be **“O Holy Night”**, not only a favorite around Christmas time but a song that can easily bring tears to my eyes because of the overt message of the gospel contained. Consider the first verse of this beloved hymn:

*O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining  
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining  
'Til He appears and the soul felt its worth  
**A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices**  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn  
**Fall on your knees; O hear the Angel voices!**  
O night divine, O night when Christ was born  
O night, O Holy night, O night divine!*

In a world that universally resonates with *weariness*, we are enthralled with the hope that comes from the news of Christ the Messiah being born. **Most** feel the weariness, but place their hope in temporal means to solve for it: government, relationships, *better* something. **Few** understand that their weariness is a result of their rebellious heart that clings to sin and refuses to yield to a glorious Savior who forgives sin, brings peace, and promises an eternal future with Him. **But fewer still** truly understand the nature of salvation is not really about us (although we are objects of God’s love), but allows us to do what we were truly created to do: **fall on our knees and worship our King!** This is what the Psalmist compelled us to do: *“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand”* (Psalm 95:6-7), because *“In His presence there is fullness of joy; at his right hand, pleasures forever”* (Psalm 16:11).

As we continue to prepare our hearts at Christmas and revel in the arrival of our King, we are reminded that Jesus is a **universal king**, saving not only the lowly but the least likely (like a pagan priestly class), but demanding **worship**, which means complete surrender of self and turning to the Lord Jesus Christ, a King worthy to be worshipped. Let’s look at a familiar story with new eyes, considering how Matthew lays out a **comparison** and **conclusion** of those who received and worshipped Jesus and those who refused and missed Him.

### THE STORY

*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, <sup>2</sup> 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.**” <sup>3</sup> When Herod the **king** heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the **chief priests and scribes** of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.*

<sup>5</sup> They told him, *“In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:*

<sup>6</sup> *“ ‘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.' ”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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.**” <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> 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.** <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

This is a familiar story and the only one that includes the *wise men*, key players at Christmas. First, let’s do a quick overview of the story before diving a bit deeper into the characters.

- **Changing our nativity scenes** - One of the things that happens to us when we actually grapple with what Scripture says is that it changes how we view events like a traditional manger scene. A small wooden barn with Jesus in a wooden trough in the middle, surrounded by Mary, Joseph, animals, shepherds and three bedazzled kings offering gifts. Unfortunately, this is NOT how it happened. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem and had to stay in a *guest room*, an attached part of the main house where animals would have been housed, most likely in the side of a hill made of rock. This story takes place **after** the shepherds came to that place in Luke 2. Here, we see Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in the **house** (2:11). We also know that this was **AFTER** Jesus was presented at the Temple (Luke 2:22-38), since they offered a sacrifice designed for the poor (turtledoves or pigeons), since they had not yet received a large sum of gold from the magi. This scene took place weeks or months **AFTER** Jesus was born...so move your wise men to the back of the house if you have a nativity scene (mostly joking)!
- **Fulfillment of Scripture** - This story fulfilled *three specific OT prophecies*. The first is **Micah 5:2**, where the ruler of Israel would come from the little town of Bethlehem, which means “*House of Bread*” and was the birthplace of king David (1 Sam. 16:4). Matthew quotes and somewhat combines 5:2 and 5:3, speaking of Jesus’ being a ruler **AND** a shepherd, which points not only to His first but also His second advent. The second was from **Hosea 11:1**, which said “*Out of Egypt I called my son.*” After the events of the wise men giving gifts to the Baby King, they were warned to depart another way, and because Herod was coming to kill the child, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt. It is fascinating that God provided the means for travel in the valuable gifts the wise men gave. Finally, **Jeremiah 31:5** where Rachel wept for her children, a reference to Herod killing all male children 2 years and younger in the region. This showed how much Herod was affected by the appearance of king makers and a competing King.
- **What was the Star that showed up in the sky** - Matthew does NOT spend much time describing or explaining the star that shone in the sky which prompted this month’s long journey by the Magi. We know it appeared rose to signal to a group in the East, bringing them to Jerusalem. Then it appeared again over Bethlehem, giving a beacon and sign of where Jesus was. Stars do not function or act like this, so this was most likely a display of God’s glory, the same glory that the shepherds were privy to (Luke 2:9), and the Shekinah light that led the people of Israel in the desert in a pillar of fire

by night (Ex. 13:21), that Moses experienced on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:17), and that Peter, James and John saw in the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2). God is light, and He shines the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4) out of darkness. It seems like only those who believed by faith could see light, since Herod had to inquire of Scribes and priests, and missed the shining light over Bethlehem.

But to truly understand this story and the meaning of it, we have to understand a bit about the characters. Who were the magi? Why was Herod so agitated, and thus so ruthless? Why did men from thousands of miles away come to worship when people who had the Scripture missed something that happened **5 miles away** (the distance of Jerusalem from Bethlehem)?

## THE PLAYERS

- **Who were the Magi?**

Once "*We Three Kings*" goes on in your head, it's hard to get any other picture out of your head. But this is not what the text lays out, although you can understand why the idea of 3 kings got mythologized based on three gifts. Legends developed during the Middle Ages that their names were Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior, and were thought to represent the three sons of Noah. Narratives have a way of burrowing into culture and get shaped over time without any real validity. This always makes it difficult to separate out fact from fiction, but that is exactly what is needed to truly understand what was intended by Scripture.

The Magi were real. The Magi were a hereditary priesthood, often possessing great political power in the Median, Babylonian, Persian, and Parthian empires.<sup>1</sup> Their religion had much in common with Judaism, in that it became monotheistic (by the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. they had adapted to the Persian religious leader named Zoroaster, who believed in a single god), had a priesthood, performed sacrifices (particularly with an emphasis on fire as a key element of worship) and claimed to possess prophetic insight and authority. They became skilled in astronomy and astrology, had knowledge of science, agriculture, math, history, and the occult. They had a whole system in place to **interpret dreams, a practice which gave them immense influence**. This group (which did apparently wear conical hats made of felt which had long flaps covering their cheeks) were NOT kings, but they actually had MORE influence. A king could die or get driven from the throne. Advisors to the king can transcend kings and kingdoms and morph throughout the centuries, which is exactly what this priesthood of Magians (not "magicians", which was a distortion of the word "magi") did.

We learn most of what we know about this group from the Bible itself, from **Daniel 2** and part of Daniel 6. When the King of Babylon named Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that scared him, he called in the Chaldeans, sorcerers, enchanters, and "magicians". When they could not fulfill the demands of the king to not only interpret but actually tell the dream, he commanded that "***all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed***" (Dan. 6:12). This is where Daniel stepped in, showed how the LORD God was more powerful, told the king his dream, interpreted it, and saved the lives of all the wise men of Babylon (Dan. 2:27), prompting the king to put Daniel in charge of all the wise men of Babylon (Dan. 2:48).

There are **two main realities to understand about the Magi in terms of Matthew's narrative**. 1) The magi were not only powerful in terms of influence, they had received the reputation of being **king-makers**. This group came from the land or area of ancient Babylon and were part of the Parthian Empire which was dominated by the Persians. Rome was currently weak, lacked an experienced General, and Herod had just battled the Parthians for control of the area of Israel. The time was ripe for the East to come in and dominate the West, and Herod knew it. When this group rode into town, they would have come with pomp

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, "The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible", editor, volume 4, p. 31-34.

and the dust of Arabian horses, looking for a king, and if Magi looked for a king, they meant business. 2) It is clear that Daniel had an immense impact on this priesthood, and taught them the Scriptures enough to know that a Messiah was to come. Remember, the exiles of Israel lived in the area of Babylon, and as they lived they would have influenced those around, even the religious leaders. It is remarkable that a group of people thousands of miles away and a light year of religious practice away knew the Scripture well enough to recognize when a star shone in the West, and they had faith enough to follow that sign. These were remarkable people and shows God's hand in not only planning out the future, but showing that He has called all nations to Himself.

- **Who did Herod think he was?**

There are several "Herod's" listed in the gospels and Acts, and sometimes it's hard to keep them straight. But the Herod listed in Matthew 2 was the Herod that trumped them all. He was known as Herod "the Great" (a nickname bestowed on him that I've often tried to capture myself!) and for good reason. Under his rule (37-4 B.C) in the land of Israel and it's surrounding areas, he beautified the Temple in Jerusalem, making it into a wonder of the world and expanding its footprint, rebuilt and fortified Masada with beautiful palaces and endless supplies of food, made a port where there was none at Caesarea Maritima (using a type of underwater cement!), and build a 2500 foot mountain fortress in the desert called the Herodium. The only thing larger than his building accomplishments was his ego, each rising as he aged.

Julius Caesar had appointed Herod's father, Antipater, to be governor of Judea under Roman occupation. He managed to get his son appointed as governor of Galilee where Herod successfully quelled guerilla bands of Jewish opposition. When the **Parthians** invaded Palestine, Herod went to Rome and in **40 B.C.** was declared by Octavian and Antony to be **King of the Jews**. He was NOT Jewish, but rather an Idumean, so he married **Mariamne**, a descendent of the Hasmonean family of Jewish royalty to make himself more acceptable to the Jews he oversaw. He loved and hated Mariamne, which would ultimately culminate in his murder of her.

Herod's rule as "King" was divided into three parts: 1) Consolidating power from 37-25 2) Prosperity from 25-14; 3) Domestic Troubles - 14-4. It is important to understand that during his entire rule, he faced opposition constantly: The **people and Pharisees** because he was cruel and NOT Jewish, the **aristocracy**, who Herod had 45 of them executed, taking their money and property, **His in laws** from the Hasmonean family, of whom he had his mother in law, brother in law, and several sons killed, and **Cleopatra** in a political struggle. His was a rule of "live by the sword and die by the sword", so he killed many who were disloyal, but this also created many who WERE disloyal and sought to undermine, remove, or kill him along the way. When one gains power through shrewd dealing and force, others will use the same tactics. Tenney summed up his rule by saying "*It was one of violence. The brightest portion lay in the middle. It must be realized that though his reign was characterized by violence, the rulers of that day were not greatly different than he was.*"

Even at the end of his rule (he died about a year after the events of Matthew 2), he clutched onto power with every fiber. Not only did he kill the children of the region of Bethlehem, he had a standing order to lock up all notable Jews from all parts of the nation to be locked up in the Hippodrome and to be killed at the moment that he died, assuring there would be weeping at his passing in all the land. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and this was certainly true of Herod.

- **What role did the religious leaders play?**

We see finally a last group, and these were the religious leaders in Jerusalem, the ones who were to lead and shepherd God's people in righteousness and the Law (Ezekiel 34). Notice

that when Herod went to them to ascertain the location where the Messiah was to be born, they knew EXACTLY where because they had access to the Scripture, the same that the Magi had learned from Daniel.

## THE TAKEAWAY

When reflecting on familiar stories, it's important to step back and understand the point that the writer intended in order to draw implications. Matthew lays out a glorious juxtaposition of responses to the arrival of the Messiah, and what we'll see is the fact that they are the **same responses** today. The question is what is your response?

### *HEROD - A Clash of Kings*

Notice again in the text how Matthew presents Herod as "King" three times, and the Magi were looking for the one "BORN KING OF THE JEWS". Herod acquired his title and power through shrewd and ruthless manipulation, not by birth. In a rule that was constantly being challenged, when Parthian king makers rode into town, it could have been assumed they were looking for a ruler of their own to knock him off, especially since he was dying of disease and his backup in Rome was weak. When the text says he was troubled or agitated, it set the whole city at edge, since a scared Herod typically meant heads would roll. So it made sense that when he feigned desire to worship a NEW KING, he was simply seeking to knock off any competition to his own Lord and Savior: HIMSELF.

*Why do people miss the Christ of Christmas?* Why, in our weariness and the futility of life in sin do we reject the solution to our longing, hope, and joy? Because like Herod, most people, in rebellion, do not want to give up CONTROL of their life. It does not matter how "great" or miserable our life is, as long as we have a semblance of control we will not yield to the fact that we are sinners in desperate need of a Savior who will rule our life.

### *SCRIBES & PRIESTS - A Display of Indifference*

Not many will want to identify with Herod, but again most are more like the Scribes and Priests in that they are simply **INDIFFERENT to the whole thing**. They know the story, believe in God and even Jesus, think they are pretty good (at least better than Herod) and that is enough. This is a **damning thought**. Jesus did not come into the world to save neutral people from their indifference, but wretchedly sinful people from judgment. In fact, **indifference is a mirage**. The same scribes who simply pointed Herod in the right direction and took their hands off were the same ones in a little over three decades who conspired to put Jesus on the cross because He was going to take away their power and influence (John 11:48). We cannot stay indifferent about Jesus. We are faced with believing, which will mean following, obeying, and yielding, or rejecting. Let no one this morning think you can be neutral about Jesus or where you stand.

### *MAGI - A Picture of Pure Worship*

The greatness of this text is the response of the Magi, pagan priests who had NO BUSINESS being in Jerusalem or Bethlehem to worship someone they had never met, but only what they were taught by Scripture. Did they come to make a king? Nope, the text says they came to worship him! What did that worship look like? They left the comfort of their own kingdom, travelled across a desert, and brought with them valuable and sacrificial gifts. Each gift showed a recognition of who they knew Jesus to be: **GOLD** was the most valuable and precious metal around, reserved for the Temple (1 Kings 6-7) and a symbol of nobility and royalty (Gen. 41:4; 1 Kings 10:1-13). In giving gold, the Magi recognized Jesus as king. **Frankincense** - The original essential oil, this was a costly smelling perfume that would be mixed with grain offerings in the Temple and Tabernacle (Lev. 2:2, 15-16). In giving this, they recognized Jesus as Priest. **Myrrh** was also a perfume which was a bit less expensive than Frankincense and primarily used in preparing bodies for a tomb, especially since the Jews did

not embalm (John 19:39). In this they recognized Jesus' humanity and future death, knowing that the Messiah had to die for His people.

Here is the stark takeaway for us. When the Magi recognized that the Savior Messiah Lord had arrived and been revealed to them, they responded with **exceeding rejoicing with great joy, falling on their knees in worship, offering him gifts**. They went back to their country, carried on with their lives, but they were never the same after seeing Jesus. Here is my concern: have we come to an understanding of our own sin, need of forgiveness, coming to Christ by faith, receiving His righteousness and being made at peace through reconciliation, only to be indifferent in worship????!! The point of salvation is NOT ABOUT US and what God can do FOR us, but allows us to get back to our God intended purpose, which is to WORSHIP HIM with rejoicing, sacrifice, and falling on our knees. Does this mean some trumped up emotionalism? By no means, but it does mean Christ is the only King and Lord in our life, and when we care about being in His presence, we are filled with joy. Indifference kills because it actually reveals a heart that is still hardened, either in an unregenerate state or one that needs to repent of apathy.

This morning, this Christmas, can you truthfully say that you are thrilled with hope, the hope of a weary world that falls on its knees in worship? Can we sing the last stanza of "O Holy Night" in truthful reality?

*Truly He taught us to love one another;  
His law is love and His Gospel is Peace  
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother  
And in His name, all oppression shall cease  
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we  
Let all within us Praise His Holy name  
Christ is the Lord; O praise His name forever!  
His power and glory evermore proclaim  
His power and glory evermore proclaim*