

After Christmas

This is a familiar text, but one we don't understand completely because Scripture is the product of an infinite intellect and infinite mind. It never stops opening itself to those who care about what it says and who ask the Lord to show them.

Matthew 2

1 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."

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

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." **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.

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." **14** And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt **15** and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. **16** Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they care no more."

19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, **20** saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." **21** And he rose and took the child and his mother

and went to the land of Israel. **22** But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. **23** And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

You will notice first that the Magi came to Jerusalem during the days of Herod the king, so the first question I want to ask is:

I. **What kind of king was Herod?**

We know from Matthew 2 that he was a very wicked king. He was a king who did not hesitate to slaughter babies. You need to understand that it was not the news of Jesus' birth that provoked him though. He was a king like that before the Magi ever arrived. Herod killed his mother. Herod killed three of his sons. As far as we know, the only person Herod loved his entire life was his beautiful Jewish wife, Mariamni. He killed her. John Stott said that Herod killed half the Sanhedrin. When Herod was dying, he was concerned that there might not be enough mourning in the land so he ordered that after his death many imminent Jews across Israel be executed. Blessedly, his heirs and those who took over did not carry that order out. This is the kind of king the Magi came to inquire of. It was very dangerous to come to Jerusalem and ask questions to a king like this on the throne. Why did he kill all those people? Because he was threatened and unsure of himself in the stability of his throne. He didn't want anybody thinking about or looking to another king. Worship has always been dangerous. Worship was dangerous originally in the beginning of Genesis when we see one of the first true worshippers named Abel. Because he adhered to a pattern of true worship, he was killed. It was like that in the beginning. Matthew 24 is the greatest chapter which serves as a battleground for prophecy. There are so many things that are mysterious in this chapter. There are some verses, however, which are not hard to understand, such as Matthew 24:9. "They will kill you." That's pretty clear-cut. So, when true worshippers are killed, we don't need to say, oh no, God has lost control. We need to say, the Word of God is true. Jesus warned us that this would happen. Worship has always been the dangerous thing because Herod was on the throne.

II. **This passage says that the people who came were wise men. Why were they wise?**

The Greek word for Magi is "magoi" (μάγοι). Yes, we get the word "magic" from it. These were very unlikely people to come to Israel because they were Gentiles. They were also very unlikely to come as worshippers, which was their stated reason, because they were men of science. It was primitive science. In those early years the frontier between religion and science was very blurred and indistinct. There was overlap. One of the most popular forms of pre-science which was also one of the most popular forms of pre-religion was called *magic*. It was something superstitious and occultic—assigning superstitious properties to the stars, the way they moved and affected our lives. We know the Magi came from the east, probably Persia or Mesopotamia. They were Zoroastrians, which means fire worshipers.

The great irony here is that the men of science, and Gentiles, men of sorcery or magic give us a pattern of true worship. Where the theologians and priests in Jerusalem who know the prophecies don't move, the Magi come from a long way off. You might say that things have really changed since those earlier days when science and religion seemed to be so connected with magic. Things haven't changed as much as you think they may have.

One of the great problems with the New Atheists is that they're too religious. And they've embraced this occultic form of pre-science and pre-religion called magic. Magic is when you make up a word for a phenomenon that you really don't understand. Or you make up a word to deceive someone who is naive to make him believe that one kind of thing is happening when

really another kind of thing is happening. What happens when God does something that obviously only God can do? We make up a word to relieve us of our responsibility to say, that's God, that's providential. We have a near star, don't we? It sends invisible rays and strikes the brown earth and green things come up. We eat the green things and we sustain life. What could be more improbable? Providential? Oh, it's photosynthesis, we say. That's not God. We've got the magic word.

How do we measure years? Well, the earth flies around the sun. Why doesn't the earth keep flying? Why does it turn and curve and come back to the same place? Why isn't one side always baked and one side always frozen? The earth has an axis. Why do we have times of planting and times of reaping? The earth also tilts to a limit and comes back to the middle. Why does the earth do that? Well, because of gravity. We don't need God. We have a magic word called *gravity*. And the most primitive form of religion is idolatry. What is idolatry? Idolatry is when you impute to *things* the properties of deity. And so, we don't need God. We've got evolution. Evolution selects. Evolution provides. Evolution guides. That's idolatry.

III. **The wise men are looking for the one born king of the Jews. What is a *born* king?**

Men aren't born kings. Sometimes they win that title in battle. Sometimes they acquire that title when their father dies or a member of their party take over the government. But this is a different kind of a baby. This is a baby *born* a king. Other kinds ascend to the throne. This born kind *descended* to the throne. He was already a king of a much higher realm and he descended to become a king on this planet where us lower creatures live.

IV. **What kind of star is this?**

There are a lot of people who don't think this is a real star. That's because real stars don't do this *naturally*. They might do this supernaturally. Stars do what their creator wants them to do. Genesis 1:16 says casually, "he made the stars also." Louie Giglio calls God "the amazing star breather." It's wrong to assume that stars have properties intrinsic and independent of their creator. Stars do what God wants them to do. Maybe it was a band of angels. Angels are called stars in the book of Revelation. Maybe it was the lining up of Jupiter and Saturn like Johannes Kepler speculated. Maybe it was, but it was a miracle in any case. The star was leading these Magi to Bethlehem, and the Magi said, we have come to worship Him.

V. **What kind of worship is it?**

There's more than one New Testament word for worship. There's the word we get *liturgy* from. There's a word that's a form of service. The word in this passage is *proskuneo*. It means "to kiss toward." The Magi want to kiss the ground in front of Him. It was a worship of resolve. Have you ever come out of a worship service and said, I didn't get much out of that? Were you resolved to worship? Were you going to church or were you going to worship? Did you pray for the worship? Did you pray for the presenters? Do you beg God that the Holy Spirit might fill the place? And you wondered why nothing happened? It's a corporate worship; they came together. They needed one another. John Wesley wrote, "the New Testament knows nothing of private religion." He meant, God never meant us to do it alone. We can't do it alone. We need one another. We need teachers of worship. That's why the magi had to ask the doctors in Jerusalem the theological questions. They may have had a fragment of Daniel's prophecy and that's why they connected the prodigy of the star with what Daniel had written in terms of the coming of the Son of man and Israel's king. They went to Jerusalem to find out what this means and how these things are connected. Where will he be? So they needed the teachers.

Guess what else they needed? Herod. They needed enemies. You and I need enemies of the Gospel. You know why? Because if we're never threatened by enemies of the Gospel, our worship can never be biblical. True worshippers were always threatened. If we never encounter enemies of the gospel, our worship can never be mature or refined. We will never have a real

opportunity to count the cost. We will never be conscious of taking a risk because faith involves risk. Do you really want to go to heaven unchallenged? Unthreatened? Unopposed? Worship is a corporate thing if it's to be a biblical thing.

VI. What kinds of gifts were these?

They presented to him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Why those gifts? The first time these things show up together in Scripture is in Exodus 30. Gold is the gift of the king. Frankincense is the blessing rising up, ascending. Myrrh is the blessing of anointing, the blessing poured out, descending. The first time we see the words together in Exodus 30 is in the instructions of the building of the tabernacle. The gold is the altar. The myrrh and frankincense are necessary for the sacrifice. Why did Jesus become human? He took on our humanity that he might take on our mortality. He was born with us so that he could die for us. Forget the stars. Jesus died so you could live.

There's lots of ways to measure whether we're growing as Christians and coming to maturity. Usually we choose the wrong kinds of measures. Who's your favorite Bible teacher? Who do you listen to? What kind of study Bible do you use? That'll tell us something, and maybe something important, but there are other measures. In this original pattern of worship, this is the first time the word "worship" shows up in the New Testament. That's why it's so important.

Here are some measures of maturity:

- A. Do you relish holy things?
- B. Do you get your joy from an approach to God from the presence of God? Can it possibly compete with college football? With golf? With money? With family?

Discussion Questions

1. Why is worship a dangerous thing?

2. What is magic? What is idolatry? How are the two connected?

3. What is the difference between man's kingship and Christ's kingship?

4. Describe true worship as presented in Matthew 2?

5. Why do we need enemies of the gospel?

Going Deeper

1. Consider from this passage, what kind of priests are these?
2. Consider from verse 10, what kind of joy is this?