

## **The Human King**

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of Matthew's gospel is to present Jesus as the King of the Jews. But as Matthew records the events surrounding the life of Jesus we see the Jews will for the most part reject their King. As a nation they will affirm; "we have no king but Caesar, we will not have this man to rule over us" (John 19:15). The genealogy proved that Jesus is the Son of David. Jesus meets the qualifications of royalty by birth (paternity) and also by prophecy (Matt. 1:23). The King is born under supernatural circumstances (virgin birth). But does anyone else affirm that Jesus is King? Do the Gentile's recognize Jesus' claim to be the King of the Jews? Matthew now tells us of an extraordinary entourage of important people from the East who recognize Jesus' right to rule. Who are these mysterious men known as the Magi? Where did they come from? How could they know about Jesus? Why would God allow them into His plans to reveal Jesus as the King? Whatever else it means; it must mean that God intends that the Gentiles someday worship God!

#### **The Magi Seek A King (vv.1-2)**

*Matthew 2:1 (NKJV) 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,*

The first verse of chapter 2 gives us our cast of characters. The wise men from the East; a wicked man from the West; and a Child from Bethlehem worthy to be worshipped. Every section of Matthew's Gospel begs the question; "If Jesus is King, should he be the King of my life?" If Jesus is qualified to be the King, predicted to be the King; acknowledged as King; do I make Jesus King of my life? When my son Jonathan was young he asked me; "In heaven will I have to kiss Jesus' feet?" I replied, "If that's what He wants." I believe Jonathan was really asking; "Does Jesus deserve to be worshipped?" Is He the King of my life? Jesus is the Sovereign Lord of Heaven and Earth and worthy to be our King.

The wise men are 'magi'. From 'the East' literally means the place where the sun rises. Some scholars believe these are the descendants of Daniel's school in Babylon. Those of you familiar with the Book of Daniel remember the magi were high ranking officials in the Court of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, the city famous for false doctrine, false gods, and opposition to God. Daniel was appointed "ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon" (Dan.2:48). Daniel saved the "wise-men" when he successfully interpreted the King's dream concerning the future of the Gentile nations. These wise men were no doubt familiar with the writings of Daniel (chapter 9!) and even to a certain extent the prophetic writings of other Jewish authors. They may have taken the information that Daniel left and were able to calculate the arrival of the King.

*2saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."*

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This is the first question mentioned in the New Testament! “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” In the Gospels we will soon find Him on a Cross (John 19:17-19); on a Throne (Hebrews 10:12); in the heart (Ephesians 3:17).

Opinions abound about the star! Was it a celestial body? A meteor, a comet? They saw a star and followed it! They believed it would bring them to the King of the Jews. And that this King was appointed in the past and would rule by divine decree in the present.

There are many myths and legends that have grown up around these ‘wise-men’. In the Middle Ages they became known as kings and were called Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. They were thought to represent the sons of Noah (therefore all mankind). One of them is pictured as an Ethiopian. A church in Europe (Cologne) claims to have the skeletal remains. The only thing we know for sure; comes from these few verses in Matthew. There may have been 3 or 30 or 300. Whoever they are they have legitimate credentials to be honored in Herod’s Court.

The Magi appear in history about the 7th century BC. They were from a province in eastern Mesopotamia. Some believe they were descendants of Noah’s son Shem. Some believe they were a part of the group that occupied Ur and were therefore related to Abraham. The name Magi (from which we get the word magic) was given to the hereditary priesthood. They were skilled in astronomy (the laws of celestial mechanics) and astrology (the belief that heavenly bodies effect earthly circumstances). They were skilled in the occult, sorcery, divination, dream interpretation (hence magic and magician). These men were powerful ‘kingmakers’ in the Persian Empire. No one could either ascend the throne or maintain the throne without their permission. These men were king-makers yet they were under the profound belief that God had sent a King to rule the earth. John MacArthur; “Historians tell us that no Persian was ever able to become King without mastering the scientific and religious disciplines of the magi and then being approved and crowned by them, and that this group also largely controlled judicial appointments”.

Are these Pagan idolaters that engage in evil (no matter how well meaning) occult practices? Are they good guys with inside information handed down by Daniel? I don’t know. But I do know that God invites them to Jesus’ coming out party as the King! They study the stars. So God provides a ‘star’ that leads them to the King. I see in this Star a kind of natural revelation (Bruner). Psalm 19:1-4; “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through out all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun”.

I think it interesting that the ‘star’ does not lead them to the Savior. It leads them to Jerusalem (and the Scriptures). The Scriptures then lead them to Bethlehem (and Christ). The material world, the world of nature can lead us to ask questions, like ‘who or what made the world’? What are the stars? How far do they stretch out? Who made the universe? Why do we exist? I have many friends who prior to coming to Christ considered themselves atheists, mystics, or

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philosophical naturalists or evolutionists or scientists. Some came to Christ by way of Science. Natural revelation should bring us to the place where we are willing to examine divine revelation (the Scriptures). God reveals the questions in nature and then points us to God's self revelation in the Bible. The world of science and nature and dare I say philosophy can only bring us half-way home. The revelation of the Word of God can bring us all the way home. God can be known and we can know Jesus Christ His Son (John 17:3).

What led you to Christ? The magi were led by a star. The fishermen by fish ("then He said to them, follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. They immediately left their nets and followed Him" Matt. 4:19). Can God use sports to bring people to Christ? Can God use music, airplanes, motorcycles, hobbies or interests? Can God use religious curiosity? What is it that you are interested in? God allowed the magi to consider a star—and then ask the right question; "Where is he who is born King of the Jews?" (v.2).

Some Bible teachers and scholars and theologians are down-right embarrassed that God used the object of their idolatry (a star) to bring them to King Jesus. But God controls the stars. I understand many people study psychology in college so they can figure out what's broken in their own life! Well meaning psychologists and therapists desire to fix broken people and are themselves broken! Why not go to God who created us; who knows the real problem is sin and the real solution a Savior!

May I remind you of something? Matthew is not encouraging the reader to look to the stars! Matthew is not inviting to consider the claims of astrology or the occult or the study of magic. Jesus brings liberation from those who are in bondage to superstition and false information! When Jesus came—he comes as the saving source of revelation! **The real meaning of the star is that Jesus fulfills every expectation that the Magi hoped for! They were looking for guidance, it did not come from the star, but the Lord who made that star! This must have upset the Jewish reader. The Gentiles are invited to accept Jesus as the King!**

### **The King Seeks A Rival (vv.3-8)**

*3When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*

Herod is upset. This group of Magi shook him to the core. Herod was the King of Judea when Jesus was born (circa 7-5 B.C). We know from secular sources of history that Herod (the Great) died in 4 B.C. This means that Jesus was born prior to that date. Herod is a fascinating study in what is both best and worst in human nature. If I were to make a movie of his life I would cast Danny DeVito to play Herod. Historians tell us he was perhaps 4'4". Though short in stature he was into big building projects. Some credit Herod with the invention of cement (first used by Herod in his building the harbor of Caesarea by the Sea. Herod was responsible for the renovation of the Temple and building the impregnable fortress called Masada (where the Jews held out against the Roman Legions of Flavius).

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But even kind historians say that Herod was cruel, vicious and unstable. One night in a fit of rage he murdered his wife and three of his children. The next morning, he felt so bad about it, he build a huge tower on the retaining wall of Jerusalem which still stands. He was so cruel to his family that Caesar Augustus made the comment; “It is safer to be Herod’s pig than his son.” At the end of his life—Herod ordered 100 of the leading citizens of Jerusalem to be arrested on trumped up charges—and executed upon his death—so the city would mourn—if not for him at least for them. Herod did die, but the guards did not have resolve to carry out his final wishes.

Herod was not a Jew. He was one of the descendants of Esau. Remember Isaac had two sons; Jacob and Esau—who wrestled in the womb of Rebecca. The two sons have never abandoned the war. The Lord described them as two nations. Jacob would have several children who would constitute the tribes of Israel. Esau would become the father of the Edomites (Gen.36:9). The son of Esau insists on his right to rule. But Jacob’s Son is the rightful heir to the throne.

How did Herod become King? Mark Anthony (of Cleopatra fame) who built the Antonine Fortress (hence the name) appointed Herod king. Herod was really a puppet king of Rome and served at the Emperor’s pleasure.

Herod knew that a Jewish heir could present a serious threat. Esau and Jacob have long represented the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. Herod a descendant of Esau represents our flesh’s desire (the old nature) to rule our own lives. Herod knew that he could be dethroned, and those who make Jesus both Lord and King pose a serious threat to the flesh. Why was Jerusalem troubled (v.3)? Jerusalem was aware of the political implications of the Magi’s questions. If the King of the Jews ruled in Jerusalem, Rome would not be happy. Herod would not be happy. A King the people could rally around would upset the political and social and religious life of the people. Much blood would be shed. Rome had already demonstrated its power to destroy. The same is true of Jesus is crowned King in your life! The old rulers must go.

Herod is told the prophecy. The bread of life would be born in the town of bread. Think carefully. Herod is told the Scriptures. He knows the Word of God. He even believes the Bible. Why else would he send soldiers to kill every male child under the age of 2 in Bethlehem? **It isn’t good enough to just know the Bible. Or even to believe the Bible. You must be willing to act based on what it says.**

In a sense Herod is like all of us—who having discovered the King, we seek to remain King of our own lives. We fight for the right to retain self-rule. (Barclay) “The man whose one desire is to do what he likes has never any use for Jesus Christ”. Herod teaches us that the human reaction to King Jesus is personal rebellion. If Jesus is Lord, than we are not. If Jesus is King, then self rule is over. Herod is not merely a villain. He represents all that we are when we rebel against the Lordship of King Jesus. Paul writes about this in Romans 1:18; “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness”.

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The magi are what most of us were on the outside—Gentiles, aliens from God, “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). How are we like Herod? We want to hold on to our right to rule. We are for the most part rebels way down deep. Herod is like original sin—buried deep inside of us from birth. “Herod lives, and he lives in us, tempting us ever anew to hate, and resist the real king” (Bruner). Luther said, “For our flesh (carnal nature) in itself is corrupt and inclined to evil, even after we accept and believe God’s Word” (see v.8).

Mark Twain writes in *Huckleberry Finn* (a conversation with the Widow Douglas) “After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn’t care no more about him, because I don’t take no stock in dead people.” Most of us don’t either. Don’t let the fact Herod’s dead, keep you from learning the lesson he neglected. He couldn’t find Jesus because He rejected the King. Herod and the Magi, both sinners, aliens from God, heard God’s gracious word. Both had clear invitations to Jesus’ birthday party. Even the religious leaders were invited. He came to his own home, and his own received him not. Few people approach the depths of sin like a Herod. But grace was extended to him. Herod heard the gospel in its most basic form; “Bethlehem”. The gospel came to Herod and he rejected it, the King came—and Herod tried to murder the King—the King who threatened his right to rule. **Hating revelation leads to hurting people. If people are willing to be ungodly, they are also willing to be inhumane. Herod is the gospel’s earliest evidence of this fact.**

*4And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.*

*5So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:*

*6‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’”*

Herod called for the chief priests and scribes. These are the religious authorities in Israel. These were the professional clergy who devoted themselves to the study of the scripture. They knew the prophecy of Micah (vv.5-6) and quote Micah 5:2.

How do we know Jesus is the King? How he was born and where He was born are both fulfillment of prophecy.

We know there was a Messianic expectation—Israel was looking for a Messiah (some still are). But why were the religious leaders unwilling to travel the short five miles to Bethlehem to see what was happening? The wise men spent months, perhaps years to make the journey from the East. They crossed a desert, invested money, and expended a great deal of energy to seek the

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Lord. The Scribes and Religious Leaders familiar with the Scriptures refuse to travel the short distance to see for themselves! Isn't there a warning here? Knowing the Scriptures is necessary and important. **Yet knowing the Bible is not necessarily the same as doing what the Bible says to do.** These same religious leaders who are indifferent, towards the child King, will later participate in plotting his death. Craig Keener p.49; "Matthew may be suggesting that the line between taking Jesus for granted and crucifying him is very thin."

*7Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.*

Why secretly? Herod did not want to reveal his true motive.

*8And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."*

### **Finding And Worshipping The King (vv.9-12)**

*9When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.*

*10When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.*

*11And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

*12Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.*

## **Conclusion**

The magi are an encouragement to us; if we seek Him we will find Him! God's grace can summon us from the least likely places. God's grace can summon us no matter how unworthy

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we are. Herod is a warning to us. Grace can be despised. Finding Jesus will result in worship and a new way home!

The passage provides a lesson for those of us who search the Scriptures and want to know the will of God for our lives. In the passage (1) the Magi follow the light given to them; (2) they confirm the meaning and direction of their steps by the Word of God; and (3) once they know the meaning and direction given by God's Word they obey God without question and allow the Lord to lead and guide their steps.

Wiersbe writes; "Note that they went home by "another way" (v.12). Anyone who comes to Christ will go home another way and be a new creature (2 Cor.5:17)" (see Wiersbe's Outlines of the New Testament; pp.17-18).