

A Ruler Who Will Shepherd Israel
Matthew 2:1-12
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CenterPoint Church

Read Matthew 2:1-12

“The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.” (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown.” Anyone in a position of authority or leadership feels pressure to lead well. Kings, monarchs and rulers throughout the ages have felt pressure to not only rule well, but to hold onto their power. And they have occasionally become murderous tyrants when they have felt threatened. When King Saul became jealous and angry that David would take over the throne after him, he threw spears at him and then hunted him all over the land. I Kings chapters 1-2 record that when Solomon took over the throne of Israel, one of his half-brothers, Adonijah, had already declared himself king. At first, Solomon allowed him to live, but then had him put to death after he angered him by asking for the woman who had laid with their father to be his wife. Other kings in history outside of the Biblical record had their opponents killed: When Cleopatra was Pharaoh in Egypt, she had her sister, Arsinoe, killed for raising an army to overthrow her. In the 15th century, Edward IV had his brother, George, killed after George plotted against him several times. In the 16th century, Henry VIII had cousins killed on suspicions of plotting to take his throne; and then later, Queen Elizabeth imprisoning and then executing her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots, for allegedly plotting to kill her and take her throne.¹ Thankfully, kings today are mostly just figureheads, and we have democratic elections and peaceful transfers of power in this country.

In Ancient Israel, there was a King who was jealous, paranoid, and murderous. Herod the Great, the king in our text this morning, had ruled the area for around 40 years and had always been a vicious ruler. He had put to death the remaining members of the ruling dynasty before him, killed 300 court officers, one of his wives, his mother-in-law, and three of his sons out of fear that they were plotting against him.² And he had become even more paranoid later in life. We will see the greatest threat to his throne this morning, and the way that it troubled him when he found out about it. But we’ll also see how God used a group of pagan astrologers to thwart his plans while at the same time celebrating the greatest gift that God gave to the world.

Our first two verses introduce the men who unwittingly let Herod know about his rival.

I. The Magi’s Arrival (vv. 1-2)

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.”

The song “We Three King of Orient Are” is a solid part of the Christmas carol rotation. You can find dozens of versions of that song on iTunes, everyone from Dolly Parton to the lead singer of Judas Priest have recorded it. But have you ever thought through those lyrics? Just the title phrase, if you

¹ <https://www.ranker.com/list/rulers-who-executed-members-of-their-own-families/carly-silver>

² Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), pp. 60-61.

compare it with what the Bible actually says: there weren't necessarily just three of them, they weren't kings, and they weren't from the orient. But other than that, it's a great song!

The reason everyone assumes there were three of them is because the Bible records three gifts that they gave to the baby Jesus; someone even gave them names at some point – Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar – though that's not in the Bible. But three gifts doesn't mean that there were only three men to give them, it was more likely a whole caravan of people. The group would have been large enough to come to Herod's attention, and they would have wanted strength in numbers for a journey that could have been up to 1,000 miles.³

The wise men were not kings, but magi, who were sometimes the counselors to kings. They were experts in astrology. Now, keep in mind that the telescope was invented in the 1600s, so don't get a mental picture of guys staring through lenses. They most likely just mapped out the night sky with their eyes and studied charts; which means they were really great star gazers. We get our word for magic from the Greek word *magoi*, but don't think of a magician on stage doing card tricks and sawing someone in half.⁴ Many think they were Persian scholar/priests whose religion was Zoroastrianism, which is an ancient dualistic system of belief in the Middle East that was mostly wiped out by Islam in the 7th century AD, but still has followers in Iran and India today. It's possible that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were forced to be part of the magi after they were taken captive by the king of Babylon in the 6th century BC, or at least they were trained that way – Daniel 1:20 says about them, *“And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the kings inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.”* Their wisdom was from Yahweh God, in contrast to the majority of the magi who did not worship our God. But having had Jews among their numbers and probably copies of Daniel's writing that had been passed down to them hundreds of years later, these wise men, these magi, could have understood prophecies from Daniel's day. So God used their knowledge of the stars and the prophecies to lead them to the area where Jesus was born.

The magi's arrival and questions get everyone's attention, including the reigning king

II. Herod's Distress (vv. 3-9)

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.”*

So the magi stumbled into Jerusalem, which they must have assumed was where the new King was, since it was the center of the Jewish religion. It also sounds like they assumed that everyone would know about this king who had been born because they started asking around, “Where is he? We want to worship him.” Herod got reports that these men were asking around about the new king and he wasn't real happy. The Greek word that the ESV translates as “troubled” and other versions say “disturbed” is *tarasso*; it more literally means “in turmoil,” “great mental distress,” or even

³ Dan Doriani, Philip Ryken, and Richard Phillips, *The Incarnation in the Gospels* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), p. 39.

⁴ David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), p. 30.

“terrified.”⁵ This is not a low-level concern for Herod, this is a massive threat. Remember the paranoia, he doesn’t want anyone coming after his throne. It says that all Jerusalem was troubled with him, probably because they knew that when he felt threatened he would start killing people.

He called the scribes and the chief priests together to see if they knew where the Christ was to be born, since the magi don’t know all of the details. This is the first time these groups are mentioned in the New Testament; they’ll play big roles in Jesus’ ministry 30 years later. They essentially quoted Micah 5:2 to Herod – “*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.*” King David was born in Bethlehem, but Micah is not talking about him to be the ruler who would come forth from there because he wrote hundreds of years after David’s life. No, there would be a second great King born in Bethlehem, and there is a clear link to his being of David’s line, and being of the tribe of Judah, which you had to be to inherit David’s throne. Verse 1 has already told us that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, it had just escaped most people’s notice.

The final four verses see

III. The Pilgrimage Completed (vv. 9-12)

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 worshipped 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.

So Herod sent the magi to go find the Child and then let him know so he could kill Him... I mean worship Him. We tend to think that all of this is happening in the days right after Jesus’ birth, but this was most likely a year later. The Bible says that the wise men found Jesus’ family in a house, but it doesn’t say where that house was. So Herod needed someone to locate the family, so he had to pretend to want to welcome the child, though of course, we find out in the next passage that Herod ordered all the male children in the area under the age of two put to death. Thankfully, a dream from God warned the magi about his true intentions.

When they found the house and the family, the wise men knelt and worshipped. You don’t do that when you’re a distinguished person visiting a peasant family with a toddler unless you know that child is destined for greatness. I’m not sure that the gifts they brought have any spiritual significance, though many have speculated that gold was a gift for a king, frankincense was for prayer, and myrrh was a funeral balm. Certainly, Nicodemus used myrrh to anoint Jesus’ body before His burial in John 19, so it’s possible that we’re getting some foreshadowing of Jesus’ life here. It’s just as likely that the magi were just offering their best gifts because they were convinced this was the most important child ever to be born; gold is the most precious metal, and frankincense and myrrh were both very costly spice perfumes. They brought their best gifts because they were convinced that He was a great King.

Conclusion

Several commentaries I read focused on something that I think I’ve always missed when I’ve read through this passage: why didn’t the chief priests and scribes that Herod summoned and asked about where the Christ child was to be born do anything in response to their knowledge? They

⁵ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 63.

were the experts called in to inform Herod, who probably was not the most Biblically-literate person. But they were professional Bible teachers and scholars, they knew the Hebrew Scriptures inside and out. Knowing that there were people looking for this Messiah's birth, you'd think they'd start saying to each other, "Hey, if the Messiah is being born around here, we should probably try to find out about that." Jesus was born five miles down the road from Jerusalem, it would not have been hard to go. But either fear of getting involved and invoking Herod's wrath, or some level of indifference kept them from investigating things on their own.

Notice that Herod and the chief priests and the townspeople of Jerusalem were Jewish, but they had no inclination to worship the King of the Jews. It is the unbelievers, the outsiders who were drawn by God to the child and bowed down in worship. This is a continual theme of the Gospels – as Jesus' own people reject Him, those who have traditionally been outsiders, Gentiles, pagans are drawn in and become part of the kingdom. Do you know what the twelfth day of Christmas on the church calendar is? It has nothing to do with drummer drumming from the song. It's what's called "Epiphany," which comes from the Greek word meaning "to manifest" or "to show." The visit of the magi is celebrated on Epiphany because it was God's showing Himself to the Gentiles.⁶

And God continues to offer salvation through His Son to all people from all tribes, all tongues, and all nations. God's plan of salvation works the same way for insiders and outsiders, for those who have never missed a Sunday in church to those with zero ties to organized religion. We are all in the same predicament, the same sinking boat; we are spiritually dead and alienated from God because of our sins. But God sent hope in the form of a baby. Not just any baby, but God the Son, part of the Trinity. He was born without the stain of sin through the Holy Spirit placing Him in Mary's womb. Because of the union of His divine and human nature, Jesus was able to represent us in living a perfect life and in dying a sacrificial death. Isaiah 9:2 says, "*A people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.*" That Scripture can be fulfilled by each one of us as we look at the Biblical text and see Jesus the Messiah, born to set His people free. We can fall at His feet and worship Him, accepting His salvation as a gift, and living in the light of His love.

Jesus is the true King, not just of Israel, but of the whole world, the whole universe. Herod was wrong to feel threatened in one sense, because Jesus wasn't going to take his earthly throne from him. But he was right to feel threatened that Jesus is the true King, just as every person has to come to grips with how they feel about Jesus being the true King. No matter what your level of Biblical knowledge, you have now been told who the Messiah, the true King, is. God has not hidden salvation from you, He has not made it hard to get to. But anyone can avoid it by just staying away from it, by staying the course of their lives, never letting Jesus become part of their thinking. But to do that would be to miss the greatest blessing you could possibly have in your life. Will you humble yourself and at least investigate and ponder things, or are you too fearful or indifferent to look into the life of Jesus and what it would mean to follow Him? Are you threatened by a King who demands your allegiance and wants to reign on the throne of your heart? Or do you welcome Him in? Are you willing to bow before Him and offer Him the gift of your life and all that you are?

And all who treasure these things in their hearts said, "Amen."

Benediction - Galatians 4:4-5 - "*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'* So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

⁶ O'Donnell, p. 66.