

When I was in elementary school, my favorite field trip was to the planetarium. Our school buses would pull into the parking lot of a nondescript building. We would shuffle inside to an ordinary-looking room with theater-style seats that reclined all the way back. With the lights fully on, the ceiling looked like a low-hanging dome. It seemed unlikely that anything interesting could happen in this room.

Then the presenter took over. They would turn out the lights, and we discovered that the ceiling transformed into a sky full of stars. We were transported into a new dimension as the presenter explained constellations, galaxies, and the nine planets (back when Pluto was a planet). What was fascinating about the trip to the planetarium is that they interpreted for us something that we saw—sky and stars—but didn't understand. Their inspirations of constellations and galaxies led us as students to see the universe in a new way.

As we continue in Matthew's origin story of Jesus, we're going to read about Magi. In ancient days, Magi interpreted stars. For this group of Magi, one of their interpretations led them to an unexpected destination. My guess is that you will be able to relate to the Magi. You and I know what it's like to search for significance. We know what it's like to long to make sense of desires and dreams. The journey of the Magi—and what they do at the end—sets a path for us to follow.

**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."
(Matt. 2:1-2)**

Matthew describes Magi who come from the east, likely Babylonia. In ancient days, Magi were considered "wise men" and served as counselors to kings. They were astrologers who interpreted stars and dreams. And that is what we see them do here: they see a star rise and make an interpretation. Later, they will interpret a dream. Their interpretation is that there is someone who has been "born king of the Jews." Their search led them to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jewish people, because that is where you would expect "the king of the Jews" to be born.

What was the star that they saw? We know of some astrological events that occurred around this particular time, and many people have speculated on the event described. One of the interesting events that occurred around this time period was the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn. Jupiter was known as the royal or kingly planet; Saturn represented the Jewish people. Perhaps their alignment led the Magi to understand that the king of the Jews had arrived.

Whatever the star, it's important to know that in the ancient world, the rising of a star was often connected with a famous person or special event. Perhaps the most well-known occurrence was in 44 BC. A festival occurred in Rome a few months after the assassination of Julius Caesar. As the festival was underway, a bright comet shined in the sky, bright enough to be seen in daylight. They interpreted this event as the soul of Julius Caesar carried to heaven. Later named "Caesar's Comet," this event contributed to his deification by Rome.

If you were hearing Matthew's story in his day, several things would stand out. First, Magi are the subjects of this scene. They shouldn't be in the story because Jews and Christians avoided Magi due to their connection to what was perceived as magic. In fact, the biblical writers speak against trusting in the counsel of Magi (Isaiah 47:13, 15b). In the book of Daniel, we're told of when Daniel and several Jewish men who trusted in God are in exile. The foreign king compares the counsel of Daniel and his friends against the counsel of the king's magi and says that Daniel's God-led counsel is ten times better than the Magi's counsel (Daniel 1:20). God, through the prophet Jeremiah, plainly forbids trusting in foreign astrology practices (cf. Jeremiah 10:1-2). Magi shouldn't be a part of the arrival story of the Jewish Messiah. Yet, they are here, and they seem to see before anyone else that "the king of the Jews" has arrived.

The second thing that would stand out to you if you were listening to Matthew's story is that the arrival of Jesus was a political statement as much as it was a spiritual statement. We perhaps too quickly define this as a Christmas story. But remember that this wasn't tied to Christmas until the 4th century. People hearing this story in Matthew's day wouldn't have thought

of trees, lights, and singing “We Three Kings.” This was—and is—a story about the arrival of God’s new King on earth. If that weren’t clear, the means of the announcement—a rising star—happened in a way that people, and especially Rome, would have understood. Matthew is declaring, and the early Christians say this with force, that Jesus is king. And if Jesus is king, that means that Rome is not. The implications are world-shifting.

That makes sense with what happens next.

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

**“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”**

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” (verses 3-8)

We’re told about another king—King Herod. Herod was king by Roman appointment, but he longed to be king by public opinion. He acted in several noted ways in effort to win favor. He sought to win favor with the Jews by marrying Mariamne, an honored woman among the people and a descendant of the Maccabeans. The Maccabeans, ironically, were key historical figures in defeating foreign injustice. Herod’s greatest effort to win favor with the Jewish people was rebuilding the Temple, the center of Jewish relationship with God. The ancient historian Josephus said that Herod’s decoration of gold on the Temple was so extensive that when the sun rose in the morning, you had to turn your eyes away because the reflection was like looking directly into the sun itself. Though he was named king, Herod’s attempt to be king would never work; the Jews despised him for his brutality, as we saw a few weeks ago.

So, when Herod learns that someone has been “born king of the Jews,” he is disturbed. The word in the original language means, “shaken, unsettled, thrown into confusion.” He views this news as a threat to his rule. And the news comes with added insult: Herod was only half-Jewish. It could never have been said of him that he was “born king of the Jews.” Someone has come on the scene who will challenge Herod’s rule with the heritage that Herod never had. “For all of his enormous power,” says Buechner, “he knew there was somebody in diapers more powerful still.”

Herod sets in motion a plan to deal with this threat. First, he gathers the Jewish priests and scholars and asks where the Jewish Messiah will be born. Herod draws an important connection between “king of the Jews” and “Messiah.” As we discussed two weeks ago, Messiah would be God’s representative on earth. He would redeem God’s people from their sin, establish true worship, defeat the enemy of God’s people, and inaugurate God’s kingdom. King and Messiah go hand-in-hand.

The priests and scholars quote from the prophet Micah. Matthew lists that but with several alterations. The most interesting change is the last phrase: “who will shepherd my people Israel.” That phrase is not from Micah 5:2, but from 2 Samuel 5:2. Matthew is making a fascinating point. The context of 2 Samuel 5:2 is David becoming king over Israel. God speaks to David and says, “You will shepherd my people Israel.” David’s kingship is a shepherd-ship. Messiah would follow in the lineage of David and would also follow in the leadership characteristics of David. Where 2 Samuel 5:2 speaks of God’s call to David, Micah 5:2 speaks of the role of the future Davidic King, the Messiah. Matthew unites history and prophecy, adapting Micah’s words to show their fulfillment at this moment in time in the birth of Jesus.

Next Herod, feigning interest, gathers the Magi to learn of the exact time of the star. He wants to know the exact time of the star because he believed that the birth occurred at the first occurrence of the star. He can then calculate the age of the child and identify the specific threat to his rule.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (verses 9-12)

The Magi leave Herod and see the star again. Previously, the star had “risen;” now the star has “stopped over the place” of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Matthew calls this place a “house.” What house are they in? A couple of options. First, in that day, barns—the setting of Jesus’ birth—were connected to living space. If the visit occurred near the time of the birth, this could refer to the combination of the two buildings. Second, perhaps more likely, some time has passed since the birth, though no more than two years (cf. v.16). Perhaps Joseph, Mary and the baby have transitioned to a residence.

Whatever the location, what happens next is strange. The Magi bow down before a baby. Think about that for a minute. Grown men. Counselors to kings. Astrologers. Foreigners. In a nondescript house, in an insignificant village, they bow down as one would do before a king or divine being. These are men who knew what royalty meant and what it required; it was their jobs. And they offer that to Jesus. On some level, they get it. Somehow, somehow they see that God is at work in their world. The divine has entered in the ordinary. And their response is worship.

They give gifts, as you would expect them to do when encountering a king. Gold had great value then, as it does today. Frankincense was a sweet-smelling resin from trees in Arabia, burned at times of worship. Myrrh was a resin from bushes in Arabia, used as a

cosmetic fragrance. The combination of frankincense and myrrh were typical gifts given to gods. It's an extravagant act, but also an act that makes a point.

The Jewish Scriptures declared that, when the Messiah arrived, he would be the recipient of gifts from foreign nations (Psalm 72:10-11, 15; Isaiah 60:5-6). Matthew reminds us that history is being fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus as God's Messiah.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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