

Worshipped and Opposed: Herod, Wise Men, and the Supremacy of God Matthew 2:1-23

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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. 17 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 are 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, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene." (Matthew 2:1-23)

The theme of the book of Matthew is that Jesus of Nazareth is the messiah, sent to bring the kingdom of God to the world. It begins with the genealogy, identifying Jesus' connection to Abraham and David, and it ends with the Great Commission, the command to make disciples of

all nations. Matthew is a theological work that is filled with the stories of Jesus' life, and he is writing to a group of Jewish Christians to demonstrate that Jesus is the One – the Messiah.

Our text this morning is the only detail that Matthew gives us on the life of Jesus after his birth and before his public ministry. There's no mention of the shepherds (Luke 2:8-20), his circumcision and naming (Luke 2:21), his presentation at the temple (Luke 2:22-38), or the encounter with Jesus and the scribes years later (Luke 2:41-52). The only thing that Matthew feels advances his case is the story of worship of the wise men and the gruesome opposition by Herod.

If you follow the line of thought from chapter one, it is almost as though Matthew wants us to understand that 1) Jesus is the messiah, 2) his birth is miraculous, and 3) then we come to the story of the wise men. Why?

I would like to do two things today: 1) walk you through the specifics of this narrative, and 2) show you what Matthew is saying here for his readers and us.

Paranoia and Worship

Chapter 2 begins by identifying that after the birth of Jesus and during the days of Herod, the king, that wise men from the east came to Jerusalem looking for the King of Jews. Who is King Herod and who are the wise men?

Herod was the Roman-appointed King of the region of Judea. He was of Idumean and Arabian decent so he was viewed as an outsider by the Jewish people. He attracted the attention of Rome when he became the governor of Galilee through his ability to maintain order among the Jewish people. In fact William Barclay says that he was the only ruler of Palestine who ever succeeded in keeping the peace and in bringing order into disorder.¹ He was very loyal to Rome, a cunning diplomat, a master planner, and a ruthless warrior. He was known for many massive public works projects including the 46 year reconstruction of the temple, and the temple mount area. The Western Wall of the Temple Mount ("Wailing Wall") that we still see today was built by Herod. And as such, he was called Herod the Great.

However, Herod was deeply suspicious and power hungry. He viewed himself as the King of the Jews, and he was constantly looking over his shoulder for potential enemies, including his own children. He ordered the execution of three of his sons because he believed that they were conspiring against him. The bloodshed and conspiracy environment of Herod's court led one ruler in Rome to say, "It is safer to be Herod's sow than his son." Herod's reign as king was a Rome-initiated position, and he guarded the throne with a bloody vengeance. Even on his death-bed, Herod ordered that at his death one member of each family in Jerusalem should

¹ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew – Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 35.

be killed so that the entire nation would really mourn his death. Gratefully, the orders were not carried out.

The wise men or magi were from the East (likely Arabia, Babylon, or Persia), and they were men who studied the stars to discern the signs of the times (astrologers). Verse 2 tells us that they had observed a unique star which they took as a sign that a king had been born. We are not sure how they came to this conclusion. It could be that they were familiar with the prophecy in Numbers 24:17 – “a star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” Matthew only states the facts. However, their intentions are clear – they have come to worship the new king that star announced (2:2).

The magi travel to Jerusalem and begin asking, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” (2:2). Notice that he is born **as** king, not he **will be** king. Their question raises a stir in Jerusalem causing Herod and the entire city to be troubled. The word “troubled” means something that causes anxiety and fear. Everyone knew that a rival to Herod’s throne would create problems. “When Herod the Great trembled the whole city shook.”²

Herod’s action was to call an emergency session of the chief priests and scribes. He asked these religious leaders where the “Christ” (Messiah) was to be born. They informed him that he would be born in Bethlehem, which is also called the City of David, and they quoted the prophecy in Micah 5:2. Notice that the religious leaders knew where the Messiah was to be born, and yet as you read on you will see that the religious leaders do nothing with the news that the magi bring. Mark it down for later – the problem for the religious leaders was not information.

Herod then called for the wise men to come to the palace covertly (v 7). He probably didn’t want to increase the credibility of these foreign star-gazers. His goal in meeting them was to determine when the star had appeared, and he gave them instruction to return to him with the news as to the Messiah’s location. Herod’s instructions are loaded with sinister intent: “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him” (v 8).

The magi must have been told by Herod to head toward Bethlehem. As they traveled, the star reappeared and miraculously came to rest over the location where Jesus was (v 9). The Magi are overjoyed at the reappearance of the star (“they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy”). And when they encountered Jesus, they fell down and worshipped him. The word “fell down” means that they fell to the ground or prostrated themselves. It was sign of submission and humility in the presence of someone who is greater.³ And then they offered him gifts – gold,

² Morris, 37.

³ See also 1 Cor 14:25, Rev 4:10, 5:14, 7:11, 11:16, 19:4

frankincense, and myrrh.⁴ Their actions and their gifts clearly communicate the worth and honor that they held in their hearts for the Christ child.

Opposition and Fulfillment

The scene shifts pretty dramatically in verse 12 from worship to opposition. God intervenes first with the Magi telling them not to return to Herod, and then to Joseph telling him that he needed to flee to Egypt. Verse 14 indicates that Joseph woke up from his dream and immediately took Jesus and Mary to Egypt.

Now there is an interesting reference in verse 15. Matthew says that this flight into Egypt was yet another fulfillment. In chapter 2 alone there are four references to prophetic fulfillment (vv 5, 15, 17-18, 23). This particular reference is to Hosea 11:1 – “Out of Egypt I called my son.” This is an obvious reference to the deliverance of God’s people from Egypt during the time of Moses. And it seems that Matthew wanted his readers to see Jesus as the fulfillment of that promise. In other words, Matthew develops a pattern in the fulfillment passages where Jesus is the outworking of God’s plan. God’s purposes all point to and climax in the coming of Jesus as the Messiah.

Verse 16 reveals the depth of Herod’s paranoia. After he figured out that the Magi have tricked him, he devised a plan to ensure that the Messiah would be killed: he orders the death of all male children under the age of two-years old. And so he dispatched his soldiers 6 miles south of Jerusalem to Bethlehem for a stunning slaughter of innocent children.

Matthew again returns to the fulfillment theme as he cites a passage in Jeremiah 31:15 which records the mourning of Rachel for her children who were killed in the ravages of war. However the context of Jeremiah 31 is one of hope:

17 There is hope for your future, declares the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country. 18 I have heard Ephraim grieving, 'You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God (Jer 31:17-18)

Matthew likely uses this passage to not only link the sorrows of the past, but also the hope for what is coming later in the book. Again, remember that the purpose of fulfillment is more than just than predictions coming true. It is about a message being received.

Our section ends with yet another divine intervention in the form of a dream and another fulfillment passage. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream (v 19), informing him that Herod had died, and that it was safe for him to return. It appears from verse 22 that Mary and Joseph were planning on returning to Judea, the area of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, but they decided to

⁴ Some suggest that the gold symbolized royalty, frankincense pictured deity, and myrrh referred to suffering. However Matthew makes no such connection.

move to Nazareth in Galilee, which was much further north. They were afraid that Herod's son, Archelaus, would try to kill Jesus.

Matthew ends this chapter with yet another fulfillment statement – "And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene" (Matt 2:23). Now Matthew is not specifically quoting a particular passage. Rather, he is summarizing the general teaching of the prophets that the coming messiah would be lowly and despised.⁵ To call someone a Nazarene was not a compliment. Nazareth was known as an obscure and unimportant town. This explains why John 1:46 records Phillip as saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Matthew wants us to see that everything – including his city of residence – is a part of God's plan.

Matthew 2 provides the bridge between the genealogy and miraculous birth of Jesus to the beginning of his ministry. Consider what we've seen:

- Cosmic events announced him
- Gentiles come to worship him
- Earthly rulers try to kill him
- Prophecies are fulfilled in him

All of this is here for one reason: to show us that Jesus is the Messiah – sent to bring God's kingdom to the world. But how does this text fit that theme?

Lessons from Matthew

So what are the lessons that we can take away from chapter 2? What is Matthew trying to say with this part of the Jesus' life? Let me give you three lessons:

1. God is unstoppable, in control, and always a step ahead, even when we don't see it.

If I had to choose one word, it would be supreme. God is the highest in authority, power, and glory. History is his story, the record of his plan being worked out. Matthew shows us that everything taking place in the life of Jesus was all a part of the master plan of God. God was never late. He was never confused. He was never worried. He was never afraid. He was never anything but supreme.

Chapter 2 shows us that nothing can challenge God's authority. Earthly kings that try to thwart him are laughable to him.

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, 3 "Let us burst their

⁵ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 100.

bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision" (Psalm 2:1-4)

"Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust" (Isa 40:15.)

Matthew will show us that everything works out according to God's plan. There is no ruler or government or person or problem that is beyond his reach. Even the cross, the death of his son, and the schemes of Satan play into his plan.

And this is important to remember when you are in the story and you cannot see how it all fits together. I call it the dark side of the will of God. So what do you do if you are in the dark side of the will of God? Remember and rest.

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. 2 I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High (Ps 9:1-2)

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. 10 And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you. 11 Sing praises to the Lord, who sits enthroned in Zion! Tell among the peoples his deeds! (Ps 9:9-12)

Matthew invites us to see that Jesus is the One, the son of the supreme God!

2. Jesus is to be worshipped by all people

Matthew is the only writer who tells us about the magi. These star-gazers, astrologers, and mystics are not the highly esteemed people in God's economy. They are outsiders and pagans, but they got it right when it came to worshipping Jesus. Regardless of their status or the strange way that God showed them the light – they got it! Matthew is going out of his way to broaden the scope of the gospel. Foreign mystics who look to the stars are graciously told the news of the King of Kings.

Oh how this reminds me of Ephesians 2:12-13 –

12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:12-13).

God finds people in the most amazing ways. I am always amazed at the varied ways that God brings people to himself. And it so wonderful to know that no matter where you've been or what you've done or what you've worshipped – there is room in God's family through Jesus for you.

But I'm also reminded that one day everyone will worship Jesus. Everyone will bend the knee in humble submission to him. And on that day he will be either savior or judge.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11).

He's the One; everyone will worship him.

3. Jesus is opposed – actively or passively – by those who are threatened by him.

From the very beginning, Jesus entrance into the world was threatening to people. John 1:10-11 tells us, "10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." And it is remarkable to me how this happens in Matthew 2.

Jesus threatens the comfort zone of people's lives. Herod's power is threatened, so he tries to kill him. Herod actively opposes Jesus. But there's another group too! It's the religious leaders. They know where the messiah is going to be born, and they even hear that there are signs indicating he has been born. And what do they do? Nothing! They were so religious that they missed what could have been the greatest event in their lives. Not even the visit of foreign dignitaries can pique their curiosity to travel 6 miles to see if He's the one.⁶

So I have to wonder how many people here oppose Jesus actively in their lives?

- How many people know that God is trying to get their attention?
- How many people know exactly what God wants them to do but go the exact opposite way?
- How many people are running, pushing, fighting against God?
- How many people are thinking, "I'm not going to let you win!"

And what they don't realize is who they are dealing with.

I wonder how many people oppose Jesus passively, politely, quietly? They are the sleeper cells of disobedience and rebellion.

- How many people think that knowing Jesus is Lord is the same as living like Jesus is Lord?
- How many people talk ahead of where they really live?
- How many people never leave the church or overtly rebel – they just don't care!
- How many people – year after year – live in a perpetual state of apathy?
- How many people just want a domesticated, non-invasive Jesus?

And the problem is that they don't know who they are dealing with.

⁶ Morris – citing Mounce, 39.

Opposing Jesus – actively or passively – is treason either way. And I think that Matthew would tell you, “Look, He’s the One!”

You see at the end of the day there are only two kinds of people in this world: those who oppose Jesus and those who worship him. And Matthew’s entire point in chapter 2 is to show us that opposing him is a bad idea.

This is the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Get on your face and worship him!

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