

A Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12

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Introduction

The context of the passage

Matthew's Gospel is his story or recounting of Jesus' life, teachings, ministry, death and resurrection. He begins his story by introducing the background and the characters. Therefore, at the beginning of chapter 1, he lays out Jesus' genealogy. This establishes him as a descendent of King David, which is a requirement for the Messiah to meet. Then, in verse 18, Matthew begins to show us how Jesus fulfilled other OT prophecies concerning the Messiah. The narrative that describes these events continues through 2:23. We understand through these events that Jesus did not become the Messiah, nor did other people make Him the Messiah. No, from His very conception, He is the Messiah. He was born the Messiah.

The events Matthew relates reveal the kinds of conflicts people faced regarding Jesus. We encountered the first conflict in verse 19. Joseph finds out that Mary whom he assumed to be a virgin is pregnant, and it is not his child. He sought to resolve that conflict in a righteous but merciful way. He decided to divorce her quietly, in private, to minimize Mary's public disgrace.

However, God had a different plan. He sent an angel to tell him to marry Mary and name the boy Jesus, indicating that He would be the Messiah who would save people from their sins. Matthew affirms that this miraculous conception is a fulfillment of the OT prophet's prediction that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. In faith and obedience, Joseph married Mary and named the boy she bore Jesus, just as the angel told him.

Matthew will go on to tell us about the many conflicts over the Messiah that will follow, some personal and some national. In fact, the next conflict mixes the two. Before we get into Matthew's account let's paint the historical backdrop.

The Magi

I've always had the impression that the Magi were naïve and eccentric astrologers who came to pay homage to Jesus after seeing signs in the sky that convinced them the OT prophecies had come true but did not really have much of an agenda beyond that. In addition, they innocently and naively thought that they were doing Herod and the Jewish leaders a favor by finding their Messiah for them. This turns out to be far different from what was probably going on. Understanding the background of the Magi will help us understand the tense political situation that drove Herod to use desperate measures to try to kill Jesus.

The Magi had a rich and powerful involvement in various empires going back centuries before Jesus was born. They continued to influence the affairs of the Middle East at the time of Jesus'

birth as well. The first sources of information about them say they were a tribe of priests in Media in the 7th century B.C. Media was where modern day Iran is now. A man became a Magi by being born one, so it was a priestly caste. As the Persian Empire grew stronger, it absorbed Media and the Magi in the 6th century B.C.

Their role in the government was to advise the leaders by interpreting signs such as, the entrails of animals offered in sacrifices, dreams and the movements of stars and planets. They believed they could read all of these to gain valuable information that would help the king and other leaders make better political and military decisions.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, ruled the Persian Empire when it conquered Jerusalem in the 6th century B.C. (586 B.C.). The empire took the Jews into slavery. It is at this time, we begin to see the Magi introduced in the OT scriptures. The OT prophet Jeremiah wrote that after the siege:

all the officials of the king of Babylon came and took seats in the Middle Gate: Nergal-Sharezer of Samgar, Nebo-Sarsekim a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a **high official** and all the other officials of the king of Babylon. (Jer. 39:3)

Jeremiah notes that Nergal-Sharezer was a “high official.” The Hebrew word that is translated high official is “rabmag,” which literally means “Chief of the Magi.”

Daniel writes about the astrologers, advisers, interpreters of dreams and magicians in King Nebuchadnezzar’s court as well. All of these members of the king’s court would have been Magi. Our English Bibles tell us that after Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream Nebuchadnezzar made him “ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.” (Dan. 2:48) These wise men would have been the Magi priests and that is how we have come to call the Magi that visited Jesus the Wise Men.

In Daniel 4:9, King Nebuchadnezzar calls Daniel “chief of the magicians.” The English word magician is not really the best word because of the image we have of an illusionist who entertains. Daniel was not a magician in our sense of the word. Daniel’s ability to interpret the king’s dreams as well as the furnace incident proved that Daniel’s God was the supreme God and the king wanted to be able to tap into God’s power and wisdom through Daniel, so the king promoted Daniel to Chief of the Magi.

In order to avoid any chances of the enslaved Jews of Palestine revolting, the Persian Empire spread them around to all areas of the Persian Empire. They deported many of the educated Jews, including Daniel and his friends to Babylon to serve in the government offices there. These Jewish slaves seem to have served Persia well, for the Empire grew powerful until Alexander the Great conquered it in the 4th century B.C. Alexander and his successors spread Greek ideas and culture throughout the Middle East.

Now, a section of the former Persian Empire was Parthia and it spread over a vast area of the Middle East including today’s Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. When the Greek Empire

gave way to the Roman Empire the Romans could not conquer Parthia, and it became one of the Roman Empire's greatest enemies.

By the first century B.C. the Romans had conquered Palestine, but the Parthians invaded and temporarily seized control of it from the Romans. Herod's father, Antipater, successfully won it back in battle only to lose it again to the Parthians in another battle. In the meantime, Herod allied himself with Rome, specifically with Caesar Augustus, who gave him the title "King of the Jews." However, Herod himself, had to flee to Alexandria, Egypt to escape the Parthians. The Parthians then restored Jewish rule to Palestine and fortified Jerusalem against further attacks from Rome. Finally, with the help of Roman troops and after a five-month siege, Herod retook Jerusalem in 37 B.C., only a little over 30 years before Jesus was born.

Now Herod, with Israel, was in the middle of two powerful enemies: the Romans and the Parthians. The Jewish people wanted their freedom from the oppressive Roman Empire, and Herod knew that they could invite the Parthians to come in, depose him and set them free. Parthia was waiting for their next opportunity to take Palestine back from the Romans. The situation was tense, to say the least.¹

The Magi were a kind of priesthood that worked for many kings around the Middle East. Matthew does not tell us that these Magi were from Parthia, but it makes the most sense. At this time, the Parthian king was growing old and unpopular. The powerful Magi not only advised the king, but they made kings. They could set up a king and replace him with another king when they needed to in order to preserve or enhance their own power.

Whom should they set up as a new king to replace this old and unpopular king? In order to grow more powerful to take back lands lost to the Roman Empire they needed a king that would be strong and popular, or rather, that they could make strong and popular. They were actively looking for their next king. Coincidentally, the Jewish prophecies spoke of a Jewish ruler that would one day rule the world. Apparently, enough people were aware of the Jewish prophecies that Seutonius, who was a Roman historian, wrote of this time:

"Throughout the whole of the East there had spread an old and persistent belief: destiny had decreed that at that time men coming forth from Judea would seize power [and rule the world]."²

Jews like Daniel had brought these prophecies to the Persians centuries before. The Babylonian Persians invented the science of astrology and the Magi constantly studied the movements of the stars and planets for clues about the plans of the gods and the movement of history. They tried to use this knowledge to their and their kingdom's advantage. One of the prophecies about the Jewish Messiah was Numbers 24:17:

A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.

This means that a great ruler will arise like a star out of Israel. Apparently, God designed this prophecy to have a double meaning. The star not only represents the Messiah in a metaphorical

way, but it also refers to a literal star. Perhaps the Magi of Parthia saw that star, and they knew they had their candidate for their next king. If there was going to be a powerful ruler arising in the land of the Jews they wanted in on that power.

Astronomers since Johannes Kepler in the 16th century have proposed several theories about how a literal astronomical phenomenon could have occurred and been interpreted this way by the Magi. Some have proposed a comet whose tail pointed downward to the house Joseph, Mary and Jesus were staying in Bethlehem. The most widely accepted theory was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn and possibly Venus. This means that these planets came close enough together to be a special sign or even to appear to be one bright star. The movie *The Nativity Story* assumes this theory. There are other theories as well.³

The problem with most of the theories is that the phenomenon might seem relevant to us but it might not have been significant to an ancient astrologer who attached different meanings to the movements of the stars in various locations in the sky. A recent theory put forth by astronomer Michael Molnar might do the best job of explaining what the Magi saw.⁴ This theory takes into account not only what they might have seen but also how they could have interpreted what they saw as a fulfillment of the prophesy in Numbers 24:17. However, in this space I cannot do Molnar's theory justice so I invite you to read his own description at <http://www.eclipse.net/~molnar/index.html>.

Any worthwhile theory must fit the known movements of the planets, knowledge of history and the Magi's own theories of astronomy with the biblical text. In Matthew 2:2, the Magi tell Herod they saw the Messiah's star rising in the east. The Greek word for star can mean either a star or a planet. From ancient records we know that the Magi associated the planet Jupiter with a king and the constellation Aries with the area of Judea. Therefore, when Jupiter rose from the horizon up into Aries they probably interpreted that as a new king of the Jews.

In verse 9, Matthew tells us that the Magi "went on their way, and the star they had seen (rising) in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was." Some argue that this describes a supernatural phenomenon—a bright star like light that God used to lead them to Jesus. This would have allusions to God leading the Israelites through the wilderness with a pillar of fire. This is very possible. God can do anything He wants to do and do it in a miraculous way. Michael Molnar argues that these movements could describe some of the natural movements of Jupiter back and forth across the sky as viewed from our planet's perspective.

Regardless of how it all happened the point that Matthew wants to make is that God was behind it all. Even if we can explain the visual effects by the natural motion of Jupiter without any miraculous phenomenon we still have to admit that the Magi interpreted it as a sign from the God of the Jews. The sign told them that the king of the Jews was born. In addition, they believed this king of the Jews would be a star they wanted to hitch their wagons to.

If these Magi were from Parthia, they came to Jerusalem looking for this king that they could help make great for themselves. They and the Jews had risen in power together before, perhaps they could rise again to world domination with the aid of the Jewish Messiah.

For Discussion and Reflection

What evidences do you see today of Christians trying to exploit Jesus and His power for their own political purposes? Is it better to build God's kingdom as a spiritual kingdom or a political kingdom? What are the methods for each? What are the results of each?

What evidences do you see today of people using a rejection of Jesus for their own political purposes?

Matthew's account with commentary

Matthew 2:1-2

**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea,
during the time of King Herod,
Magi from the east came to Jerusalem**

Regardless of precisely when this or that theory says Jesus was born it had to be before March 4 B.C. for that is when reliable ancient records tell us that Herod died.

2
and asked,

**“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?
We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”**

3
**When King Herod heard this he was disturbed,
and all Jerusalem with him.**

We will learn more about King Herod when we study 2:13-18, but for now it is important to know that Caesar Augustus the emperor of the Roman Empire named Herod “king of the Jews.” This verse introduces the conflict or complication of this mini-story. The conflict is there is a new king of the Jews that King Herod must deal with. If the theory is correct that the Magi were kingmakers from rival Parthia, then “disturbed” is a mild expression.

In this passage, Matthew only uses two words that refer to emotions. The first word, the one that is translated “disturbed,” is the same word Matthew uses to describe the feeling of terror the Disciples had when they saw Jesus walking on the water (14:26). They thought He was a ghost who was coming to harm them. King Herod's first response to the news is somewhere between anxiety and terror.

Matthew refers to Herod twice as King Herod to emphasize the threat to his throne. Especially coming from these Parthian kingmakers, the words “Where is the one who has been born king of

the Jews?” must have been a calculated insult designed to insult and harass Herod. Herod knows his job is on the line. The Parthian Magi probably came with a small army, and for all he knows there may be a larger army on its way to take Jerusalem by force if necessary.

Why was all Jerusalem also disturbed though? Wouldn't they be overjoyed that their long awaited for Messiah has finally come? They might be wondering what the Parthian army is going to do. They, too, would not know if a larger army is just over the hill that will cause great loss of life and property. However, Matthew is probably referring more to Jerusalem as the headquarters for the Jewish leaders that opposed Jesus. He will refer to them specifically in the next verse.

We must assume that since the chief priests and teachers of the law were dependent on King Herod's power they shared his deep anxiety. If a new king comes to power what would happen to them and their elite status? Each of them probably immediately began taking stock of who would be loyal to whom and who would betray whom. They were used to playing political hardball.

Finally, how was it that these pagan astrologers could see the signs in the stars and know that the Jewish Messiah was born but the Jewish leaders did not? This is because God forbid the Jews from engaging in astrology and similar arts. They could have seen the same star the Magi did but have been completely unaware that it meant anything concerning them.

4 - 6

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

King Herod's second response to the news is to marshal his advisors, get the facts and devise a strategy. "All the people's chief priests and teachers of the law" represents the pinnacle of elite political power. They, as a group, will be the ones that kill Jesus in the end. Matthew could have left out the word "people's." He seems to be emphasizing the great responsibility these elite have for leading the people according to God's ways rather than just holding power for personal gain as they later proved they were.

**"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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.'**"

This is the second prophecy about the Messiah that Matthew uses to show that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies and is therefore the Messiah. This prophecy can be found in Micah 5:2-5, although these leaders that Herod called together don't quote the passage verbatim. Instead, they give a condensed version of it. The main point is that the Messiah, as a descendent of David, would come from Bethlehem, which was David's hometown.

Even the common people know this prophecy. John (7:42) relates that the people said:

“Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David’s family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?”

This is the second fulfillment of predictive prophecy Matthew relates to his readers. Remember that when Matthew or any of the other Gospel writer quotes or alludes to an OT prophecy he is claiming that God made a plan to send a Messiah, and He engineered human history and even the movement of the stars and planets to carry out that plan.

Skeptics today accuse Christians of reading the events of Jesus’ life back into the OT and saying that a passage was a messianic prophecy but no one understood it that way at the time of writing. However, the answer these leaders gave to Herod shows that the Jewish leaders accepted the prophecy as a messianic prophecy at this time. They knew that God was behind it all, so when they rejected God’s Messiah they were acting a lot like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were rejecting God’s rule over their lives. They asserted that they wanted to live their lives independently of God.

7 - 8

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

King Herod’s third response to the threat is to employ his cunning strategy. That he called this meeting secretly reveals a number of things. First, he is trying desperately to control this incident to his advantage. The less the people know the better for him. In light of his future actions, it also reveals his treachery. He is cool, cunning and calculating. Before sending them off, he made sure he found out the exact time the birth star appeared, just in case the Magi didn’t come back. He will probably pat himself on the back later when they don’t.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said,

“Go and make a careful search for the child.

As soon as you find him,

report to me,

so that I too may go and worship him.”

Can you imagine Herod pretending to say these words with utmost sincerity and congeniality?

9 - 10

After they had heard the king,

they went on their way,

and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them

until it stopped over the place where the child was.

The Magi’s second response was to continue on their mission. They probably thought it was strange that the Jews did not know their long awaited Messiah was born.

The description of how the star moved is the most challenging to reconcile with a literal interpretation. It is difficult to imagine how a star (or planet) could move in such a way as to stop over a particular house. If Matthew is referring to a supernatural phenomenon then it is easy. Someone suggested that God only allowed the Magi to see the star. That is certainly possible. On the other hand, as I mentioned above, astronomer Michael Molnar argues that these movements are consistent with our perception of the motion of a planet like Jupiter as it orbits the sun.

An example of this kind of language is the way we describe a sunrise. Is the sun rising or is earth rotating about an axis so that from our point of view it only looks like it is rising and so we call it a sunrise? We have to assume that Matthew's readers were familiar with his way of describing the star because he does not bother to explain it like he explains other things he thinks they might not understand. In addition, scholars of the history of navigation tell us that ancient navigators could find far away destinations with pinpoint accuracy without Global Positioning Satellites. Imagine that!

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

The Magi's third response was intense joy. "Overjoyed" is the second of only two words describing emotions in this passage. Do you remember the other word? In 2:3, Matthew says King Herod was "disturbed," which could mean as an intense emotion as terrified. What a contrast! Now given the historical background on the Magi and the theory that they were Parthian kingmakers their joy might have only meant that they thought they found their next king or a super king with which they could make an alliance in the future.

I hope that their joy went beyond this though. It might have. The Jews they had known and their ancestors had known taught them the Jewish scriptures and the prophecies about the Messiah. Perhaps they saw in the baby Jesus a king who really would rule with perfect justice, wisdom and mercy and provide people of all the nations with salvation from their sins.

For discussion and reflection

One of the keys to understanding a narrative passage in one of the Gospels is to note any words that refer to emotions. The Gospel authors use emotion words very carefully and purposefully. They often use emotion words to prompt the reader as to what kind of emotion he or she should also feel in response to the content of the passage. In this case, when I think about Jesus wanting to be king of my life, sometimes I feel disturbed. Sometimes I even feel terrified at the prospect of turning the control of my life over to Him. Do you feel that way, too? What lies do we buy into that cause us to feel this way? What are the truths we can remember that will, instead, produce joy under His kingship?

11

**On coming to the house,
they saw the child with his mother Mary,
and they bowed down and worshipped him.
Then they opened their treasures**

and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

The word that is translated worship literally means to “fall down” or even “throw oneself down on the ground as a sign of devotion or humility, before high-ranking persons or divine beings.” It was a common eastern way of showing submission. It is the same word Satan uses when he promises to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he will bow down and worship him (Matt. 4:9). It is the same word used of the elders in Revelation 5:14 when they fell down and worshipped Jesus.

In what sense does Matthew mean that they worshipped the baby Jesus? How sincere were they? If these Magi were from Parthia, they came to Jerusalem looking for this king that they could help make great for themselves. They and the Jews had risen in power together before, perhaps they could rise again to world domination with the aid of the Jewish Messiah. However, I think at this point it went beyond politics.

They must have been quite surprised, even shocked to find the baby living in a small peasant house. The baby, his family and surroundings did not match the expectations they probably had of a newborn king. Shouldn't they find him wrapped in fine linens, lying in a fancy bed surrounded by fancy furnishings and fancy attendants in a fancy palace in the capital city Jerusalem? Yet, they remained confident that they really did find the newborn king of the Jews. If they had second thoughts, they probably would not have given him the gifts and just left to check their star charts again and tried to find a newborn king that fulfilled their expectations.

Finally, this was the newborn king of the Jews. The Jews had long claimed that their God is the one and only true God. In the ancient Middle East people believed that a king was in some sense divine. If the messianic prophecies were fulfilled then they would have reasoned that the God of the Jews was real and more powerful than all the gods they had ever worshipped put together. Perhaps they came looking for a king they could use to their own advantage but left believing in the one true God. And He would be a star they wanted to hitch their wagons to.

12

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

This warning accomplished at least two things. First, it gave Joseph, Mary and Jesus additional time to escape. Second, it reaffirmed to the Magi, to Matthew's readers and to us that the God of Israel is real, powerful and behind this newborn king of the Jews. The contrasts are clear. Herod, like most kings of the day, lusted for power and used any treacherous means to get rid of threats to his throne. He was a spiritual hypocrite, saying he believed one thing but practicing another. Contrast that with the baby Jesus. A baby represents innocence in contrast to Herod's many years of greed, treachery and bloodthirsty jealousy. Just the fact that he was a baby born to a peasant family and living in a peasant house, yet was the future king of the Jews shows that the God of the Jews has something special in mind. They had a lot to reflect on as they journeyed home.

Conclusion

All the events Matthew relates show God's providence and control over nature and the affairs of men and nations. God set the planets in motion and knew beforehand what they would look like from the vantage point of the Middle East at certain points in human history. He knew how he would engineer the events and decisions of His people, the Jewish nation and how he would predict through his prophets when He would send His Messiah. He knew how he would show pagan astrologers how to recognize when and where that Messiah was born.

This is, at once, a comfort to those who accept God's plan and a discomfort to those who do not. Those who want to chart their own destiny, must swim against an all-powerful stream.

¹ Much of the information about the theory that the Magi were Parthians comes from The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible. Vol. 4, p. 31-34.

On Parthia see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parthia>

² Quoted in Wilkins, Michael J. The NIV Application Commentary. Zondervan. p. 94

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_of_bethlehem

⁴ Molnar, Michael. The Star of Bethlehem : The Legacy of the Magi. Rutgers University Press. 2000.