

Matt. 2:1-12 - The Gift of the Magi

Written by Tim Black

Sunday, 21 December 2008 16:49 -

1.

Introduction

1.

There are a number of fascinating unknowns in this account of the wise men who came to worship Christ—we are told little of who they are or where they are from, why they follow the star and how they know from it that the King of the Jews was born. And who can forget both the richness and the unfamiliarity of the treasures they gave to Him—gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Yet these high-ranking foreigners to the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise bow the knee to Jesus Christ.

2.

Though these wise men are passing strange, this passage is arranged to be a study in contrasts between these "faithful" unbelievers and the unfaithful among God's people. Where these Magi are good, Herod and all Jerusalem are evil. The unforgettable gift of the magi reveals the surpassing worth of Christ.

3.

Outline. To recognize this contrast and its intended application we will consider the passage under three headings:

1.

The Magi's Quest to Worship vv. 1-2

2.

Herod's Quest to Destroy vv. 3-8

3.

The Gift of the Magi vv. 9-12

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4.

Body

1.

The Magi's Quest to Worship vv. 1-2

1.

Setting

1.

Matthew briefly sets the stage, then presents the magi and their quest.

2.

Text

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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."

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What is their name? Wise men

1.

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We may ask both of Herod and the magi, "What is their name?" and "What is their quest?"

2.

Wise men

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Their name tells us they were "wise men." The word "magi" was applied to priests, kings' advisors, scholars, sages; men of a stature like our nation's senators or members of the president's cabinet.

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Magicians

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The word was also applied to pagan magicians and astrologers. Simon and Elymas the magicians in Acts 8:6, 9, 11 were "magi." In the arrival of these magi we see a portent that Christ would be victorious over those who had formerly served the devil, and would turn them to worship the true and living God.

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Gentiles

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Clearly these magi were Gentiles. They remind us of the Gentile prophet Balaam, also from the east, who by God's direction prophesied "a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." Perhaps they knew of Balaam's prophecy. They remind us of other Gentiles from the East who came to honor David and Solomon. They are akin to the God-fearers in the Old Testament, and are a foretaste of the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's people in the New.

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What is their quest?

1.

Location of king

2.

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More important than their name is their quest. They ask, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"

Amazingly they already know of Christ's birth and identity; they only need help finding His location!

-

Reason: Star

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The reason for their quest is that they have seen "his star when it rose." The star could have been a supernova, comet, meteor, angels or even the light of God Himself, but whether this star was natural or miraculous, it was an extraordinary star which God used to lead the magi to Christ. It led them to Judea but then apparently disappeared, so they went to its major city, Jerusalem, and asked the Jews to lead them to the King of the Jews.

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The star is described as "the star in its rising," "to.n avste,ra evn th/| avnatolh/|,"

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which is similar in the Greek to Zechariah's description of Christ in

Luke 1:78

as the "sunrise (or Dayspring) from on high," "

avnatolh. evx u[you]

," recalling God's promise in

Malachi

4:2

,"

For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

"

-

Purpose: Worship

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Worship. The magi state their purpose plainly, "We have come to worship Him." Shining brightly through the fog of their pagan superstition and unbelief is the clear purpose that all of God's people should have—

we have come to worship Him

! For their part, they believe He may one day be their king. Without fully knowing who He is, they are preparing for the day when He may rule over them.

-

Object: Christ, not the Star. Notice that they did not worship the star. By God's direction they were led to worship Christ himself. Matthew Henry comments, "Thus the stars that had been misused came to be put to the right use, to lead men to Christ; the gods of the heathen became his servants."

¹ Remember that God has told you, "Beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars

stars

, all the

host of heaven

, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them.

" (

Deut. 4:19

)

-

Herod's Quest to Destroy vv. 3-8

1.

Text

1.

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."

2.

What is his name? Herod & the Jews

1.

Response: Troubled

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Having learned of the magi's quest to worship Christ, next we learn of Herod's quest to destroy . The first hint of his intent comes in his response to the magi's news, which fits the reputation of his

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name. Yes, Herod knew God's promises of the coming king of the Jews, but Herod was not a Jew. He was an Edomite, a son not of faithful Jacob but of unfaithful Esau, who had sold his birthright, and though legally appointed by the Roman powers that be, yet by both the religious Pharisees and the militant Zealots, among the Jews Herod was viewed to have

no divine right

to the throne of David. And now eminent foreigners bring the news that a rightful

king has been born. So Herod is "

troubled

, and all Jerusalem with him.

"

The scepter had departed from Judah, so it was time for Shiloh to come.

-

Throughout the OT Edomites ridiculed and persecuted God's people. Doeg, who turned against David and killed the priests who followed David rather than Saul, was an Edomite. Hadad the Edomite opposed Solomon and all Israel. And now the Edomite Herod the Great rises to oppose the Seed of the Woman by whom all men could be saved.

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Herod was "a man made up of falsehood and cruelty." [2](#) If his subjects honor his rival Jesus, will they be put to death? Though close to death himself, aged Herod clings fiercely to his throne and will not subject himself to the Lord's anointed. He asks, "Where is this child?"

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For their part, the Jews in Jerusalem did not even know that the King of the Jews had been born. The angel had announced Christ's birth to the shepherds, "

good news of great joy which shall be for all the people

," but in Jerusalem that news fell on the rocky soil of hearts of stone. "Yes, long ago God sent us into exile and promised to send a Savior, but what difference does it make to me now? I live under a government I do not want, I pay taxes to Caesar, I have more work and less pay, hard times with too many cares to care anymore whatever the prophets have said. Go and worship the King of the Jews? That's all right, you do it for me."

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Indicates their Character

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Herod and the Jews' response indicates their character. By revealing Christ's birth to the Gentiles, God shows the guilty ignorance of His own people, rooted in unbelief, because of the hardness of their hearts. The Jews' wisdom under Herod is not from God, but is the wisdom of the world. "Has not God made

foolish the wisdom of the world?

" (

1 Cor. 1:20

)

-

What is his quest? Herod's quest. Herod's quest is to discover the place and time of Christ's birth, supposedly in order to worship Christ, but actually in order to kill him.

1.

Location of king

-

Herod asks first for the location of this newborn King. The answer comes quickly and easily; Micah 5:2 says the messianic Ruler will come from Bethlehem. God kept that promise!

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Time of birth

-

Next Herod asks for the time at which the star had appeared. By this Herod could judge Christ's age. Herod asks in secret, because he does not want to reveal now or later his purpose to kill the Messiah.

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Purpose: "Worship" = Destroy

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Herod claims his purpose is to worship Christ, but behind this show of piety and excuse of busyness Herod hides his fear of and malice for Jesus Christ. He says "when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him.

" In these words he takes the easy option of parroting the magi's purpose, thinking he makes a mockery of them, but ultimately the Lord makes a parody of him.

"

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 bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.'

"

-

Herod's plan is ill-conceived and even irrational. If the child is God's Messiah, it will be impossible to kill him. If the child is not, there is no reason to do so. What is more, so far from leading the magi to Christ, Herod asks the magi to show Herod the way! Apparently Herod did not imagine how easily the Lord would thwart his evil plan. But by the Lord's humorous plan Herod entrusted his scheme to

wise men

who truly

did

want to worship Christ.

-

Do you see the great contrast between the Jews and Herod their king on the one hand, and the magi of the Gentiles and the true King of the Jews on the other?

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The Jews were God's people, but now Gentiles worship Him.

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Herod serves the Romans in Judea, but the magi from the east serve Christ.

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Herod was appointed by the Romans; Jesus was anointed by God.

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The magi ask, "Take me to your leader," but the Jews and Herod do not know or care about their true and rightful King! The Gentiles knew the time by the star, and the Jews knew the place by the scriptures. Yet the Jews would not walk the few miles to Bethlehem to see the newly-born King of the Jews!

Would you walk the 7 miles to Bethlehem to see the Savior promised you by the true and living God?!

Jesus said "

41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. 42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

"

-

How far will you go to worship Jesus Christ? Would you go to the ends of the earth? Christ commands you to worship Him, and invites you to His banquet table and an inheritance that never perishes, spoils or fades away. To glorify and enjoy Him forever. Will you do it?

-

Christ said of the Roman centurion, who was a Gentile just like you, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

" (

Matt. 8:10-12

)

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The Gift of the Magi vv. 9-12. The burden of this passage, then, is to challenge you to seek and find and worship and rejoice in Christ even more than these pagan magi did. From their joy, worship, gifts, and warning, we can learn much of the true worship of Christ.

1.

Text

1.

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.

2.

They followed God's lead and rejoiced in it

1.

First, they followed God's lead and rejoiced in it.

2.

"After listening" It's comical how Matthew describes the wise men as listening to Herod but not obeying him. I'm reminded of the scene in VeggieTales where the residents of Jericho say to the Israelites who are about to tear down their wall, "Nice to meet you, now go a-way." You

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hope the magi don't trust Herod.

3.

The star. But who do they trust? They trust God. "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."

1.

1.

1.

1.

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The star had led them to Judea. While in Jerusalem they depended on and exhausted all natural means of finding the baby Jesus, but now God provides again a supernatural means of bringing them to their destination, and because of God's miraculous provision, they rejoice! Herod and the Jews are a troubled bunch, but the star provided by God brings joy! It leads them directly to the house where "they saw the child with Mary his mother."

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They followed God's lead and rejoiced in it.

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Do you rejoice at God's lead? Our Shorter Catechism's answer 26 says "Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies." As our King Christ rules us through His word and Spirit, and in the church, through his officers. God's leadership is a great blessing to us.

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- 1.
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- 1.

They worshiped Christ. Second, they worshiped Christ.

- 1.

Though they may have given honor to Herod, the text does not say they worshiped him. Herod was a king, but only a mere man. Jesus was a king who was not only man, but was also God, and so they worshiped Him.

- 2.

Jesus Christ is worthy of worship, even by the greatest men of this world.

- 3.

Here foreigners teach the Jews how they ought to worship Christ. In **Isaiah 28:11-12**, God foretold that "

11 By people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the LORD will speak to this people, 12 to whom he has said, 'This is rest; give rest to the weary; and this is repose;' yet they would not hear.

" At Pentecost and throughout Acts God brought the Gentiles into the church, so that in 1 Cor. 14 Paul quotes this passage from Isaiah to teach that when a Jewish or Gentile unbeliever can't understand a Gentile tongue in the worship service, it is a sign warning him how far he is from understanding the gospel—how far outside the church he is—and which urgently directs him to join the worship of Christ.

- 4.

But you are not in darkness; you are sons of light, sons of the day. We who have had the Daystar of Christ arise in our hearts must study to worship Him.

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5.

"the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. " (**John 4:23**)

6.

Do you study how to worship Christ?

7.

Psalm 72:9-11

-

9 May desert tribes bow down before him and his enemies lick the dust! 10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! 11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!

-

They gave Christ gifts. Third, they gave Christ gifts.

1.

This fulfilled the prophecy of **Isaiah 60:3-6** that "nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising....the wealth of the nations shall come to you....They shall bring gold and frankincense...."

2.

The presents they brought were characteristic of the region of Arabia, Persia, Mesopotamia. They gave from the gifts God had given to them. What gifts has God given uniquely to you? Find a way to use them for Jesus Christ.

3.

These gifts were also costly gifts. David said "I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing. " (2 Sam.

24:24

) They gave their best. Do you give your best to God? This doesn't mean you should give beyond your means. Rather, it means something more. It means you give with the attitude that you offer everything to the Lord. First the magi offered themselves, then they offered their possessions to the Lord. This order matters to God, as you can see when it says God had regard for Abel, and then for his offering.

4.

They believed God's word. Lastly, they believed God's word.

1.

God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they returned to their own country by another way. Though they may have promised to return to Herod, it was under the proviso of "If the Lord permits." By His authoritative word in a dream, the Lord did not permit them to return to Herod.

2.

2 Pet. 1:19 says "We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. " God's written word in Scripture is inerrant and infallible, true in all it teaches and touches, a sure guarantee to which we must pay attention and hold fast in our hearts. And because Christ has shone in our hearts we must trust His promise to be with us to the end in this life and to raise us up in glory.

3.

Conclusion

1.

At the end of Revelation Jesus shows that the star the magi followed and even God's written word pale in brightness before the splendor of His majesty, for as he says, "I am...the bright morning star." (Rev

. 22:16

)

Do you follow His lead to Himself and rejoiced in Him

?

Do you worship Him

?

Do you give yourself wholly to Him

?

Do you believe His words

?

2.

These things are the true treasures at the end of the magi's quest. These things show the true value of gift of the magi—they show the true worth of Jesus Christ.

[1](#) Matthew Henry, 11.

[2](#) Matthew Henry, 10.