

Sermon Notes & References

Magi from the East
Matthew 2:1-16

December 20, 2015

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1. Three Groups Then

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^A Isaiah 49:7, 60:1-6; Psalms 68:29, 31, 72:10-11; 1 Timothy 1:4; Titus 1:4

^B Numbers 24:17

^C Micah 5:2; 2 Samuel 5:2

A. Christmas Time

1. Legends

a. in Christmas songs

- (A) Frostie the Snowman
- (B) Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer

b. in Stories and Movies

- (A) A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens
- (B) How the Grinch Stole Christmas
- (C) Miracle on 34th Street
- (D) It's a Wonderful Life

c. and Santa Claus!

- d. so to a lot of people these are more real than Christ – “They reflect the spirit of Christmas.” – no! they reflect the spirit of the world
- e. like the woman who was overheard to say to a friend as they stood in front of a manger scene in a store window: “Isn’t that just like the church, bringing Christ into a holiday?”

2. Magi

a. term was used of the astrologers and conjurers of Babylon, Media and Persia – as recorded in Daniel

- (A) from whose name we get the words “magic” and “magician”
- (B) some were genuine seekers after the truth, as were apparently those described in Matthew 2
- (C) but there were also others – some of whom are named in the book of Acts – that were deceivers and dealers in evil practices

b. we are not given much detail about these magi

- (A) but around them has grown up various legends
- (B) that there were three of them – probably assumed because three specific gifts are mentioned
- (C) that they were kings, dating from the 2nd- 3rd century
 - (1) probably as a perceived fulfilment of verses such as “[Nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising.](#)” (Isaiah 60:3; also see Psalms 68:29, 31; 72:10-11; Isaiah 49:7; 60:1-6)
 - (2) but the context of such passages reflects the time of when Christ returns as the triumphant King; and,
 - (3) the idea that they were kings disagrees with history, where Magi were advisors to kings, rather than

kings themselves

- (D) and in the sixth century, they were even given names: Melkon (later changed to Melchior), Balthasar and Gaspar
- c. so thus, around the historical truth, there grew up legends
 - (A) fables, against which Paul warns both Timothy and Titus: "Do not give heed to (Jewish) fables ..." 1 Timothy 1:4, Titus 1:14
 - (B) so, although historians such as Josephus and Eusebius, as well as some of the Jewish writings known as the apocrypha, may give us useful background information of Biblical times
 - (C) but to rely upon such secular writing in the place of the inspired words of the Scriptures is a dangerous thing to do
- d. on this Christmas Sunday, let us just look at a few of the events in this second chapter of Matthew and what they should mean to us

B. The Magi and Herod. 2:1-8

- 1. The Star and the Quest – "1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, 2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." (2:1-2 AV)
 - a. "Wise men" is literally, "Magi," as previously described: interpreters of signs in the heaven and of dreams
 - (A) most who did this were worshippers of false gods
 - (B) but Joseph in Egypt, and Daniel in Babylon were wise men who did it by God's Holy Spirit
 - (C) as in this chapter, God used dreams to reveal things to men
 - (D) God also chose here to use a heavenly sign to these men
 - (E) they might even have been Jewish proselytes, since there was a large Jewish community in Babylon
 - b. Jerusalem, where King David a thousand years before had set up his throne, was the natural place to come to find the "King of the Jews"
 - (A) Herod, an Idumean (i.e., Edomite) had become king of Palestine by political manoeuvring, including marrying Mariamne, a Jewess of high standing
 - (B) he and others were appointed as kings by the Roman emperor
 - (C) but this Child is born a king
 - (1) He is born King by God's promise
 - (2) He is born King by Divine right
 - (3) as a baby in a manger, He is already King

- c. the star has signalled the birth of this King
 - (A) the Magi's speech can be understood in two ways
 - (1) to them, something about this star, its appearance in the heavens, identified it with a King and with the Jewish nation
 - (2) "while in the East, we saw His star", a star which pointed these students of the heavens of a great event in Judea
 - (3) or, as the word for "east" also signifies "rising", it can mean, "we have seen His star rising" – that this star has signalled the event of the birth of this child
 - (4) either way it led them to seek this King of the Jews
 - (B) what was this star?
 - (1) all sorts of naturalistic explanations have been proposed
 - (2) a comet; a conjunction of planets; a supernova
 - (3) but none of them, either by their character or by the time at which they took place, is satisfactory
 - (4) as the story here reads, the star appeared, they saw it, it set them upon their way; only later, as they left Jerusalem for Bethlehem did it reappear to guide them to the house where the young child was, along with Mary and Joseph
 - (5) such striking behaviour by this "star" can only be attributed to the supernatural
 - (6) what it does not say, however, is "we have been following His star", an interpolation by some of our Christmas carols
 - (7) maybe this star was even that predicted by the mercenary, eastern prophet, Balaam: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, A sceptre shall rise from Israel, ..." (Numbers 24:17)

2. Herod Hears of Them – "When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." (2:3 AV)

- a. Herod was always troubled about any threat to his being king
 - (A) he has been diagnosed as having acute paranoia on such matters
 - (B) in a fit of jealousy he had executed Mariamne, his favourite wife, over 20 years before; and three years prior to this, her two sons Alexander and Aristobulus, as possible claimants of his throne
- b. so if Herod was troubled, no wonder the people of Jerusalem were too
 - (A) who knows what further cruelties he might inflict upon them
 - (B) moreover, a rival claimant to the throne could bring Rome into the conflict, upsetting the peace and

prosperity they enjoyed

c. so Herod calls upon the ...

3. The Religious Rulers – “4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. 5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, 6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule (literally, shepherd) my people Israel.” (2:4-6 AV)

a. Herod’s summons and question

- (A) the chief priests were principally of the Sadducean party, the scribes – lawyers, interpreters of the Law – of the Pharisaic
- (B) these two were strongly antagonistic to each other
- (C) some, citing the deviousness of Herod, suggest that he met each group separately, so that he would get the right answer; the biblical text says nothing to either affirm or deny this
- (D) the Magi were seeking the One born King of the Jews; Herod asks where Messiah (Christ) would be born – the titles are synonymous
- (E) Herod knew the truth, but chose to live his life apart from it

b. The rulers’ answer

- (A) comes from Micah 5:2, at least the first part; but the last part from the prophecy from the Lord to David in 2 Samuel 7:12: “You will shepherd My people Israel, and you will be a ruler over Israel.”
- (B) in both Jeremiah and Ezekiel the rulers of Judah are referred to as shepherds – they were to be caring ruler, not cruel rulers
- (C) this should have told Herod that this One born King of the Jews, was a king in a totally different realm than his own
- (D) the religious priests and scribes knew the truth, could quote the very Scriptures that applied, but none went to find the Christ-child

4. Herod’s Clandestine Meeting – “7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.” (2:7-8 AV)

a. what a lot is couched in that word ‘privily’ ... ‘secretly’

- (A) no scribe, no priest was present – for they well knew Herod and his ways, his fears, his paranoia, his cruelty

- (B) they by their vary looks could warn the magi of his duplicity
- (C) and with honeyed words he sends them to Bethlehem, intending that they should be his unwitting agents for the destruction of this One, born King of the Jews – to be king in place of Herod
- (D) 'that I may worship him' – what hypocritical deception
- (E) Satan is at work through this Herod to destroy the Saviour
- (F) the Magi leave to continue their quest, unaware of the great spiritual battle taking place behind the scene

C. The Magi and the Christ-Child 2:9-11

1. Led by the Star – “When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.” (2:9 AV)
 - a. that word, 'lo' – beholding or looking – along with the next verse is used to draw attention to the reappearance of the star guiding them to the very house where the young Jesus was
 - b. the language – *it came and stood over* – is descriptive of an action totally alien to the motion of a star, planet or moon – this was God’s direct intervention in His universe to witness to His Son

2. Their Rejoicing – “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” (2:10 AV)
 - a. there was rejoicing not simply in the reappearance of the start, but in that it had gone before them to Bethlehem, but now stood still and their quest was over
 - b. if it was Babylon from whence they came, then this was the end of about a four to five-month journey
 - c. if the star first made its appearance at the time of Jesus birth, then the young child, awaiting them inside that house, would still be in His first year, his age that of the time they had taken travelling
 - d. the star showed that they had come to the very house
 - e. it was indeed a time to rejoice

3. Their Worship – “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.” (2:11 AV)
 - a. Kneeling
 - (A) it was in the night that they made this six-mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem – a trip of a couple of hours
 - (B) they came to the house; did they knock? ... did Joseph get up and answer the door, find out their business, and let them in?

- (C) but there was Mary who was up with the young child
- (D) in common with honour paid to a king in that time, they would kneel with their face to the earth before
- (E) did they understand that this child was more than simply a king? ... that He was Divine? but to the extent that they did understand they paid their tribute to him
- (F) King Herod, the priests, the scribes were comfortably back in Jerusalem, but these Gentile seekers had found God's Son

b. their gifts

- (A) some see these gifts as simply those that would be common by way of presentation to some important person
- (B) others believe that the God who led them to come to see His Son, also led them in their selection of gifts
 - (1) Gold, was certainly a royal gift, given as tribute and as an admission of Christ's sovereignty
 - (2) Frankincense, used in worship and symbolic of prayer, would be a confession of the spiritual ascendancy of Christ
 - (3) Myrrh, used in the burial of the dead, may speak of Christ's Passion; the Man who was born to die for our sins
- (C) in any case these were rich gifts and would finance this family in the days to come

D. Their Danger and Escape 2:12-16

1. Wise Men Warned – "And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way." (2:12 AV)
 - a. no extraneous detail
 - b. God took care of them and they left in safety

2. Joseph's Family – "13 And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. 14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: 15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son." (2:13-15 AV)
 - a. before it happens, God knows Herod's heart and plans
 - b. and this family is dispatched 75 miles south to the safety of Egypt – another Roman province, and out from under of any of Herod's power
 - c. and, as an aside, another fulfilment of Scripture, which has too many nuances for us to even attempt to comment

upon it this morning

3. Herod's Hatred – "Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men." (2:16 AV)
 - a. Herod leaves nothing to chance – the Christ-Child was probably at most a half year in age; but he sets his window of cruelty at four times that to prevent the escape of this threat to the throne
 - b. but God is too quick and Herod is too late
 - c. within a matter of months, Herod himself is dead

E. Conclusion

1. Three Groups Then
 - a. the antagonistic – Herod
 - b. the indifferent – priests and scribes
 - c. the seekers after God
2. Three Groups Now
 - a. these same
 - b. pray that many this Christmas may turn from the first two group to become members of the last – those seeking God through His Christ

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ASV American Standard Version of 1901
AV Authorized (King James) Version of 1769
NAS New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation (usually the 1995 edition)

Some of the commentaries and resources used in the preparation of this message are identified as follow:

Barnes – *Notes on the New Testament, et alia*, by Rev Albert Barnes, Gall & Inglis, Edinburgh
BM – *Biblical Museum*, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870
EBC – *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, MI:
RWP – *Robertson’s Word Pictures of the New Testament*, by Dr. A. T. Robertson