

The One Born King of the Jews

Matthew 2:1–12

Turn to Matthew 2, please. This is the story of the wise men, a famous Christmas story.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, wise men 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.”

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 wise men 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.”

⁹After 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.

1 A Tale of Two Kings – 2:1–3

For most of Jesus’s life, whether or not he is king of the Jews does not seem to matter. In all the Gospels, it comes to the front at his trial. Is he the king of the Jews, or is he not. Does he or does he not believe that he is the king of the Jews. That only comes up at his trial.

Matthew’s birth story also brings the kingship of Jesus to the front. Luke’s story mentions it, but Matthew makes more of it.

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of **King** Herod, wise men 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.” When **King** Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*

We have two different kings of the Jews. Herod was king, but he was not born to be king of the Jews. Herod was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. He was king of the Jews because his father served the Romans faithfully, and to reward Herod's father, the Romans made Herod king of the Jews. The Jews did not like Rome, and they did not like Herod.

The genealogy in Matthew 1 showed that Joseph was in king David's line. When Jesus was born, Joseph named him, and by naming him Joseph adopted Jesus as his own son. That's how Jesus comes to be king of the Jews.

So these men from the east come into Jerusalem, and they are confident that the one born king of the Jews has to be around here somewhere, because they saw his star come up in the east.

These men brought three gifts to Jesus, but it does not say there were three wise men. It was probably a larger group, probably including an armed guard. They asked everyone about the one born king of the Jews. So you can imagine that this caused a stir in Jerusalem.

We can see why Herod did not like this. He's king of the Jews, though not born to be king of the Jews. He knows very well that the Jews hate him. News of a new king is not happy news. Herod wants his sons and grandsons to be kings after him, and in fact they were. So Herod is troubled.

It is not so clear why the rest of Jerusalem would be troubled. Many of them want the Messiah to come. We should read this as a taste of what is coming. Jerusalem never received Jesus. On the whole Galilee was friendlier to Jesus than Jerusalem. His disciples and his larger crowd of followers were Galileans. Jerusalem did not want Jesus.

Jerusalem was troubled about the birth of Jesus, and pagan Gentiles from the east traveled a great distance to worship this royal baby. Matthew is the one Gospel written to Jews, and already in this story he's telling his Jewish readers about Jews and Gentiles and the Christ.

Herod knows that the one born king could be the Messiah, so he finds out that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, which is 5 miles away. He secretly calls the wise men and says, "when you find him, tell me where he is, so I can worship him too." Why did he call them secretly? Why does he want to know exactly how old the child was? It sounds ominous.

The next line begins, "After they had heard the king." Matthew has a lovely little bit of tongue in cheek here. "After they had listened to the king," they went on their way. Did they agree to come back? No. They listened politely. These are wise men, not fools.

They are not convinced that Herod wants to worship this baby king. I'm surprised Herod thought he could fool anyone about that. Later on God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod, but that was not the first time they had doubts.

They gave Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh: kingly gifts. Wealthy people give gifts like that to kings. They gave baby Jesus the full royal treatment, because he was a great king.

By going back and forth between King Herod and the one born King of the Jews, Matthew tells us that Jesus of Nazareth was a legitimate heir of Herod's throne in Jerusalem. Jesus was born for *that* throne. Jerusalem would not have been out of line to put Jesus on that throne.

Thirty years later, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem to tell Jerusalem that very thing. He was their king. Jerusalem did not get it, and would not have put him on the throne if they had. But he did belong there. God had bigger plans for Jesus, but he was legitimately king in his lifetime.

2 The Wise Men and The Star

“Magi” is the Greek word for wise men. Magi were priestly astrologers, religious astrologers. Astronomy is the study of the stars, and astrology is getting guidance for life and about the future from the stars. God does not like astrology. These are religious astrologers, and they are the elite members of their society. They are the ones that know what's going on.

They come from the east, likely Babylon, which is now Iraq. Babylon was known for astrology. The genealogy in Matthew 1 mentions “the exile to Babylon” four times. The exile to Babylon was the low point of Israel's Old Testament story. God's people were defeated and slaughtered by Babylon, and the survivors marched to Babylon to be slaves there. Later, some exiles returned to Judea, but Matthew 1 never mentions that.

Now, high ranking pagans from Babylon come to worship the one born king of the Jews. That's twist, isn't it. There were still Jews in Babylon, and perhaps these wise men knew about the Jewish faith. But as we read their story in Matthew 2, their primary source of information is a particular star. They would have called a comet a star, so comet is possible.

How does this star tell them that the king of the Jews has been born? We have no idea. Why would eastern wise men even care about the king of the Jews? The Jews were one of many small nations, all of whom had royal lines. Why do they care about this king? We don't know.

But three things happened to them when they saw this star. 1, this star told them that the king of the Jews had been born. The baby was born when the star appeared. How do they know this is a king? Don't know. The specifically Jewish king? Don't know, but it tells them this.

2 This is a *great* king. The Jews were a small nation at this time, small and ruled by Rome. But in spite of that, these wise men know that this baby will be a remarkable king, a famous king, or they would not have come so far or given such kingly gifts. The star told them this.

3 They want to worship him! Unless you were a Jew longing for the Messiah, Herod's reaction is more normal. If a great king is born in another nation, that's bad news for you. But not these wise men. They want to worship him. When they get to the baby, they bow down and worship. This is God's Spirit moving in their hearts, this is God calling them to himself. *"I revealed myself to those not asking for me, I was found by those not seeking me."* Isaiah 65.

God used astrology to tell pagan scholars about his Son Jesus, and he moved with his Holy Spirit in their hearts so that they made a long difficult trip to come and worship baby Jesus and give him royal gifts.

God can communicate with any godless person at any time, and move them to worship him, without any help from God's people. That has never been the normal way people come to Christ, but there have always been some.

3 Great Joy – Verses 9–10

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.

The way Matthew tells the story, while they were in the east they saw the star when it rose, and then they did not see it again until they left Jerusalem to go to nearby Bethlehem. If the star had been leading them the whole way, they would not have needed to stop in Jerusalem and ask for directions.

Once they left Jerusalem, the star reappeared and went ahead of them to Bethlehem, and then it stopped over the place where the child was. The same star they saw in the east now stood over the very house. So, people, this is not a star or a comet doing its thing. This is something miraculous light from God. (Let's not talk afterward about what it might have been, please.)

When they saw the star over the place where the child was, they were overjoyed. That's how the NIV puts it. In Hebrew, if someone was joyful, you would say "they rejoiced." If you wanted to emphasize it, you would say "they rejoiced with joy." To make it even stronger, you would say, "they rejoiced with great joy." And here, Matthew takes it one step past that: "they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy." This is the strongest expression of joy in the New Testament.

Once their star settles over the very place, they know their long trip is a success. The one born king of the Jews is right there ahead of them, and they will get to worship them. Great overflowing joy.

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.

Then they opened their treasures. They brought their treasures with them – did you catch that? They opened their treasures and gave him gifts.

Matthew's story of Jesus's birth is generally not a happy story. In Luke's story there is a lot of joy, but not so much in Matthew. Repeating "the exile to Babylon" four times darkens the genealogy. At the end of Matthew 1, Joseph is on the brink of divorcing Mary.

In Matthew 2, all Jerusalem is troubled with they hear about the new born king. Later Herod tries to kill Jesus, and does kill other baby boys. Joseph packs up Mary and Jesus in the middle of the night and flees to Egypt until Herod dies. Then Joseph moves to Galilee because he does not trust Herod's son who rules in Jerusalem. Lots of difficulties.

In the middle of all that, we see the great joy of the wise men, because they will have a chance to bow before Jesus and worship him. They rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

I thought about this joy. What did the wise men have that we don't have that would cause joy? We have what they had. On the Lord's Day, we gather to worship this very same King. We know he is present here, and we worship him. We bring him ourselves, our treasures, our gifts. We eat the bread and drink from the cup, his body and his blood. The star could be over this very building on Sunday morning!

The wise men had the actual baby there, which we do not have. But in other ways we know this King much better than they did. What they had that we don't have is that for them it was fresh and new, and it is not to us.

I am *not* saying we should feel their kind of joy. But we *should* see what their joy means. To recognize how great our King Jesus really is, and to be able to come before him, and worship him, and bring him gifts: that is a wonderful thing.

To know that he's the great King Jesus, and to come into his presence, to worship him, and to bring him gifts. That cluster is a great blessing to us. That's what gave them joy. Let's understand what gave them great joy, and let's acknowledge that we have the same privilege. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for this story, thank you for calling Gentiles into your family. Thank you for what you showed these wise men about our Lord, and thank you for their great hunger and drive to see your Son and worship him. Thank you for giving us the same. Open our eyes to the light that is all around us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.