



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

WASHINGTON, DC

KING OF KINGS

Epiphany 2019
Matthew 2:1-12
Dan Claire

The story of the Wise Men is the sequel to Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, and it begins with two important details that weren't mentioned in chapter one: namely, the *place* and the *time*. Matthew writes: "*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.*" (2:1)

The place and the time of a story usually aren't all that exciting, but if it's a good story, these details are often essential for understanding what the story is all about. That's certainly the case in Matthew's story.

The *place* where Jesus was born, Matthew tells us, was Bethlehem—not Jerusalem. Isn't it odd that Matthew didn't mention this earlier, when he told the story of Jesus' birth? Matthew was saving this detail until now, until the story of the Wise Men. Most people would have expected the new king to be born in the royal palace in Jerusalem, ~5 miles to the north, and that's exactly where the Wise Men looked first. They arrived and asked, "*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.*" (2:2) But Jesus wasn't there. He was in the City of David, in Bethlehem and not in Jerusalem.

The other important detail in 2:1 was the *time*. Matthew sets the time as being during the days of Herod the king, when Israel's economy was booming. Herod the Great was the mastermind behind many of the architectural wonders pilgrims see when visiting the Holy Land today. Not until the late 20th Century has any leader in Israel come close to rivaling Herod's success as a developer. Herod built the breathtaking winter fortress atop Masada, overlooking the Dead Sea. In Caesarea he built a beautiful seaside palace and arena and hippodrome and seaport on the Mediterranean. Most importantly, Herod was responsible for the magnificent and glorious expansion of the temple in Jerusalem, making it very likely the greatest temple in the ancient world. So, in one sense, it was a time of great economic and cultural prosperity in Israel.

Yet it was also a time of tremendous suffering for most people living in Israel at the time. Herod was a brutal tyrant who would stop at nothing to accomplish his plans. During his reign, Herod murdered his wife, his brother-in-law, three of his sons, 300 military leaders, and untold numbers of his subjects and slaves. The people of Israel lived in constant fear of their king. So the *time* when Jesus was born, the time when the Wise Men came to visit, was a time of great fear and darkness under a wicked king.

With these two details, the place and the time, Matthew highlights not only what the story of the Wise Men is all about, but also his larger Gospel. It's really the Tale of **Two** Kings.

Not three kings, but two. Forget about "We Three Kings of Orient Are." Matthew doesn't tell us how many Wise Men came. Later poets have said there were three, but only because they brought gold, frankincense & myrrh—three gifts, three kings. There might have been three, but it's almost certain that many more people came in their entourage, considering the luxurious gifts that they brought, and the deference that King Herod showed them. We don't know how many Wise Men there were.

What's more, we don't know that they were kings. Matthew calls them "Magi," which means astrologers. Nowhere does he say that they were monarchs over foreign nations.

On the other hand, there is good reason why Christians historically have regarded the Magi as kings. The Old Testament often anticipates a day when a new Son of David would return to Jerusalem as the Messiah King. The Messiah would be different from previous kings over Israel, in that he would rule with goodness and justice, ushering in an everlasting kingdom of peace. And so rulers would come from the ends of the earth to pay tribute to Israel's Messiah King, and to willingly submit themselves and their kingdoms to him. For example, consider these Old Testament passages often read in churches on Epiphany.

*May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute;
may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!
May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him! (Psalm 72:10-11)*

*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.
They shall bring gold and frankincense.
Their kings shall minister to you.
Your gates shall be open continually, day and night they shall not be shut,
that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations,
with their kings led in procession. (Isaiah 60:3, 6, 10-11)*

In these readings, the kings who come from afar sound a lot like the Wise Men in Matthew 2, don't they? So it's little wonder that Christian readers of the Old Testament have made this connection and regarded the Wise Men as kings.

Nevertheless, Matthew calls them Magi, Wise Men, and *not* kings. So if the Wise Men of Matthew 2 weren't rulers of geopolitical kingdoms, were the Old Testament prophets mistaken? Or have Christians read something into Matthew's story that really isn't there?

I don't think so. There *is* a sense in which it is entirely appropriate for us to think of the Wise Men as kings. Because if we go back to the very beginning, to the earliest description of humanity, before the rebellion began, back to what CS Lewis might call a "deeper magic," we

find that men and women were made to be kings and queens under God. God intended for us to rule with goodness and justice as his image bearers, each one of us governing in some way, so that the earth might be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the seas.

Then there was a rebellion, of humanity against God. We fell into sin because we refused to acknowledge God as our sovereign. And the earth was filled with injustice and violence, hatred and death.

When God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, he commissioned them to be a light to the Gentiles, as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They were to model for the world how good life could be by returning to that deeper magic of God's original design, and ruling with goodness and justice as God's image bearers. Yet there was another rebellion, of Israel against God. And so the prophets looked forward to a day when Messiah would come and set things right. They promised that he would rule with goodness and justice as God's faithful image bearer. And all humanity, all the fallen kings and queens of the earth, both Jews and Gentiles, would come to pay him tribute and acknowledge him as Lord.

So in this way, in the sense of God's deep magic before the rebellion, these Magi *were* kings. And they were coming to do what we all were created to do, to return to God, acknowledging his sovereignty, and then to be kings under him, ruling as his image bearers.

We don't know how many of them came, and it doesn't matter anyways, because this is really the Tale of **Two** Kings rather than Three. Matthew brings this into focus by revealing the time—specifically the reign of Herod the Great—and by revealing the place as Bethlehem rather than Jerusalem.

The Magi came first to Jerusalem. But *“when Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.”* (2:3-4)

Of all people, the King of Israel should have been glad that this day had come. Israel was supposed to be a light to the Gentiles as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And now the Gentiles were coming to Jerusalem to pay tribute to the Lord, just as the Old Testament prophets had promised.

However, the Messiah's coming meant that Herod also would have to pay him tribute and acknowledge him as Lord, and this was something Herod had no intention of doing. King Jesus had been born, but King Herod was on the throne. Israel wasn't big enough for two kings. Herod had murdered many other challengers, including his own kin. So when it was revealed in vv 5-6 that *Bethlehem*—not Jerusalem—was where the prophets had said that the Messiah would be born, Herod summoned the Magi (v 7), and he told them a big, fat lie in v 8: He said, “Go

(to Bethlehem) and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him" (2:8).

Herod certainly wanted to find Jesus, but not to worship him. Herod was determined that his story would be the Tale of **One** King rather than Two. He didn't want to worship Jesus; he wanted to kill him. So (v 12), when the Wise Men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they went home another way, Herod exploded with rage (v 16), and he ordered that all the boys in Bethlehem two and under be killed. But Jesus' father Joseph had also been warned about Herod in a dream, and so the Holy Family had escaped before the massacre, and were safe and sound where Herod would never think to look for them—in Egypt of all places.

All Matthew has to do is mention **Egypt** to remind students of the Bible that his Tale of Two Kings is nothing new. The Tale of Two Kings has been going on ever since the rebellion began in the garden. This Tale has been told and retold with different characters throughout the Old Testament.

Yet of all the stories, the most famous was the Exodus. Like King Herod, Pharaoh was a wicked tyrant who refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Lord. Like Herod, Pharaoh had ordered the murder of Hebrew boys under his rule. But a young prince named Moses escaped the massacre, and through him eventually Pharaoh was defeated by the Lord.

In Matthew's Tale of Two Kings, Jesus and his family escaped to Egypt of all places, because Herod's opposition to God had completely turned the tables on the old way of thinking about Israel and Egypt. Israel, rather than Egypt, had become a place of bondage and death for the Hebrews. King Herod was the new Pharaoh, murdering the people under his care, and refusing to bow before the Lord.

What Matthew wants us to see here is the bitter fruit of opposing God. Students of the Bible will remember how the Tale of Two Kings in Exodus ended. Death came to the house of Pharaoh. The Israelites escaped from slavery with the plunder of Egypt, while the Egyptian army was thrown into the sea. Matthew wants us to understand that King Herod awaits a similar fate. And so do all other kings and queens who set themselves in opposition to the Lord.

Compare King Herod to these other kings who came from the east. When they finally arrived in Bethlehem and went inside the house to see Jesus (v11), "they fell down and worshiped him," as God had always intended, and as the Old Testament prophets repeatedly foretold. They did what Herod should have done. And they did what we should do, because we're *all* kings and queens. This story isn't primarily about the Wise Men. Ultimately, the Tale of Two Kings isn't even about King Herod's opposition to King Jesus. Ultimately, this story is for us, because we're all kings and queens, and Christmas confronts us with the most important decision of our lives. How shall we respond to the promised Messiah King? Will we respond like Herod, doing whatever it takes to keep Jesus from claiming what now rightfully belongs to him? Will we try

to put him to death rather than acknowledge him as Lord? Again and again and again, from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible shows how the Tale of Two Kings will end. The gates of hell will not prevail against King Jesus and his kingdom. Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

King Jesus would prefer that we respond as the Wise Men once did (v11), by worshiping him. But what does that mean? Did the Wise Men bring guitars and start singing, "Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down"? (Not that there's anything wrong with that.) When people hear the word "worship" today, they often envision something different from what the Bible means by worship. But what did Matthew envision when he described the Wise Men as worshiping Jesus? From the end of this story, we can see at least three things that Matthew had in mind.

First, worship is a pledge of allegiance. Note in v 11 that the wise men *fell down* and worshiped Jesus. Not because they were clumsy, or because the cave was dark, but because for them worship meant physically demonstrating their political allegiance.

We have been taught all our lives to keep politics and religion separate, but Biblical worship is always political, in that it's a public expression of deep personal loyalty, of allegiance and obedience to God as the true King. When the Wise Men fell down before Jesus and worshiped him, they were acknowledging him as their Lord and demonstrating their allegiance not only to him, but also to his tribe, namely, all those people who identify as Christians.

At the end of his poem on the Journey of the Magi, T.S. Eliot writes:

*We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
with an alien people clutching their gods.*

The Wise Men came back transformed, with new loyalties to Jesus and his people.

Secondly, worship is also a pledge of one's possessions. The Wise Men (v 11) opened their treasures and offered Jesus costly gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Most every worship service recorded in the Bible involved some kind of expense, and often a significant expense. This can be very difficult for churches like ours to wrap our minds around. After all, as Protestants we emphasize the free grace of Jesus Christ. And as Evangelical Protestants we go to great lengths to try to lower the barriers for outsiders to join our community. Nevertheless, God's word makes clear that it means to become a Christian is to surrender everything to King Jesus. As John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard Movement used to say, "I am just loose change in God's pocket. He can spend me as he pleases." So it makes sense that biblical worship is costly, and involves the pledge of our possessions.

Many of us who tithe regularly to the church have set it up to occur automatically and electronically. It's very helpful to the church, but one of the negative consequences of this practice for worshipers is that it separates that sense of "extravagant cost" from the experience of weekly worship. In prior generations, when people would come and bring a tithe or more of their earnings to the church, they felt it in ways that we don't experience today.

The Wise Men brought Jesus the very best that they had to give, because worship is a pledge of one's possessions. This ought to figure more prominently in our worship today.

Finally, worship involves the pledge of our rule. The Wise Men (v 12), having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, departed to their own country by another way. They disobeyed King Herod and began to use the power of their own rule, as God's image-bearers, in service to the Lord. In so doing, they began to fulfill God's original design for all humanity.

We all were made to be kings and queens. But we were made to be kings and queens **under God**. When we insist on ruling without him, we become like Pharaoh and Herod. Our rule is distorted and misshapen, sometimes weak, other times tyrannical, never fully good, never fully just. But when we give him our allegiance and control over our possessions, we're empowered to rule as he intended. It's what we were made for, and what our hearts are longing for, as kings and queens under the King of Kings.