

Looking Forward to Christmas

Session 5

December 29, 2024

Looking Forward in Worship

Session Passage: Matthew 2:1-11,16-18

Matthew 2:1-6

Connection to The Point. Wise men arrived in Jerusalem seeking to worship the king of the Jews.

After Jesus was born (v. 1). Matthew's Gospel was written by one of Jesus's twelve disciples. In chapter 1 he wrote of an angel's announcement to Joseph in a dream of Mary's miraculous conception (1:18-25). Now in this one phrase, Matthew succinctly wrote of the birth of Jesus. He did not relate any of the details from Luke's Gospel—Caesar Augustus's census, the manger, the shepherds, or the angels (Luke 2:1-20).

In the days of King Herod (v. 1). Matthew set the time of Jesus's birth during the rule of King Herod (also known as Herod the Great). The Romans had made Herod king of Judea in 37 BC. Herod was only part Jew and so was despised by many of his Jewish subjects. He did manage to accomplish a number of significant construction projects in the region, including a project to renovate and enlarge the Jerusalem temple. Nevertheless, Herod was better known for his ruthless and paranoid political tactics, even having members of his own family killed. Herod died in 4 BC.

Wise men from the east (v. 1). Matthew reported that a group of *wise men* came to Judea from the east. Known as Magi, they were important political and religious figures in their country, possibly Persia or Babylon. They were experts in the fields of astronomy, astrology, and dream interpretation. Despite popular traditions, the text gives no clue as to how many there were, never calls them kings, and never gives their names.

Jerusalem (v. 1). It was probably natural that the wise men would go to the capital city of *Jerusalem* to look for a newborn King of the Jews. They were well educated so they probably knew the rich history of Israel and the Jewish people.

King of the Jews (v. 2). The wise men's question, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" emphasizes that the King they were looking for was King by birth, not king by appointment as Herod had been appointed king by the Roman government in 37 BC. Jesus held the right to be king by being of the royal line of David (1:1-17).

For we saw his star at its rising (v. 2). Through their studies of the stars, the wise men had seen the King's star at its rising and had interpreted this as a sign of the birth of the new Jewish King. *Star (aster)* refers to a bright heavenly body other than the sun that is visible in the sky. It is one of the Greek terms from which "astronomy" and "astronaut" are derived. No other information is provided as to what exactly

the wise men saw, but it was profound enough to get their attention and motivate them to seek out this newborn King.

Worship him (v. 2). The term for *worship* (*proskuneo*) can mean to show deferential respect, to demonstrate an attitude of complete submission to one in authority, or it can describe the act of worship. In this case, the meaning remains ambiguous. What is evident is that these non-Jews sought out the Jewish Messiah to honor Him at His birth.

Deeply disturbed (v. 3). The Greek term (*tarasso*) literally means to cause movement by shaking or stirring something, such as water. Figuratively it means to greatly trouble or unsettle, to cause inner turmoil, or to be terrified. Herod was already paranoid, thinking others were out to get him and take his throne. So, when he heard the reports of the birth of a baby boy who was the “king of the Jews” he was greatly troubled. In his mind Herod likely viewed the wise men’s questions about this “king of the Jews” as something that could cause doubt among the Jews as to the legitimacy of Herod’s reign; some already questioned the legitimacy of his kingship.

The chief priests and scribes (v. 4). Herod called together the religious leaders of Jerusalem. The *chief priests* included the high priest, all former high priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the leaders over the twenty-four orders of priests; most of these officials were Sadducees. The *scribes* were the teachers of the law, skilled at interpreting and applying the Mosaic law. The majority of these teachers were Pharisees.

Where the Messiah would be born (v. 4). In his question, Herod associated the newborn King of the Jews with the Messiah. Apparently he thought this newborn King would eventually claim to be the Messiah and thereby threaten his political position. If Herod had been a devout Jew, he probably would have already known the answer to the question as to the location of the child’s birth.

Messiah is the transliteration of the Hebrew word *Mashiach* meaning “anointed one” that is also translated into Greek as *Christos*. Jewish expectations concerning the nature of the Messiah were divided. Some expected a priestly Messiah, while others expected a royal king, and others viewed the Messiah being a combination of both. By the time of Jesus, many looked for a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to its former glory under Kings David and Solomon.

In Bethlehem of Judea (v. 5). The religious leaders gave Herod the right answer. They all undoubtedly agreed. *Bethlehem* was the city of David and would be from where the final Davidic King would come. Bethlehem was a small village about five miles southwest of Jerusalem.

Written by the prophet (v. 5). *The prophet* referred to is Micah, who ministered primarily to the Southern Kingdom of Judah sometime between 750–686 BC. Micah warned the people of God’s impending judgment on them for their disobedience. However, he also foretold a future time when God would restore the people and give them a Ruler who would govern with great care and compassion and bring peace (Mic. 5:1-5). The actual quote the religious leaders gave to Herod is from Micah 5:2, with the addition from 2 Samuel 5:2 at the end of the quote.

Matthew 2:7-8,16-18

Connection to The Point. Herod feigned interest in worshipping Jesus, but it was so that he could kill Him.

Herod (v. 7). Herod was a complex man. On the one hand, he was capable of great political and military feats. But at the same time, he was possessed by a paranoia so great that in order to protect his political position he would have people who he saw as a threat executed, including some of his sons and one of his wives. Using a play on words, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus said of Herod, “I would rather be Herod’s pig [*hys*] than his son [*huios*].” So, Herod’s actions in this matter were in keeping with his character.

Secretly summoned (v. 7). That Herod secretly summoned and questioned the wise men suggests that he already had in mind a plan of action. The first step was to find out where and when this new King had been born. That Herod did so in secret may suggest he did not want to appear to be endorsing the wise men’s claim that the newborn child was the King of the Jews.

The exact time the star appeared (v. 7). Matthew does not supply the answer to Herod’s question. However, since Herod died in 4 BC Jesus’s birth had to have occurred before then. Herod’s order to kill all the boys in Bethlehem two years and younger (v. 16) suggests the wise men’s visit took place about one to two years after Jesus’s birth. Some estimate Jesus’s birth to have occurred around 6 BC.

Search carefully (v. 8). The term *search* (*exetazo*) means to examine using careful methods, to thoroughly inquire and question. *Carefully* (*akribos*) emphasizes accuracy, diligence, and precision in one’s actions. These words along with Herod’s command that the wise men “**report back to me**” emphasize the importance and urgency Herod felt in locating the child.

So that I too can go and worship him (v. 8). The term *worship* (*proskuneo*) is the same word spoken by the wise men in verse 2 when they inquired as to where the newborn King could be found so they could worship him. The insincerity of Herod’s words is suggested by the secrecy with which he had summoned the wise men to question them.

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Outwitted (v. 16). After finding the baby in Bethlehem, the wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they returned home by a different route (v. 12). When the wise men did not return to Herod, he realized he had been *outwitted* (*empaizo*). The Greek term refers to someone who has been ridiculed or made fun of in words and/or actions. Herod, the deceiver, felt he had been deceived (tricked or made a fool) by the wise men. They had outmaneuvered him by not returning to Jerusalem.

Flew into a rage (v. 16). The term for *rage* (*thumoo*) describes someone who is provoked to great anger, incensed.

Massacre all the boys in and around Bethlehem (v. 16). Herod gave orders that all *boys* in and around Bethlehem who were **two years old and under** were to be killed. There are no other historical sources that mention this event. However, given the small size of rural Bethlehem, the number of boys two years old and under probably would have been fewer than twenty and therefore not seen by the historians of the time as worthy of note. Herod's actions were perfectly in keeping with his character and penchant for executing those he saw as a threat to his throne.

The time he had learned from the wise men (v. 16). This seems to indicate that the Magi had told Herod the precise time when they had first seen the star and that it must have been no more than two years earlier. So Herod must have been confident that by massacring all the boys under the age of two he was sure to eliminate the one he targeted.

Spoken through Jeremiah (v. 17). Matthew applied a passage from Jeremiah as a prophecy of this event (Jer. 31:15). In its original context, the verse describes the cries of the mothers of Judah as their children were being taken away into exile. It is not uncommon for Old Testament prophecies to have dual fulfillments, where the passage refers to events in the prophet's own time but also foretell events that will occur at some future date.

Ramah (v. 18). *Ramah* was a city located five miles north of Jerusalem which was one of the first to be passed by the Jews as they were taken into exile. It is also the region in which Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was buried.

Rachel (v. 18). In the original context of Jeremiah 31:15, the mothers of Judah mourning for their children taken into exile were personified as *Rachel*, one of the wives of the patriarch Jacob. Rachel's son Joseph had been sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. Her other son Benjamin was threatened (from his father Jacob's perspective) with being taken to Egypt and thereby separated from his family forever.

Matthew 2:9-11

Connection to The Point. The wise men bowed and gave gifts as an act of worship.

After hearing the king (v. 9). Herod had summoned the wise men to his palace secretly to confer with them concerning the newborn King of the Jews (v. 7). He had ordered them to go to Bethlehem to search for the child King and then report back to him.

They went on their way (v. 9). The wise men left Herod to continue their search for the newborn King. All they knew at this point was that He was to be found in Bethlehem according to the Scriptures the chief priests and scribes had identified as foretelling the location of His birth (vv. 5,8).

The star (v. 9). Although the wise men had been told by Herod the location in which to search for the child, it was *the star* that had led them to Israel in the first place (v. 2) that remained their true guide.

Led them (v. 9). Previously, there had been no indication as to if the star had actually moved prior to this event. The initial rising of the star over Israel may have led the wise men to Israel and Jerusalem, where they sought more detailed information about exactly where the newborn King may have been found.¹ In any case, the star now led wise men directly to the place where the child was.

Overwhelmed with joy (v. 10). Seeing the star, the wise men were overwhelmed with joy. The presence of the star told the wise men that after their long journey they would be successful in their quest of find the newborn King. A more literal translation of the sentence would be “they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.”

Entering the house (v. 11). Having arrived at their destination, the wise men entered the house where Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus were staying. It is noteworthy that, at this point, Mary and Joseph had not returned to Nazareth with the baby Jesus, but were still temporarily living in Bethlehem, perhaps in the home of a relative. Matthew does not indicate why they had stayed. But from here they would flee to Egypt after Joseph was warned by an angel of the Lord in a dream of Herod’s intent to kill their child (v. 13).

The child (v. 11). The term for *child* (*paidion*) normally refers to a boy or girl of any age from an infant to before the onset of puberty. At this stage, Jesus was no longer an infant, but was anywhere from one to two years old. Obviously, the traditional rendition of the wise men visiting the baby Jesus in a manger is inaccurate. In each place the child Jesus is mentioned, He is identified with Mary his mother, although He is always mentioned first (vv. 13,14,20,21).

Falling to their knees, they worshiped him (v. 11). The wise men’s initial reaction to beholding the baby Jesus was to fall to their knees and worship Him. The term for *worship* (*proskuneo*) is the same word used by the wise men when they inquired of the location where the baby had been born so that they could “worship him” (v. 2). The term can mean to show deferential respect, to demonstrate an attitude of complete submission to one in authority, or it can describe the act of worship. In this instance, the term describes more than merely showing respect. But their intent and what they understood about who Jesus is was not indicated by Matthew. Most likely they did not have a complete understanding of who Jesus is—the incarnate Son of God and Savior; they were giving honor to the newborn King.

Treasures (v. 11). The offering of gifts when visiting royalty was a standard practice in the ancient world. Ambassadors brought valuable commodities from their homelands as gifts and/or as tribute when visiting the rulers of foreign countries. The fact that there were three gifts may have given rise to the tradition of “the three wise men.” All three gifts were valuable commodities that could have helped the family financially. They were also associated with royalty and religious sacrifices. The three gifts are never mentioned again in the New Testament; it is not stated what became of them.

Gold (v. 11). *Gold* was and is a universally precious metal. It was extremely valuable because of its rarity and beauty. It is easy to melt and cast into objects and jewelry. It is mentioned over four-hundred-and-

fifty times in the Bible, more than any other metal. The text does not say how much gold was given by the wise men or how it was fashioned.

Frankincense, and myrrh (v. 11). Both are resins from certain trees in the dry regions of southern Arabia and northern Africa. *Frankincense* is a white, resinous gum derived from various types of *Boswellia* trees. It could be burned as incense during religious and important social events. It was used as perfume, for medicinal purposes, for anointing kings and priests, and in temple sacrifices. *Myrrh* is a resinous gum from the spiny *Commiphora myrrah* bush. It is a fragrant substance that was used as perfume, in anointing oil, and in religious purification rituals. It was also used as a spice on dead bodies at burial.

1. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 65.