

# The Newborn King

Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus is born in the backwater town of Bethlehem to young, poor, unknown parents, but He is already a king. His kingdom immediately threatens the wicked rulers in this world. Today many Christians are unaware that Jesus is a king, in fact, *the* king of the nations. But the magi know better and lead us to fall down, adore, and follow Him.

## Men from the East

Matthew gives no details about Mary's pregnancy or the birth of Jesus other than the location of Bethlehem in Judea (v. 1). He is born in the days of Herod, and wise men (*magoi*) see His star in the east and come to worship Him as king (v. 2). So here we have two kings, one of them sought from afar while the politically powerful one nearby only hears about it (v. 3). Who are the magi? The word "magi" is the plural Latin word derived from Greek *magos* which is derived from Persian where the magi were Zoroastrian priests who studied the stars. They were ancient astrologers, or in the cases when we appreciate their work, astronomers. Zoroastrianism was thoroughly pagan and dualistic, believing the cosmos is suspended in a never-ending battle between good and evil which are ultimately equal. To faithful Jews, magi are first rate idolators. But God often deals with idolators. He called Abraham out of Ur of Chaldea (Gen. 11:31; 12:1). He sent Israel into Babylonian exile, and when Nebuchadnezzar promotes Daniel, he becomes "chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon" (Dan. 2:48). Daniel becomes the magus of magi, the wisest of the wisemen in Babylon who learn from him how to study the heavens and not worship them. Still, in the New Testament magi are pagan sorcerer-magician types. After Simon Magus, the magician from Samaria, believes and is baptized, he tries to pay the apostles for the ability to bless with the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:18-19). We call the purchase of church office *simony* after him. Elymas the sorcerer was Jewish false prophet and advisor to the proconsul Sergius Paulus on the island of Cyprus. He tries to prevent Sergius from believing the gospel preached by Paul and Barnabas, so Paul rebukes him and he goes blind for a time (Acts 13:6-12). First we had four disreputable women (and plenty of men) in the genealogy leading up to the messiah (1:1-17), then the scandal of Mary getting pregnant and Joseph marrying her anyway (1:18-25). And now we have stargazers coming from the east to find Jesus. Matthew is just getting started.

## Troubled in Jerusalem

Herod is troubled and he should be (v. 3). Rome appointed his Edomite father Anipater as procurator of Judea, and he made his son Herod the tetrarch of Galilee in 47 B.C. Seven years later Herod fled to Rome after the Parthians invaded and civil war erupted. Herod came back with an army endorsed by the Roman senate to squash invaders and rebels, to become king of Judea and rule with an iron fist. He succeeded in 37 B.C. and grew his territory to include all of Palestine, earning him the title "king of the Jews" until his death in 4 or 3 B.C. Herod was a swift, ruthless, and clever ruler. He squashed uprisings but also built things including an amphitheater and hippodrome outside Jerusalem. He constructed a magnificent, famously three-towered palace for himself but also improved the temple. Because he was not a Jew, he married one, Mariamne who influenced him to promote her brother Aristobulus to be a high priest. Aristobulus was charismatic, attractive, and loved by the people, and was thus perceived as a threat by Herod who had him drowned at a swimming party in the Jordan River. Herod would sniff a rival and then pounce, which is why he gathers all the chief priests and scribes to tell him where the Christ is to be born. They quote Micah

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5:2: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel” (v. 6). In Micah it says, “You are little among the thousands of Judah”, which Matthew turns on its head to say Bethlehem is *not* the least. The shepherd is coming to gather His sheep and He will feed His flock in the strength of the Lord (Mic. 5:3-4). The magi come to see the king and soon Jesus will be drawing all kinds of people to Himself. He is a different kind of king than Herod. While it’s true that His kingdom does not come from this world, it’s still a kingdom that threatens unjust and evil civil authorities. It’s Herod’s son Antipas who imprisons John the Baptizer, and ultimately has him executed, because John told him it’s not lawful to take his brother’s wife (Matt. 14:1-12). The priests and theologians in Jerusalem are cowed by Herod and therefore unwilling to care for God’s people. They’re aiding the man who tries to murder the Christ. No doubt some of them loved Yahweh and this is not what they set out to do, but there they are troubled in Jerusalem. We see the same thing happening in different ways today. Think of all the evangelical ministers gathered around President Trump cheerleading, utterly unwilling to tell him to repent of his adulteries. Note the scribes in Christian colleges and big evangelical ministries who won’t stand up for biblical sexual morality because they’ve been bought by federal money and speaking circuits. In Israel when Jesus is born there is corruption from top to bottom, but that is no problem for the Lord because from the village of nowhere the shepherd-king will rise and He will lay His life down for His people (cf. 2 Sam. 5:1-3).

## Worship the King

Herod calls the wisemen secretly and finds out when the star appeared (v. 7). He wants to know how old that child is, indicating Jesus has not just been born but is under two years old (cf. 2:16). If Herod sends soldiers with the wisemen, his plot will be obvious, so he tells them to search carefully and bring back word so he may come worship (v. 8). The star leads the magi five and a half miles to the house where Jesus is, and they rejoice with exceedingly great joy (vv. 9-10). They may have seen a constellation from the east and then the glory cloud came down to lead them to the house, we don’t know exactly. We also don’t know how many magi there were, but church tradition has posited three because of the three gifts. They see the young child, fall down, worship Him, and present gifts for a king: gold, frankincense and myrrh (v. 11). These magi come to honor Him the way Isaiah prophesied the Gentiles would bring their riches to Jerusalem: “The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising... All those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord” (Is. 60:3, 6). When Solomon was crowned, the Queen of Sheba came see, hear his wisdom, and bless him (1 Kgs. 10:1-13). Jesus is just an infant, but they see what the Lord has done. God sends a dream warning them to avoid Herod, so they go out another way (v. 12). Having come on a long journey and given costly gifts, they are now marked men. This story is filled with mystery, wonder, danger, fear, glory, wisdom and riches. Jesus is still doing this. He draws idolatrous people, star worshippers, cultural Marxists, backslidden Christians, materialistic atheists, and others you think would not come, to Himself. Others try to stop it from happening. His kingdom is not from this world, but it is in this world. We either come to adore and honor Him or not. Only if we come will we be so overwhelmed at His glory, majesty, beauty, wisdom—His redeeming love making all of it possible—that we fall down and worship. Coming to Jesus was and is expensive and dangerous, but what we find, like the magi did, is priceless and eternal.