

The Homage of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 29, 2013

It's with great joy that once again I have the privilege of ministering the word of God to you and I would like for you to take your Bibles this morning and turn to Matthew's gospel, chapter 2. This is the Sunday after Christmas when we celebrated the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and I was compelled, I believe by the Spirit of God, to share with you an historical narrative from Scripture that speaks of something else that happened some time after the Lord was born and we find that in Matthew 2, beginning in verse 1-12. Follow along as I read the text.

“1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 ‘Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.’ 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They said to him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: 6 “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”’ 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi and ascertained from them the exact time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.’ 9 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.”

I never tire of contemplating the redemptive plan and purposes of our glorious God and while the Incarnation of Christ is veiled in mystery in the Old Testament, that veil is removed completely in the New Testament. Suddenly, what was concealed in types and ritual, symbols and prophecy, becomes clear, gloriously clear but what most people believe has much more to do with tradition than with God glorifying truth with respect to the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior. This is certainly true pertaining to Jesus' mysterious visitors, the magi. Who are these men? Where did they come from? How did they know where to go when they saw the star? What was this star that appeared and then disappeared and then appeared again? Why could only the magi see the star and not Herod, not the chief priests, not the scribes, not other people surrounding Jerusalem and other places? Why did the magi rejoice exceedingly when the star reappeared and then stood over the place where the child was? How could a star do all of this?

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Then, perhaps the two most important questions that emerge from this text: what does all of this reveal about Jesus? More importantly even yet, is what does this say to you? How should this narrative impact your life? Unless we answer, especially these last two questions correctly, then we will miss the whole point of what God is so clearly revealing here in this passage.

Bear with me for a bit of a history lesson. We must have much context here in order to understand the text. As we look at this, there are several key characters in this narrative: you have Herod, you have the chief priests and scribes and then you have the magi. Let's learn about them a little bit. First of all: Herod, sometimes known as Herod the Great, was the king that the Romans had appointed over the Jews but he was an Edomite, he was not a Jew and the Jews, therefore, despised him and he knew it. Herod was a gifted orator; he was politically ambitious; he was a narcissist through-and-through, totally in love with himself. He was also a very evil genius. In fact, Josephus, one of the historians of that day, said this of Herod, "Herod was capable, crafty and cruel."

But we also know that Rome admired him and, therefore, they put him in place to keep the Jews from uprising. Herod was a brilliant architect, a brilliant builder. Perhaps one of his most famous projects was the expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. But he was also a notorious womanizer. He was completely ruled by his lust. In fact, he had ten wives and his most famous wife was Mariamne I who was a Jewess and, of course, he needed a Jewish wife to legitimize his right to reign over the Jews. But like all tyrants, he was insanely jealous and cruel. He was paranoid of anything that might threaten his throne and so he distrusted everybody especially the Jews that he knew found him to be utterly despicable.

History records numerous accounts of murders and assassinations and ultimately he killed his wife, Mariamne, and her mother, Alexandra, and Mariamne's two sons. In fact, five days before his death which was approximately 4 AD, he had another son killed. Emperor Augustus said, "It's safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." And because he knew no one would mourn his death, he commanded that all the noble families of Jerusalem be gathered up and killed as soon as he died. Now, although his wish was never carried out, it demonstrates the diabolical wickedness of this fiendish megalomaniac. I find it fascinating that in the providence of God, this is the person that God wanted to rule when his Son would come to this earth, an insanely jealous, demonically controlled butcher willing to massacre all the little boys 2 and under to preserve his power.

Like all wicked rulers, Herod had his religious leaders as allies to help him control the masses and these were the chief priests and the scribes. The chief priests were from the priestly line of Aaron. Most of them were Sadducees which were the liberal Jews that grossly distorted the law and the Scriptures to support their own agendas but they had considerable political and religious power in that day. There was, of course, the high priest that was a part of them. Typically, that was an office that was given by the king as

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an act of political appointment. Sometimes the high priest even purchased that position and if the ruler didn't like him, he would be removed and so forth. The high priest presided over the Sanhedrin which would have been 72 Jewish leaders much like our Senate and Supreme Court combined. Then you have other categories of priests that performed different functions: you have the Pharisees that worked with them. Together these formed really the priestly aristocracy of Israel and these were loosely labeled the chief priests. Bottom line: what you have is a bunch of corrupt politicians who disguised themselves as great and noble men of God much like the Islamic mullahs of our day.

Then, of course, you have the scribes. Scribes consisted of both Sadducees as well as Pharisees. They were the scholars; they were the lawyers; they were the ones that knew the Old Testament law. And they were highly skilled at twisting the law for their own political gain. So, these were Herod's henchmen, if you will.

Then, we also have the magi and as we look at this, we must ask the question: where these really the three kings we sing about? Oriental kings riding camels? Were there just three of them in number as the popular Christmas carol suggests? Well, I would submit to you that that is just myth. One Bible scholar by the name of Vincent says, "Many absurd traditions and guesses respecting these visitors to our Lord's cradle have found their way into popular beliefs and Christian art. They were said to be kings and three in number. They were said to be representatives of the three families of Shem, Ham and Japheth and, therefore, one of them is pictured as an Ethiopian. Their names are given as Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior and their three skulls, amazingly enough, are said to have been found. They were found in the 12th century by Bishop Reinhold of Cologne and today they are on exhibit in a priceless casket in a great cathedral in Europe." I'm not sure which is more astonishing, the fact that Bishop Reinhold could recognize the identity of these three skulls after 1,200 years or people that believe him. You know, this betrays just a frightening gullibility that remains endemic in the world today.

Frankly, we know very little about the specifics of these men that came, these wise men here in Matthew's account, but as we look at Scripture, we can begin to piece together some information that may help us understand at least in general, who these men were and why they came. In order to do this, we would need to take time which we won't do today but I'll give you a little overview of some of the things that are recorded in the book of Daniel and Daniel's prophecy because there we have some light that is shed on the identity of the magi, as well as looking at other extra-biblical, historical records like Herodotus that gives us some information.

As we look at this, notice in verse 2 it says that they were wise men or magi and magi is an untranslatable word that is merely a name for a certain tribe of people. It's best translated magi who were a priestly line of people from among the ancient Medes. Now, these men were very skilled in astronomy, the science, as well as astrology, the superstition, that Satan uses to deceive the gullible. These two crafts were blended together back then as they are today. In fact, you can probably open up most papers, certainly on the internet, and you can look up the 12 signs of the zodiac and you can find

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your horoscope. A practice, by the way, which is condemned by God because it presumes to define one's personality make-up and offer great insight into the future. This is the sin of divination that we read about in the Old Testament. They are described as diviners and soothsayers or fortune tellers. In Deuteronomy 18, we read that they are detestable in the eyes of God.

As a footnote, it's interesting that sadly we legitimize these very same kinds of people in many apostate Christian churches. They are called prophets or apostles. These are false teachers who claim to receive revelation directly from God and to speak the word of God on their own, apart from Scripture. And yet, as you look at their alleged prophecies, you find very quickly that they are erroneous and contradictory to God's written revelation in his word.

So the magi were skilled in the practice of divination and sorcery and the word "magi" was corrupted down through history to become the word "magic." A magician is really a synonym for sorcerer. So we can conclude that these men were from the priestly line or the descendants from a tribe of people associated with the ancient Medes. Of course, they were a very nomadic people whose origins can be traced all the way back to Abraham in the Ur of the Chaldees where they lived. We can read about that in Genesis 12.

Now, according to Herodotus, who was an ancient historian, the magi were a hereditary priesthood tribe like you would have the Levites in Israel, one of the 12 tribes that were set apart to be the priests of Israel, to do those duties. So, the Medes set apart the magi to do the same. We also find that the magi had great political power over four empires: over the Babylonian empire. By the way, that is present-day Iraq. Then over the Medo-Persian empire which was the conglomerate empire that overtook Babylon which is current-day Iran and that would be the historical context of these men that we're reading about here. Later on, the Grecian empire, you have Alexander the Great that conquered Medo-Persia and then the Romans that are now in power during this time here in Matthew 2. The Romans were terrified of these men. The magi rose to power through their demonic, their occultic astrological abilities, their sorcery, their divination, their astronomy. And they became the advisers of the royalty of the East and thus they were called the wise men.

Now, it's fascinating in the Old Testament, for example in Jeremiah 39:3 and also verse 13, we read about Nergalsharezer, the Rabmag, which means the chief magi and he was in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. So there were these official advisers to the kings in those days. You read about them as well in Esther 1:13. We know that Satan empowered them to advise Nebuchadnezzar in his violent quest to conquer Israel. And you will recall that there was a young, 15 year old, Jewish boy that had dealings with the magi and his name was Daniel. Remember Babylon came in and conquered Israel in 605 BC, they kidnapped many of the Jewish people and they certainly kidnapped Daniel from a royal family in Judah along with three other friends and deported them to Babylon to be brainwashed into the Babylonian culture and required them to assist all of the new Jewish prisoners that were coming in the exile.

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If we go to Daniel 2, we find that Daniel rises to a position of a great statesman there with Nebuchadnezzar in his court and the magi there in Daniel 2:10 are called the Chaldeans which is very likely another name for the magi. They were also called, in verse 27, magicians or magi. You will recall that Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, these wise men were unable to interpret the dream so he wanted them to be killed because he was so furious and then Daniel pleads with the king in Daniel 2:24 and says, “Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon, I will declare the interpretation to the king.” So, we see how Daniel then interprets the dream and then Nebuchadnezzar makes him master over the magi. In chapter 5:11, we read, “The king appointed him chief of the magicians,” or chief of the magi, donjurers, Chaldeans and diviners.”

So, we see that now at this stage in history, these men literally owed Daniel their lives. Being their new leader and life-saver, I’m sure that Daniel had their undivided attention as he taught them about Jehovah God, as he taught them about the Messiah that would come, as he talked to them about the Old Testament prophecies. And I’m sure, many other godly saints among the diaspora also would tell these people about these great truths.

Now, what’s also fascinating is that the magi were so powerful in that day when Jesus was born that no Persian king would ever be allowed to come to power apart from two conditions being met. Two conditions: 1. they had to master the scientific and religious practice and disciplines of the magi which included astronomy, math, agriculture, architecture, natural history and astrology. Then, secondly, they had to be approved of and crowned by the magi. In fact, the wisdom of the magi was called “the law of the Medes and the Persians” as we read in Esther 1:19 and Daniel 6:15. So all the judicial, all of the kingly offices were controlled by the magi.

Think about this: 600 years before Jesus was born, our sovereign God who ordains the end from the beginning, used Daniel to prepare these ancient Gentile king-makers for the arrival of the King of kings, the Messiah. In the context of Matthew 2, we see the plot begin to thicken. Rome was scared of the eastern empire during this period of history because across that vast Arabian desert loomed this great Parthian empire, the land of the Medes and the Persians, the land of ancient Babylon. They were worried about them. They were historically their violent enemies. They fought in 63 BC, 55 BC and 40 BC and guess where they always fought? Right there in the Mediterranean in the land of Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel. Israel was, therefore, kind of a no-man’s land between these vast empires, the Parthian empire and the Roman empire. Again, bear in mind that the Romans especially despised and feared these sorcerers, these astrologers. In fact, Philo of Rome, who was a Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, said of them, “They are vipers, they are scorpions and they are venomous creatures.”

Now, at the time of Christ’s birth, there was a ruling body in the eastern Parthian/Persian empire called the Magistony. They were totally composed of the magi and they had one primary duty and that was to make kings. In 2 BC, their king whose name was Phraates IV, was poisoned by an Italian concubine who had borne him a son and wanted him to

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basically replace him as king and so they were now looking for a new king for the eastern empire and they ultimately wanted to conquer Rome.

Let's put this all into perspective as we marvel at how God providentially orchestrates history in order to accomplish his glorious purposes. We have an insanely jealous puppet-king that the people despise and then suddenly he discovers these Persian king-makers entering into Jerusalem. Now, I would submit to you and we don't know how many came but I would submit to you that it would have been far more than three as we piece together lots of other information in history. Normally, they would travel with an entourage of soldiers and most of the time, they would ride white Persian steeds, not the camels like you see on the Christmas cards. And many times they would be accompanied with as many as 1,000 mounted cavalry. So, with a cavalry that size, you can imagine what it would be like for them to come riding into Jerusalem. Now, we don't know if there were 1,000 soldiers, we don't know exactly what they were riding but it's fair to assume that they were escorted. I did the math and knowing what it's like to go great distances on horseback, I would estimate that from where they started to where they ended up, it would have taken at least two months, probably closer to three and in order to travel in those days, you would have to have a large caravan to carry all of your supplies, to carry your tents and so forth and that would require lots of servants.

The point is, there's a large group of king-makers coming in to Jerusalem. Imagine, we know they wore these kind of pointed sorcery hats and they wore flowing robes and you have this large caravan, you have this mounted Persian cavalry and then these king-makers come in saying, "Where is he who is born king of the Jews for we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him?"

As I look at the Scripture, I find myself seeing a bit of humor that perhaps the Lord is adding here because we know that the kings of that day were very superstitious and when Herod would have heard the word "star" or "aster" in the original language, he knew that it was a blazing forth of light. It wasn't necessarily just a star but he would have probably thought like many of them would have in that day, that it was a falling star or a comet which would have always been a bad omen that would predict that it's time for a king to be deposed. So kings lived in constant fear. Then you add to that, king-makers from Persia saying, "Where is this king of the Jews?" After a while, you have to just laugh. You can just see that this guy all of a sudden was terrified. Verse 3 we read, "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled." The word means to literally quake or shake with fear; to stir up; to throw a person into confusion. But not only him, it says "and all Jerusalem with him." What's even more humorous in my mind is that we know historically that most all of Herod's troops were away during that time on a mission so they were very vulnerable.

So what do wicked men do when they're threatened? What do wicked men do? Well, they scheme against God and consult with the emissaries of Satan and in this case, it would have been the chief priests and scribes. So we see in verse 4, "Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the

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Christ was to be born. They said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet.'" There they are quoting the prophet Micah 5:2. It's interesting in verse 4, it says "began to inquire." Grammatically, it means that they were constantly asking so they were on a search and destroy mission here. We've got to find this child before the whole thing gets out of hand.

With that background, I give you a very brief outline as we look at it for a few minutes here a little bit more closely. We're going to look at the light for the king-makers and darkness for the king-haters and ultimately answer the question: what does this say about the Messiah and how should this impact you?

Let's look at light for the king-makers in verse 1. "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold." Folks, you want to underline that word, it means "wow, look at this. This is amazing." "Behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem. Where is He who is born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." Again, think about it, 600 years before Jesus was born, the sovereign grace of God reaches into the hearts of the magi in Nebuchadnezzar's court through Daniel. We can't prove this completely but I think it's fair, I think it's a tenable hypothesis that that could have happened. He offers them, therefore, a hope of forgiveness. The hope of forgiveness, the hope of grace and mercy from a Messiah that would one day come, Immanuel. So the glorious presence of God would one day come into the world, a light would shine out of Judah. In fact, this was the prophecy that Daniel would have understood in Numbers 24:17. There we read, "A star shall come forth from Judah and a scepter shall rise from Israel." I'm sure Daniel would have explained to them that a star, a *cohab* in the Hebrew is going to come. This blazing forth, a blazing forth of light. Of course, this speaks of the Messiah. We know it to be the Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world. The Lord Jesus who said of himself, "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright and morning star," Revelation 22:16.

Daniel would have also taught them about Genesis 49:10, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet until Shiloh comes and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." Shiloh was a cryptogram or a secret code for the Messiah, the very one who will one day be called the Lion from the tribe of Judah in Revelation 5:5. Undoubtedly, Daniel would have taught them about these great truths and now in the miracle of divine providence 600 years later, these magi, these king-makers who perhaps in many ways had forgotten about this ancient prophet Daniel that had delivered their ancestors from death in Nebuchadnezzar's court, they now see this blazing light. They see something supernatural and somehow they know what it is and what to do.

Now, first of all, what was this star? Everybody knows it was a star. I mean, haven't you seen television? Haven't you seen Christmas cards? Haven't you seen Christmas trees that have the star up there? Folks, have you ever tried following a star? I challenge you to do so. I was thinking about this: do you realize that the nearest star to the earth is the sun

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and it is 93 million miles away. The outside portion of the sun is 7 million degrees Fahrenheit. So I hardly think that this was a star as we would think of a star.

And it's also intriguing, Herod and others in Jerusalem had not seen this "star" in the east. In fact, in verse 7, they had to ask the magi where it appeared. It says, "Then Herod secretly called the magi and ascertained from them the exact time the star appeared," phaino in the original language. It means "to flash" or "to shine forth like lightning." "Where did you see this flashing forth of light? What time did that happen?" You see, even now, he's beginning to understand that this wasn't just a falling star here. There is something else going on.

And I find it curious: why would the magi go west to Jerusalem when they saw this brilliant light shining in the east? Somehow they had to have known the meaning of this light and I believe they remembered the prophet Daniel. They knew something of these Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, the King of the Jews that would come. It's also fascinating: later in verse 9, this blazing forth of supernatural light that they see in the east suddenly reappears. So it disappears and then reappears and then leads them directly over the house where the Messiah was. So I hardly think that this was a star as we would think of a star. As a footnote: Jesus was now between 3 months and 2 years old. Verse 16 we read again how Herod ascertained from the magi the child's age and we know that ultimately he was going to kill and he did kill all the males 2 years and under.

By the way, I hope you see that this is a very different scenario often depicted in nativity scenes where you have three wise men on some camels or some of them may be off on the ground and you have the infant in a manger, you've got Joseph and Mary, you've got Santa over here and you've got Frosty waving at people wearing UT orange. I mean, this is a totally different deal than what we often see.

Dear friend, don't miss this: what the magi saw was not some massive luminous sphere of plasma held together by gravity that shines by thermonuclear fusion of hydrogen. It was an aster in the original language, a brilliant, dazzling, blazing forth of light. It could be translated "a shining forth." But isn't it interesting that in the text, it's not just any shining forth, it says it was "his star." The Greek grammar indicates that it's possessive here, it belongs to him. It's his shining forth. While we can't be dogmatic, I believe that this was the Shekinah glory of the Living God, a foretaste of the sign of the Son of man that will appear in the sky as Jesus describes in Matthew 24, that day when all of the lights of the heavens will be turned out and every eye will see him coming all around the globe in all of his glory. A glorious light of the Divine Presence, that signal to sinful men that God had arrived. This was the same blazing forth of light that was prophesied in Numbers 24:17 that I read earlier. Again, "a star," a coshab, a blazing forth, "shall come forth from Jacob and a scepter shall rise from Israel." In other words, a ruling king will rise from Israel. This is a reference to the Messiah.

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Now, you will recall as we look at Scripture that God is immaterial and many times when God would materialize himself and allow man to gaze upon his glory, he would do so in glorious light. You might say that he would reduce his attributes to ineffable visible light which the Jews called the Shekinah or the Presence. Again, this is a manifestation of radiant, dazzling, resplendent, ineffable light that we cannot even imagine and this could very well be the aster that they saw.

Beloved, I believe that this was the effulgence of the glory of the Living God. As we look at Scripture, we know that that is described in many places throughout the word of God. Remember that it blazed forth in the burning bush with Moses and then later again, at Mount Sinai when Moses asked to see the glory of God. As we go through the historical record, we see that it was the Shekinah that led the children of Israel in the wilderness, a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. We see that it hovered between the cherubim over the mercy seat atop the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, in the tabernacle and in the temple. Later on, we see that it finally appears in dark Israel to the shepherds for they saw the glory of God that shone around them and the angelic messengers announced the birth of the Lord Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the same light that blinded Saul on the road to Damascus when he became the Apostle Paul later. We saw it in the Mount of Transfiguration with the Lord Jesus Christ when he allowed the effulgence of his glory to burst forth from within him, that glorious presence that caused Peter and James and John to shake with fear when they saw his clothing become white and gleaming and his face shining like the sun. And it will be, dear friends, the sign of the Son of man when he returns some day in power and great glory. It will even be the lamp of the Lamb that will illumine the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21.

So here he came the first time. We see him coming, the Lord Jesus, and only a select few are able to see him but we know that when he returns, the effulgence of his glory and his presence will streak across the darkened heavens for every man to see. So think about it: the grace of God now draws these Persian king-makers to the Messiah. Perhaps when they saw the light they said, "Oh my goodness. Remember that prophet, Daniel? He was right." And they get out the books. "Oh yes, here's what we've got to do." Of course, this would have been utterly reprehensible to the Jews to think that God would extend his mercy to the Gentiles. Even worse, these pagan sorcerers, these elite rulers from Persia.

For these magi to come to Christ is yet another fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 65:1. There we read, "I permitted myself to be sought by those who did not ask for me. I permitted myself to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, Here am I to a nation which did not call on my name." But of Israel, he goes on to say, "I have spread out my hands all the day long to a rebellious people who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts, a people who continually provoke me to my face." A passage, by the way, that Paul quotes in Romans 10, verses 20 and 21, to describe the rebellion of his fellow Jews. So we see these types of judgments all through Scripture and I believe that even for these magi to come was a part of that fulfillment.

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So here we witness the power of sovereign grace that can pierce any heart and bring any person to the light of truth. So, again, think about it: verse 2, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship him.” Then when Herod the king heard it, “he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.” He’s probably saying, “What is going on here? We’ve got Persian king-makers that have come here to worship a newborn King of the Jews and they’ve been led here by some supernatural light.”

So we’ve seen light for the king-makers, let us focus in closing upon darkness for the king-haters. Obviously, Herod knew of the promised Messiah. He knew that he would one day come and he rightly feared that perhaps that day had come and indeed it had and it happened in a way that he could have never imagined. Notice in verse 4, “Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet.’” Verse 6, “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” It is absolutely amazing when you think about it. You notice that phrase there “a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Those were the very words that God spoke to David in 2 Samuel 5:2 when God originally enthroned him over all of the tribes of Israel at Hebron.

So Herod and the religious elite of Israel knew what was going on. They knew what was happening but think about it: they absolutely refused to humble themselves in obedient worship. Instead, in verse 7, we read, “Then Herod secretly called the magi and ascertained from them the exact time the star appeared.” Why did he do this secretly? What’s going on here? Well, it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? He didn’t want anyone to know what he suspected to be true. The people of Jerusalem were already nervous and, boy, if they thought the Messiah had come and they hated him, well, that would spell political disaster for him. Nor did he want anyone to know the nefarious nature of his diabolical scheme to destroy his divine rival. He needed to know the exact date of when they first saw the light so that he could come up with an approximate idea of the age of the Christ child so that he could plot to kill him. What a picture of man’s high treason against the Most High God.

So Herod responds in fear and anger in verse 8, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” Obviously, this was disingenuous. He just wanted to know where he was so that he could kill him. Folks, may I remind you of something that we see all through Scripture: Satan is God’s ape. Satan is the one that God allows to rule this world ultimately for God’s glory. And then what we see is that here in this section, Herod is Satan’s ape. He doesn’t know it but he is and as Satan’s ape, Herod has a plan here, a plan from the very start, to circumvent the purposes of God. When you think about it, like all godless rulers and we have them all around the world today, all godless men that reject the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, Herod’s schemes are going to prove futile.

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The Homage of the Magi

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Preached on: Sunday, December 29, 2013

So here we have also a picture of most of the Jewish people who would join him in the refusal to worship their Messiah. Remember Luke 19, they say, “We do not want this man to reign over us.” What a contrast to the magi. Notice what happens some time later, verse 9, “After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east.” Let me pause there for a second. It says “which they had seen in the east,” not “which they had followed from the east,” but “they had seen from the east.” My friends, this was, how shall I put it, this was a signal, this was a sign pointing them. This was not a GPS, if I can put it that way.

They had seen it in the east, it went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Christ child was. Think about it: only a selected few could see the light, those who humbled themselves by believing on him but those who remained hardened, they could not see him. So, once again, the light of grace reappears and now it leads these men to the Savior and this produces within them this inexpressible joy in verse 10, “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” You see, it appears again to them now and, boy, they’re excited. Why are they excited? Well, wouldn’t you be excited? To know that God is somehow working on your behalf leading you to the Messiah King, the Son of God who would now be still a child but yet, nonetheless, the God of glory? Jesus would later say in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in the darkness but shall have the light of life.” John even tells us, you will recall in John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Then in verse 11, we read, “After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him.” Folks, underline Him. They did not worship Mary. They worshiped Him. Of course, this is a bone that sticks in the throat of many Roman Catholics who worship her. They fell down on their faces and they worshiped him which means they prostrated themselves in lowly worship. This would have been the typical approach of people in that day when they came before an eastern monarch. My friend, if we can think of it this way: the higher a man’s conception of God, the more lowly will be his homage. Does this reflect your heart?

“Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” Their hearts are overflowing here with gratitude. They were prepared all the time to give this to him. Gold is the most precious of all metals, a symbol of nobility and royalty. Frankincense was a very expensive incense with a fabulous fragrance. I don’t know if you’ve ever smelled it but it’s a fabulous fragrance. By the way, it was stored in a special chamber in the temple. They would use it to sprinkle on grain offerings which symbolized the people’s passionate prayer that they are offering to the Lord sacrifices that are pleasing to him and so that’s the mindset behind the frankincense. Then, also, myrrh which was a costly perfume. By the way, it was also later mixed with wine as an anesthetic and given to Jesus on the cross, or at least offered to him and it was also mixed with other spices to prepare his body for burial.

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So, folks, as we learn of this amazing passage of Scripture, this amazing event that took place, we don't know a lot of the specifics, certainly we can't be dogmatic even with many of the things that I've shared with you even though I think they are rooted in the word of God to at least help us see what possibly what might have been going on. But certainly we can look at this and ask the question: which category do I fall into? Am I part of the king-makers or the king-haters? You know, the answer really depends upon how you see God, how you respond to the light of the gospel, how you respond to Christ. In John 8:12, again, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life." Does that describe you? Are you a follower of Christ? The Lord Jesus has come. He is the one, according to 1 Peter 2:9, "who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light." Scripture says that he is the light of men, the light that shines in darkness.

I close with this thought. In 2 Corinthians 4, the Spirit of God speaks through his servant, the Apostle Paul, and he tells us that the gospel, the saving truth that tells us that sinful man can be reconciled to a holy God through faith in Christ, the gospel is veiled. The reality of who Christ is and why he came, it is veiled to those who are perishing. Certainly, it was veiled to the people of ancient Israel as it is to many today. But in verse 4 of that text in 2 Corinthians 4, we read about those who are perishing. It says, "In whose case the God of this world," referring to Satan, "has blinded the minds of the unbelieving that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God."

Like the Apostle Paul and thousands of preachers who have gone on after him, who have followed him, today I preach to you the same old gospel story, the wonderful truth of saving grace. In verse 6 of that text in 2 Corinthians 4, we read, "For God who said Light shall shine out of darkness," that God who said that is the one who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ and I give that to you again here today.

Dear Christian, by way of application, ask yourself: what is my heart of worship? Is my homage low or is it high and haughty? Do you bow low before the Lord your God in your heart? Do you fall on your face before him at least spiritually speaking, maybe even physically at times? Do you see him for who he really is? Do you see him as the Creator? As the Redeemer? And as the Glorious King that's coming again? Do you see his transcendent glory, his holiness? Do you tremble in reverential fear and awe before him? Because, my friends, hear this: if you truly know who Christ is and you truly love the Lord Jesus Christ, you will fall down before him. You will not have a cavalier attitude towards him. You will worship him and serve him even if it takes you to a cross. You will adore him. You will submit to him and ultimately you will manifest his glorious presence and his character in your life.

So I pray that all of us will emulate these ancient king-makers whoever they were, whatever they rode, whoever they rode with and that we will all fall down on our faces

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and worship him. May we give him the very best of our time and our treasure as a true expression of our love for the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for us. Amen.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these amazing truths. I pray, again, that you will overwhelm us with the reality of the glory and the grace that you have given us through Christ. And, Lord, for those that do not know you as Savior which is so easy to do in our fake Christian culture, Lord, I pray that you will overwhelm them with the reality of the condemnation that is upon them and cause them to run to the cross and to cry out for the mercy and grace that you will so instantly grant to those who humble themselves before you in utter contrition and repentance. Lord, we long to see our family and our friends, our community, our country, our world, come to Christ. Use us to that end, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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