

II. Advent in Biblical Perspective
The Kings of Christmas
“Magi and Kings from the East”
Matthew 2:1–12
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December 13, 2020 • Sunday Sermon

In our Kings of Christmas series we looked at Caesar Augustus in our last study and in this study we’ll look at the Kings from the East. In our next study we’ll look at Herod the Great and then after that it will be a study on the King of Kings, Jesus.

Matthew 2:1–12 says [1] *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] saying, “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.” [3] When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; [4] and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. [5] They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: [6] ““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.”*” (from Micah 5:2)

[7] *Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. [8] And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him.” [9] After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the Child was. [10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. [11] And going into the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. [12] And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.* The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

In our last study we encountered the King in Luke 2:1–7 whose title was Caesar Augustus and his name was Gaius Octavius or Octavian as he is known in most of our history books. He is the one who gave out the decree in the days of Jesus. It was done under the governor known as Quirinius who will later be replaced by Pontius Pilate. It was the first of a number of decrees. There are two recorded in the Bible with the next one happening 14 years after this one. It is a series of registrations through a census and taxation with military distribution. There are a number of purposes for it. Octavius was quite the administrator for he was the one that established Pax Romana so that people could travel anywhere at any time. He nurtured and developed the road systems allowing local areas that they ruled to keep their local religions is also something he did well. He was the grand nephew of Julius Caesar and Caesar adopted him as his son so that when he was assassinated before the senate it became known in the reading of his will that Octavius would be the next emperor which he was.

I titled the study I did on Caesar Augustus, King or Pawn, and many would quake in his presence as King. The reason people might say he was a pawn is due to God using this king to give the decree that sends Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem which fulfills the Micah 5:2 prophecy

given hundreds of years earlier. While I'm drawn to that interpretation I just can't settle there. I don't think he is a pawn. I think he is a king that God ordained him to be. He had kingly powers and kingly decrees and really acting as a king. God in His sovereignty to accomplish His purposes does not have to reduce or diminish persons or their positions. Remember God is King of Kings and not just pawns. God actually rules and reigns over carpenters who make decisions under a sovereign God to not leave their wife back at home to have the Baby, but in compassion brings her with him on a 90 mile journey so that she is there and delivers in Bethlehem. God is sovereign over all which includes a king who is the greatest emperor in all of Rome. God has the heart of the king in His hand (Proverbs 21:1). So God's sovereignty doesn't need to be explained by the diminishing upon whom, through whom and with whom He accomplishes His purposes.

That is why we are now where we are at this point where the birth of the Messiah is real history with real people, real places, real times and real events. Go back and check to see if there was a 14 year edict that was put into place by Octavius. What do the records of Rome say? What about Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem? Luke 2 doesn't start off 'once upon a time' or 'in a far away land.' It's not a fable or myth. Real history is ultimately His Story at work through real people – carpenters, teenage virgins, and the most powerful king in Rome.

Now we come to another king unnamed – a king of the East. This is an historical narrative. This historic narrative starts after the birth of Jesus, in the days of Herod. It's real history that is taking place. In this historical moment Magi show up from the East in Jerusalem at Herod's palace with a specific question. We don't really know how many there were it's just that most assume three because of the three gifts (gold, frankincense, myrrh) mentioned when they see and worship Jesus. We also really don't know how many gifts were brought for the Bible under the Holy Spirit just focuses on those three. All we know is that there were two or more Magi because it's plural. It could have been a couple of hundred because it said the city was all stirred up because Herod was stirred up and I'll answer why he was stirred up in our next study when we focus on Herod.

The Magi ask a very specific question because they are looking for some intelligence to accomplish something. They have come to worship the King of the Jews and that's astonishing. They want to know where this King is and they have assumed He was already born. Due to their question they are looking for a very specific King – King of the Jews. So who are these Magi? Why would show up in the nation of Israel to ask this question – where is He who was born King of the Jews – what did they do? I want to walk you through the answers to these questions from our text of Scripture.

Who are they? They are called Magi. This is a very technical term for a certain guild of people. The closest answer I can give you is the cabinet of the President of the United States. They are special advisors with the imprimatur of the one they advise. In other words, when they show up the king shows up. It's just like if there was a royal wedding, a royal birth or royal funeral and the President of the United States can't get there, many times he'll send one of the members of his cabinet according to a certain ranking, usually. That is what has happened here where this king from the East has sent his "cabinet."

These people (Magi) show up in a number of places in the Bible. They show up in Egypt, the Kingdom of Assyria, the Kingdom of Babylon, the Kingdom of Medo-Persia, the Kingdom of Greece and in the Kingdom of Rome. The reason is because kings need intelligence, advice, and counsel from "learned" people. They are scholars who have extensive libraries. They exist to study the disciplines of the day that were valued – history, religion,

philosophy – and two very important ones. We know that God declares in the heavens the glory of God in creation but they had perverted that into making their readings of the heavens the wisdom so the two important ones were their disciplines of astrology and astronomy. This can sometimes be a power position for if you are a Magi then the only bigger than that is a king and when they would go somewhere it was like the king showed up himself. They were there in the name of the President or the name of the king. The more they could astound that king with that kind of power and prestige the more they could control him and the more power and prestige they would get.

So I'm trying to tell you that I don't think these Magi are kings. I know we sing 'We three Kings' but I think they are a part of the king's "cabinet" and not a king. Now can a Magi become a king? I would say yes but by in large Magi are not called kings for Magi exist to serve kings. But their presence is the presence of the King of the East who they serve when they show up at Herod's palace. Sometimes these men can get addicted and intoxicated with power so Magi in some cases went into the black arts. Magi becomes the root for magic and those in the black arts and magic became known as magicians. We have an account of this in the Bible when Moses went and spoke with Pharaoh he called his magicians (Exodus 7:11) who engaged in the supernatural of the kingdom of darkness. By in large throughout the Scripture Magi are basically scientists, scholars, counselors, philosophers and teachers that are available to and serve at the pleasure of the king, whatever the royal task was given them. So we have Magi that have shown up in Jerusalem.

So where did they come from? They saw His star from the East. The kingdoms that would have been in the East historically would have been Assyria, Babylon and Medo-Persia which can be found in the Old Testament. Babylon makes three invasions of Israel and their first invasion is to get some potential wise men. They get the up and inners of society and take them into captivity. We know the names of four of them – Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – who became counselors to Nebuchadnezzar. We know Daniel remained a counselor for 70 years and served in five dynasties. Daniel also served in two different empires – the Babylonian and Medo-Persian. Daniel was a Magi of his day, a trusted counselor and over all the counselors. So it is people like that who are showing up from the remnants of those kingdoms. Rome is currently in control of everything but there are remnants of those previous kingdoms I mentioned and from those puppet kings they have sent Magi from the East. They are there as royal emissaries and royal counselors.

So why are they there in Jerusalem? They are looking for the King of the Jews. Why are they looking for the King of the Jews? It is because His star rose. Where would you think His star has risen? In those days pagan lore was that if you as an astrologer/astronomer saw a previously undiscovered star that rises that would represent either the birth, death or death and birth of a king. They didn't just go out and notice what king for they went to a specific nation and they asked for a specific king. Why would they be so specific and why would they come to worship this King? They come specifically to Herod appointed as King by Rome and ask him this very specific question. Herod gets troubled and so does everyone else. Then Herod calls for his Magi, his counselors wanting to know the answer to the question the Magi from the East are asking him about this King of the Jews. Herod knows they are asking about where the Christ is to be born and who to ask about this, since they ask about King of the Jews, even though he is not a Jew.

They tell Herod the Micah 5:2 passage that prophesied this Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is where Jacob comes and his wife Rachel, gives birth to his son

Benjamin and Rachel dies and is buried there in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is the place Naomi, her husband and sons leave to go to Moab. Then her husband and sons die and she comes back to Bethlehem with one daughter-in-law, Ruth, who meets a man named Boaz. They get married and here is the royal line from the tribe of Judah because from Boaz will come Obed, then Jesse and from Jesse's sons come David. Samuel is the one who comes to Bethlehem and picks David from Jesse's sons to anoint him as king. David, when encapsulated by the Philistines will say 'O that I could drink the water one more time from Bethlehem.' David's mighty men go break in and get water from the well in Bethlehem for him but when he gets it he pours it out as a drink offering to the Lord Himself and says 'this is sacred, this is not leadership this is worship' in praise to Him for what God had done through his men.

It is Bethlehem that the decree of Gaius Octavius sends Joseph and Mary and Jesus is born and the announcement to the angels. Jesus is no longer at a stable in Bethlehem for He is now in a house. So how long has He been there? I have no idea but it has to be at least a couple of days, maybe a couple of weeks or because Herod later will try to kill this Jesus and he will go up to age 2, it could have been up to 22 to 23 months since His birth, but I do know these are real men looking for Jesus. When they found out they then go to find Him.

Before I go further, I need to answer the question why they wanted to see the King of the Jews. Let's look at Numbers 24 which is the fourth and final oracle of a Prophet whom God had called and that Prophet is Balaam. This is what I think the Magi are responding to which is a text in the Pentateuch that would have drawn their attention particular in astronomy and astrology. Balaam's first and second oracle are in Numbers 23 and the third and fourth oracle are given in Numbers 24. Here is a sermon anticipating the Messiah.

Numbers 24:17a says *[17] I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.* I believe it is this verse that the Magi were drawn to. You might be thinking, 'how did these Magi get this verse?' I have tried to be careful not to overstate what I know and not say what I don't know but at this point I will go to what I call sanctified speculation and Biblically conformed conjecture. I believe they knew this verse because they were from the East, remnants of the kingdoms of Babylon and Persia, with Daniel being the head man for 70 years and these extensive libraries are amassed. Daniel, who was faithful to the Lord, would he have brought his Bible to the library? Yes, and Daniel's Bible would have been the Pentateuch – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Because of Daniel that would have been part of the curriculum for wise men.

When they see a star they haven't seen and see this text in Numbers where a star represents a king. And this text says that it is a King from the line of Jacob, who bears the scepter for Israel then that sends them, not on a search but a specific mission. They come to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel to the palace of the appointed king and ask – where is He born, King of the Jews? Herod tells them that according to the prophets He is in Bethlehem. Then Herod tells the Magi to go find Him in Bethlehem and report it back to him so that he can go worship Him. So we know from Scripture that the Magi wanted to go worship Him but do you really believe Herod wanted to go worship Him? No, because he tried to kill Him. There is always a lot of deception and hypocrisy at Christmas.

Numbers 24 told the Magi what the star was and then Micah 5 sends them on a five mile trip to Bethlehem, but when they get ready to leave again guess what they see again? It is the star and it leads them right to Bethlehem. So the Word is guiding them and God's providence is affirming the Word with the star. When they get to Bethlehem they see Joseph, Mary and the Jesus and as the text says they rejoiced exceedingly but it really means they joyfully rejoiced.

They rejoiced in their rejoicing. They were just overflowing with joy. This has become much more than just a mere royal task. They didn't come simply to honor a king, they came to worship Him.

I want to give you some speculation here. Can you imagine the conversation when they showed up and saw Joseph, Mary and Jesus in Bethlehem? When the Magi ask what the Child's name was I can just imagine how Joseph told them how He got His name and what His name meant. This is Immanuel – God with us. Then I'm sure Mary chimed in and told them about the angel that came to see her and how she was going to have this Child. That would be in fulfillment of all these Scriptures in Genesis to Isaiah. Of course I'm speculating but I have to believe some conversation took place between them all.

I do know that when they saw Mary with her Baby they fell down and worshipped Him. They didn't worship Joseph or Mary or Mary and the Baby, but Him. They gave gifts to Him, not Mary or Joseph although I'm sure they both made use of those gifts. How would Joseph and Mary get to Egypt and then back to Nazareth? So again I'm sure those gifts came in handy for what was ahead of them, but after the Magi had worshipped Him the Lord intervenes and warns them of what Herod is about to do and do to them so they left Jesus to go home a *different* way. That is what always happens in the lives of believers.

It is interesting to note that when the Magi worshipped Him they worshipped Him lavishly with gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold is the currency of kings. Frankincense (incense) represents prayers and praise. In the temple, the altar of incense was kept by the priests. Myrrh was their version of gardenias. Have you ever gone to a funeral without gardenias? Myrrh was gloomy and showed up at funerals. What did Israel do to the Prophets? They killed them. Myrrh is a Prophet who will die for His people. Incense – Jesus is the Priest and the altar. Gold – He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Oh the blessing of these gifts for the trip Joseph and Mary were about to make.

Here is the takeaway that we learn from these Magi who were sent by the King of the East. The unmistakable reality is that we who come to Christ will be marked by God-centered worship and loving obedience to the King of Kings who not only came to save us but who by sovereign grace brought us to come to Him alone as our Lord and Savior. This is what happened to the Magi who came to Christ. When He gives you a direction that's the way you go. Just like Jesus did with the demoniac, He sends the Magi home a safe way and now they're His witnesses. Worshipping and witnessing are the marks of those who come to Christ.

This worship is also marked by giving. Worship is not an event attended to watch, it is something you do and one of the things you do is give of the treasures He has already given to you and it is given lavishly and generously. This is not a preacher working on the year-end giving. This is me trying to share with you what a mark of the believer is – God-centered worship which is a mark of participation and participation is a mark of giving. This is why Paul says that which you have determined to give set aside and bring on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week (I Corinthians 16:2).

I'm not a curmudgeon. I understand bookkeeping, providential hindrances and all the reasons for online giving, but I'm trying to tell you not to give up in participation of worship. In fact, look at the negative side of it. Where do we see the division in the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness? It is in the Garden between Cain and Abel. What is the dividing line between Cain and Abel? Both showed up at the worship service but Abel showed up with the first of the flock – the tithe – and sacrificial fat portions – offerings. Cain brought some of the fruit of the ground, probably last minute gathering and tip God a little bit here. He had no regard

for this worship because of the offering. Both men gave of their vocation and they became the judgment of God. Fast forward to Nadab and Abihu and God brings a lethal judgment upon them but before He does this is what He says to them ‘Who told you to bring this unauthorized offering to Me?’ (Numbers 3:4) and were struck dead. You might be thinking ‘well that’s Old Testament.’

Let’s go to the New Testament. There is a worship service happening and Ananias and Sapphira are giving their check but they lied. Acts 5:1–6 says *[1] But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, [2] and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. [3] But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? [4] While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” [5] When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. [6] The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.*

But I want to go from the negative to the positive. What you have purposed to do bring on the first of the week. Look at the gift from heaven. Being around Christmas time in the next few days something like this will happen to someone reading this – wife says ‘Joe Smith just gave us a gift.’ Husband says ‘he did? Did we get him a gift?’ Wife says ‘no.’ Husband says ‘Run out and get one quickly.’ We are not going to get through a commercial Christmas without giving someone a gift who gave us one, yet in the Christian Christmas Jesus gives Himself. Do we give ourselves to Him, who gave Himself for us? If we do, it will be marked by participatory sacrificial worship. We will not rob God.

Please don’t rob God and I’m not telling you to go rob somebody else either. I’m just saying don’t rob God, but the key to not robbing God is not just checking the box, but it’s checking our hearts. These Magi saw Him and boom they worshipped, not only worshipped but they gave their gifts to Him, and then they followed Him. They obeyed the Divine intervention to go back home another way because that is what Jesus does – He works in the lives and guides us with His Word even in another way.

I love how Luke brings us to down and outer Jewish shepherds. I love how Matthew brings us to up and inner Gentile kings and their emissaries. Matthew shows these people, Gentile Kings with authority who come and bow in worship and at the end Jesus says ‘all authority has been given to Me’ for Matthew ends his Gospel by saying in Matthew 28:18–20; *[18] And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (Gentile), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

At the birth of Jesus, the Gentile nations come and at His ascension we are sent to the Gentile nations to hear of Him, the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings. I pray that you and I will grasp this glorious truth. Not only do we come marked by worship and obedience, but He who by sovereign grace brought us to come to Him alone as our Lord and Savior. I am pleading with you to come to Christ who came for you. I do know that none of us will come to Christ who came for us unless Christ first comes to bring you to Himself. These Magi kings would have never gotten to Jesus without Numbers 24 and the intervention of God’s providence. They would have never had Numbers 24 without the Babylonian captivity of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. There was a political movement that I’m sure Israel was disappointed

in that moment for look at what God was setting up hundreds of years later through the captivity of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. There is the unseen hand of God who is working to bring us to Him who came for us that we would come to Him. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we can spend in Your Word. We're astonished at the length of the trip of these emissaries, the intentionality, and just the glorious Gospel gilded work of sovereign grace that You accomplished, not just hundreds of years before but before the foundation of the world to bring these Magi to worship and to walk away another way in obedience. God, would You please do this again and again and again and again? I thank You for how you have done it again and again and again. For those who know You would You please allow them to know like never before not only the majesty of the One who came to them but the majesty and power of the One who came to them to bring them to come to Him who came to save them? It is glorious for salvation is from the Lord. You're not only the Savior who came to us and brought us to Yourself but You are the One who bought us for Yourself so we worship You, we adore You and we're grateful for the instruments You use, like a Mary and a Joseph, but O God we thank You for Your Word by Your Spirit who uses instruments to bring us to Jesus and we would worship Him. So Father, speak to hearts reading this and encourage those who know You and what You have done to save them and give those a sense who have not yet come to You that You have them reading this today for a reason. You have come to bring them to hear of the One who came to save them and may this day they come, for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

Magi and Kings from the East

Who?

Why?

What?

Life Takeaway

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