

Ruler of the Nations

Matthew 2: 1–12¹

After Jesus Was Born.

One of the first things that we notice about our text this morning (and it will not be the first time, if we've been paying attention throughout this advent season), is that the story of Jesus is firmly fixed in history. This story of Jesus does not begin with some non-specific time cue like, "Long ago in a galaxy far, far away..." or, "Once upon a time..." or even, "'Twas the night before Christmas..." The story of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham as Matthew has it,² and, ultimately, the Son of God, as we see in the Gospel according to Luke,³ is presented by its authors, both human and divine, as historical fact. It does not happen in Middle Earth, or Narnia, or on the other side of the looking glass. In Matthew 2, verse 1, we read simply:

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, Matthew 2:1 ESV

Bethlehem was and is a real place; you can find it on Google Maps. Herod the First, called "The Great" (especially by himself, most likely), was an Idumean—an Edomite—appointed by the Roman senate as the puppet "king" of the Jews from around 40 BC until his death shortly after the birth of Jesus. These are the facts, as historians have recorded them, so it's important that we believe and present this story as truth—as history—because it is. And just as elements of the narrative are true, so also the rest.

Jesus was born. History records that as well. He was born at Bethlehem, and he was born near the end of the reign of Herod the First. And in days—those very real days on the timeline of human history—these very real men, "wise men from the east,"

¹ ...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." Matthew 2:1–2 ESV

Now,

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him... Matthew 2:3 ESV

and no wonder. As far as he knew, and by decree of the Roman senate, he was king of the Jews and there was no other. Why would there be? would it be? How this be? Of course, we have some insight. The Gospel According to Matthew begins with the words,

¹ The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Matthew 1:1 ESV

¹ All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted,

² Cf. Matthew 1:1.

³ Cf. Luke 1:35.

placing Jesus within a family tree, and connecting Him to two historic covenants; God’s covenant with Abraham, and His covenant with David. In the covenant with David, God had promised,

⁴ ...“If your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.” ^{1 Kings 2:4} ESV

So, by making clear that Jesus is the Son of David, Matthew establishes that He was quite literally “born King of the Jews.” He was born with a claim to the throne that was at that time occupied by Herod who had no such hereditary claim. Herod owed his authority to his Roman masters. Jesus was born to be King according to the promise of God Himself.

Before Jesus Was Born.

Of course, Herod—and all Jerusalem, for that matter—had no real right to this ignorance. Being troubled, and that trouble extending to the people of his capital, he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people (those who ought to have known; those who ought to have been waiting and watching for this very thing), and he inquired of them where the Christ—the Messiah; God’s anointed—was to be born. Now, we don’t know how long it may have taken these religious scholars to reach this conclusion, but probably not long. It had been right there in front of them for centuries.

⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet...” ^{Matthew 2:5–6} ESV

(by the Prophet Micah, and about 700 years earlier),

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.”” ^{Matthew 2:5–6} ESV

So, given that they had plenty of time, they probably should have known. Especially given that the wise men from the east had figured this out, probably working from the very same source material. See, these men, contrary to the description in at least one Christmas carol, were not kings. They were magi—wise men—one source designates them “priests or court advisors,⁴” as was Joseph to Pharaoh in Egypt, or Daniel and his friends to the kings of Babylon and Persia. In fact, they were probably from the region of ancient Babylon, what we know today as Iraq, and they were probably men who had access to the scrolls of the Hebrew prophets that had been carried there along with Daniel and the exiles from Judah.

See, they said,

² ...“we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” ^{Matthew 2:2} NKJV5

but why would they have associated this particular star with “He who has been born King of the Jews”? Well, we know that when Daniel was in “the east”, He not only wrote prophecy,

⁴ R. C. Sproul, ed.,
⁵

(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

(Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 1673.

but had access to the Law, and even the work of prophets who were writing at about the same time. In Daniel, chapter 9, he wrote:

¹ In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans— ² in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, **according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.** Daniel 9:1–2 ESV

There was communication, then, between Israel and the east, and it makes sense that the “wise men” of Babylon would have accumulated the wisdom of the Jews as surely as they did that of the other peoples that they conquered. Given this, their interpretation of the star was not a matter of good astrology; it was a matter of good scholarship. Having read and understood the promises of at least some of the Old Covenant Scriptures, and knowing that the time was near, they saw the star and they understood that something momentous—something earth shattering—was happening in Daniel’s homeland; something that required not only investigation, but worship.

When Jesus Was Born.

So, associating the rising of the star with the time of the Christ’s birth,

⁷ ...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. Matthew 2:7–9 ESV

Which raises a couple of interesting points. First, if the star could guide them to the very house where Jesus was to be found after the visit to Herod, then why not before? And of course, it could have. If God had so desired, the star could have led the wise men straight to Bethlehem without the intervening conversation with Herod. So, we have to assume that God wanted to use these wise men from the east to push the religious and political elites of Israel to wake up and realize that the fullness of time had come.

Secondly, the next verses tell us:

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... Matthew 2:10–11 ESV

Putting the fact that Jesus was found in a house, not a manger, together with Herod’s determination of what time the star had appeared and his subsequent massacre of all the male children in the region of Bethlehem who were to years old or under, it seems fairly certain that these wise men were not present on the night of Jesus’ birth, and did not worship Him side by side with the shepherds at the manger. It is more likely that the star made its first

appearance on the night Jesus was born, and that the wise men, having to make preparations and then travel quite a distance, arrived at least a year later, to fall down and worship before a toddler, and

¹¹ ...opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:11 ESV

Something else to note; we have no idea how many of these wise men actually were there. Tradition tells us three, but that's just because there were three different types of treasure. The thing is, the treasure probably had more to do with the One to whom it was offered than with the number making the offering. The main thing is not how many came, but rather the fact that they did.

Before Jesus Was Born (Part Two).

And why? Well, they certainly did not come for what they could get out of it. These men who were almost certainly what is known in Scripture as God-fearing gentiles, had everything to lose, and nothing to gain. Seeking for a baby, they could not have thought to find enlightenment in the wisdom of his words, and carrying gifts that were worth at least a small fortune in their day, they could not have hoped for profit. So, they did not come for themselves. They came to worship. They came to make an offering. They came to ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; nothing more, and nothing less, and this, according to the promise of God. In Isaiah, chapter 1:

² It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, Isaiah 2:2 ESV

And Jeremiah 3:

¹⁷ At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart. Jeremiah 3:17 ESV

Or Haggai:

⁷ And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. ⁸ The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. ⁹ The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.' ” Haggai 2:7-9 ESV

Even the prophecy of Micah, to which the chief priests and scribes referred Herod.

² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days...

⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he shall be their peace... Micah 5:2-5 ESV

I could go on and on, but hopefully you see the theme. Of course, these prophecies refer to far more than simply Christ's birth at Bethlehem, and something far greater than the adoration of the wise men. See, Jesus was born king of the Jews, but that was never the point. He was the Son of David, yes, but He was also the Son of Abraham, to whom God said:

⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, **for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.** ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. Genesis 17:5-6 ESV

Lord of the Nations.

Even so, the wise men were only the forerunners of the nations. They came to worship and bow down before a child, but years later, the title they ascribed to Him, "King of the Jews", would take on a more sinister implication.

³⁵ And when they had crucified him... ³⁷ over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Matthew 27:35-37 ESV

But on His way to that cross, He would say:

³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. ³² And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." John 12:31-32 NKJV

And, one more time, this was the promise of God, and God always keeps His promises. Because Jesus,

⁶ ...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. Philippians 2:6-7 ESV

This the message of Christmas, but,

⁸ ...being found in human form... Philippians 2:8 ESV

not only at Bethlehem, but all through His life,

⁸ ...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:8 ESV

And is the message of the Gospel.

¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. John 1:11 ESV

In fact, they tried to kill Him.

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. John 1:11–13 ESV

He did all this for us, and for our salvation. But here's the point anticipated and signified by the worship of those wise men long ago.

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9–11 ESV

Even so, we are called this morning to believe that He came to save us from our sin. We are called to trust in Christ and Christ alone for salvation and life, and to confess with the church of all ages that “Jesus Christ is Lord,”⁶ Then, believing, and professing our faith to the world, may we, by the grace of God, follow the example of the wise men, bowing and worshiping, but not at a manger or even a cross, rather, at the feet of our Savior, who is King of kings, and Lord of all Nations.

6 Cf. Romans 10:9–10.