

Series: Keeping Christ in Christmas

Title: King of Kings

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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Verse 1

Matthew 2:1-12 tells of how “wise men” visited Jesus after His birth. Verse 1 says, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem” (Matthew 2:1). The phrase “after Jesus was born” appeared as an aorist passive participle in the original language of the text.¹ Matthew’s intent was to depict the events of our text as taking place sometime after the birth of Jesus. Contrary to popular depictions, it is likely that Jesus was several months old by the time the wise men visited Him.

According to Matthew, Jesus “was born in Bethlehem.” The town in view was not the Bethlehem of Galilee, a town located 7 miles northwest of Nazareth.² Instead, Matthew’s reference was to a small village that was a few miles south of Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary were both from Bethlehem. According to Hebrew custom, they returned home for the birth of their baby boy.³ Jesus’ birth in the place was a fulfillment of Micah 5:2. The place was the home of King David (1 Samuel 17:12); thus, Matthew’s mention of Bethlehem pointed to Jesus’ Messianic nature. The name of the town meant “house of bread.” For Christians, the name provided a reminder that Jesus is “the bread of life” (John 6:35) who gives spiritual provision to all who trust in Him.

After Jesus was born, “wise men from the east” came to visit Him. Matthew was the only gospel writer to provide an account of such a visit.⁴ His reason in doing so was rather simple. The wise men were Gentiles. Matthew wanted His Jewish readers to know that Jesus’ work had application for those outside of Israel.

Who are the “wise men” who came to visit Jesus? Originally, the term was used of a priestly caste within Persian society; however, the word eventually was applied to a wide variety of magicians and astrologers.⁵ The title is often rendered “magi” in English accounts of the Christmas story. Many have regarded the men as being kings. Such a perspective is based on Messianic prophecies concerning the men (Psalm 72:8-11; Isaiah 60:3). We should not see the wise men as being literal kings; however, they could be regarded as royalty, since they likely served in royal courts.

Perhaps modern Christmas folklore has obscured the true nature of such wise men and their work. The terminology of Matthew 2:1 referred to an official office in the ancient world. Those who filled such an office possessed skills related to astronomy, science, and mathematics.⁶ They often used “astronomical observation” for purposes of “astrological speculation.”⁷ Such individuals were well-versed in using stars and celestial beings as guides for traveling. In addition, they often superstitiously believed that stars communicated secret

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 2.

² Robertson, 14.

³ Robertson, 14.

⁴ France, 85.

⁵ France, 86.

⁶ Glasscock, 50.

⁷ Blomberg, 62.

messages. A wise man was a diviner, one who used astrology and interpretation of dreams in order to disclose special, hidden truth.⁸

We are not told how many wise men travelled to visit Jesus, but tradition maintains that three made the pilgrimage. Such an interpretation of the events found in Matthew 2:1-12 is based on the number of gifts the magi brought (Matthew 2:11). The exact identity of the magi is unknown. Nothing is said about their names, ethnicities, or homelands. Matthew only said that they were “from the east.” The popular fictional book “Ben Hur” has made speculation concerning the wisemen’s origin and identity. It has even proposed that the names of the men were Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior.⁹

Maybe Matthew was intentional to not share much about the identity of the men. Perhaps he did not want to limit the gospel to one nation or people group. It seems his intent was simply to show that the message of Jesus had implications for all nations, not just Jewish people. A.T. Robertson has said that the appearance of the magi at Jesus’ home had the intent of “...foreshadowing the fortunes of the new faith: reception by the Gentiles, rejection by the Jews.”¹⁰ Paul would elaborate on such realities in Romans 11:25 and Ephesians 2:11-22. Though Matthew’s writing was intended for a Jewish readership, he was intentional to uphold Jesus as performing a work that brought Gentile people into the fold of God. In fact, his gospel would end with strict words from Jesus’ concerning this matter — “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:18).

There are many instances in historical folklore that tell of Eastern magi visiting kings. There is actually an account of magicians visiting Nero in 66 AD. The Greek writers Cassius and Suetonius tell of this event.¹¹ Interestingly, the famous Greek translation of the Old Testament that was used during Jesus’ day (the Septuagint) used the same Greek word rendered “wise men” in Matthew 2:1 to speak of magicians who served in Nebuchadnezzar’s court (Daniel 2:2, 10).¹² Such men from Daniel’s day had heard prophecies concerning the Messiah from Daniel himself (Daniel 2:31-45). Maybe Daniel’s prophecies had been handed down through Persian courts over the years. Perhaps when the time for Jesus’ birth arrived, magicians from the East were ready to visit the “Ancient of Days” they had heard about (Daniel 7:9-14). The well-attested nature of Daniel’s great reputation in the ancient world makes such things likely (Daniel 5:11-12).

In Matthew’s account, the wisemen could be regarded as a literary foil. They were an indictment against the spiritual dulness and dumbness of Israel. When Jesus appeared on Earth, His own people rejected Him. Foreign magicians, however, travelled great distances to worship Him. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus would later pronounce judgment on Israel for their rejection of their Messiah (Matthew 23:37-39).

In telling of the magi’s pilgrimage, Matthew said they “arrived in Jerusalem.” Apparently the men went immediately to the most prominent city of the land, thinking that the birth of the promised king of kings would naturally occur in such a place. Unfortunately, the differences between first-century and twenty-first centuries make the scene from Matthew’s count hard for us to comprehend. In addition, popular depictions of the Christmas story also diminish the significance and spectacle that would have been associated with the magi’s arrival in Jerusalem. One should not envision three lone, weary men traveling into Jerusalem on camelback, mostly unnoticed by citizens of the city.

⁸ Ross, 16.

⁹ Robertson, 16.

¹⁰ Robertson, 14.

¹¹ France, 86.

¹² Ross, 16.

Individuals from foreign courts would not have travelled alone. They would have been accompanied by a large entourage. A caravan would have travelled with them to provide necessary sustenance and support for their journey. They would have been flanked by many servants and animals. Numerous carts and chariots carried a number of goods, commodities, and people. Elaborate tents and sleeping accommodations were probably packed for the trip. Because wise men were men of means, they would have traveled with nice foods, several articles of clothing, and an assortment of creature comforts and diversions. Maybe they had musicians and heralds that travelled before them to announce their arrival. Perhaps they flew banners and standards that represented their homelands. As such individuals paraded through the streets of a foreign town or city, they likely generated a lot of attention.¹³

Verse 2

Arriving in Jerusalem, the wise men asked, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him” (Matthew 2:2). It has previously been mentioned that the events surrounding Matthew 2:1-12 did not take place when Jesus was a newborn infant. The language of verses 9 and 11 was used of a child, not a baby. Some believe Jesus would have been about one year old at the time of the events found in our text.¹⁴ However, Matthew 2:16 reveals that Jesus was still under two years of age at the time of the visit from the wisemen. We may not know Jesus’ exact age at the time of the events around in Matthew 2:1-12; however, we do know that modern visions of wisemen bowing before a newborn baby are incorrect. Renaissance art by artists like Girolamo da Santacroce paint a more accurate picture.

Notice that Matthew depicted the wisemen as calling Jesus “king of the Jews.” The use of the title was in alignment with Matthew’s theme for His gospel. He was intentional to depict Jesus as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies for his Jewish readers. He would use the title for Jesus later in Matthew 27:11.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, the wise men announced that a star had guided their travels. Such things were a fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy. In Israel’s history, one named Balaam had used a star in a prophecy concerning the coming of Israel’s king. In Numbers 24:17, he said, “I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel. He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites.” Documents from the Dead Sea community indicated that ancient Jews regarded Numbers 24:17 as a Messianic prophecy.¹⁵ Interestingly, Balaam was from the East (Numbers 22:5). In addition to the prophecies from Daniel, maybe oral tradition had spread reports throughout the East concerning a coming king from Israel. There are many stories in ancient history that told of stars appearing at the births of royal figures.¹⁶ Maybe popularity of Jewish prophecies prompted foreigners to fabricate accounts to match Messianic ones.

The appearance of the star in Matthew’s account was portrayed as being a means of divine revelation. Psalm 19:1 indicates that celestial bodies, and creation at large, provide a means of general revelation for all humanity. The scene in Matthew 2:2 indicates a star was used for special and specific revelation from God at the time of Jesus’ birth.

We do not know the exact nature of the star the wisemen saw. Some have proposed that it might have been an appearance of Haley’s Comet. Others have claimed Saturn might

¹³ Glasscock, 53.

¹⁴ Glasscock, 50.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 2.

¹⁶ France, 87.

have been visible. An exploding star, a nova, is another possibility.¹⁷ Modern readers are only left to conjecture concerning such matters. However, it is worth noting that the language of Matthew's gospel seems to indicate that the star's appearance was miraculous in nature.¹⁸ If the Lord wanted to create a special start for the special purpose of announcing His Son's birth, He could have easily done so. When one accepts that the Lord is the creator of all things, such feats are relatively simple to accept.

After announcing the way they followed a star to Jerusalem, the wise men told of their desire "to worship" Jesus. The Greek word rendered "worship" could have simply referred to the ordinary homage one paid to a king. However, later events in Matthew's narrative will reveal that the wise men had more in mind. The magi were interested in engaging in the type of worship that belongs to God (Matthew 14:33). At the same time, their actions constituted a form of royal veneration, since Jesus would one day rule over all creation (Isaiah 9:6). Ultimately, the wise men's homage was a fulfillment of the second Psalm: "So now, kings, be wise; receive instruction, you judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with reverential awe and rejoice with trembling. Pay homage to the Son or he will be angry and you will perish in your rebellion, for his anger may ignite at any moment. All who take refuge in him are happy" (Psalm 2:10-12).

The language of Matthew 2:2 was later used in reference to the way Jesus' disciples worshipped Him after the resurrection. Like the magi and Jesus' first followers, we have similarly been called to worship Jesus. Adoration and praise is the fitting response to Jesus' Lordship. In Philippians 2:10-11, Paul said, "...at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Verse 3

Matthew continued his account of the wise men's visit by saying, "When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:3). The king in view was Herod the Great, a ruler of Judea who died around 4 AD. It was not Herod Agrippa who is spoken of in Acts 12:20-25.¹⁹ Herod the Great obtained power over Judea at some point between 37 and 34 BC. He was half Jewish and he was known as being "a great builder of public works and a shrewd diplomat in his dealing with both Romans and Jews."²⁰ By all accounts, he was a very successful and effective ruler, though he was a very violent and bloody one. He was the founder of the Idumean (Herodian) dynasty. He reconstructed the Jewish Temple. The end result was Herod's Temple, the beautiful complex that the Jews enjoyed until its destruction by Titus in 70 AD.²¹

Herod's disturbance at the appearance of the wise men should be understandable. The king had secured his position through hard work and bloodshed. He was undoubtedly concerned about the announcement of a new king. As a vassal of the Roman Empire, he was expected to enforce Roman control over the region. Because of Jewish beliefs, there was often widespread resentment toward occupying forces. This led to revolts and unrest. Supposed messianic figures who promised liberation from Rome were commonplace. If Herod was to lose control of the region, he would surely lose his job, and he would likely lose his life.

The historical background of Matthew 2:1-12 makes us see why Herod was disturbed by the inquiry from foreign magi. He was highly motivated to snuff out any threat to his

¹⁷ France, 87.

¹⁸ France, 87.

¹⁹ France, 86.

²⁰ Blomberg, 62.

²¹ Glasscock, 50.

kingdom. History tells of the way his paranoia drove him to order the killings of his own wife (Mariam), her two sons, her brother, her mother, and her grandfather.²² Emperor Augustus was a close friend of Herod. He is reported to have jokingly used a play on words in reference to Herod. He liked to say, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.” In Koiné Greek, the words for pig (hús) and son (huiós) were similar.²³ Because of all of these things, it is not hard to understand Herod’s paranoid disturbance in Matthew 2:3.

The word rendered “disturbed” in our text was a strong one. It meant, “to be in turmoil,” “to be terrified,” or “to be greatly agitated.”²⁴ One has said the language meant “to stir up” or “to throw into confusion.”²⁵ In addition to Herod’s terror, Matthew said “all Jerusalem” was terrified with the king. The gospel writer likely intended to use hyperbole.²⁶ He didn’t mean to say that every single person in Jerusalem was terrified. He simply meant to convey a sense of widespread alarm concerning the magi’s announcement. Matthew would use a similar literary device in Matthew 21:10.

What was the reason for such national nervousness regarding the visit of the wise men? It is important to remember that Messianic hopes were high in first-century Judea. Nearly every citizen of Israel had high hopes of a deliverer. Most were zealous for someone to break the bondage of Roman rule. We see evidence of such later in Matthew’s gospel with the boisterous reception Jesus received when He arrived in Jerusalem for the Holy Week (Mark 11:1-11).

At the same time, the appearance of a new Messianic prospect brought nervousness. Most of the populace knew that any revolt against Rome would lead to bloody carnage. Think about the way Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified. The governor was motivated by a desire to suppress a potential revolt amongst the Jews in Jerusalem (Mark 15:15; Luke 23:2; John 19:15-16). Also, remember the tumult concerning the disciples’ teaching in the book of Acts (Acts 5:21-32). The earliest disciples were accused of “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

Upon hearing announcements concerning a prospective king in Matthew 2:3, the residents of Jerusalem were set on edge. They had anxiety because they did not want to experience the bloody fallout that could come with a Messianic uprising. Most were familiar with Herod’s paranoia and murderous fits.²⁷ One has commented, “It is no wonder that the city was troubled. In a world of violence and what seemed to be unlimited military power, every family feared what the news of the arrival of Messiah would bring.”²⁸

Verse 4

In response to the magi’s interrogative, Herod took action. Matthew 2:4 says, “So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born.” The “chief priests” were the respective leaders of twenty-four groups of priests in Jerusalem. The scribes were well-trained religious experts who had the responsibility of interpreting, applying and teaching Jewish laws.²⁹ The group of “chief priests and scribes”

²² Robertson, 17.

²³ Glasscock, 51.

²⁴ Blomberg, 63.

²⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 3.

²⁶ Glasscock, 53.

²⁷ Robertson, 17.

²⁸ Glasscock, 54.

²⁹ Blomberg, 63.

from Matthew 2:4 was likely an ad hoc group made up of members of the Sanhedrin. History reveals Herod had a tenuous relationship with the Sanhedrin. Josephus tells of the way in which Herod began his reign with a massacre of Sanhedrin members.³⁰ As a result, he likely cherry-picked trusted members he felt he could trust to handle the matter related to the supposed new king.³¹

Matthew made frequent reference to “the chief priests and scribes” in his gospel. He consistently represented them as being individuals who possessed a head knowledge of God’s Word while being devoid of a heart knowledge of the Lord. He frequently condemned the two groups for their spiritual blindness and stubbornness. For rebukes of the scribes in Matthew’s gospel, see Matthew 5:20; 7:29; 20:18; 23:2, 34; 27:61. For rebukes of the priests, consult Matthew 16:21; 20:18; 21:15, 23, 45; 26:3, 14, 47, 59; 27:1, 3, 6, 12, 20, 41, 62). Matthew was intentional to depict both the chief priests and scribes as being instrumental in the death of our Lord (Matthew 20:18; 27:41). The spiritual blindness of the two groups, along with their hard-hearted willingness to participate in Herod’s scheme, stand as a warning for the spiritually interested folk of all generations. All are always in danger of having a head religion that is devoid of heart transformation. Ryle has said, “Let us all be aware of resting satisfied with head knowledge. It is an excellent thing, when rightly used. But a man may have much of it, and yet perish everlastingly. What is the state of our hearts? This is the great question.”³²

In Matthew 2:4, Matthew depicted Herod as interrogating the chief priests and scribes. He said, Herod “...asked them where the Messiah would be born.” In the original language of the New Testament, the verb translated “asked” appeared as an imperfect tense verb. The verbiage ported Herod as repeatedly quizzing his subjects. He had a lengthy discussion in which he sought to understand Jewish tradition concerning the birth of the Messiah.³³

The fact that Herod had to ask for information concerning the Anointed One’s appearing reveals that the man was a nominal Jew at best. Most Israelites were well-astute in the basics of Messianic promises. Herod, however, did not know enough Scripture and tradition to know where the Messiah would be born.³⁴ The murderous king stands as a lesson concerning the need for a thorough understanding of Scripture.

Verse 5

Matthew shared the response of the chief priests and the scribes to Herod’s interrogation, saying, “‘In Bethlehem of Judea,’ they told him, ‘because this is what was written by the prophet’” (Matthew 5:5). In responding to the king, the men used technical language that was used for referencing Scripture — “was written.” They employed a fulfillment formula similar to one Matthew used in Matthew 1:22-23. The gospel writer took aim to depict Jesus as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy on a number of occasions in his writing.³⁵

The response of the Sanhedrin members revealed that the men had a strong knowledge of Scripture. They were able to quickly cite two different Hebrew prophecies related to the Messiah’s birth. However, despite their knowledge of God’s Word, they were blind in other matters. Commenting on the spiritual condition of the men, Charles Spurgeon said, “Some men may become well instructed in their Bibles, and yet be all the worse for what they have discovered...like these scribes, they know much about the Lord Jesus, and yet have not heart

³⁰ Robertson, 17-18.

³¹ France, 88.

³² Ryle, 9.

³³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 3.

³⁴ Blomberg, 63.

³⁵ Blomberg, 61.

toward him...May it never be my case, to be a master of Scriptural, geography, prophecy, and theology, and yet miss Him of whom the Scripture speaks!"³⁶

Verse 6

Matthew 2:6 contained quotations of both 2 Samuel 5:2 and Micah 5:2. The chief priests and scribes used a common Hebrew teaching technique from the first-century world. Oftentimes, rabbis melded numerous passages of Scripture together into one quotation through a technique known as "a competitive quotation." Through such a teaching method, one demonstrated the way multiple passages of Scripture conveyed one major theological truth.³⁷ The original readers of Mathew's gospel would have understood that the chief priests and scribes were using such a method in response to Herod.³⁸

On top of the melding of two passages, we also see a degree of variation in Matthew's quotation of Micah 5:2. It seems he purposely depicted the chief priests and scribes as replacing Micah's reference to "Ephrathah" with "Judah." He used, as was common in his day, a sort of poetic license in reciting ancient prophecies. His intent was to emphasize the fact that Jesus was of the royal tribe from which the Messiah was expected to come.³⁹

The reference to Messiah as a "shepherd" was significant. It referred to the spiritual leadership the Messiah would provide. In the immediate context of Matthew 2:1-12, the title set Jesus apart from Herod. For first-century Jews, the term "shepherd" was used of gentle pastoral care marked by compassion.⁴⁰ Matthew meant to show that Jesus was not a cruel, dictatorial tyrant like Herod.

In Mark's gospel, a similar picture is provided. In the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Mark spoke of Jesus by saying, "When he went ashore, he saw a large crowd and had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then he began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). Mark's account of the feeding came right on the heels of the narrative that told of how Herod had John the Baptist put to death (Mark 6:14-29).

Both Matthew and Mark portrayed Jesus' ministry at His first coming as being centered on spiritual care for spiritually helpless people. In first-century Judea, many were looking for a political emancipator. Even Jesus' disciples were obsessed with such things (Mark 14:47; Acts 1:6). Most missed the clear references in Hebrew prophecy to the Messiah's spiritual ministry (Zechariah 10:3; Jeremiah 10:21; 23:1; 27:6; Ezekiel 34:2-3). When Jesus came to Earth, He fulfilled such prophecies. He made it His mission to meet the spiritual needs of God's people. Though many shepherds had failed to faithfully lead God's people in Israel's history, Jesus donned the role of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-14). It is for this reason that the author of Hebrews called Him "the great Shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20). It is also why Peter called Jesus "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Peter 2:25).

Most first-century Jews were ignorant of the fact that Messiah would engage in such spiritual shepherding at His appearing. They were too fixated on political aspirations to think about such things. Maybe the chief priests and the scribes referenced the Messiah's spiritual leadership when talking to Herod for a reason. Perhaps they wanted to divert his attention away from possible political threats, alleviating his concerns. It could be that they used a form of trickery with Herod while secretly hoping that the magi's announcement was a precursor for the downfall of Roman domination. Whatever the case, Jesus role as the Good Shepherd was

³⁶ Spurgeon, 10.

³⁷ Ross, 18.

³⁸ Blomberg, 64.

³⁹ France, 88.

⁴⁰ Blomberg, 64.

confirmed by their pronouncement. Because of the incarnation and the First Coming of Christ, God's people can say with David, "The Lord is my shepherd; I have what I need" (Psalm 23:1).

Verse 7

Hearing the response of the chief priests and the scribes, Herod called a secret meeting with the magi. The Bible says, "Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared" (Matthew 2:7). It seems Herod didn't trust the members of the Sanhedrin. Perhaps he believed they secretly hoped the newborn king was the Messiah. Maybe his genocidal plot of Matthew 2:16-18 had already been hatched in his mind. Whatever the case, Herod had a plan. He didn't trust local leaders and he sought a way to enlist the foreign magi for his purposes.

Verse 8

Herod dispatched the magi, giving them strict orders concerning what he wanted them to do. Matthew 2:8 says, "He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him.'" The original language of the New Testament employed several imperative mood verbs in verse 8. The intent was to portray Herod handing down multiple commands with a sense of urgency.⁴¹ The word rendered "search" was one that meant "to examine" or "to inquire." It implied a "careful examination."⁴² Herod's dictates to the wise men might have seemed presumptuous and awkward, since the foreign magi were under no compulsion to obey the king of Judea.

After issuing out commands, Herod expressed a desire to worship the newborn King himself. Obviously, the man's motives were insincere. Though he professed that he wanted to worship Jesus, he actually wanted to kill Him. One has said that Herod's words contained "a bald-faced lie."⁴³

Verse 9

Scripture does not tell us if the wise men responded to Herod's commands in any way. Matthew simply continued his narrative by saying, "After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was" (Matthew 2:9). By reading between the lines, it appears that the wise men saw through Herod's duplicitous tactic. They had no intent on following his commands. They kindly dismissed themselves from his presence and went on their way, searching for the king their ancestors had spoken of for years. Understanding the magnitude of ancient prophecies and the astronomical signs they had seen, the magi departed on a fervent quest to find the newborn king. Unlike Herod, they wanted to truly worship Jesus.

As the wise men went on their way, they once again saw the cosmic sign that had previously led them. The original language of the text used a Greek word that was often translated "behold" in older English translations of the New Testament. The word was an imperatival exclamation, drawing attention to a great sight or event.⁴⁴ The language dramatically depicted the star as reappearing. Though it had previously disappeared for a period of time, it reappeared to light the way to the new king.

Matthew said the star "led" the wisemen "until it came and stopped above the place where the child was." The original language of the text uses an imperfect tense verb; thus, it depicted a continual action in the past. One could literally translate Matthew's words as

⁴¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 3.

⁴² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 3.

⁴³ Blomberg, 65.

⁴⁴ Glasscock, 56.

meaning, “the star was going ahead of them.”⁴⁵ In saying that the star “stopped above the place where the child was,” Matthew employed an aorist tense verb. Such language indicated that the star came to rest permanently for a period of time over the house where Jesus lived.⁴⁶ From Matthew’s description, it seems that the “star” was some type of comet-like appearance in the sky. It originally guided the men as they traveled from the East to Jerusalem, but disappeared temporarily during their discussions with Herod. As the men launched out from Jerusalem to find Jesus in Bethlehem, the star reappeared and progressively guided them until it permanently positioned itself over Jesus’ house for a period of time.

Ultimately, however, there is a degree of mystery concerning the exact nature of the star. One has said, “Various attempts to link the star with different astronomical phenomenon, especially for purposes of dating (e.g., a comment or a conjunction of planets), prove interesting but are probably irrelevant.”⁴⁷ Plain and simple, we can’t really know all that was involved with the appearance of the celestial body. All we know is that the Lord used some means in the sky to direct the magi. We should have faith that the Lord, the Creator of all things, can work in such ways according to his will. One has said, “God is quite capable of providing any phenomena he desires to accomplish his purpose. What is clear is that the star was not like any other star.”⁴⁸

Verse 10

Matthew 2:10 described the wise men’s reaction to seeing Jesus, the long-awaited King: “When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy.” The magi’s joy at the sight of the star over Jesus’ home should not be overlooked. Consider the fact that the men had just had audience with Herod the Great, one of the greatest monarchs in the world. Herod was a close friend and confidant with the Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar (also known as Octavian). Herod was also a close friend of Cleopatra and Antony, two other powerful individuals in the first-century world. It is remarkable that the magi did not express joy in Herod’s presence, yet they were overcome with joy when they arrived at Jesus’ home.

It would not be farfetched to conclude that the wise men were in the long line of faithful believers who were led to faith in Christ because of the ministry of the prophet Daniel. Some would conjecture that Nebuchadnezzar came to Christ because of Daniel’s influence (Daniel 4:34-37). Like the famous king of Babylon, the magi of Matthew 12:1-12 had been justified by faith just as Abraham had in Genesis 15:6. They understood God’s promise concerning the Messiah, so they were filled with joy at the opportunity of meeting the promised redeemer face to face.

From Luke’s gospel, we learn that such joy at the appearing of the Messiah is something available to all of humanity. When an angel of the Lord announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds in a field, he said, “Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). It is for good reason that the New Testament often encourages Christians to be people of joy. Paul told the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). Peter said, “Though you have not seen him, you love him; though not seeing him now, you believe in him, and you rejoice with inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8).

⁴⁵ Glasscock, 56.

⁴⁶ Glasscock, 56.

⁴⁷ Blomberg, 65.

⁴⁸ Glasscock, 56.

Verse 11

Upon entering the house in which Jesus was staying, the magi personally saw the Redeemer and worshipped Him. Matthew said, "Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11). Notice that Jesus was not in a stable or a manger, outside of an inn, as He was in Luke 2:7. By this time, Mary and Joseph had likely found some sort of temporary housing in Bethlehem.

The word for "worshipped" in Matthew 2:11 was often used of the homage reserved for a king or an earthly potentate.⁴⁹ Note that no worship was given to Mary. Matthew mentioned her in his narrative (Matthew 1:18), but he never depicted her as being worthy of veneration. Jesus was the one worthy of worship. The magi's worship of Jesus was a fulfillment of Psalm 2:10-12.

In saying "they opened their treasures," Matthew likely meant to depict the wise men as opening fine, ornate boxes. Such receptacles were used to carry precious gifts to dignitaries.⁵⁰ Inside of their boxes, the magi carried "gold, frankincense, and myrrh." The giving of such gifts could have been a fulfillment of Psalm 72:10-11 and Isaiah 60:3.⁵¹ In addition, Jewish readers of Matthew's gospel would likely have remembered the way the Queen of Sheba travelled from afar to present gifts of gold to Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-12). Matthew's account once again depicted Jesus as the rightful heir of David's throne (Matthew 1:1-17).

Frankincense was a "white resinous gum obtained from several kinds of certain trees in Arabia."⁵² Myrrh was of similar substance. Both were used for various medicinal treatments. They were also employed as ointments and perfumes. Some make much of the fact that myrrh was given to Jesus at His crucifixion (Mark 15:23). Through the gifts of the magi, maybe there was a foreshadowing of the way in which the king would die for sins.

However, it is probably best to regard the gifts as an indicator of Jesus' kingly nature. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were often associated with royalty in the ancient world.⁵³ In our text, the gifts depicted Jesus as being the king of all creation (Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 6:15). They contrasted Him with Herod, a godless king who rejected the will of God.

Another important thing related to the magi's gift concerns the value of such things. Perfumes were often reserved for the upper levels of society in the ancient world. Common people typically could not afford them. Joseph and Mary would have never have dreamed of possessing such things. Jesus, in accordance with Hebrew prophecy (Isaiah 53:2), was born into a poor and humble estate. As we will see in later passages from Matthew, Jesus and His family would soon have to flee their homeland because of governmental injustice (Matthew 2:13-23). Such a flight from their land would have undoubtedly produced great financial hardship. Maybe the Lord providentially planned to provide for Jesus' family through the magi's lavish gifts.⁵⁴ The Lord is always faithful to meet the needs of His people (Matthew 6:25-33; Philippians 4:19).

The response of the wise men beckons us to examine our own lives. Do we truly worship Jesus? Are we presenting ourselves as living sacrifices for His glory? True worship will always cost us something. The wise men presented Jesus with costly gifts. We may not

⁴⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 3.

⁵⁰ Glasscock, 57.

⁵¹ France, 89.

⁵² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 3.

⁵³ Blomberg, 65.

⁵⁴ Spurgeon, 11.

present precious ointments and metals to the Lord. However, the lesson remains — true worship will always exact some sort of personal cost. We should ask ourselves whether or not our efforts at discipleship, prayer, world evangelism, stewardship, and service within the church are characterized by any real sacrifice.

Verse 12

Matthew closed his account of the magi's visit by saying, "And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route" (Matthew 2:12). The warning of Matthew 2:12 was directed toward the wise men, not Jesus' family. A subsequent angelic visitation would warn Joseph to protect Jesus from Herod (Matthew 2:13). The warning for the wise men revealed that Herod indeed planned to kill the men on their return to Jerusalem. After receiving divine revelation, the magi returned home, but "they returned to their own country by another route." That is, they likely travelled along coastal roads to return to the East, avoiding roads that went through Jerusalem or heavily-populated cities like Jericho.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Glasscock, 57.