

A Regal Response to Holy Light
December 20, 2020
Matthew 2:7-15

Our Bible Study lesson considers the Wise Men and their visit to Bethlehem. The story starts with Matthew 2: 1-6, which introduces the Wise Men. Matthew has nothing to say about the circumstances by which Mary and Joseph happened to be in Bethlehem. We must rely on Luke for that. They must have lived there in Bethlehem for quite a while, as we shall see. Bethlehem of Judea was, of course, the town of David the great king, and by Jesus's time was primarily known for that. It was an agricultural town about five miles south of Jerusalem, and a likely source of agricultural produce that fed that city.

Matthew next introduces the "Magi" (plural of Magus, the singular). The Magi were originally a tribe of Medes. The Medes were a people from what would now be northwestern Iran, who were allies of the Persians when the Babylonian empire was overthrown, just before the end of the Jewish Exile. The Medes tried to overthrow the Persian empire, but failed. The Magi subsequently abandoned pursuit of political power, and became a tribe of priests, very much like the Levites were among the Israelites. In Persia, no sacrifice could be offered unless one of the Magi was present. They were skilled in philosophy, medicine, and natural science (especially astronomy and astrology). Later in the east, the word Magi referred to the Zoroastrian priestly caste. The word Magi also was used of astrologers and magicians more generally.

Even after the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great, the Magi continued. After the various Greek empires that followed Alexander fell apart, the Romans established themselves in Palestine. The Parthian empire arose in Mesopotamia, the heartland of the former Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires. The Roman Empire never conquered the Parthians. There was conflict. Palestine was in the frontier zone between the two empires that included, as well, Syria. Palestine was particularly important as a barrier to Parthian penetration into Egypt, a breadbasket of Rome and an important strategic asset.

So at the time Jesus was born, Magi were wise men, priests, and royal advisers to the Parthians. The word later came to also refer to those of a lower sort who practiced soothsaying, or other forms of magic. Hence the term "Magician," derived from "Magi," for those who practice magic. The singular "Magus" is

encountered in the story of the magician Simon Magus in Acts 8:9-13. Magi traveling as a delegation to a king is not unique to Matthew. As an example, in A.D. 66 a delegation of Magi from the Parthian Empire paid homage to the Roman Emperor Nero in Naples before returning home by another route.

Matthew does not give the number of Magi, or their names. That all comes from later traditions. Early on, there were thought to be twelve. The number three is likely derived from the three gifts mentioned. The names Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar are from even later tradition.

The Magi came to Jerusalem seeking He who was born King of the Jews, for they had seen “his star” in the east, and had come to worship him. The Babylonians, millennia before these particular Magi, but from the same part of the world, deserve credit for being the original astronomers. We still see their influence in there being sixty seconds in a minute and sixty minutes in an hour. There are 360 degrees in a circle. All these go back to Babylonian mathematics and astronomy. From the point of view of the ancients, the dome of the heavens over the earth included fixed stars which never changed position, a background against which wandering stars, including the sun and the moon and the known planets, would move. Remember, the idea that stars were at all sun-like was inconceivable; they were way too small. The dome of stars continued to rotate around the earth, as did the sun and the moon, with remarkable regularity; they were utterly predictable. At least, until something extraordinary happened, like a nova, comet, or eclipse.

But planets didn't just move across the fixed dome of the heavens; they sometimes did so irregularly. Normally the planets beyond Earth, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, take a position slightly further eastward each day, as seen from Earth. But very occasionally the planet stops and moves backwards, in a “retrograde” manner, before again stopping and continuing to move towards the east against that fixed field of stars. (The inner planets, Venus and Mercury, alternate between being visible in the early morning and early evening.) All of these heavenly bodies rise in the east, as the Magi mention in verse 2. Of course, the actual phenomenon is that the Earth rotates to bring these heavenly bodies into view. Eventually Ptolemy devised a model that could reasonably well account for the peculiar movements of the planets as observed. As they moved on circular paths around the Earth, they orbited around a point on that circular path. It was only the better precision of instruments and measurements many centuries later that definitively established that Copernicus's model, with the planets circling the Sun, was better.

In antiquity, there was (in astrology and similar beliefs elsewhere) the thought that one's life was in some way governed and made predictable according to the star under which one was born. One such star was Regulus, the "king" star, in the constellation of the lion. The planet Jupiter was in conjunction with Regulus (aligned with the star as seen from earth) in 2 A.D. That may have been the phenomenon the Magi saw, and in it, read the meaning they brought to Jerusalem. There was also a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C. in Pisces (the constellation associated with the Jews), and a massing of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars all in Pisces the following year. In 11 A.D. there was a visit by Halley's comet. Chinese and Korean records show a tail-less comet or "bushy star" (possibly a nova) in 4 or 5 B.C. We can but speculate which of these, or some other, astronomical phenomenon was recognized by the Magi as having such great significance.

Next we meet Herod, Herod the Great as he was known. Herod ruled Judea and most of Palestine from when the Romans appointed him as governor in 47 B.C., and King of the Jews in 40 A.D., to reign until 4 B.C. He was part Jewish, part Idumean. He was not in any sense chosen by the Jews to be their King. He did "great" things, like the rebuilding of the temple on massive scale, and "awful" things, like the execution of his wife, her mother, and three of his sons. He didn't hesitate to kill anyone whom he considered a threat to his power. The Roman emperor Augustus famously said that it was safer to be Herod's pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*), a play on words in Greek. As Herod got older, he became more and more arbitrary and ready to kill on large scale. As his death approached, he had the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges. He ordered that at the moment he died, they were all to be killed. He intended that at least some tears would be shed when he died. (Barclay does not mention whether these orders were carried out.)

It is completely in character for Herod to want to kill this new threat to his throne. It is surprising he didn't send assassins to accompany the Magi. Maybe that would not have been diplomatic. Since Bethlehem is so close to Jerusalem, Joseph and Mary must have fled to Egypt very soon after the Magi's visit, before Herod had a chance to do what he soon did. As we read, he had all of the male children under two years old in or around Bethlehem killed. Since Bethlehem is a small town, that might have meant 20 to 40 children, something that would not necessarily have been noted by Josephus or others writing about Herod, considering his other atrocities. Only Matthew tells us of the slaughter of the Innocents.

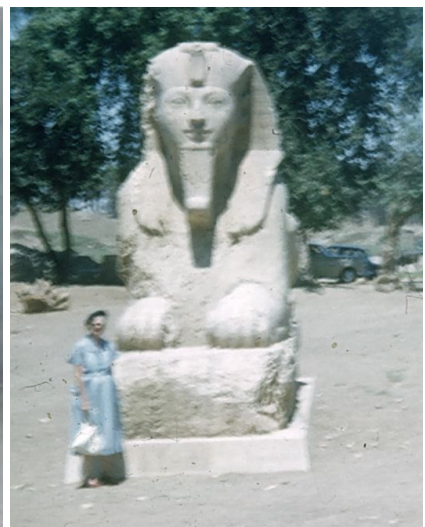
The word translated as “worship” in verse 2, and later “worshipped” in verse 11 was also used in Greek for doing homage to a king. Of course, in antiquity, Kings also assumed god status, as for Pharaoh in Egypt earlier, and Caesar in Jesus’s time. The gifts brought by the Magi are appropriate precious gifts for a king. The gold, frankincense and myrrh have been associated with Jesus’s kingly, priestly, and sacrificial roles, such as in the hymn “We Three Kings.”

Four times in two chapters God communicates through dreams. In today’s passage, in a dream the Magi are “warned” to go home by a different way rather than report back to Herod. The word “warned” is a Greek word that means, “instructed by an oracle.” Then, in the next verse, Joseph is told to flee to Egypt. The word “Arise” implies this happened the very night of the day when the Magi visited. It seems likely that Herod had spies following these visitors, and they would make the trip back to Jerusalem to report within a few hours.

I’d like to share a famous picture that I think speaks to the suddenness of this turn of events, from Jesus being honored as a King, to refugee status fleeing just ahead of executioners. This one is especially meaningful to me because of the photo of my grandmother next to that same sphinx. My grandparents visited Egypt and the Holy Land (then part of Jordan) on their way back from the Belgian Congo upon retirement in 1956.



“Rest on the Flight” Luc Olivier Merson, 1879



Katie Smith in Egypt, 1956

Eventually, Herod the great died. He willed control of Judea to one of his sons, Archelaus, and the area that included Galilee to a different son, Antipas. Archelaus, as “Ethnarc” of Judea, was, if anything, worse than the original Herod. He began his governorship by killing about 3000 of the most influential people in Judea.

Antipas was a better ruler, and it seemed safe to return to Nazareth. Joseph again received the news that he could return in a dream. By the time Jesus was twelve and his family visited Jerusalem (as told by Luke), Archelaus had been replaced by a Roman governor in 6 A.D. Governance directly by Rome (through a governor) would be the case until the destruction of Jerusalem, except for a brief interval 41- 44 A.D. when Herod Agrippa reigned as king.

So, I've filled most of my allotted 5 pages with just background! Yet there is still so much that can be said. One thing I will call attention to. That is, Matthew very frequently, and in several places in this narrative, cites passages from the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) where he sees prophecies fulfilled by the events he relates. If one goes back to the Old Testament and finds these passages, most directly concern events of that earlier era. The prophecy is presented in Matthew as if it was a prediction of these events in the life of Jesus, with no acknowledgement that the original context was different. That's the case, for example, of the prophecy mentioned last week, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive a son ..." The context was the lifting of the siege of Jerusalem in King Ahaz's day. In modern scholarship, doing this would be considered deceptive. But, that was not at all the case in Matthew's day. This was a normal practice, and can be seen in the writings of Philo and other writers of the day. The prophecies, in effect, get dual use. First in the original context, then later concerning Jesus. So it is with verse 23. The prophecy perhaps is that of Judges 13:5 (concerning Samson), or perhaps Isaiah 11:1 (the shoot from the stump of Jesse). In both cases the word "nazirite" (for Sampson) and "shoot" (from Jesse) are words phonetically similar to "Nazarene" or "Nazorean," meaning someone from Nazareth. In fact, Nazareth is never mentioned in any ancient records (prior to the New Testament). Matthew's use of, or substitutions for similar words, was also considered acceptable practice in that day. These are tools that he used to communicate with his listeners, tools that they understood. Methods that, in our adoption of the gospels as canonical, we accept.

So, I have spent all this time looking at this one story, as if looking at one star with a telescope. Pause. Step back. Consider the majesty of the whole firmament. This is just the beginning. It is one little piece, an important one, of the full story of God's saving grace extended to humanity. That story pivots around the birth of a baby, and then who that baby becomes. Let us give thanks in awe and wonder.

Note: I've used Barclay's Matthew Commentary and the *Interpreter's Bible* v.7 extensively as sources.

Prayer: *God of all nations, help us to remember that in your wide mercy you came to show love to all the peoples of the earth. Amen.*