

Worshipping Jesus in a Hostile World

Matthew 2

Turn to Matthew 2. We'll read that whole chapter today. Two kings, in Matthew 2, and two responses to Jesus. The riddle was to see if you figured them out. The two kings are Herod and Jesus. The two responses to Jesus are the wise men's response (joyful worship), and Herod's response (angry attack).

This sermon is called "worshipping Jesus in a hostile world." Let's read Matthew 2:1-2

2:1-2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Three characters here, let's introduce them. First, Jesus. All of Matthew 1 introduced Jesus. Most of chapter one was Joseph's genealogy. Joseph came from David's line, Mary's Joseph was Israelite royalty. Mary had a child, but the child did not come from Joseph, or any other man.

Mary's child came from God himself, by a miracle of the Holy Spirit. That is how Mary became pregnant. The angel told Joseph, "Joseph son of David, take Mary as your wife, and name the baby boy." In other words, the angel told Joseph to adopt Mary's baby boy. Joseph did so.

Jesus was God's son in any case. But Jesus was David's royal descendant only because Joseph obeyed. Joseph did obey, so Jesus was suitable to be the next king of Israel.

Herod. This is Herod the Great, who ruled Judah for about 35 years. He was not a Jew, he was an Idumean. He was crass and wild, also a great builder and architect; the Jews did not like him. He became king of the Jews because when young he had powerful Roman friends. At the time of Jesus' birth he was near the end of his life.

The Magi. Traditionally "the wise men," but that translation was criticized, so the NIV and others call them "magi," which is the Greek word exactly, it is a refusal to translate the word. But the word often meant people with special knowledge or information, which is pretty close to wise men, if you ask me. It could also mean sorcerer or wizard or magician, and Moses told them to avoid people like that. But Matthew respects them, so probably the more noble kind of magi.

These men come from the east, which would mean Babylon or that area, and they came to worship the great king of the Jews. When Paul preached at synagogues in Roman cities, there were usually Gentiles at the synagogue who had come to believe that the God of Israel was the true God, and they worshipped the God of Israel.

The Jews apparently welcomed this. Cornelius in Acts 10 is the most famous such person in the NT. The wise men seem to have been like Cornelius, worshippers of the God of Israel, and from the Jews they learned about the Messiah, the great king of the Jews.

And these men saw a star or planet or comet or some combination of these, and were convinced that the great king of the Jews had been born, and they came a long way to worship this baby.

2:1-2 - After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

These men come during the time of King Herod and ask around the city for the one born to be king of the Jews! It is already a remarkable situation. Are the wise men naïve? Might Herod feel threatened? Doesn't occur, it seems. Actually, perhaps they are a little naïve, more on that later.

2:3-6 - When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:⁶ “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

We can understand why Herod would be disturbed. He's not a Jew, and was certainly not born to be king. This baby is a threat. But all Jerusalem disturbed with him? This is puzzling. Jerusalem, however, never will be a good place for Jesus, it did not welcome him.

Matthew 1 is all Jewish. Jesus the real king of the Jews. In Matthew 2, however, the people of Jerusalem are disturbed about this birth, but Gentile magi worship him with joy!

Herod takes the magi seriously. He assumes a special baby has been born. It was common in the ancient world to connect an unusual light in the sky with a great ruler. The wise men were persuaded, and King Herod believed them that this royal baby was for real.

The wise men do not use the word “messiah,” just “born to be king of the Jews.” But Herod asks about the “Messiah's” birth. That is striking. Herod believes this baby is the Messiah, and that this baby will be born wherever the Scriptures say the Messiah was to be born, Bethlehem. And Herod believes that the baby was born when the star appeared to the magi.

2:7-8 - Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

Herod means no good by this. He does it secretly, wants no fuss. No one else seems interested!

2:9-10 - *After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.*¹⁰ *When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

The star apparently disappeared in between. When they were in Jerusalem, they did not know where to go. They had seen the star in the east, they said. But now entering Bethlehem it is back. I have no idea what they were seeing, that would lead them right to the house, like a gps. But some light from God took them where they wanted to go.

Their joy is worded as strongly as you could possibly say it, I don't know if the NT has its equal elsewhere. "They rejoiced with incredibly great joy" is how it reads in Greek. The reappearing star brought this out. It assured them that this truly was the royal child, and that God was with them on their journey, and God was bringing them right to the child.

¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

They brought three gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. From this the tradition says three wise men, but we've no idea how many wise men there were. It was a long and dangerous trip, I'd be surprised if only three. Don't know. Three gifts.

The point of these gifts is that they were royal gifts. In those days, these were noble gifts, fitting for a king. Jesus was indeed a king, and they treated him like a king. They bowed down, and they worshipped, and they gave kingly gifts.

When we bring our offering to the church, and put our gift in that box, we are doing the same thing. In the ancient world, when you visited a king, you brought a gift from what you had. This is still true when people visit heads of state.

When we put money in the offering, we are honouring our king by bringing a gift to our king, God himself. This is as meaningful a part of our worship, as their gifts were to their worship. We can't compete with their gifts, but we bring what we have. As they did.

I'm guessing the wise men had to dig deep into their funds for all this. Imagine yourself riding on a camel from here to Calgary to give a king a royal gift, and then you'll turn around and ride back. If you're doing all that to honour a king and bring a gift, it'll be the best gift you can take.

So, they go into a house, probably a little house, probably crowded with all them, they see the child and Mary, they bow and worship and they give their gifts. Visit a bit? Probably. Spend the night in a hotel, where a dream tells them to avoid Herod, and the next day they head back to Babylon.

This little unit is has a sort of rhythm in Greek that English could do but does not. I have omitted some words to make the structure clearer:

2:10-12 ¹⁰Seeing the star, they rejoiced with great joy;
 ¹¹And coming into the house, they saw the child with Mary;
 And falling, they worshipped him;
 And opening their treasures, they offered him gifts;
 ¹²And being warned in a dream, they returned another way.

That’s called “worshipping Jesus.” I hope you understand that we are doing the same thing they did. We celebrate the birth of Jesus. We have Advent candles and readings, to count down the Sundays. We read careful these Scriptures that teach about his coming. We sing “O come, all you faithful, O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.” “Joy to the World, the Lord has come.” “O come O come Emmanuel.” We offer gifts to this king, as the wise men did.

This is not unique. Most churches are doing these things. In Matthew 2, there are two responses to Jesus: one, let’s worship him. Two, let’s destroy him. They are both real, and there are not other choices.

Now the story gets nasty. The magi head home, and we learn about Herod.

2:13-15 - *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”*

¹⁴ *So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

Almighty God protects his Son. How? By keeping his Son one step ahead of trouble. He tells the wise men to take a different road home. He tells Joseph to leave for Egypt, right now, in the middle of the night, and stay there.

2:16-18 - *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸ “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

Herod was furious about the wise men avoiding him. The historians tell us that in his later years, “furious” was a common state. It is a tragic story. I want God to save those babies too, as well as baby Jesus, but God has other plans. We have four OT quotes in this story: the birth in Bethlehem, the return from Egypt, the weeping mothers, and settling in Nazareth. Matthew is teaching that none of this is random. This is all going according to God’s plan.

Can you think of any other time in the Bible when an angry king killed baby boys? Pharaoh, when Moses was a baby. Both Moses and Jesus were in danger from the same kind of king.

Both were saved by their parents, with God's help. Jesus found safety in Egypt, Moses also, in Pharaoh's own household. Matthew tells this part of the story mostly to show the parallel between Moses and Jesus.

Jesus is the Messiah, but he is also the new Moses, as he is also a Prophet and a Priest.

2:19-23 - After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt²⁰ and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

We might have thought that once Herod was dead all would be well. Not quite. Herod is not the only ruler who would be a danger to Jesus. Joseph brought child and mother back from Egypt, but he was still afraid to live in Bethlehem, only 6 miles from Jerusalem.

God agreed. Joseph had a dream that warned him off Judea, so he went to Galilee, 60 miles north, the town of Nazareth.

We think our Christmas manger scene is the biblical story of Jesus' birth. But we have made it sentimental and quaint by ignoring big chunks of the story. Notice: a bit earlier, Joseph was ready to permanently separate from pregnant Mary. That was surely a heartache for them both.

Then, a powerful king plots to kill baby Jesus. God warns the wise men of danger. Twice God warns Joseph of danger. They get up to flee in the middle of the night. Ten or twenty young mothers watch soldiers execute their toddler sons.

And that, my brothers and sisters, is just as much the biblical Christmas story as our tender manger scene. In that hostile world, the wise men rejoice and bow down, they worship and offer gifts. The Christmas story is not the only part of our faith that we have read selectively like this; we enjoy the pleasant parts and ignore the frightening parts.

And then, when hard life happens to us, as it always does, we are more lost and perplexed than we need to be, because we have avoided the Scriptures that would have strengthened us.

That's not the real call today though. The call today is to imitate the wise men

Matthew 2 tells of two responses to King Jesus. We get a hint of Herod's dark response at the start, when he's troubled at the news of a royal Jewish birth. Then we get the story of these mysterious foreign worshippers who bow to Jesus and give kingly presents to Jesus.

Then Herod's response takes over. The wise men, with joy, plan to worship Jesus; Herod, with anger, plans to destroy him. God intervened, Herod failed to destroy Jesus.

Thirty years later, Jerusalem rulers again tried to kill Jesus, and that time, by God's will, they succeeded. Though God raised Jesus back to life. The book of Revelation, near the end, describes a scene where the kings of the earth gather their armies to fight Christ himself.

We worship Jesus, as did the wise men. The rulers of earth would prefer to destroy Jesus, and there are always many people who follow them. Imagine our Prime Minister, or the American President. If Jesus returned to earth, would these leaders say: "Lord Jesus! So glad you're back! It's all a mess! Show me the way!" Would any head of state **now on earth** respond that way?

If Jesus came back now, and the world's national leaders thought they had a good chance together of destroying him rather than submitting to him, they would gather their armies now to fight Christ himself. And if the people thought there was a real chance to destroy Christ once for all, many people would volunteer for those armies. I'm talking about now.

We are not talking about rulers persecuting *believers*. How do the rulers of earth respond to *king Jesus himself*? That's the question. At the beginning of Jesus' life, and at the end, they wanted to destroy him. It will happen again at the end of human history. Herod is not just the bad one among a good batch. Herod is typical.

Matthew wants us to know that this is the kind of world Jesus was born into, and this is where we worship. The wise men worshipped Jesus in that world, and so then and now do many others, and so do we. In quiet ways, God still keeps working so that worship can keep happening. So we will worship him faithfully until he returns.

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Amen.