

LEARNING BASIC BIBLE STUDY METHODS

An Inductive Guide to the Study of the Bible,

Using the Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 2

THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN

Matthew 2:1-12

(Note: This is the second lesson in this series on learning how to study the Bible. To begin the series in the proper order start with the Introduction and proceed through the lessons in order.)

The very next passage in the gospel after the report of the birth of Jesus records the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem. The account is short and straightforward; but it does include a reference to an Old Testament prophecy which will be important in the interpretation. The story essentially tells of the homage of these “Magi” to the one who was born king of the Jews. But it is a story that is tightly connected to its context; it not only builds on the information revealed in the previous passage about the birth, but it also lays the foundation for the crisis to follow.

At the outset it will be helpful to explain the historical sequence of the narratives. This is because a lot of traditional teaching on the visit of the wise men puts the event a little later, when Jesus was a year or so old, probably because of Herod’s desire to kill the children two years old and under. But we know that Herod died in the spring of 4 B.C., and since the wise men come to Herod to find out where the king was to be born, the visit must have been shortly after the birth of Jesus. Herod probably set the age of two years old in order to be sure he killed the one who was to be king, thinking that the wise men had been traveling for some time. So the sequence would be: Jesus was born somewhere late 5 B.C. or early 4 B.C., the wise men showed up in early spring, and Herod the Great died shortly after have the children slaughtered. For chronological details like this, see Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company).

Reading the Text

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

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ 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 be the shepherd of my people Israel’.”

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

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On 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 and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Observations on the Text

The story falls into several parts: the arrival of the Magi looking for the new-born King of the Jews (vv. 1, 2), the answer from the prophet Micah on where the king was to be born (vv. 3-6), the attempt of Herod to have the Magi report to him (vv. 7,8), and the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem where they worshiped the child and presented their gifts (vv. 9-12).

If you are looking at the sentences in these sections, the structure is pretty simple. In the first section, in verses 1 and 2, the main sentence is “Magi came . . . and asked The first two clauses tell us this was after Jesus was born and during the time of Herod. The rest of the section is the direct quotation. As noted in the last lesson, this quotation is the most important interpretive

part of the first section: “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” Their arrival in Jerusalem would have caused a stir; but the reason for their coming would have sent Herod and his court into a panic.

In the second section (vv. 3-6), the clauses that advance the story are these: [Herod] was disturbed and all Jerusalem, he asked (the priests and scribes) where the Messiah was to be born, they told him it was in Bethlehem because of the prophesy of Micah. Here the quotation from Scripture is the basis for their answer to the king, as well as Matthew’s confirmation in this section that Jesus was indeed this promised Shepherd of Israel.

The third section is simply the scheme of Herod (vv. 7 and 8). But note again it simply says that Herod called them [the Magi] to find out the time the star appeared, and then sent them to Bethlehem. But what is added to his action is the direct quotation that they should inform him where the child was. This, of course, God would prevent them from doing, for Herod’s intent was evil.

The final section (vv. 9-12) is simply a narrative report that draws the story to a close: they went on their way, the star went ahead of them, they were overjoyed, they saw the child and Mary, they bowed and worshiped, they presented their gifts, and then they went home by another route—because they had been warned in a dream. In this section the individual acts will have to be explained.

The Subject Matter of the Story

It is clear enough to see that the story traces the quest of these Magi to find the one who was born king of the Jews. They arrive in the palace, they receive directions, they are “coached” by the king, they visit Bethlehem, and they do homage to the child.

What this all means will depend on understanding who the Magi were, but an initial guess would lead you to the idea that they are important people from the east who are acknowledging that Jesus is the promised king. The narrative then underscores the truth that Matthew is presenting, that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and that this truth was a real threat to the reigning king because he was evil but a source of joy to the nations.

But there is more here than a visit to a child who would be king someday. These Magi worshiped him. That was the intent of their coming. And so the narrative also reminds us that this child Jesus was far more than a future king. Only if He is divine could He be worshiped.

And this makes us aware of the primary “mover” in the story, God. He is not specifically mentioned, but the presence is obvious. The “star” had guided the wise men to Bethlehem. The prophecy had recorded exactly where Messiah should be born, and the dream warned them to return home a different way. Without this divine intervention they would never have come, the

scribes would not have known where to send them if they had arrived, and they would certainly have fallen into Herod's trap without the warning. The supernatural element moving in the lives of the Magi is the true cause of their actions.

Defining Terms and Identifying People

So who were these **Magi**? We should say at the outset that the tradition that these men were three kings, and that their names have been preserved for us, has no foundation in biblical history at all. Here again you could check out the facts in a good Bible dictionary, looking under "Magi" as they were called. You will probably find that these were a priestly caste of very wise men from Mesopotamia, somewhere in the east, perhaps Persia or Babylonia--we are not told. They were famous for their learning, and for their wisdom. They were very interested in astronomy/astrology; when they observed the movements of stars and planets they carefully recorded everything they saw. Anything out of the ordinary was taken by them to be some kind of an omen. Now they had seen a star that could not be identified.

How then did they know to come to Jerusalem? The straight answer is that we do not know, but can only speculate. These types of wise men were diligent to discover what signs and omens meant. And if they had recourse to the holy books of Israel, which they very well could have had in the east since Babylon remained a center of Jewish studies, they might have come across the prophecy of Balaam, an early prophet from the east who had predicted that a star would march forth in Israel (Num. 24:17). It may be that they saw the phenomenon, searched their collections of books, talked to various scribes of the different religions, and learned that Israel was the place. If they had inquired about it further, they might have discovered that this one who was to be born would be special, worthy of worship. Then, when they came to Israel, where would they have gone looking for a king but to the palace?

Of course it is also possible that the Lord simply revealed these things to them when they saw the star, and then confirmed the revelation when the star appeared over the house where Jesus was.

Now then, what about **Herod**? This is Herod the Great, who ruled from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. Any study of Herod will immediately show that the man was a ruthless and paranoid tyrant. He would easily kill his own sons, or one of his wives, or the high priest, if he thought any of these were in any way conspiring against him. And so the thought of a king being born was an immediate threat. Especially if it was the promised Messiah, the king of the Jews. Herod, you see, was not Jewish. He was Idumaeon--an Edomite, a descendant of Esau and not Jacob. He had tried to ingratiate himself to the Jews by marrying into the Hasmonean family (the line of Jewish kings [the Maccabeans] that had reigned for a hundred years), and by building the temple in Jerusalem. But he could not be trusted; and he himself trusted no one. So if you learn a little more about this character you will appreciate more why he and his court were thrown into a panic. There could

also be a little history behind the disturbance as well, for the wise men may have come from a land that was antagonistic to Rome, and so their visit raised a lot of questions.

A short word about the **house** may also be helpful, primarily because of traditional pictures and scenes of the wise men, the shepherds, and the animals all gathered around the manger. Most people realize that such a grouping just puts all these elements of Christmas together. But if you have time to trace through some of the material, there is some clarification. The Bible traditionally used the English word “inn” for the birth narrative--there was no room in the “inn,” so they had to go to the stable area. Bethlehem was a very small community; it would not likely have had an “inn,” at least not in any sense that we today have. It seems that there is a good bit of evidence to suggest the word refers to a “cave-home” type of dwelling. People often lived in caves, and expanded their building out in front of the cave. Inside the cave-home the few animals they possessed would be kept way in the back in the cave, or down in a lower level of the cave, to keep them from wandering off; and the people would live and sleep in the room or rooms at the front. When Joseph and Mary came to the town it was all very crowded because all the relatives were there to be taxed. And when they came to the lodging, perhaps the home of a close relative, the sleeping places for guests as well as family were all taken. There was no room--except in the back where the animals were. While this seems to us a shame, in some ways it would have been better for Mary--it was at least private and warm. After Jesus was born, there was probably more room in the house proper since the people who came to be taxed would have left. So the Magi could come to the house and find Mary and the child in the living quarters.

But the critical word to define in this story is the word **worship**. They came to worship Jesus. And after they received confirmation from the Bible and from the Star, they knew this was of God, and so they came and worshiped him. The word for worship in the text does not help us much in knowing what they thought, what they said, or what they did. But a general study of acts of worship would lead us to conclude that they bowed down and worshiped him because they believed he was divinely sent or even divine. Perhaps they considered him another divine monarch. We do not know. But the passage emphasizes that they received the sign from heaven, heard the word from Scripture, were led to the exact place by the star, and naturally bowed and worshiped him. Worship includes submission, adoration, and homage. The evidence of their worship came in the gifts they gave, gifts fit for a divine king.

By recording this event Matthew certainly has in mind that the natural response to Jesus is not simply homage as to a king, but worship to the Lord of heaven and earth. The picture of Messiah will continue to grow with each successive narrative.

You might also want to consider why **gold**, and **incense**, and **myrrh** were brought to Jesus by the Magi. Biblical commentaries often see symbolic meanings in the specific gifts; they say that gold was a gift for a king (but in the Old Testament gold was also the proper setting for the sanctuary where God dwelt among His people), the incense was for deity (as the sacrifices in the Old Testament were sprinkled with it), and the myrrh was a preparation His suffering. Matthew makes no such points out of the gifts, and so we should be cautious about reading something into the text that has little support elsewhere in the Bible. It is easy to get carried away with symbolic interpretations--but you must learn not to do this unless there is some pretty good support for it. There is a lot of symbolism in the Bible, and so if the items were well known symbols (like oil, or

the dove) you can do something with it; or, if the text itself makes something of it, that too is the basis for doing it. But there is little that is convincing for the symbolic interpretation of these elements--they are used in too many ways in the Bible. So we probably should simply say that these were costly gifts, and so they were certainly appropriate for a king. They speak of the homage of the Magi. And, they would have been welcomed by Joseph and Mary who were very poor.

The Old Testament Citation

The scribes and teachers of the law knew exactly where Messiah was to be born, for they knew the Scripture very well. The scribes probably had most if not all of it memorized. The prophet Micah foretold that from the little town of Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, there would come the ruler who would be the Shepherd of Israel.

If you go back and read a bit of the context of Micah 5:2, say from 4:6--5:5, you will see that the passage is concerned with the announcement of the Babylonian captivity and the death and destruction that will accompany the invasion of the land. But the prophecy quickly advances to tell how God would later deliver Israel from the oppressing nations. He would one day bring from this least-expected place of Bethlehem a ruler. Here we learn something of the way prophecy is written: they have the details of the prophecy exact, but they do not clarify when these events will be fulfilled. In fact, there may be centuries between the fulfillment of one verse and the next. The prophets seem always to begin with announcements of doom and judgment, and end up with the regathering and glorious culmination of history in the coming of the Messiah. They knew the events, and the sequence; we now know the time involved between some of the events.

Well, in the time of Herod the Great the Babylonian captivity was ancient history, but the people were still under the domination of foreign powers, now the Roman Empire, and they were still longing for one who could champion their cause and throw off the bonds of Rome. The Bible prophesied that Messiah would come and be such a champion, delivering the people from oppression and bringing in an age of peace. I suspect that Herod soon realized that the setting in his day was right for the prophecy to be fulfilled. But he was not the king who would fulfill any prophecy--he was not a righteous man, not even a Jew.

If you read closely in Micah 5:2 the prophecy also tells us something else about this ruler: “whose origins [lit. goes out] are from of old, from ancient times [days of eternity].” This final section of the verse by itself could be given a couple of different interpretations; but when put together with other prophecies about the Messiah, it becomes clear that it reveals that Messiah was pre-existent, that He had an ancient history of activities before “coming forth” in Bethlehem. Micah was somewhat contemporary with Isaiah, and Isaiah said this king would be “Everlasting Father” (Isa. 9:6). Later, Daniel would see this “Son of Man” in heaven receiving kingship from the Ancient of Days, clearly revealing that the Messiah was sent into the world (Dan. 7:9-14).

Here we learn something about the way the New Testament draws on the Old Testament. These folks knew their Bible, especially the parts that told of the coming of Messiah. When they quote a line from the Old Testament, they intend their citation to be a link to the context. They are not simply proof-texting; they are using a key verse from the passage to show that the fulfillment has begun to unfold. By recording the answer of the scribes to Herod, Matthew has reminded his readers that Jesus is this promised Messiah who was to be born in Bethlehem, and that His “goings were from everlasting.” This is why in Matthew’s view it was fitting for the wise men to worship Him.

Now there are some other Old Testament passages that are significant for the interpretation of this chapter. But since Matthew does not mention them, you would have to work a little harder to find them. A good commentary on Matthew might include them; if not, you would have to read up on Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. We are here concerned with why these Magi from the east come to look for Jesus and worship Him, and why they bring treasures to Him. In other words, what is the significance of this whole event?

Isaiah 49, a prophecy about the restoration of Israel after the captivity, begins to focus on the image of the “Servant of the LORD” for its revelation. Isaiah’s use of the “Servant” has several levels of meaning, but ultimately the “Servant” in the relevant passages (Isa. 49--53) refers to the Messiah. According to Isaiah 49 the “Servant” not only will restore the fortunes of Israel (which means in this chapter the “Servant” cannot be Israel, not in the final analysis), but will also be a light to the nations, to bring salvation to the ends of the earth (v. 6). Ultimately this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In verse 7, then, it adds that kings and princes will bow down before this chosen one, this Servant. The idea of homage from the nations is repeated in verse 23. It is likely that the complete fulfillment of these predictions of the homage of kings and princes to the Servant of the LORD will be at the end of the age (see also Isa. 52:15). But at the first coming of Jesus, there were token events, previews of that ultimate homage, that made it clear that Jesus was the one to whom this adoration and homage would come.

Isaiah 60 also predicts how in the Messianic Age the glory of the LORD will arise and cover the land. And at that time nations will come to the light, and kings will be drawn to the brightness (v. 3). And the wealth and the riches of the nations will be brought to the city of the Holy One (v. 5). The gifts of the Magi probably are a foretaste of that great homage to come at the end of the age, showing that this child is the one to whom all homage is due.

New Testament Correlation

No other gospel account has this narrative of the wise men visiting Jesus. And so we have to look into the rest of New Testament literature to see if there is anything that will contribute significantly to this. There is not a great deal that we can find that is exactly the same in its teaching, but if we look for the theme of homage to Jesus, that opens up several passages.

Philippians 2:10 and 11 might come immediately to mind (since we looked at it in the last lesson). Because of the wonderful salvation that Jesus has provided for us, God has highly honored Him, and given Him a name above every name, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” There could hardly be a more comprehensive statement about the future homage to be paid to Christ.

In the Book of Revelation we read about those in heaven who lay their crowns before Him and acknowledge that He is worthy to receive all the glory and honor and power and wealth and praise (see Rev. 4:10, 11; 5:9-14). So what the Magi do here is a little preview of what everyone will do in the future, bow before Him as Lord and King.

In view of this, the psalmist advises the kings and rulers of the world, as well as their subjects, to “kiss the Son, lest He be angry in the way” (Ps. 2:10-12). Kissing the Son is the way one would bow and do homage to a king; it would indicate submission to the kingship of this Son, whom we know to be Jesus the Messiah (read the whole psalm). Those who are wise, the psalmist says (note we are dealing with the wise men in this passage), will do that before the Son, this Messiah, comes to judge the world..

Well, you can spend as much time in these related passages as you wish. But you can see from a brief survey of a few related passages that the story of the Magi fits into an important part of the plan of God. It gives a little picture of what is yet to happen; but it also instructs people to submit to Christ as the wise men did in paying homage to him.

Conclusion and Application

So this brings us to the conclusion of the study. What we want to do now is to try to state briefly what this passage is revealing to us about the plan of God in Christ Jesus. We would probably say that it reveals the proper response to the revelation about Jesus is one of faith and worship. It does this by telling the story of the wise men who responded to whatever revelation God had given them by coming to look for Jesus, and when they found Him they worshiped Him. The story does not get into any major theological discussions about Jesus, or about worship; but it does hint at all these things through their actions and through the prophecy of Micah, and through the response of Herod.

One of the ways to develop an application (the “so-what”) of a passage, is to try to identify with the humans in the story. You will find in most stories the action works on two levels, what the Lord is doing, and what the people are doing. The Lord is doing something because of what the people are doing, or the people are doing something because of what the Lord is doing (which is the case here). By identifying with the people in the story, you can draw some lessons.

Well, in this story we have Herod. He certainly represents the response of the unbeliever to the news of the coming of the Messiah. He wants to know about it, but is not interested to go four and a half miles to see for himself. In fact, he is more concerned that the presence of the Christ will interfere with his power, with his position, with his lifestyle. The world is filled with people who like Herod want to know, but are not actually looking for the One who will save people from their sins.

But there are the wise men, the focus of the story. The primary application would call for identification with these men. In other words, the way of faith looks for God's provision of a Savior, and finding it in Jesus, submits to Him and worships Him, even though it may not yet be clear how it will all work out. Over and over again the gospel will call for faith; but as the passages unfold it will be clear that faith in Jesus will be well founded.

Bible Study Methods

And just a review now of some of the Bible Study Methods we have been using to look at the first two passages:

1. Start by laying out the structure of the story so that you can follow the story line but also see how the story explains the important things with quotations and explanatory verses.
2. Try to determine the subject matter of the story--what it is actually about. This will be done easily by noting the subjects and verbs of the sentences that advance the story line.
3. Do a little bit of research to find out what key words mean, or who the participants of the story might be.
4. Connect the passage to Old Testament and New Testament passages that may actually be referred to, or that may refer to this passage, and see how those verses in their contexts provide the information to make a full interpretation of the story.
5. Use the human participants in the story for models when forming lessons, models of either belief or unbelief. This will help identify the point of the passage.