

Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction

- A. We remember that the theme of Matthew is *fulfillment* (**notice the five fulfillment passages in the first two chapters of Matthew [1:22-23; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18, 23]**). Matthew wrote his gospel for Jewish Christians in order to assure them that their new faith was in perfect harmony (continuity) with their Jewish heritage and the faith of their ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David). The Jewish Christians were being accused of being traitors to their Jewish heritage because of their faith in Jesus and their membership in the church. But Matthew writes to show that it is only through faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah (and therefore as a member of the Messiah's church) that anyone will ever truly experience the fulfillment of all of God's promises to Israel.
- B. To this point, Matthew has said nothing about where Jesus was born. Obviously, if this was just a history/biography, Matthew would have already said something about this. In fact, there are many things Matthew would have included that he never bothers to include (compare with Luke)! Matthew clearly has an agenda. He is systematically pursuing his theme of fulfillment. Only because he is now switching to another area of fulfillment will he now tell us where Jesus was born.

I. Verses 1-2

- A. "Behold" always tells us that something significant and noteworthy is about to happen. It may be startling and unexpected. "Behold" is always used to get our attention (now listen up!).
- B. The Greek for "wise men" is "magi". Magi were most often associated with sorcery and magic (Acts 13:6 – When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain **magician** [magi/wise man], a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus" [later known as Simon **Magus**]). Magi often functioned as pagan priests. They were astrologers who studied the stars for signs (a form of divination; cf. Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:9-14). They were men who had "secret wisdom" and knowledge of the future and so they were often advisors to kings. Even if these Magi were not involved in witchcraft and sorcery, their profession would have caused them to be ostracised and avoided by most Jews. They are from the east (likely from the city of Babylon in Persia), so it's very probable that they would have been familiar with some Jews and some of their Scriptures.
- C. The magi observed the rising of a new "star" and concluded in some way that it was related to the coming of the Jewish Messiah. Perhaps they had heard of the prophecy in Numbers 24:17 ("I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.") But who would have guessed that "a star shall come out of Jacob" would foretell the rising of an actual "star" in the night sky? Apparently, the *only* ones who would be aware of the rising of the Messiah's star in the night sky would be these Gentile magi who still watch the sky for signs! Who would have guessed that God would take the superstitious profession of these Gentile magi and use it to graciously reveal to them the arrival of the Jewish Messiah!
- D. "Came to Jerusalem... 'where is he...?'" – Where would you naturally go to find the one who has been born king of the Jews? To the capital, royal city of the Jews – Jerusalem! So

the magi travel to Jerusalem and when they get there, they ask: “*Where is he* who has been born king of the Jews?” Apparently, they have not yet been following any star! And if they have, then the star obviously led them to the “wrong” place. As of now, they have no idea where this new-born king might be. They have simply assumed – somewhere in Jerusalem. And they have also assumed that everyone would *know* about this royal birth.

- E. “Come to worship Him” – The magi certainly don’t understand that Jesus is *God* in the flesh. The word for worship here can mean to pay homage or to show appropriate reverence and respect to any human king. But that doesn’t *in any way* minimize the importance of what these magi are doing! These *Gentile magi* are acting in accordance with what they know. And what they know is that the king of the Jews has been born – the one who comes from God and of whom many great things have been prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures. The desire of these Gentile magi to pay homage to the king of the Jews is astonishing... it’s *unbelievable* – especially when he’s still a baby in his mother’s arms! What does it mean? And are we really supposed to believe that God has chosen to reveal to Gentile magi from the east the birth of the Jewish Messiah by means of their superstitious study of the stars?

II. Verses 3-8

- A. “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” We shouldn’t be surprised to hear that Herod *the king* was troubled (in distress and turmoil). What is surprising is to hear that “all Jerusalem with him” was troubled. “All Jerusalem” probably means the Jewish religious leaders – the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, etc. But why should they be troubled at the news of their own Messiah’s arrival – the one they profess to be waiting for and looking for?
- B. “And assembling... [Herod] “inquired of them...” The religious leaders know all too well what Herod is like. They know that if he finds the baby, Herod will kill the one who has been born king of the Jews. And yet perhaps all too eagerly...
- C. “They told him...”
~ Matthew 2:6 – 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.
~ Micah 5:2, 4 – 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... and he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD.
~ 2 Samuel 5:2 – In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, “You shall be SHEPHERD OF MY PEOPLE ISRAEL, and you shall be prince over Israel.”

It seems pretty obvious that Matthew has modified the answer that the chief priests and scribes gave to Jesus. He switches “the land of Judah” for the original “Ephrathah.” Why would he do that? Because he wants to emphasize that Jesus comes from the royal tribe. He fulfills the promise of Genesis 49:10 (“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.”)

And why did Matthew switch “are by no means least” for “are two little”? Micah said that even though Bethlehem was too little and insignificant to be among the clans of Judah, the Messiah would come forth from Bethlehem. The obvious meaning is that *once* the Messiah comes forth, Bethlehem will no longer be so insignificant. And since the Messiah has now come, Matthew quotes the prophecy in such a way that he shows it has already been fulfilled! Instead of: “You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, *who are too little* to be among the clans of Judah...” Matthew says triumphantly: “You, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, *are by no means least* among the rulers of Judah...”

In Jesus Christ, and in His birth in Bethlehem, the time of fulfillment has truly come! Indeed, Matthew is so exultant that he can’t help but *skip ahead* in Micah’s prophecy to the *idea* of a shepherd while actually *quoting* from Samuel where the Lord said that David would be shepherd of his people Israel. Why does Matthew do this? Obviously, it’s because he sees all of this fulfilled in Jesus who *said* “I am the good shepherd” and who indeed *was* and *is* the good shepherd! So even God’s simple statement to David that he would be shepherd of His people Israel (which we actually only hear from the mouth of the people of Israel), Matthew sees as a prophecy that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ!

Jesus has come to fulfill the entire Old Testament – not just the obvious prophecies, but the whole thing! He is all in all. The goal, the end, the culmination, the climax, the fulfillment, the *telos* of all things! And so the Jewish Christians are strengthened in their faith. They are encouraged to persevere in the midst of persecution. And we should be too.

III. Verses 9-12

- A. “After listening to the king, they went on their way” Alone? – Apparently none of the Jewish leaders had any interest in the birth of one who might be the fulfillment of their own ancient prophecies. As the magi go on their way, they know that their destination is now Bethlehem (that will be easy enough to find), but they have no idea where in Bethlehem the child might be. That’s why Herod had told them to “search diligently.” And that’s no doubt what the Magi expected they would have to do!
- B. “And behold” Matthew wants to get our attention. He wants to emphasize the fact that something startling and important and wonderful is about to happen. Something *amazing*.
- C. “The star that they had seen... where the child was.” The “star” that a couple of months ago had announced to these Gentile magi the birth of the Jewish Messiah now appears again and actually *guides* them to the very house in which the child lay! Earlier we asked if we were really supposed to believe that God has chosen to reveal to Gentile magi from the east the birth of the Jewish Messiah by means of their superstitious study of the stars! And now we see that not only has God announced the birth of the Messiah, He has sovereignly chosen to use the Messiah’s star to personally guide these Gentile Magi to the very house where Jesus lay! Behold! Be amazed! Wonder! And if that isn’t amazing enough, here is something almost just as astonishing.
- D. “When they saw the star, they [the *Gentile magi*] **rejoiced exceedingly** with **GREAT JOY**.”

- E. “And going into the house... by another way” This would *undoubtedly* remind Matthew’s Jewish Christian readers of a famous OT story – the Gentile queen of Sheba who traveled a very great distance to visit Solomon, the royal son of David in Jerusalem.

1 Kings 10:9-10 – [The Queen of Sheba said to King Solomon:] Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness.” Then she gave the king 120 talents of gold, and a very great quantity of spices and precious stones.

This event was so significant that later on, the prophets would use it as a model for the future glory of the Messiah:

Psalms 72:10-11 – May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; **may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him**, all nations serve him!

Isaiah 60:5-6 – Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; **all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense**, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.

Conclusion

- A. “Wise men still seek Him”

What does it mean when the Gentile queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon is “fulfilled” by the Gentile magi’s visit to the baby Jesus? What does it mean when these Gentile magi (like the queen of Sheba) are willing to travel a great distance to pay homage to the king, and (like the queen of Sheba) rejoice greatly in their discovery of the king? And what does it mean when the Gentile magi travel perhaps 800 miles to find the Jewish king, but the Jewish leaders won’t even travel five miles? What does it mean when the Jewish leaders are troubled at rumors of the Messiah and the Gentile magi rejoice exceedingly with great joy? What does it mean when God himself *chooses* the Gentile magi to be among the very first witnesses to the Jewish Messiah? What does it mean when God reveals to them, and *only* to *them*, the star of him who was born king of the Jews and then leads them personally to the house where Jesus lay? For that matter, what does it mean when of the four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (besides Mary), *all of them* are Gentiles?

Isn’t it beautiful? Isn’t it wonderful? It means that God is gracious and merciful to all, both Jew and Gentile, showing no partiality. The Jewish Messiah is not just the Messiah for the Jews. He is the Messiah for the Gentiles! Matthew’s Jewish Christian readers were being accused of abandoning their Jewish heritage by membership in the church, the new covenant people of the Messiah – a people in which there were Jews and Gentiles alike – with no distinction. But in this story, Matthew begins to show beautifully and powerfully that it was already prophesied in the Old Testament itself that one day the Gentiles would worship right alongside the Jews as equal heirs of all God’s promises. In fact, Matthew shows us here that what truly matters is not whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, but whether you joyfully seek after and worship the one whom God sent, Jesus the Messiah. And as we see from this story, a Gentile can just as easily seek after Jesus as can a Jew.

Later, Jesus will say to the Jews, “The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42). God shows no partiality. A child can seek after Jesus just as easily as can an adult – and sometimes he is the only one who does. The one who grew up in a non-Christian family and lived a life of blatant sin can seek after Jesus just as easily as one who grew up in a Christian family and lived a moral life – and sometimes he is the only one who does. The one who has never gone to church can seek after Jesus just as easily as the one who has gone to church all of his life – and sometimes he is the only one who does. The one who was a high school dropout can seek after Jesus just as easily as the one with multiple doctorates – and sometimes he is the only one who does. It matters not if you are poor or rich, black or white, male or female – God extends His grace to people of *all* different classes and groups. All that matters is that we seek Him in the person of Jesus Christ. All that matters is that like the Gentile magi we rejoice in the Messiah and worship Him – freely offering him not only our gifts, but our lives. The Gentile magi have shown us what it means to seek him – with diligence and perseverance, with joy and gladness, with humility and reverence. And the Scriptures hold out this word of hope to each one of us: “If you seek Him, He will be found by you” (2 Chronicles 15:2) – just as the magi found Jesus.

B. Gentile Magi still need Him

Genesis 49:10 – The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until **tribute** comes to him; and to him shall be the **obedience** of the peoples.

Psalms 72:10-11 – May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him **tribute**; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations **serve** him!

In the story of the coming of the Gentile magi, Matthew begins to show that when the OT prophesied the future subjection of the Gentile nations to the Jewish Messiah, this would not happen through military domination but through the changing of Gentile hearts into those that willingly seek after, rejoice in, and worship the Jewish Messiah.

Zechariah 9:9-10 – Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

It has always been God’s purpose that the Gentiles should rejoice in the rule of the Messiah no less than the Jews. So when God sends a star to bring Gentile magi to the Messiah, it foreshadows the very end of Matthew’s gospel when the Jewish Messiah will commission his Jewish disciples to “Go and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). We, too, need to be stars as we are constantly pointing people to the Messiah. In this way we, too, can be a part of seeing the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ. We can be a part of bringing in the day when all the nations will serve Him and bring him tribute.

Teaching our Children

- Q. Who were the “wise men” (magi) that came to Jerusalem seeking Jesus?
- A. They were Gentiles who watched the stars to try and understand the future (something that the Jews were commanded by God not to do!)
- Q. How would the Jews have felt about the magi?
- A. They would look down upon them and think of them as fools and pagans.
- Q. Who was it that revealed to the *Gentile* magi the star of the *Jewish* Messiah?
- A. GOD!!! This was God’s sovereign and gracious choice! (Talk about how surprising this would have been to the Jews!)
- Q. When the Jewish leaders heard about the birth of their Messiah, how did they respond?
- A. They were troubled and distressed. They didn’t really want the Messiah to come. They didn’t bother traveling five miles to look for Him (even though the Gentile magi probably traveled 800 miles to seek the Messiah).
- Q. Why is it important that Jesus was born in Bethlehem?
- A. Because the prophets foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. (See Scriptures under II. C.)
- Q. How were the magi able to find the Messiah?
- A. God graciously caused the star of the Messiah to lead the Gentile magi right to the house where Jesus was.
- Q. Unlike the Jewish leaders, how did the magi respond when they saw the star and found the Messiah?
- A. The magi rejoiced exceedingly with great joy, they fell down and worshipped Jesus, and they offered him precious and costly gifts.
- Q. When the Jewish Christians read this story of the magi, what Old Testament story would it have reminded them of?
- A. The story of the queen of Sheba. (see Scriptures under III. E.) Jesus is the fulfillment of this story!
- Q. Did the Jews have any right to look down upon the Gentile magi?
- A. No! (see Matthew 12:42) What matters is not whether we are Jew or Gentile, children or adults, fast learners or slower learners, rich or poor... the only thing that matters is seeking Jesus. God shows His grace to *all* different kinds of people.
- Q. The Gentile magi showed the Jewish leaders (and all of us) how to truly seek after Jesus. If we want to follow their example, how will we seek after Jesus?
- A. We will seek after Jesus with diligence and perseverance (the magi traveled 800 miles!), with joy and gladness (the magi rejoiced exceedingly with great joy), with humility and reverence (the magi worshiped Jesus and offered Him their gifts).
- Q. If we truly seek after Jesus, will we find Him?
- A. YES – just like the magi did. (See 2 Chronicles 15:2)

Read Genesis 49:10 and Psalm 72:10-11 under Conclusion B. and discuss how the coming of the magi is a picture of the fulfillment of these prophecies.

- Q. How can we Christians be a part of bringing all the nations to serve the Messiah and bring Him tribute?
- A. We can be bright stars that lead others to Jesus through our words and our lives.