

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Matthew 2:1-6

It's mid October, you have to know that the Christmas decorations will soon be put up everywhere. Christmas sales will start soon, and all the holiday activities will in full swing. Still over two months to go. And here I am preaching from the beginning of Matthew's gospel here in October, when our obvious subject matter is the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As for myself, I enjoy the Christmas season, but please don't think I'm trying to rush things by preaching from these early chapters of Matthew. This passage is not merely part of the familiar traditions of our culture, but it is the infallible word of God.

Yet the tradition is so familiar. Three wise men from the east. Of course, the tradition so often gets it wrong, compared to the actual words of the Bible. For example, nowhere in the Bible do we find the definition of three wise men. There are three gifts offered, to be sure, but there is no inspired record of three and only three men. And even more egregiously, the familiar traditions all have those three wise men dutifully attending to the baby Jesus as he lies in the manger, surrounded by the animals as well as the shepherds. But our text, verse 11, tells us that the wise men went to the house where Jesus was living with his mother Mary. We also know that when Herod wanted to be sure that Jesus would be killed, he ordered all the boys two years old and younger to be killed, "according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men," as we read in verse 16 of this chapter. So the wise men didn't come to the manger, they didn't come to see a newborn infant, and we don't know that there were only three of them. Further, the familiar song, "We Three Kings of Orient Are..." adds further layers to the myth, for there is no biblical indication that they were kings. And I won't even mention

the foolishness of ascribing actual names to these men.

So let's move on from mere traditions to the text of Holy Scripture. Actually, we don't know much about the men themselves. We know they are from "the east." Whether that is from the area of the Medes and Persians, or from Babylonia, we don't know for sure. The priestly class among the Medes and Persians certainly were known for an interest in a study of the stars, and that could well be a connection. There is a Iranian linguistic connection between the word for Magi as well, so that is consistent but still not conclusive.

The church father Origen, among others, link them to the Babylonians or Chaldeans, given references in the book of Daniel. One consistently faithful and thorough commentator simply notes, "in all probability [these Magi came] from either the one or the other of the two favored areas."

So what do we know about them? What is it that stands out with these wise men, or "Magi" in the actual Greek writing?

v.1-2

But that raises more questions, doesn't it? The details of how they came to know of the baby aren't revealed. Their ability to rightly understand the guidance of the star is also unexplained. And what was that star? Was it an actual, ordinary star or planet? How was it made to shine so clearly? In terms of astronomical descriptions, we simply don't know. Surely it was real, and not just a figment of their imagination, but the scientific details of how it became so evident are not given to us. All of which leads us to the obvious conclusion that the emphasis God intends for us to focus upon are the words, "they have come to worship him."

That's what we know. They came to worship Jesus. They

came to honor him with their lives, expressed by their gifts. Again, that same commentator, “Everything else is left out of the picture in order that the full emphasis may be placed on this one thing...We are not given a detailed description of the star. We are not told how the magi connected this star with the birth...These wise men, whoever they were, wherever they came from, came to worship him.”

I’ve said before that Matthew’s primary audience was Jewish, and the importance of these foreign worshipers is immediately obvious.

I. THE WISE MEN: JESUS WOULD BE WORSHIPED BY ALL THE NATIONS.

It wasn’t just the nation of Israel who would worship Jesus. These wise men represent the other nations, the Gentiles. So it is that,

A. The king of the Jews will be a blessing to all the nations.

That is so much a part of the gospel, isn’t it? This promise to the nations. It isn’t new, though, since it was embedded in the promise of the covenant right from the time of Abraham.

Gen. 12:1 “Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Paul quotes that in Galatians 3, with such significant theological importance, demonstrating that new Christian believers are not subject to the ceremonial Jewish laws as the ground of their salvation.

Gal. 3:7 “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”

The personal importance of this idea is evangelistic. Just consider what Peter preached after the healing of the lame beggar in Acts 3.

Acts 3:18 “But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. 19 Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, 20 that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, 21 whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. 22 Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. 23 And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.’ 24 And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. 25 You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’ 26 God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.”

All the families of the earth will be blessed in Jesus. And from his birth, from the very beginning of his incarnation, that was made evident by the presence of these wise men from the east. They came to worship him. That was God’s plan.

B. God makes Jesus known to all the nations.

v.2 “We saw his star when it rose...”

God made the star evident. God made the star visible. God made himself known to these wise men in the language they apparently knew so well, the language of astronomy, the language of stars.

Beloved, God makes himself known! When the light of the world came into the world, God made all the lights shine brightly. So let’s get away from the idea of “We three kings of Orient are...bearing gifts we traverse afar.” Let’s stick with the emphasis the Scripture gives to us, that the light of the world was made known to all the nations of the world.

As Paul puts it,

Col 3:11 “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

So what’s next?

v.3

What do we learn from Herod? Well, look at what Herod did? He gathered all Jerusalem with him. He seems to unify the Jews in their opposition to Jesus. So he used them for his own purposes, even as the Jewish leaders used him for their own purposes.

v.4

The reality of all of this is that while Jesus was being made known to all the nations, he was being rejected by his own nation, the nation of Israel. The invitation of the gospel to the whole world comes in the context of God putting an end to the unique

position which Israel held as the people of God in the Old Covenant. So Herod makes known to us that,

II. HEROD: JESUS WOULD BE OPPOSED AND REJECTED BY ISRAEL.

Now, Herod also gives us a means to put all of this into the historical narrative. Often called Herod the Great in historical records, he was described by the historian Josephus as “capable, crafty and cruel.” He was a great builder, but a cruel and bloodthirsty tyrant. Josephus also records that he died shortly after a lunar eclipse, which can be dated at the close of March or beginning of April in the year 4 BC. So a date around 5 BC for Christ’s birth may well be correct.

Surely such a wicked ruler cannot tolerate any threat to his rule, and the idea of a newborn king was surely such a threat. So he was troubled, verse 3, a Greek word that could be translated much more strongly in English. He was agitated and stirred up in a great way, and he joined himself with the Jews in this unholy alliance to capture and kill the Lord Jesus.

A. The unholy alliance between the Jews and the Romans.

Such a grievous alliance, the religious leaders of the Jews would reject Jesus, for he was a threat to their own power and influence. And the Roman rulers would do the same. That unholy alliance would become evident again at Jesus’ crucifixion, when those same to groups joined together to have Jesus put to death. But that time it is another Roman ruler names Herod.

Luke 23:6 “When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7 And when he learned that he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. 8 When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. 9

So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. 10 The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. 11 And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. 12 And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.”

So Satan uses all the means at his disposal to rid the world of Jesus. That’s what Herod’s part in this drama amounts to. But somewhat inadvertently, Herod also reveals to us a significant measure of,

B. The Old Testament awareness of Messiah.

Go back to,
v.4

You should know that word in three languages. English, it is the Anointed. Hebrew, the Messiah. And Greek, the Christ. Herod wanted to know where the Christ was to be born. He inquired where the Messiah was to be born. He knew there would be a Messiah, a ruler and a king, and that’s what troubled him so greatly.

Perhaps he had become familiar with the Psalm 2.

Ps. 2:6 “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”
7 I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” 10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all

who take refuge in him.”

Herod didn’t want to hear that! “Kiss the son!” He didn’t want to hear the threat of what would happen if he didn’t, for the promise was given to this Messiah, “You shall break [the nations] with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

The point is, though, that Messiah was known. The coming of Messiah was predicted. Christ was revealed by prophetic utterances. So Jesus’ birth was the fulfillment of all that God had planned and ordained for the redemption of his people. And we get one further testimony of that perfect plan by which God has made himself known in the flesh, through Jesus his son. Another prophecy. Another very specific prophecy which teaches us not only of the sovereign and preordained purpose of God, but also some important things about the identity of the Messiah.

The prophecy is of the little town of Bethlehem. And the emphasis is that Bethlehem is,

III. BETHLEHEM: A PLACE ORDAINED BY GOD.

v.5-6

So often will we read those words or something like them, “for so it is written by the prophet.” So often, in this gospel especially, will we see the validation and confirmation of God’s will and purpose by reference to the Old Testament prophets. So often will we encounter Jesus or be introduced to Jesus with the words, “that the prophets may be fulfilled.”

All of that shows forth the importance of believing in the infallibility of the whole of God’s word, of recognizing the inspired nature of all the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments. God spoke through the prophets, and since God’s word was true, the word of

the prophet was true. And Jesus is true, he is the eternal son of God come in the flesh, as God had planned and prepared from before the foundation of the world.

This is such an edifying theme to unfold in the study of Scripture, to see how all these specific prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus. Today, an obvious one. The place of his birth. A city name Bethlehem, of Judea, “for so it is written by the prophet.”

v.6

The prophet was Micah, a prophet who saw the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722. His writing alternates between words of warning and messages of hope. He writes of a royal deliverer who would save God’s people from all her enemies.

Micah 5:1 “Now gather yourself in troops, O daughter of troops; He has laid siege against us; They will strike the judge of Israel with a rod on the cheek. 2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.” Therefore He shall give them up, Until the time that she who is in labor has given birth; Then the remnant of His brethren Shall return to the children of Israel. 4 And He shall stand and feed His flock In the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God; And they shall abide, For now He shall be great To the ends of the earth; 5 And this One shall be peace. Judgment on Israel’s Enemies When the Assyrian comes into our land, And when he treads in our palaces, Then we will raise against him Seven shepherds and eight princely men.”

Bethlehem was a small city, only a mere cluster of small dwellings. There was nothing there to boast about. Nothing that would indicate strength or power. She was, indeed, very “little among the clans of Judah.” Unimportant. Insignificant. There

was nothing to show prominence among men. But there was a purpose in the plan of God. This insignificant little city who bring forth,

A. A ruler for God’s people.

But not just any ruler, one “whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” A ruler, ordained and preordained by God. A ruler coming from the city of David.

1 Sam. 17:12 “Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons.”

And remember how David was chosen. He wasn’t the oldest of Jesse’s sons. When Samuel came to Bethlehem in order to make known whom the Lord had chosen to be king of Israel, we read this,

1 Sam. 16:7 But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” 9 Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” 10 And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen these.” 11 Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.” 12 And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the Lord said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he.” 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah.”

Anoint the youngest, he is the one whom the Lord has chosen, for the Lord does not look on the outward appearance like a man. The Lord looks on the heart. So the one who was least in importance would be the ruler for God's people, the youngest of the sons of Jesse.

The youngest son from the little town of Bethlehem, a place ordained by God some 700 years before Jesus was born. And this connection with Bethlehem would continue to identify Jesus throughout his ministry. For example, John records the response of the Jews immediately after Jesus identified himself as the living water as he taught in the Jewish temple at the Feast of Booths. We read in,

John 7:25 "Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, "Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? 26 And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ? 27 But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from." 28 So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. 29 I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me." 30 So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. 31 Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?"

John 7:37 "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not

yet glorified. 40 When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." 41 Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? 42 Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" 43 So there was a division among the people over him. 44 Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him."

The Scriptures said that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, from the offspring of David. He would be a ruler for God's people. Not a great political or military conquerer, but a ruler nonetheless, a ruler in the line of David, coming from the city of David. He would be the ruler whom we studied this morning, the one who continues to rule now at the right hand of the throne of God. God has installed his King upon his throne.

But there is one more thing to know about Jesus. Not only would he be a ruler, but also a shepherd.

B. A shepherd for God's people.

One who would watch over the sheep.

v.6

This, too, was predicted by the Old Testament.

Psalms 23:1 "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. 3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

And this identity of Jesus becomes such a vitally important aspect of his identity in the New Covenant.

John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. 11 I am the

good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

You see, the little town of Bethlehem is important because Jesus came from that place, Jesus the ruler and Jesus the good shepherd. And tonight, you and I are called to do the very thing that those Magi came to do. They came to worship him.

And so I exhort you this afternoon—come and worship him, the shepherd of Israel. That's what this is all about. Come and worship him, the anointed Messiah and ruler of all God's people. Come and worship this one who was born. Worship the incarnate son of God, the second person of the trinity who came to us in the flesh.