

A Ruler Worthy of Praise (Matthew 2:1-12)

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When was the last time you read an article in the news entitled, “National leader rules with perfect integrity and wisdom” or “Reigning Monarch Never Failed His People”? If you stumbled across such a headline, what would you conclude? It’s a propaganda piece. It’s blatantly biased reporting. No ruler on earth is perfect. Every king in the history of the world is riddled with weakness and limitations.

You may invest your hope in them to the point of functionally worshiping them and demonizing their opponents! But at some point, the mirage will come crashing down. You will be disappointed. You may think they are a ruler worthy of your praise. Jas 3:2 has the final word: “For we all stumble in many ways.”

That stubborn fact, that reality without exception in the kingdom of men, makes King Jesus, in contrast, all the more amazing. He has no feet of clay. He’s perfect in all his ways. He has no weakness. His power is unlimited. He never stumbles or falls. He only does what is pleasing to God the Father. He is wiser than you will ever comprehend. He is more loving than you could ever imagine. And his sovereign control over the affairs of the kingdom of men is absolute.

Does his kingdom appear insignificant? Are his citizens mocked and despised? Do the kings and kingdoms of this world rage with all their fury against the Lord of Host and his Anointed? They have and will continue. But we must not take the mistrust and suspicion we often hold against human authorities and foist it on King Jesus as if he is no different, one more figure in a panoply of the fallen.

Unlike every other king, King Jesus is forever and always worthy of praise. And that’s what makes Christmas such good news. The King of Kings, the only Sovereign, the Ruler of the kingdoms of men, has come to us! He’s arrived! Matt 2:1-12 is a window into the royal identity of King Jesus and a study in contrast between those who oppose his authority and those who delight in his authority.

And it confronts every one of us with a critical question. Will you resist him or embrace him? Will you clutch the fleeting shadow of your kingdom? Or will you devote and abandon yourself to the kingdom of God? How are you going to respond to King Jesus?

1) THE INCARNATION IS A DIVINE INVASION OF THE KINGDOM OF MEN (vv. 1-2)

The events in the first half of Ch. 2 likely took place when Jesus was 1-2 years old, though we're not given an exact time. All we know is they took place "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea." The location points to Jesus' identity. Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David, the prototypical king of Israel. Judah was the tribe from which the Lord promised to raise up a royal deliverer, the long-awaited Messiah who would make everything sad untrue. The very location of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem of Judea, confirms Jesus' identity as God's Anointed Ruler.

But he wasn't born into a political vacuum. He was born "in the days of Herod the king." The Romans crowned Herod the Great king of Judea around 40BC. He was uniquely skilled at quashing uprisings, collecting taxes, and generally enforcing Rome's agenda, especially during the early and middle years of his reign. Toward the end, however, instability and strife characterized his rule, partly on account of trying to deal with 10 wives and 15 children.

Historian Melton Winstead describes his later years this way. "Herod became a paranoid tyrant, worried that he would lose his kingdom. The fortresses he built reflect this paranoia, as they provided refuge when he felt threatened." His behavior became increasingly violent. He executed two of his sons due to rumors of mutiny. He killed one of his wives and her parents.

It was during these very years of terror at the thought of losing his authority that a group of wise men or magi came from the east to Jerusalem. Magi were less than reputable figures in the early church. They were typically schooled in history, literature, astronomy, and spiritual arts of various sorts. It's not the sort of figure Matthew would voluntarily insert into the story unless, of course, he's simply reporting the truth.

Besides, they were Gentiles. The very first people Matthew records coming to worship Jesus are not part of the ethnic people of God. It's an anticipation of the Great Commission in Matt 28 where Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples of all nations! The wise men seem to have a basic understanding Jewish, messianic expectations because they show up in Jerusalem, the capital city, and ask (v. 2), "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose..."

Evidently, some sort of astronomical phenomena convinced them a great king had been born in the west. Jews were scattered around the known world by the first century. Perhaps the magi had heard of Balaam's prophecy in Num 24:17, "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." Scholars have developed all kinds of theories about the exact nature of the star. Ultimately, we know nothing more than what Matthew reveals. A light in the heavens convinced these men the Messiah or in Gentile parlance "the king of the Jews" had been born!

It wasn't a dispassionate scholarly quest. It was deeply personal. They came to learn about him. They came to "worship him." What brought them hundreds if not thousands of miles, requiring months of painstaking travel? A desire, a zeal, to honor and praise a worthy king they longed to meet. In so doing, they demonstrated the true depth of their wisdom.

In the words of Prov 1:7, wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. It always has. What made these men truly wise wasn't their knowledge of planetary orbits or ancient literature. It was the holy, God-given resolve in their hearts to worship King Jesus, though at this point, they don't even seem to know his name!

Remember, friend, what makes you truly wise. It's not how many languages you can program, how much money you earn, how many degrees you have, the polished character of your wardrobe, the witty words you speak or write. There is one thing and one thing only that separates the foolish from the wise. Do you fear the Lord? Is the governing passion, the ruling desire, in your life to know and follow hard after Jesus? Therein lies the difference.

Creation still sings of his glory, friend, calling us to join the magi in devoted pursuit of the King of Kings. Ps 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." Rom 1:20, "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." You don't need to track down a specific star. The entire cosmos we inhabit shouts of the royal majesty of our Creator, calling you to confess there is a God in heaven who is infinitely worthy of praise.

I'm sure there were many things the wise men didn't know about the Messiah. But they knew the most important thing. In the days of Herod, a day like our own where the kingdoms of men are ruled by immoral dictators, rebellious toddlers, sinners like us, the King of Kings broke in. Nothing outside of himself obligated God to do so. He had every right to let us languish in the sorrow of our disobedience, hating and

being hated, abusing our authority to advance the kingdom of me, running toward judgment. Yet in those days, our days, he's the king who intervenes. The incarnation is a divine invasion of the kingdom of men.

2) KING JESUS IS OPPOSED BY ALL WHO CLING TO THEIR OWN AUTHORITY (vv. 3-8)

Look at v. 3. "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him..." You have "Herod the king" in v. 1. The "king of the Jews" in v. 2. Back to "Herod the king" in v. 3. The conflict is palpable. Who's the real king? Who's going to be king? Whoever this king was, Herod didn't like him. Why not? Because he represented a threat to his own authority, to the autonomy of his kingdom.

Was "all Jerusalem" troubled with him for the same reasons? Did circulating reports of the magi's quest prick their conscience, disquieting hearts devoted to building their own kingdom? Or were they simply afraid of how Herod would respond to a perceived threat? The widespread opposition to Jesus among the Jews in Matthew's gospel suggests the former is in view, even if the latter is also historically accurate. Together, both this Gentile king and his Jewish people illustrate a very different sort of response toward the arrival of king Jesus than the magi, a response that indicts our own.

It's the age-old warfare that began in Gen 3. Will we worship God or try to be God? Will we submit to his authority, or will we assert our own? Will we rejoice in his royal rule, or contend against him? None of us are born welcoming Jesus as our King. Troubled is an understatement. We are naturally opposed to his kingdom. We want nothing to do with his reign because we are committed to our own. We come into the kingdom of this world embodying the words of Ps 2:1-3.

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.'"

That's not what "other people" do, friend. That's what we do. That's what you do. Our default OS is no different than Herod's. All sin, every failure to conform to the perfect law of God in act, attitude, or nature, ultimately boils down to an authority issue. Who will be the functional king of your life?

Know this. Christmas is not a symbol of whatever feel-good emotion you choose. Christmas is about a king, king Jesus, the King of Kings, who came to claim his own.

That *should* trouble you if you are resisting or ignoring his divine authority in your life. He brooks no rivals. He tolerates no coups. He does not participate in peaceful transitions of power from himself to you. He is your King. The depth of his commitment to his glory and your good compels him to vindicate his authority and establish his reign. You cannot prevail against the Lord of Hosts.

Herod certainly tried. He wasn't unfamiliar with Jewish messianic expectations. They longed for a deliverer who would rescue them from the very Roman authority Herod represented. The wise men's question resonated within his soul as an existential threat. A threat to his autonomy was at hand. It was Herod's worst nightmare. So he gathers the local specialists in messianic affairs in v. 4. Where is this "Anointed One" supposed to be born? They answer him with the words of the prophet Micah.

Listen to the original prophecy where v. 5 is found. Mic 5:2-5, "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. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace."

Micah spoke those words when the Jewish people were fast on their way to exile in Babylon on account of their refusal to obey the Word of God. But Micah promises that's not the end of the story. After the sorrow of exile, the Lord will deliver, restore, and purify a remnant for himself. He will bring salvation to his people – not through a spiritual guru offering an alternative path of personal fulfillment, but through a ruler, a shepherd-king, a man with the authority to care.

That's exactly what Jesus came to do. To establish his reign, inaugurate the kingdom of God, and bring wandering sheep like us home. Herod "the great" has nothing on this ruler. What does Micah say? He shall be great "to the ends of the earth." Peace was something Herod fought to maintain and was terrified of losing. What does Micah tell us is true of King Jesus? He is our peace. Peace isn't something outside of himself he struggles to maintain. Peace is who he is. It's found within him, enjoyed by all who humbly submit to his authority.

But we don't naturally look to God's authority to find peace. Where do we naturally think the good life is found? It's found in getting what I want, building my kingdom,

establishing my rule, and convincing everyone around me to submit to my rule! When you give your spouse the silent treatment after an argument, that's what you're doing. When you only seek counsel from "supportive" people who will agree with you, that's what you're doing. When you lash out in anger at someone who isn't giving you what we want, that's what you're doing.

At its core, a heart of unholy anger is a refusal to submit to God's rule. Anger says, "I want to rule. I must rule. I will rule. Just watch. And if you try to stop me, you will suffer the consequences." We assert our rule for altruistic ends as much as for manifestly selfish ends. "I'm only yelling at you son because I want you to stop disrespecting your mother!" A noble end doesn't justify a sinful means, friend. The sinful way I respond to my child's rebellion reveals my own.

There is only one ruler who will stand in the end. It's not you, or me, or the pastor you love, or the politician you hate. It's King Jesus. For the people of God, the royal reign of Christ is a tremendous comfort. His sovereign authority, cosmic rule, and unmatched supremacy are a joy to our hearts. Not so if you're trying to build your own kingdom on earth. Not so if the cry of your heart is, "My kingdom come, my will be done."

And lest you think I'm simply speaking to all the angry people or haters out there, consider this. Just because you don't feel like you're opposed to Jesus' authority doesn't make you innocent. Here's the test. Are you more interested in building your kingdom or his? Living for yourself or living for him? There is no neutral option. There is no Switzerland space where you are neither for Jesus nor against Jesus. No one can serve two masters. Either you are living in glad submission to his authority, or you are contending against his authority.

Matt 12:30, "Whoever is not with me is against me." Herod is all of us. Herod is Ps 2. Herod is why we need a Savior and why Christmas is such good news. Yes, King Jesus is opposed by all who cling to their own authority. But King Jesus is treasured by all who submit to his authority!

3) KING JESUS IS TREASURED BY ALL WHO SUBMIT TO HIS AUTHORITY (vv. 9-12)

After spinning a lie about his desire to "come and worship" the child, Herod sends the wise men off. He's not interested in worshipping Jesus. He wants to kill him! But though he appears to have duped the wise men, the Lord didn't stop leading them.

Have you ever been in a situation where unbeknownst to you, a human authority figure was using you for their own selfish ends? You were being taken advantage of and you didn't even know it. Take heart in the Lord's faithfulness to these men. Herod's sinister schemes didn't stop God from directing the course of their lives for his glory and their good.

You may be similarly duped, Christian. But if the ruling desire in your heart is to worship and follow King Jesus, God will not abandon or forsake you. He will direct you. He will guide you. He will care for you. V. 9, "After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was." The star brought them all the way home to God's place, no less than the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night led the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land of Canaan.

Remember, these guys were Gentiles! They were not people the Jews thought of as "deserving" of God's mercy or "worthy" of his favor. Yet they were the ones the Lord drew near. The "good people," the Jews, remained far off. Remember that friend, when you're tempted to disqualify yourself from experiencing God's favor. The issue isn't whether you've earned an audience with the king. The issue is whether you are willing to pursue him as your king. Jer 29:13, "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord."

When you do that, friend, when you seek the Lord as an expression of your devotion to him, know this. You don't need a star to guide you because you have something far better. You have the Word of God. The Apostle Peter witnessed the blinding splendor of Christ and heard the voice of God himself on the mount of transfiguration. He writes in 2 Pe 1:18, "We ourselves heard this very voice from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."

But then he rejoices that we have something far better than subjective personal experience to ground our faith and guide our pursuit of King Jesus. 2 Pe 1:19, "And we have the prophet word more fully confirmed (more certain than even our eyewitness experiences!), to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

What's the "morning star" in 2 Pe 1:19? It's Christ himself. And how does he lead us to himself? Through the gift of his Word! May we rejoice in the guiding light of the



Word that leads us home to Jesus no less than the wise men rejoiced in the star! V. 10, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."

Now imagine the moment. The wise men go into the house (v. 11) and they see the child with Mary his mother. They see him with their own eyes. They see one who created the stars. The one who in that very moment was sustaining their bated breath and beating hearts. The one who has reigned over the affairs of your life since the day you were born. That Lord, that King, was before them as a young toddler – subject to all the frailties of human flesh and at the very same time, fully and completely God.

Do you long to see him, Christian? One day you will. Rev 22:4, "They will see his face." The object of your longing. The goal of your journey. They were not disappointed, and you will not be either.

Think about all the ways the wise men could have responded. All the questions they could have asked. All the objections they could have raised. All the concerns they could have relayed. We all have our own lists of "why's" and "why not's." But the moment they saw him, it wasn't questions or objections or suggestions that came pouring out of their hearts. V. 11, "And they fell down and worshiped him."

That is the right response. That is the only response. That is what we were created to do. That's what Jesus has redeemed us to do, brothers and sisters. "Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh."

The gifts the wise men brought recall the very gifts the Queen of Sheba gave Solomon in 1 Ki 10. They point to the Lord's promise in Isa 60:5-6 of a coming day when the wealth of the Gentiles will be devoted to honor of the Messiah and his people. "The wealth of the nations shall come to you...They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD." They were gifts of tremendous value. And they're a picture of true worship.

True worship isn't about really getting into the singing on Sunday morning. It means taking the things that are precious to you, the things you care about – your time, your money, your skills, your relationships, your future, your weekends, your weeknights, and saying, "Lord, all of this. All that I have, all the gifts and blessings and treasures you have given me, I surrender to your priorities and purposes. It's all for you, God.

And here's where we must make a critical connection. Who was it who experienced the joy of treasuring Jesus? It wasn't Herod who clutched to his own authority. It was men who came with humble hearts, cheerfully embracing Jesus' royal authority. If you want to see Jesus, if you want to know the joy of his presence, the satisfaction of worshipping him, there is a requirement, friend. You must submit to his authority. Either you come to him as your King, or you do not come to him at all.

Some people say, "I might consider submitting to him if he proves he's worth it. But he has to make the first move. He has to meet my standards. Otherwise, I'm not budging." Friend, Jesus will not submit to the courtroom of your authority. The sight of his glory is reserved for the humble. For those who say through the power of the Spirit, "Jesus, you are my king, and I will gladly obey your Word, even when it's hard."

There is no other way to know him. There is no other way to approach him and live, friend. King Jesus is treasured (and only treasured) by those who submit to his authority.

CONCLUSION

The story ends with a remarkable glimpse of the prevailing providence of God. Herod laid an elaborate trap. The King of Kings sprang it with the simple gift of dream, warning these Gentiles to go home a different way.

There are times when the kingdom of God – his work in your life or his church – appears as small, vulnerable, and helpless as a 1-year-old child. But if it is sustained by the providence of Almighty God – the God who sees, the God who knows, the God who is intimately aware of every scheme of man – what can we know for sure? No power of hell can pluck us from his hand.

The Father guarded the life of his Son. If you are in Christ by faith, he guards your life too. Grant Osborne hits the nail on the head. "When people try to thwart the divine will, God intervenes supernaturally to overcome all such hostile actions."

He has not changed, my friends. He's still the King. So how will you respond? Will you oppose him, or will you submit to him? Will you contend with him? Or will you treasure him? You cannot change the fact that he is King. You can decide today how you will respond. Choose carefully.



Ps 2:10–12, “Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 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.”