Commentary and Lesson on Matthew 2:1-23

by Dr. Knox Chamblin


I. THE MAGI.

A. Their Identity.

Matthew calls them magoi, whence the Latin magi. Daniel refers to magoi in the Babylonian Empire (1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7). "In later centuries down to NT times, the term loosely covered a wide variety of men interested in dreams, astrology, magic, books thought to contain mysterious references to the future, and the like" (Carson, 85). Apparently this visit resulted from astrological speculation and the study of Jewish writings. They are said to have come "from the east" (v. 1b); this probably means from Babylon (cf. Jewish influence in Babylon from the Exile onwards). Their identification as "kings" can be traced back to the 3rd century A.D. (Carson, 85), and seems to have resulted from OT prophecies about kings coming to worship Messiah (e.g. Isa 60:3, "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising"). The tradition of "three kings" arose from the number of gifts they are said to have presented (2:11); we do not know how many magi came.

B. Their Mission.

This they state in the simplest terms: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east [better, at its rising; cf. NIV mg.] and have come to worship him" (v. 2). Matthew thus carries forward a twin theme introduced in ch. 1:
1. The **kingship** of Jesus. The magi speak of him not merely as one destined to become king, but as one possessing kingly status **at his birth** (cf. the Greek of v. 2; Carson, 86, 89). Accordingly, they come to **worship** him (the same verb recurs in v. 11).

2. The salvation of **Gentiles**. Whatever their home, these magi are Gentiles. In Mt they are the very first to worship Jesus the King (Matthew says nothing about the homage of Jesus' parents or of Jewish shepherds). Moreover, their zeal to worship the child (demonstrated by their long journey) stands in stark contrast to the indifference of the Jews (none of whom join them for the short trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem) and the hostility of Herod.

II. THE STAR.

A. **Its Nature.**

The Greek **astōr** is not restricted to what we call a "star"; it could be any heavenly phenomenon. The main suggestions:

1. A comet. But a comet crosses the heavens too hurriedly to be seriously considered.

2. A supernova. A "nova" is "a star which suddenly increases its light and energy output tremendously and then sinks back to relative obscurity" (Webster). This would happen to an extraordinary degree in a supernova. For this view, cf. Eric Mascall, *The Secularisation of Christianity*, 278 (he renders **en tē anatolē**, "at its flaring up").
3. A planetary conjunction. Johannes Kepler, a German astronomer (d. 1630), pointed out that in the year 7 B.C. there occurred "a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the zodiacal constellation Pisces [fishes], a sign sometimes connected in ancient astrology with the Hebrews" (Carson, 85). Moreover, this astronomical phenomenon occurs only every 794 years but in that year occurred no less than three times (in May, Sept/Oct, and Nov/Dec). Alfred Edersheim points out, in The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 1: 212, that the following year, 6 B.C., Mars joined the conjunction. Moreover, says Edersheim, "Kepler...also noticed, that when [in 1603-4] the three planets came into conjunction, a new, extraordinary, brilliant, and peculiarly colored evanescent star was visible between Jupiter and Saturn, and he suggested that a similar star had appeared under the same circumstances in the conjunction preceding the Nativity" (213).

When we add to the above (i) that Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., and (ii) that he orders the killing of "all the boys...who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (2:16), there is a fairly strong case to be made for this view.

4. A unique supernatural phenomenon. The star is an utterly miraculous phenomenon provided by God to herald the birth of his Son. This view can of course not be disproven. All suggestions must remain speculative; the evidence is inconclusive.

B. Its Meaning.

Far more important than the nature of the heavenly phenomenon, is its significance. NB that the magi speak of having seen "his star" - i.e. the one belonging to, or associated with, the "one born king of the Jews." This language strongly suggests that the magi had joined the study of the heavens with the study of the Hebrew Bible.
1. OT prophecies.  
   a. Num 24:17 (an oracle of Balaam): "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."  
   b. Gen 49:10 (Jacob's words about Judah): "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."  
   c. Isa 60:3 (and vv. 1-6): "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

   a. The kingship of Jesus. The star heralds the coming of Israel's King, the one in whom the prophecies of Gen 49:10 and Num 24:17 are fulfilled.  
   b. The salvation of the Gentiles. Gen 49:10 speaks of "the obedience of the nations," and Isa 60:3 of nations coming to Israel's light (and Num 24:17-18 speaks of the king's conquest of Moab, Edom, and the like). This is precisely what happens in Mt 2: Gentile magi are drawn by the star (light) of Israel's Messiah, and obey him by worshipping him.

III. THE PROPHECY.

We come to 2:5-6, and to its quotation of Micah 5:2.

A. The Original Meaning of the Prophecy.

1. The humiliation of Judah. The opening note of the passage (5:1-5) is ominous: "They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod." Assaults from Assyria may be included, but so also is the defeat of Zedekiah, the last of the Davidic monarchs, by the Babylonians (cf. 2 Kings 25, especially v. 7).

2. The restoration of the Davidic kingship.
a. Origin in Bethlehem. This town is significant, both because it was "the town of David" (Lk 2:11; cf. 1 Sam 16:1), and because it was small and insignificant ("though you are small among the clans of Judah," Mic 5:2).

b. Origin in the distant past: "whose origins are from old, from ancient times" (v. 2b). Some see here a reference to the ruler's pre-existence (thus G. Archer, NBC: R). It is much more likely that Micah links the coming ruler with past time, namely with the establishment of the covenant with the House of David (2 Sam 7:14-16; cf. Ps 89:34-36). In other words, he will come not to establish a new dynasty but to re-establish the old one.

c. The birth of the promised one. "Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth" (5:3a). Note the reference to the mother of the coming King. "This expectation is doubtless to be related to Isaiah's mysterious promise of Immanuel's birth" (L. Allen, NICOT, 345).

3. The character of the king's reign. We must view this in the light of the corruption of the kings of Micah's day.

a. Rule in Yahweh's name; i.e. Yahweh will rule through him: "He will stand and shepherd his flock [imagery fitting for a Davidic king] in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God" (5:4a).

b. A reign of justice and peace. "They will live securely" (5:4b; cf. 4:1-5, of life "in the name of the LORD," v. 5, i.e. life according to his law, v. 2).

c. Inclusion of the Gentiles. "for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth" (5:4c). Cf. Mic 4:2-3, on the
Word's going forth from Zion to the Gentile nations round about, the effect of which is the end of war among them.

B. Information for the Magi.

Micah provides the answer to the magi's inquiry. "Where," they ask, "is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (Mt 2:2). "In Bethlehem in Judea," the scholars answer (v. 5), on the basis of Scripture (v. 6).

C. The Theology of Matthew.

1. The applicability of the original meaning. In Matthew's portrait of Jesus, several aspects of the original meaning are pertinent (beyond the fact of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem): a. Jesus as fulfillment. His ancestry (1:1-17) links him to the establishing of the Davidic Covenant. b. The character of his reign (justice and peace vs. corruption and tyranny): cf. below on Jesus and Herod. c. The importance of the mother (cf. comments on 1:21-23). d. The inclusion of the Gentiles.

2. Matthew's shift of emphasis. Mic 5:2 reads, "But you, Bethlehem..., though you are small..." (the Hebrew might also be rendered, with Allen, "But from you..., home of one of Judah's smaller clans..."). In quoting the v., Matthew adds the adverb oudamōs: "But you, Bethlehem,...are by no means least..." (2:6a). Between Micah's writing the prophecy and Matthew's quoting it, stands the actual birth of the Davidic King. By virtue of His coming, Bethlehem has ceased to be the least significant among Judah's clans - on the contrary, she now ranks as the greatest.


A. Jesus and Moses.

As God appointed Moses to lead his people out of bondage, so he has appointed Jesus to save his people from their sins (1:21). As Moses' life was threatened by Pharaoh, so is Jesus' by Herod. As Moses' life is saved so that he can fulfill his appointed task, so is Jesus' - that he may accomplish the saving purpose for which God has sent him (namely, to give his own life, 20:28, rather than have it taken from him by the Judean king or the Roman emperor).

B. Egypt as a Haven.

Just as Egypt provided relief from famine for Jacob and his sons, so it provides Jesus and his parents protection from Herod's murderous design. This fits in well with Matthew's theology of the Gentiles: not only have Gentiles come to worship Jesus in face of Israel's opposition; now in face of a dire threat from the king of the Jews (though Herod himself was an Idumean), it is a Gentile land that furnishes sanctuary for Israel's Messiah!

C. Jesus and Jacob.

"And so [with Herod's death] was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son'" (2:15, quoting Hos 11:1). This is a counterpart to 1:22-23. (1) The introductory formulas are identical. (2) Here, as in 1:22-23, there are two stages of realization. God's call of Jacob his son (= Israelites, "the sons of Jacob") out of Egypt; and God's call of his Son the Messiah out of Egypt. Cf. earlier comments on Mt's use of "fulfill" (plēroō). Jesus comes to lead a new Exodus, to save his people from their sins (1:21).

A. The Original Meaning of Jeremiah 31:15 (Mt 2:18).

1. Sorrow over exiles. Rachel weeps "because her children are no more." The "children" in question are, or at least include, members of the northern tribes deported by the Assyrians (cf. 31:4-6, 9, 18-20); see Gundry, 36. The prospect of Babylonian exile (affecting Judah and Benjamin) may also be included (cf. 40:1-2, including the reference to Ramah); see Carson, 94.

2. Rachel and Ramah.

   a. The location of Ramah. Ramah is about five miles north of Jerusalem (J. A. Thompson, Jeremiah, NICOT, 573), approximately the same distance as Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem.

   b. The burial-place of Rachel. According to 1 Sam 10:2-3, Rachel's tomb was in Zelzah, near Ramah. Gen 35:16-20 reports that she died and was buried during a journey from Bethel (near Ramah) to Ephrath (i.e. Bethlehem). This happened "while they were still some distance from Ephrath" (35:16), or "while we were still on the way, a little distance from Ephrath" (48:7). So Rachel's burial has associations with both Ramah and Bethlehem.

   c. Rachel as Mother of Israel. Rachel did not mother as many sons as did Leah (Gen 35:23-24), but she was Jacob's favorite wife. She mourns over the loss of all of Jacob's offspring, those (in all probability) from both northern and southern kingdoms.
3. The context of hope. NB that the promise of return is given immediately after Jer 31:15. "This is what the LORD says: 'Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded,' declares the LORD. 'They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future,' declares the LORD. 'Your children will return to their own land'" (31:16-17). Then 31:31-34 speaks of the time when Yahweh will make a "new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (v. 31), in which their sins will be forgiven (v. 34). Rachel's mourning will be turned into joy.

B. Matthew's Meaning.

1. The emotional factor. Israel's present anguish (as expressed especially by the mothers of the slain babies) is just as intense as was her anguish over the exile of northern and southern tribes.

2. The geographical factor. Given the close association between Ramah and Bethlehem in the circumstances of Rachel's death, it is fitting that this verse be chosen as an expression of Israel's grief.

3. The theological factor. In Mt 1, the Babylonian Exile concludes the second segment of the genealogy (v. 11) - at which point all hopes associated with the Davidic Dynasty seem to have been dashed. But the Exile also marks the beginning of the third and final segment of the genealogy (v. 12), that climaxes with the coming of Jesus the Messiah - at which point all the promises to the House of David begin to come to full realization. Thus we can say (recallig the note of hope in Jer 31) that the child who has escaped Herod's slaughter is the one whom God has appointed to bring restoration, to turn sorrow into joy, and to usher in the New Covenant prophesied in Jer 31 (cf. Mt 26:28). Matthew does not
expressly quote the words of hope from Jer 31; but this whole Gospel is devoted to setting forth the fullest realization of that hope. Cf. Carson, 95.

THE RETURN TO NAZARETH. 2:19-23.

I. A GENERAL PROPHECY.

The plural "through the prophets" is specially noteworthy, alongside the singulars of 1:22; 2:5, 15, 17. Matthew has no particular OT passage in view (as confirmed by the impossibility of finding an OT counterpart for the statement of 2:23b).

II. MESSIAH'S HUMILIATION.

In keeping with prophecy (e.g. Isa 49:7; 53:2-3), he lives in a despised town (he is "the Nazarene," not "the Bethlehemite"): cf. Jn 1:46; 7:42,52.

III. THE DAVIDIC MESSIAH.

Nazoraios recalls Hebrew netser, "branch" (Isa 11:1). Jesus "was a branch from a royal line hacked down to a stump and reared in surroundings guaranteed to win him scorn" (Carson, 97). "The Davidic origin of the Branch provides a fitting capstone to Matthew's version of Jesus' nativity, which began with a reference to 'Jesus Christ the son of David' (1:1; cf. Rev 22:16). Thus Matthew marries phonetics with Christology" (Gundry, 40). More than one theme of Matthew's birth narrative is recalled in Rev 22:16b, "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."
SUGGESTED TEACHING OUTLINE

MAIN IDEA: God confirms and preserves Jesus as Christ and Davidic king.

I. The visit of the magi (2:1-12)
   A. Jesus is confirmed as the king of the Jews (1:2-12)
   B. Jesus is confirmed as the Christ (2:4)
   C. God preserves his Christ and king in Bethlehem (2:7-8,12)

II. The Escape to Egypt (2:13-18)
   A. God preserves Jesus from the rival king Herod (2:12-16)
   B. God confirms Jesus as his Christ and king (2:15,17-18)

III. The Return to Nazareth (2:19-23)
   A. God restores his Christ and king from Egypt (2:19-21)
   B. God preserves his Christ and king in Nazareth (2:22-23)
   C. God confirms Jesus as Christ and king (2:23)

SUGGESTED STUDY OUTLINE

MAIN IDEA: God confirms and preserves Jesus as Christ and Davidic king.

I. Birth in Bethlehem: God confirms his Christ and king (2:1-12)
   A. Jesus is confirmed as the king of the Jews (1:2-12)
      1. By Gentiles: the Magi recognize his star (2:1-2)
      2. By Jews: Herod and the people of Jerusalem believe the prophecies (2:3,7-8)
      3. By Scripture: Jesus was born according to prophecy (2:4-6)
      4. By God’s intervention (2:2,7,9-10,12)
         a. Star (2:2,7,9-10)
         b. Dream validates the Magi’s conclusions (2:12)
B. The Davidic king of the Jews is also the Christ (2:2,4)
   1. King of the Jews (2:2)
   2. Christ (2:4)
C. The Christ/Davidic king is to be worshiped (2:2,8,10-11)
   1. By Gentiles (2:2,10-11)
   2. By Jews (2:8)
D. God preserves his Christ and king in Bethlehem (2:7-8,12)
   1. Herod’s ominous actions (2:7-8)
   2. God’s intervention: the Magi’s dream (2:12)
   3. Magi’s response: obedient return by another route (2:12)

II. The Escape to Egypt: God preserves his Christ and king in Egypt (2:13-18) [compare Ex. 1-2 and 1 Sam. 16 – 2 Sam. 2]
A. Jesus escapes the rival king Herod (2:12-15)
   1. The danger: Herod will kill Jesus (2:12-13)
   2. God’s intervention: Joseph’s dream (2:13)
   3. Joseph’s response: obedient flight to Egypt (2:14-15)
   4. Fulfillment of prophecy confirms Jesus as Christ and king (2:15)
B. Herod’s response (2:16-18)
   1. Slaughter of the innocents (2:16)
   2. Fulfillment of prophecy confirms Jesus as Christ and king (2:17-18; see also Jer. 31)

III. The Return to Nazareth (2:19-23)
A. God restores his Christ and king from Egypt (2:19-21)
   1. Herod’s death removes the threat to Jesus’ life (2:19-20)
   2. God’s intervention: Joseph’s dream (2:19-20)
   3. Joseph’s response: obedient return from Egypt (2:21)
B. God preserves his Christ and king in Nazareth (2:22-23)
   1. Another threat to Jesus: Archelaus (2:22)
   2. God’s intervention: Joseph’s dream (2:22)
   3. Joseph’s response: obedient move to Nazareth (2:22-23)
   4. Fulfillment of prophecy confirms Jesus as Christ and king (2:23)
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In this chapter Matthew condensed all the events of Jesus’ life from the time of his infancy to the time his ministry began. How does this help you understand Matthew’s purpose in writing this chapter? Does Matthew appear to have been more interested in preserving the history of Jesus’ life, or in teaching a particular lesson? If he was more interested in teaching a lesson, what was the lesson? How should this lesson affect the way you read this gospel, if at all?

2. How does the magi’s response differ from that of Herod and the people of Jerusalem? How do you think Matthew’s original audience reacted to this difference? What does this say about Matthew’s purpose in relating this story?

3. How did the magi learn of Jesus’ birth? Did they employ biblically acceptable means to discover his birth? How do the details of the story help you answer this question?

4. Why did Herod want to kill Jesus? Could he have succeeded if the Magi or Joseph had not obeyed their dreams? Explain your reasoning.

5. According to Jesus elsewhere in this gospel, one must worship only God (4:8-10). On what basis was it acceptable for the magi to have worshiped Jesus? If it was because Jesus was divine, how could the magi have known this?

6. In Hosea 11, where this prophecy “Out of Egypt I called my son” is found, God was referring to the past event of the Exodus, not foretelling a future event. In what sense did Jesus’ flight to Egypt and subsequent return “fulfill” this prophecy?

7. How many of the “fulfilled” prophecies in this chapter originally referred directly to Jesus? What does this tell you about the way Matthew used Old Testament prophecy? How should this influence the way you read the rest of Matthew’s
gospel? Do you think other New Testament writers may have shared Matthew’s perspective on Old Testament prophecy?

8. Why did Herod kill the babies? On what grounds do you suppose he was able to accomplish this? How do you feel when you read about this massacre? Is it simply a detail you read without involvement? How does this gruesome detail function in the story?

9. What themes or elements do you see recurring throughout the narrative? Do these themes or elements help you determine Matthew’s main point? If so, how? What was his main point? Does this create any expectations in you regarding what you may find in the rest of Matthew’s gospel?

10. Does the teaching in this chapter seem consistent with what you know about Matthew’s theology? Is there anything in this chapter that seems inconsistent with what you know about Matthew’s theology?

11. What elements in this chapter also appeared in chapter 1? How does chapter 2 continue and build on chapter 1? How does it lead into and relate to chapter 3?

**QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. How did a Gentile (Herod) get to be king over the Jews, and to be recognized as king by the Jews themselves?

2. Why do you suppose the Jews were troubled by the birth of their Christ?