

Scattering the Darkness: Prophecy to History

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah 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 shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On 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, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Is the past the key to understanding the present or is the present the key to understanding the past? Which do you need more to understand the other? If we have only the present to figure out the past, it all becomes pretty murky as we're forced to make guesses about what has happened to bring us to our current place. If we know the past, things get clearer as we know what actually happened and can figure out better how those events shape and influence our present existence.

Why this bit of philosophical thought today? Because I wonder how we approach the events in the Bible. Do we think of them as real people who led real lives in real history or nothing more than stories meant to teach moral truths to us today? If we look at them as just stories to teach us moral truths, then our whole faith basis and hope becomes murky, darkened as the promises of God become nothing more than nice thoughts meant to give you a temporary positivity boost. If these are nothing but moralizing stories, then our faith, our religion, is no different than any other world religion. They all give us "spiritual" pep talks, but none of them save you. They leave you in darkness. So, is the story of the Magi visiting Jesus nothing more than a spiritual pep talk of how we should seek something higher and greater in life, that we should sacrifice precious things to our higher power, or is it something more real, actual historical events meant to give us a clear understanding of who we are and what we have today?

The meaning and significance of the Magi seeking and worshiping Jesus is completely lost if it's not history. Matthew wants us to take this account as history, as something that actually happened, as he states so matter-of-factly: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem" (verse 1) These are the facts. Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in the kingdom of Judea - real physical locations. It was at the specific time in history when King Herod reigned. Check the dates. Magi from the east came to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, the place where you would expect the king of the Jews to be.

Maybe this story has slowly drifted into murky legend territory because we've seen one too many nativity plays, but the Magi were real people. It was a real profession of the people in Babylon (a city that was to the east of Jerusalem). They were a kind of religious class who studied the stars as their profession, their livelihood. They were experts in it. And their study showed them a real star, something that was not in their charts, something that had not been seen or documented or cataloged in centuries of their practice.

How did they match up the appearance of this special star with the one born in Jerusalem as the king of the Jews? When we look at history, we see the answer. In the 6th century B.C., a Jewish man named Daniel was exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon. After God gave Daniel the ability to tell King Nebuchadnezzar the king's dream and interpret it, we're informed: "Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men." (Daniel 2:48) Through this historical event, God placed Daniel, a devout believer, in charge of all of Babylon's Magi. He no doubt shared with them God's historically preserved prophecy from about 1400 B.C. given in Numbers 24:17,19 "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel... A ruler will come out of Jacob." Because God's preservation of the historical prophecies of Jesus through the written word and through Daniel, the Magi knew that this special star pointed to a king in Judea - a real king in a real place in a real time who was supposed to reign over all nations. This is why they made a real trip to find him. They believed they would find a real child.

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, they meet a real king who was really ruling of the land of Judea: Herod the Great. When Herod heard that the Magi had come to worship one who had been born the king of the Jews, “he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.” (verse 3) Why? Because this real person was a Jew by faith but not by ethnicity. Herod was Idumean, from the descendants of Esau. The Roman Senate had appointed him king, not the people, not his lineage. Herod had no real or historical claim to the throne. He knew Jewish history that the monarchy in Jerusalem belonged to David’s descendants, but Herod had worked hard to get his throne. Because of his faith, he also knew of the prophecies from hundreds of years earlier that said a shoot would rise up from Jesse’s stump, that the Davidic kingship would one day rise again and rule forever. This baby posed a real threat to Herod’s rule, and he wouldn’t have that.

Herod gathered together the Bible scholars. He didn’t want a story; he wanted facts. He wanted history. “When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.” (verse 4) And the chief priests and Bible experts had an answer: “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written...” (verse 5) The Bible scholars did not believe that they were consulting a book of legends regarding the chosen one as they quoted the prophet Micah. They gave a real place from where to expect the real Messiah, the actual continuation of the Davidic kingship.

Herod did not treat the prophecies of the Bible as fanciful tales of a chosen one, stories that abound in every religion. No, he took this as real. “Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.” (verse 7) When you keep reading in Matthew, we see that Herod used this real information about a real star in order to determine the real age of this king of the Jews who threatened his reign and made real plans to execute this real person, killing many infant and toddler boys in the real town of Bethlehem.

While Herod would make a good fictitious villain, he is a real person who did really awful things. He was known both for his philanthropic ventures such as using his wealth to feed the poor during the great famine of 25 B.C. and repairing and building up the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem as well as for his paranoid and violent nature which led to him executing his mother-in-law, brother-in-law, wife, and 3 of his sons. Killing baby boys to protect his throne is something that the real, historical Herod the Great would do.

After that real encounter with Herod, the Magi still really expected to worship the one born king of the Jews. The star came back and led them exactly to where Jesus was in Bethlehem. They worshiped Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh – real gifts fit for a king, not merely a moralizing story of legend.

Why does this all matter as to whether or not it actually happened in history? If this were just a story, we could glean some moralizing truth about the good guys always winning, that we should all pilgrimage to see Jesus, travel to worship him, learn to give expensive gifts to God. But that leaves us in darkness. Moralizing Bible stories doesn’t save anyone ever.

The Magi finding and worshipping Jesus is an account preserved for us that we would know he actually came. We ourselves didn’t see the star. We weren’t there worshipping Jesus as a baby being held in Mary’s arms. We didn’t talk with the chief priests and the Bible scholars and visit Bethlehem. We didn’t interview Herod the Great. But all of this was recorded so that we know history, that it would scatter the darkness of uncertainty to know that the prophecies of Jesus, that kings from the east would worship him as the king of all people, have indeed been accomplished in history. God keeps his Word in the real world in real time so that we are saved.

God worked in history, unfolded it for us, so that we would know that this child born as the king of the Jews is also the king of all people, our king, just as was prophesied about him. God had really been made flesh. He was here to live perfectly for us. That’s why the Father worked within history to preserve his son from Herod’s clutches. It wouldn’t be until after he had lived a fully perfect child, teen, and adult life that he would sacrifice himself to pay for all our sins. And now God has continued to work in the real world with real history to actually bring us here to worship the same king that the real Magi did. God did not use fiction and legend to bring us to faith in him; he used real people, real accounts, real truth to scatter our darkness, our sin.

This prophecy to history of the Magi worshipping Jesus in our world in real time scatters the darkness of our present and makes it clear that we have a real Savior who was really born for all of us. We worship a real Savior today, just like those real Magi did. Amen.