

Bradford Houdyshel

Title: “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?”

Key verse: Matthew 2:2 (NASB) – “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

Good morning everyone. And: Merry Christmas! It’s good to see you all here today. For the past few weeks, we have been marking each week of the Advent season, anticipating the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the birth of our Savior in Bethlehem. Last night, we had our Christmas Eve service, with a very fine program by Pastor Pendleton. We celebrated the birth of Jesus and today we continue with that celebration.

The scene of the stable in Bethlehem is very familiar to us. We see the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths, laid in the manger by His mother, Mary, with Joseph nearby. We know from the story in the Gospel of Luke that an angel appeared to some shepherds as they watched over their flocks in the field and the angel announced to them the birth of “the Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). So they hurried to the stable and found Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. In Matthew 2, we read of wise men called “magi” who also visited the infant Jesus. Our pictures of the scene in the stable on the night of Jesus’ birth usually include all of these images I just described. Indeed, they are all important parts of the story. But, actually, the visit of the wise men, the magi, did not take place until a year or two after the birth of Christ. Today for my Christmas message, I would like to focus on the story that comes after the birth of Christ, the story of the magi who traveled from the east, arriving in Jerusalem and asking “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” That question is the title of my message today.

Let’s read Matthew chapter 2, verses 1 to 12 (NASB) –

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ²“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for from you will come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.’” [This is from the prophet Micah in the Old Testament, chapter 5, verses 2 and 4].

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.

⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” ⁹After hearing the king, they went on their way; and behold, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on ahead of them until it came to a stop over the place where the Child was to be found. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And after they came into the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary; and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And after being warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

I told you a moment ago that this part of the story takes place about a year or two after the birth of Christ. At the time of His birth, these wise men, the magi, see some kind of star back in their

home country. They somehow understand that it means that the King of the Jews has been born, and so they journey to Jerusalem. Some time has passed since the birth, and when they get to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph are no longer staying in the stable – notice that verse 11 says they are living in a house at that time. I want to look in some detail at this whole story and I will divide my message into the following parts:

1. Who are these wise men, the “magi”?
2. A look at the Gentiles.
3. Why was Herod and all Jerusalem troubled at the magi’s question?
4. Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?

Part 1: Who are the “magi”?

The Greek word here is *magoi* (μάγοι), which is the plural form of the word *magos* (μάγος). The footnote in my New American Standard Bible describes the magi this way: “A caste of educated men specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural science.” Verse 1 says they have come “from the east” and my Lexham Bible Dictionary says this: “The ancient Greek historian Herodotus used *magoi* to describe a class of priests among the ancient Medes and Persians.”

Why would such people be interested in the King of the Jews? If you remember Old Testament history, God’s Chosen People were often disobedient, and He sometimes judged them harshly. Finally, they lost their kingdom and were led away to captivity in the east: the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria and led into captivity there, while later on the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered and the people exiled to Babylon. While there, they made a big impression on the Babylonian rulers, and later the Medes and Persians. You can read about this in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, where Daniel and his three friends were brought into the service of the king of Babylon. The books of Nehemiah and Esther also tell us about the Jews who lived in this region after it was conquered by the Medes and Persians.

Eventually, King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to the land of Judah. However, many Jews chose to stay in Mesopotamia. It seems that they had an influence on the religious landscape of the Persian empire, and so it is entirely conceivable that the Magi could have heard of the Jewish hopes for a Messiah. Evidently, God desired to use the magi’s preoccupation with astrology and astronomy to give them a special sign in the night sky, a sign that they interpreted to mean that the King of the Jews had been born. Anyone knowledgeable of Jewish yearnings for a Messiah would have known that this title “King of the Jews” was a Messianic title.

And so the magi came from the east to Judea to look for this king. Church tradition gives us a few images of these magi that aren’t actually in the Bible. For example, I’m sure you have heard these men described as three kings. Well, they were not kings and there were not three of them. But they were certainly very important personages. Perhaps the fact that three gifts are mentioned, people thought there must be three magi, each man presenting one gift. Actually, the group that arrived in Jerusalem was not a small group of three men. These magi must have journeyed from the east in quite a large company of people – that is what would have been required for such a long journey from a distant land.

Let's read again some verses from Matthew 2. Verses 1 and 2 –

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ²“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

And verse 11 –

And after they came into the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary; and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold symbolizes kingship; frankincense symbolizes deity; and myrrh symbolizes suffering and death.

These wise men came from a far country to worship the King of the Jews. It is remarkable to me that these respected Gentiles from the east were able to understand the sign in the sky of the birth of the Messiah and travel all the way to Judea to worship Him. And it is remarkable to me that the first recorded worshippers of Jesus were Gentiles. I know that some scholars in recent years have presented arguments that these magi were Jews resident in Mesopotamia, but most Bible scholars today still regard these men as Gentiles. It is remarkable to me that the first worshippers of Jesus were Gentiles.

Part 2: A look at the Gentiles

As I have read and reread the Old Testament numerous times over the years, I have been continually struck at how much God loves the Gentiles. In my childhood, I had been given the notion that there are two kinds of people, Jews and Gentiles, and the former are the Chosen People who have a central place in God's plan. Indeed they do, and much of the Old Testament outlines how the children of Israel are to keep themselves distinct from the Gentiles. But as I read the Old Testament from the beginning to the end, I notice some details that have surprised me. God loves the Gentiles, too. Let me spend a few minutes talking about the Gentiles. This sermon today is about the King of the Jews, but it's also about God caring for non-Jews as well.

For example, although Abraham's son Isaac is the “son of promise” through whom God will fulfill His plans, Abraham's other son Ishmael is also given a blessing and a promise in Genesis 16:10-12 and 21:18. Ishmael was born outside of God's plan, but God still has a blessing for him. Let me give you another example: Moses marries the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian, and it seems that this priest of Midian already knows the true God Yahweh – see Exodus 2 and 3 and other places for more on that story. Wow – the Midianites were not among the Chosen People, but at least some of them knew the true God. And my third example is this: God sends the prophet Jonah to give a message to the city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire, telling them that they must repent or face destruction. They choose to repent and God spares their city. These and other stories from the Old Testament have shown me that God loves the Gentiles as well as the Israelites.

Indeed, when Abraham is first called by God in Genesis 12, God gives him this promise in verses 2 and 3 (NASB) –

“And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing; ³and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

God's purpose in focusing on one man, and one nation from that man, was actually part of His plan to bless *all* the families of the earth.

And in spite of Israel's frequent failures to be faithful, God promises in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NASB) that He will make a new covenant with them –

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. ³³ “For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord: “I will put My law within them and write it on their heart; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ They will not teach again, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their wrongdoing, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Then at the beginning of the gospel story in Matthew 1:20-21 (NASB), we read this –

But when he [Joseph] had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.”

The name “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves” or “Jehovah saves,” and He will save His people from their sins. Who are “His people”? Of course, this is a reference to the Jews. But this salvation will not be limited just to the Jews. I could share many New Testament verses with you to show you this, but I will share just two passages.

At the end of Matthew, Jesus gives His disciples the Great Commission. Mt. 28:19-20 (NIV) – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Jesus commissions the apostles to make disciples of ALL nations. This is their mission and ours during this current age. The gospel message is for all nations. Jesus, the King of the Jews, directs us to reach all nations.

In the epistle to the Romans, Paul says this in Romans 1:15-16 (NASB) –

So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Of course the gospel message goes to the Jew first, but it is also for the Greek – this word “Greek” is the New Testament term for non-Jews, that is, this means the Gentiles. Wherever Paul went on his missionary journeys, he generally went to the synagogues first, because the Jews would have the background information to understand the gospel message. But he also focused attention on the Gentiles, for that was the mission Jesus gave him at his conversion on the Damascus road in Acts 9.

Although thousands of Jews embraced the gospel, as we read in the book of Acts, sadly many Jews also rejected the gospel message – they rejected the King of the Jews. Paul describes his

distress over that fact in Romans 9:1-5. I'm not going to read the passage, but you can see there Paul's heart for his fellow Israelites.

[Romans 9:1-5 (NASB) – I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my countrymen, my kinsmen according to the flesh, ⁴ who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the temple service, and the promises; ⁵ whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.]

Romans 9, 10, and 11 is an interesting portion of Scripture. There, Paul discusses the fate of Israel, God's election of His people, the inclusion of the Gentiles, and another chance for the Israelites. Chapter 11 is quite interesting. Let's read verses 11 and 12 (NASB) where Paul describes how the Israelites' rejection of Christ opened the way for the Gentiles – I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their wrongdoing salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. ¹² Now if their wrongdoing proves to be riches for the world, and their failure, riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!

The Jews have been made jealous because the Gentiles have been included in the plan of salvation and so many Gentiles have embraced it. But if this is great news for the Gentiles, well actually, it's going to be even greater for any Jews who embrace the gospel. Let's read verses 14 and 15 (NASB) –

If somehow I may move my own people to jealousy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection proves to be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

There is a hint here that Israelites will be moved to jealousy and some will eventually accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. And then after this statement comes a fascinating illustration about branches of an olive tree broken off and then branches from a wild tree being grafted in. The branches broken off represent the Israelites who rejected the gospel, while the branches grafted in represent the Gentiles. Paul then gives this warning to his Gentile audience in verses 18-21 (NASB) –

Do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either.

We Gentiles should not be arrogant, we should not be conceited, just because we accepted the gospel while the Jews have not. We should not be complacent either. Nor should we persecute the Jews because of their rejection of Christ. Verse 20 – do not be conceited, but fear. Because it is quite easy to break off the grafted-in branches: we Gentiles could lose our chance. Let us be humble, not arrogant.

Verses 23-24 suggest that Israelites may yet come to believe in Jesus Christ –

And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

If Israelites do not persist in their unbelief and they come to faith in Christ, then they can be grafted in again. And indeed, throughout church history we have seen numerous Jewish people realize that Jesus is the Messiah and have embraced Him.

Let's read verse 25 and the first phrase of verse 26 –

For I do not want you, brothers, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; ²⁶ and so all Israel will be saved ...

A “partial hardening has happened to Israel.” And things will remain that way “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” Interesting. There first needs to be a full number of Gentiles to come to faith in Christ ... and then after that a large number of Israelities will be saved. Verse 26 says “all Israel,” but it doesn't mean that every single Israelite gets saved, scholars tell us. But all the Israelities that God wants in the kingdom will accept Christ as their lord and savior.

Well, on this Christmas morning, I have taken a long detour off of my Christmas story to talk about the Gentiles. These are things that I have pondered for a very long time, and I wanted to share these thoughts with you. I feel much gratitude that we Gentiles have been incorporated into the new covenant originally promised to the Jews. And I am hopeful that more Jewish people will embrace Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Let us now return to the Magi who were searching for the newly born King of the Jews. Let's read the opening lines of Matthew 2. Here are verses 1 to 3 –

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ²“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Part 3: Why was Herod and all Jerusalem troubled at the magi's question?

Let me tell you some of the background to the political situation in Judea at this period of time. The Roman empire controlled Judea, and they had installed Herod as king there. Herod the Great was not an Israelite. He was from a related ethnic group called the Idumeans. He was politically astute and the Romans liked him because he was able to control the unruly Judeans. But he was also a rather paranoid ruler who was afraid of rivals. He had one of his wives executed and her two sons killed – he feared they were plotting against him. On the positive side, he embarked on some great building projects, including a total renovation of the Jerusalem temple. In fact, because of that, it has been called “Herod's Temple.”

Since he did not like rivals, you can imagine that he would be disturbed by this group of magi from the east who were making inquiries around Jerusalem as to where the King of the Jews had been born. King of the Jews? Herod was king, and he did not want any rivals.

When this large company of people arrived in Jerusalem from the east, with their leaders inquiring where the King of the Jews was to be found, of course this created quite a stir. We read in verse 4 that Herod called the chief priests and scribes together to ask them where the Christ was to be born. In verses 5 and 6, they quote from the prophet Micah, so let's look at Micah 5:2 (NASB) –

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will come forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His times of coming forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

We see here that the prophet Micah declares that the Messiah is to be born in the small town of Bethlehem. That was where King David had been from – and if you remember the story of David, he was the youngest boy in his family and thought to be not very significant. Now, the Messiah is going to repeat these humble beginnings, born in this small place that produced the great King David.

Let us move on to the next part of today's message and return to that question of the magi:
Part 4: Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?

When I think of the story of the magi, I notice that these experts in reading the stars could read something in the sky that told them that the King of Jews had been born. But it did not tell them the exact location. For that, they had to make inquiries in the capital city of Judea. This gives me a lesson about our lives. The Lord has given us some information, but not everything. He gives us enough information to get started, but He doesn't reveal everything. We step out in faith, and along the way we sometimes must put some effort into gaining additional information that we need in order to complete the journey that God started us on. The Christian life is a life where we walk by faith and not by sight, as 2nd Corinthians 5:7 tells us. But, remember, it is an active life and not a passive one. Whenever I read Hebrews chapter 11, with its stories of faithful saints of the Old Testament, I marvel at the fact that each of the people mentioned there exercised their faith by doing something. Doing something. Faith acts. Hebrews 11:4 – by faith Abel offered a sacrifice. Verse 7 – by faith Noah built an ark. Let's read Hebrews 11:8 (NASB) – “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he left, not knowing where he was going.” This reminds me of the magi, who were shown a sign that the King of the Jews had been born and then they journeyed to find Him, asking questions along the way.

Let me return to the magi's question, but I want to look at it from a different angle. The magi asked a question of geography. But I would like to ask a question of spirituality. Where is the “King of the Jews” in your life? Who is He to you? Is He the king of your life? Is He the king reigning in your heart? Or is He distant from you?

On this Christmas day, when we celebrate the birth of the savior of the world and hear a familiar story, I would like us each to reflect on this question: where is Jesus in your life? Have you accepted Christ as your savior? Are you a Christian who has gotten too complacent in your life and recently Jesus has been feeling distant from you? Please refresh your love for Jesus. At the back of the auditorium, you see the sign that says “Lift” – that is a place you can go to after the service today and ask the people there to lift you up in prayer. You can ask for prayer ... or you can ask for more, if you have any kind of need. If you haven't accepted Christ yet, you can ask someone how to enter into a relationship with Jesus and we can show you. I will be there at the sign today, and others will be there. We can pray for you or give you assistance in your walk with the Lord.

I have come to the end of my Christmas message. May God bless all of you this day. And may you all walk close to Jesus, our Messiah, our King, every day of your lives. Let's pray.