Exegetical Notes, Matthew 2:1-12

"The Visitation of the Magi"

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Matthew 2:1-12

Verse 1

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem…

- We do not know how long "after" the events that took place in Bethlehem happened that these events happened. The word does imply that some time had passed.
- The Herod referred to is Herod the Great. He died some few years after the birth of Jesus (see verse 19) and is not to be confused with Herod Antipas who was king at the time of Jesus' death.
- "Magi" is a confusing term. It probably refers to astrologers from Persia who studied the skies looking for some astrological event that would tell the future. They were definitely not "kings" as the hymns imply, but students of the stars. That God uses such people to announce the Messiah's birth indicates the great desire of God to reach people everywhere with the news of the Messiah's birth. That the stars were altered to acknowledge Jesus' birth shows that all nature knew Him as the Son of God.
- Jerusalem was about 5 miles from Bethlehem.

Verse 2

… and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

- We do not know to whom this question was first addressed. Apparently, the Magi asked around in Jerusalem, assuming that the birth of a new prince who was to rule as king would be generally known.

- They “saw his star in the east.” This means that when they were at home, in the east, they saw a special star that they took to indicate the birth of a new prince among the Jews.
- The star may have been the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, but it was more likely a special event.
- Their purpose in making the long journey from their homeland to Jerusalem was to pay homage to this new prince.

Verse 3
When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

- The news disturbed King Herod because he knew nothing about the birth of a new prince who would rule Judea. The birth of this prince was even more troubling because foreign persons and supernatural events marked it.
- When Herod was upset everyone else near him was also upset. However, in this case the concept suggested a change in rule that must affect everyone. Thus everyone in Jerusalem was troubled by the news of this birth.

Verse 4
When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked where the Christ was to be born.

- Herod suspected that this new prince whose birth was unknown to him, but revealed to strangers in the stars, might be the promised Messiah. “Christ” is the Greek title for the Hebrew title, “Messiah.” So he asked those who should know where the Messiah was to be born.

Verse 5-6
“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written,

‘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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

- The quotation comes from Micah 5:2. Micah wrote these words 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

Verse 7

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

- Herod was not interested in knowing when the star appeared in the sky each day. He wanted to know on what date the Magi had first observed the star in the sky. This information would allow him to pinpoint the date of the prince's birth.
- Herod's interview with the Magi was done in secret so that no one but he would have this information and because his intentions were evil.

Verse 8

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

- Herod told the Magi where to go to look for the new prince in accordance with the word of the Bible. He commissioned them to search for the child and report their finding of the child back to him. He told them that he also wanted to pay homage to this newborn prince.

Verse 9

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

- This verse is full of mystery. We do not know how the star guided the Magi to the exact place where Jesus was. We do not know how the star stopped over that place in such a way as to tell the Magi that this was the place. However, these mysteries confirm that this star was not a usual star, for usual stars lack these capacities, and that its specific purpose in God's plan was to guide these men to the baby Jesus.
- The movement of the star is in accord with the word of Scripture. As it led them to Bethlehem.

Verse 10

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

- The sight of the star causes great joy in the Magi, perhaps because it confirms that their mission can be completed. It is likely that they had been following this star on this journey for over two years. Thus the

sight of the star at the suspected end of their trip would be an indication of their success in finding the newborn prince who would rule Judea.

Verse 11

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.

- The word translated "house" is the Greek word for house. It is a distinctly different word than barn. Thus we know that at the time of the Magi's visit Mary and Joseph were no longer living in the stable in which Jesus was born.
- The word translated "child" is the Greek word for a toddler or young child. It is not the word that means infant. The implication is that this visit occurred sometime after the birth of Jesus.
- If the star appeared at the time when Jesus was born and the Magi traveled for several months or more to find the baby following the star, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus was older when the Magi found him.
- The implication is that Mary and Joseph did not return to Nazareth immediately after the birth of Jesus but instead settled in Bethlehem. It would have been easier to settle in a new place considering the circumstances of Jesus' conception than to return to their hometown. Their stay in Egypt interrupted this plan (see verse 14). When they returned from Egypt they settled in Nazareth again (see verse 22-23).
- Note that Joseph has already disappeared from the story. He is not present when the Magi visit.
- To "worship him" means to pay him the homage due him as king of the Jews.

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

- Much tradition has spread regarding the meaning of these gifts. The presentation of gifts would have been usual under the circumstances. These were appropriate gifts under the circumstances. Their meanings come from church tradition and not scripture.
- The tradition of the church assumed that there were three Magi who visited Jesus because there were three gifts. This is also assumptive. We do not know the exact number of Magi in the party; just that the group offered three gifts.

Verse 12

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

- Through a dream, God warned the Magi that Herod's intentions were dishonorable as regarded the child. So, to avoid bringing trouble to the child, they did not report to Herod as they had been instructed to do. Instead they slipped off the stage into history never to be heard of again.
- However, their visit establishes:
    1. That it was God's intention to announce the birth of the Messiah to the entire world, not just Israel, thus implying that the salvation brought to the world by the Messiah will not be for Israel alone but for the entire world. That the Messiah came to the world through Israel confirms God's intention for Israel as found in Genesis 12:1-3. When he called them His people, it was intended that the whole world would be blessed through them. With the coming of the Messiah through Israel, Israel blessed the world.
    2. That the entire world, including the natural world, was aware of the birth of the Messiah. Even non-Jews, totally unaware of the Hebrew scripture, were told of His birth through natural events and the skies themselves were altered when Jesus was born.
    3. Natural events alone were not enough to find the Messiah. The Magi appealed to Herod who appealed to the ancient Hebrew scripture, now part of our Bible. Without the guidance of the scripture, the Magi could not have found the Messiah.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Visitation of the Magi.* They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)