

A Baby and Wise Men from the East

Thomas Robinson, *Behold Your King 3*, December 9, 2018

Matthew 2:1-12

¹ Now after **Jesus** was born in **Bethlehem** of Judea in the days of **Herod the king**, behold, **Magi** from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is **he who has been born king of the Jews?** For we saw his **star** in the east and came to **do obeisance to him.**”

³ When **Herod the king** heard this, he was **troubled**, and **all Jerusalem** with him. ⁴ And after assembling all the **chief priests** and **scribes** of the people, he inquired of them **where the Messiah was to be born.**

⁵ They told him, “**In Bethlehem of Judea.**” For so it has been written through the prophet:

⁶ *And you, **Bethlehem**, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for **from you shall come a ruler**
who will **shepherd my people Israel.*** [cf. Micah 5:2-4]

⁷ Then Herod summoned the Magi secretly and ascertained from them **what time the star had appeared.** ⁸ And **he sent them** to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and **search** diligently for the **child**, and when you have found him, report to me, that **I too may come and do obeisance to him.**”

⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, **the star** that they had seen in the east (rising) went before them until it came to rest over **the place where the child was.** ¹⁰ When they **saw the star**, they **rejoiced** exceedingly with **great joy.**

¹¹ And going into the house, they **saw the child** with **Mary** his mother, and they **fell down** and **did obeisance to him.** Then, opening their treasures, they **offered** him **gifts, gold** and **frankincense** and **myrrh.** ¹² And being **warned in a dream** not to go back to **Herod**, **they departed** to their own country by another way.

Isaiah 60:2-3

² ... Yahweh will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. ³ And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Micah 5:2-4

² But you, 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. | ³ 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. | ⁴ And he shall endure and shepherd his flock in the strength of Yahweh, | in the majesty of the name of Yahweh his God. | And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great | to the ends of the earth.

Philippians 2:5-11

⁵ Think this among yourselves, which also means in Messiah Jesus, ⁶ who: Though he was in the form of God, | he did not consider that equality with God | a thing to be exploited, | ⁷ rather he emptied himself, | by taking the form of a slave, | being born in human likeness. | ⁸ And being found in human shape, | he humbled himself | by becoming obedient to the point of death, | even death on a cross. | ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him | and graced him with the name | that is above every name, | ¹⁰ so that at Jesus' name | every knee should bow, | of those in heaven and on earth and under earth, | ¹¹ and every tongue confess that “Jesus Messiah is LORD,” | to the glory of God the Father.

2 Corinthians 5:14-19

¹⁴ For the Messiah's love urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. ¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we know no one according to the flesh; even though we once knew Christ according to the flesh, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. ...

How Do You Know What is Happening?

Matthew wants us to see beyond the surface: Jesus Messiah, Son of David, Son of Abraham.

He led us through royal/mixed genealogy. He showed us Mary's unusual pregnancy, Joseph's challenge of faith, new meaning of "God with us." He says hardly a word about Jesus' birth itself, but brings in other eyes, outside witnesses of events around the birth.

The gifts of the Magi are vulnerable to misuse, adapting the story to our worship of Mammon.

But for Matthew this is the clash of two visions of kingship, power, what really matters.

The Magi are the world/nations at large, given an opportunity to see what God's people, who should have been eagerly looking, cannot see because of corrupt, blinding power.

Magi are exotic, then and now, eastern scholars, astronomers, wise men, reading the skies.

We meet them arriving in Jerusalem, sometime after Jesus' birth. With naïve frankness they ask not whether a new king is born but where he is. A star revealed his birth.

Herod is not exotic. Everything about him is the known world of power, violence, fear, control.

He accepts but with fear. An anointed king threatens. He musters religion to respond.

Religious leaders provide an answer and a text, Micah adapted. God has long made promises.

But knowledge didn't bring anticipation or understanding. The Roman king has power. He has a plan for violence wrapped in courtesy, false humility, coopting the Magi's mission.

The Magi listen but don't trust Herod – overjoyed that the Star gives the guidance they need.

They find a village house, a child, and mother and give gifts of obeisance to true royalty. As with the Star, they trust a dream rather than the king Herod. They go home another way.

What did the Magi See? What does it Mean?

As with the genealogy and "Emmanuel," Mt trusts that we will think about the Magi's story and see through their experience. We bring our life, perception, but must see for ourselves.

T. S. Eliot, the American/English poet, wrote a dramatic monologue poem, "The Journey of the Magi" shortly after his conversion and baptism in 1927. Many years after the journey, one of the Magi, now back in his old kingdom, remembers. The hard journey with doubt and leading. The uneasy return to our familiar kingdoms, clutching gods, but never the same.

"We" experienced the beginning of something greater. Birth ... Death? Not Herod's murders but "our death." Agony of death to old reality, clutching our gods. But more!

When did Christ / God die for us? The cross. Yes! Also Yes, in the emptying of the incarnation, of birth. The eternal Logos opened his eyes in a baby – fleshy, finite, transitory existence – humiliation for our sake. That humility is God's glory shining like a star in our dark world.

But if this happened, God's life broke into our world in Bethlehem and broke the grip of death through Jesus' death and resurrection, then there can be real new birth, new creation.

The Death that grips us can die. That Love from God can move us into a new world of reconciliation. Can we see? Trust God and receive his gift? Creative, reconciling, loving Life!

The Journey of the Magi

By T. S. Eliot (1927)

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For the journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins,
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death,
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.