

“Worship the King”

December 24, 2015

Brian Watson

I’ll start by referring to a movie, though it’s not a Christmas movie. Some of you may know who Will Ferrell is. He’s a comedic actor, a former cast member of Saturday Night Live and now a movie star. In 2006, he appeared in a movie called *Talladega Nights*, about a race car driver named Ricky Bobby. There’s a scene in which Ricky Bobby, played by Ferrell, is praying over a meal of all the worst sort of American food: Domino’s Pizza, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bell, along with Wonder bread, Coca-cola, and other “only in America” products. And he prays an “only in America” prayer that is rather irreverent.

He keeps praying to “Dear Lord Baby Jesus.” At one point in his prayer, Ricky Bobby’s wife interrupts him. She says, “You know, Sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him ‘Baby.’” Ricky Bobby says to her, “Look, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I’m saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown up Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus or whoever you want.” Then he proceeds to pray, “Dear tiny Jesus in your golden fleece diaper with your tiny fat balled up fists . . .” At that point, he gets interrupted by his father-in-law, who says, “He was a man. He had a beard.” Eventually, he continues, “Dear eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn infant Jesus, don’t even know a word yet, just a little infant, so cuddly, but still omnipotent, we just thank you for all the races I’ve won . . .”

I don’t recommend watching the movie. As I said, it’s irreverent, and at times crude. Yet that scene captures something true. It’s hard to know if it’s making fun of American culture or Christianity, or both, but it’s true that many people like to think of a little baby Jesus. Even Christians can fall into “sentimental baby Jesus” trap. Many people like the idea of a baby Jesus, probably because he doesn’t speak, as Ricky Bobby observed. A baby isn’t very threatening. A baby has a lot of needs, but he makes few demands.

But Jesus didn’t just come to be a cute little baby. He came to save his people. I talked about this on Sunday, but I want to recap what I said then, because it’s so important.

The whole story of the Bible—the story of human history—is that God made a good world, and he made people to have a relationship with him. They were supposed to worship God and reflect what he is like. They were supposed to rule over the world by obeying God’s word. But the first human beings turned away from God. They didn’t trust him. Because they turned

away from God, there's been a separation between God and humans ever since. And that separation leads to all kinds of bad things. There's a separation between God and people. People are separated from each other, so we misunderstand each other and we fight with one another. And we're even separated from the best versions of ourselves.

The story of Christmas is that God becomes man to bring his people back to himself. He comes to put an end to that separation. God has to become man, because we can't find our way to God. On Sunday, we looked at Matthew 1. In that chapter, we see that Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). God became man—without ceasing to be God. And he was born as a baby, after a miraculous conception. He came to save his people from his sins (Matt. 1:21). He came to save them from separation from God, from a life of emptiness. He came to save us from our worst selves. God came down to us in the form of a man because we can't climb our way up to him. "The Son of God became man to enable men to become sons of God."¹

The story of Jesus doesn't end with Christmas, of course. Without Good Friday and Easter, there would be no salvation. There would be no end to that separation. The baby Jesus grew up to become a man. He lived a perfect life—always doing what God the Father wanted. Yet he died as a criminal on a cross, an instrument of torture and death. He did this not because he did any crimes, but because we have. We have walked away from God. We've turned our backs on our Maker. We have failed to do the very thing we were made to do. And Jesus rose from the grave, showing that death can't stop him.

And a man like that isn't just cute and cuddly. He's scary. The idea of God coming to us can be a comfort and joy, or it can be a threat. It depends on how we view God.

Tonight, we'll look at Matthew 2. As we do that, we'll see that baby Jesus was perceived as a threat soon after his birth. And the reason why is that Jesus was born a king. He was born king of the Jews. And he's more than that. He's the King of the universe. He's a threat to all human rulers. He's a treat to all other kingdoms. Tonight, we need to consider these questions: Is Jesus our King? Will we come under his rule? Will we worship him?

In the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we're going to see four things. One, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. He is the fulfillment of all our needs and deepest hopes. Two, Jesus attracts some people to himself. Three, Jesus repels others. Or, to put it another way, some people aren't attracted to Jesus; instead, they try to attack him! Four, Jesus was worshiped.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 178.

We're going to read through all of Matthew 2. If you're not used to looking carefully at the Bible, this may be new to you. But we do this every week because we believe that the Bible is God's Word to us. It is the way that God communicates things that we couldn't otherwise know. So we look carefully at what's in the Bible, trying to figure out what God is saying to us.

So, let's begin. Let's look at the first two verses of Matthew 2:

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

In order to understand what's going on here, we have to understand who Herod was and who the magi, or "wise men," were. Herod was the ruler of Judea, the region of Palestine where Jerusalem and Bethlehem were. He was an Idumean, which meant his family line could be traced back to Edom, and ultimately back to Esau. What all of that means is that the Jews didn't view him as a fellow Jew. He was a half-Jew. So most Jewish people wouldn't view him as a legitimate Jewish ruler. But the Roman Empire had named him the "King of Jews" and he ruled for over thirty years (37-4 BC). He's known for his many building projects, including rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

Herod was also a cruel man. He killed people who were opposed to him. He even had his mother-in-law and three of his sons killed.

The "wise men" here are actually known as magi. That's the word from which we get the word "magic." They weren't wisdom teachers. And they're not kings, and we don't know that there were three of them, despite what the hymn says. They were astrologers, probably from Babylon. They were Gentiles, not Jews, who looked at stars and planets in the sky and tried to figure out what it all meant. We don't know much about them or what they saw that led them to Jerusalem. They saw a "star" and followed it to Jerusalem. One biblical scholar, named Colin Nicholl, believes it was actually a comet that they saw.² Whatever they saw, they made a long trip that must have taken months. We tend to think of the magi as showing up right after Jesus' birth, but they could have arrived a year or so after Jesus was born.

Why would the magi be looking for the birth of the king of the Jews? Well, for one thing, apparently magi tried to predict events in history by watching the movement of stars. It was

² Colin Nicholl, *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

believed that when a great king was born, a star would appear. So when they saw this particular star, or comet, they believed a great king was born. But that doesn't explain why they went to Jerusalem. The magi may have known about a prophecy from the Old Testament, found in Numbers 24:17, that said,

I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near:
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.

If the magi came from Babylon, it would make sense that they might know something from the Hebrew Scriptures. After all, many Jews were exiled to Babylon over five hundred years earlier, and they spent several decades in Babylon.³ So if the magi were aware of this prophecy, they might have been looking for a star that would appear when this king would rise out of Israel.⁴ The magi might also have known of some other passages in the Bible, particularly Isaiah, that predicted a coming king. So they went to Jerusalem, the capital city, because that's where you would expect a king to be born.

So, that's the historical setting for all of this. But don't miss the point. When these pagan astrologers come to the "King of the Jews," Herod, they ask him, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" That's like a group of delegates from China going to the White House and asking the President, "Where is he who has been born President of the United States?" The President might look at them and say, "Um, *I* am the President!" That's what's going on here. This was a dangerous thing for the magi to do. Herod could have killed them right there. But he doesn't kill them. Instead, he's disturbed.

We see Herod's reaction in the next few verses:

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;
⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ " "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

³ Recall that Daniel lived in Babylon, and there are "magicians" mentioned in Daniel 2:2, 10.

⁴ That's what Nicholl believes. See Ivan Mesa, "Was the Star of Bethlehem a Comet? An Interview with Bible Scholar Colin Nicholl," The Gospel Coalition, December 24, 2015, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/was-the-star-of-bethlehem-a-comet>. See also Greg Cootsona, "What Kind of Astronomical Marvel Was the Star of Bethlehem?" *Christianity Today*, November 23, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december/what-kind-of-astronomical-marvel-was-star-of-bethlehem.html>.

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men 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, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”

When Herod found out who the magi were looking for, he was troubled. He was disturbed. He knew that whoever these magi were looking for, he was a threat to his own rule. So he gets all the religious experts, the chief priests and the scribes, to tell him what’s going on. He must have known that there were prophecies that predicted the coming of the Christ, or Messiah, an anointed King who was a descendent of David.

What’s interesting is that these religious experts are able to point right to the place in the Old Testament that predicted where the Christ would be born. They quote Micah 5:2 (with the last line taken from 2 Samuel 5:2).

Now, let me make three observations about all of this. One, the magi had seen a miraculous sign in the skies. Theologians call this general revelation. The Bible says that we can know some things about God just from observing the world around us. We can see the vastness of the universe, or the complexity of DNA, and realize that such a complicated universe can only be the product of an intelligent mind. So we can know that there is a God, and we can have some sense of his power. But the magi needed more than that. They needed special revelation. That is, they needed to hear specifically from God’s Word in order to find out where this king was born. The sign in nature only took them as far as Jerusalem. To get to Bethlehem, they needed to hear from the Bible. And that’s true for us. We can know some vague things about God from reason and from observation. But to know God specifically, we need to go to God’s Word.

My second observation is that the Bible is God’s Word. In verse, the religious leaders say, “it is written by the prophets.” That should really be translated, “it is written *through* (Greek: διὰ) the prophets.” God is the ultimate author of the Bible, and he wrote it through prophets and Jesus’ apostles.

Here’s the third observation: The religious leaders, these Jewish scholars, knew the Hebrew Bible, but they weren’t looking for the Messiah. The magi traveled months to see Jesus, but the chief priests and scribes couldn’t be bothered to walk a few miles to see Jesus. They had

all this knowledge of the Bible, but they weren't doing anything with it. And that can be true of us, too.

So, the wise men came to worship Jesus, and Herod was threatened by this. So Herod is sly. He wants to know where this threat is so he can wipe it out. He says he wants to worship this king, too.

Then the magi go to see the real King of the Jews. And we read about that in verses 9-12:

⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose 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 worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

When the magi see the place where the infant Jesus was, in the little town of Bethlehem, they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” They were overjoyed. So they go to him and present gifts to him. We don't know all that the magi believed. But given the fact that they came such a long way, they must have hoped that this King of the Jews would be the one who brings peace to the world. So they worship him. This shows that God was going to bring Gentiles, non-Jewish people, to Jesus. People who respond rightly to Jesus act like the magi. When they know who Jesus is, they are full of joy, and they worship.

We also see that God warned them not to go back to Herod in Jerusalem. God did that to protect Jesus, and perhaps even to protect the magi. So they went back home, having worshiped Jesus.

In the next few verses, we see what happens to Jesus. Here are verses 13-15:

¹³ Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Again, God speaks to his people through a dream. Now, at this point in the story, you may begin to wonder if God always does this. Does God always speak to people through angels and dreams? No. He communicates to us through the written word, the Bible. This is unusual. But

this is an unusual moment in history. So God acts in unusual ways. He tells Joseph, the leader of the family, to go to Egypt until Herod is dead.

We're also told that Jesus' exile into Egypt fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Hosea: "Out of Egypt, I called my son." Again, this shows that the Bible is God speaking through his prophets. In context, Hosea 11:1 refers to Israel. What we're told is that by going to Egypt and then coming back out of Egypt, Jesus is fulfilling what happened to Israel. In a sense, Jesus relives various points of Israel's history. To put it another way, Israel's history in the Old Testament foreshadowed the coming of Jesus.

One part of Israel's history that pointed forward to Jesus' birth was when Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, tried to kill all the male Israelite children (Exodus 1). Now, it's Herod who kills Israelite children in order to stamp out what he perceived to be a threat. We see this in the next few verses:

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

When Herod realized the magi weren't coming back to him, he was angry. He was determined to find that child. Since he couldn't find him specifically, he had all the young male children in Bethlehem killed. Bethlehem was not a big town, so this would have amounted to about twenty children at most. Still, it's ugly. It shows the opposition that faces God's people. And it shows what kind of world God came into when Jesus was born.

We're told that this event fulfills more prophecy. This time, the prophecy is from Jeremiah, who is sometimes known as the weeping prophet. Verse 18 of Matthew 2 is taken from Jeremiah 31:15. In Jeremiah 31, there is a hopeful message. In Jeremiah's day, the nation of Israel was coming to an end. Soon, they would be defeated by Babylon, the major world power in that day. God was using Babylon to punish Israel because they had turned away from God and had worshiped false gods. So, even as they were about to be exiled, they would come back to the land. God would even make a new covenant with his people. That means he was going to relate

to them in a different way. He was going to forgive their sins. But before that time, there was going to be exile. And many people would die in that day when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem.

In a similar way, soon after Jesus was born, many children in Bethlehem died. And God's people, represented by baby Jesus, went into exile. This shows that the Christmas story isn't some cute little children's story. It is a story of God entering into a world of evil. But there was hope. Baby Jesus was going to come out of exile.

Yet the man Jesus was going to have another exile. This time, he was going to be cut off from the land. Not the land of Palestine. No, this time, he would be cut off from the land of the living (Isa. 53:8). Jesus was exiled from life, and from the blessings of God, so that we don't have to be exiled forever from God's presence and from his blessings. Jesus even came to a nowhere place to rescue his people. We see that at the end of the chapter:

¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. ²³ And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

After Herod died, and the threat was over, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus went back to Israel. But they didn't return to Bethlehem, or stay around Jerusalem, because Herod's son was there. So they went to Nazareth. This was a small place. There may have been anywhere from 500 to 2,000 people living there. Yet this, too, was a fulfillment of Scripture. It's hard to know exactly what prophecy Matthew has in mind. It's possible that there is some subtle wordplay on the promise that the Messiah would be a "branch" that came from the "stump" of Jesse, David's father (Isa. 11:1). Or it might be simply that some prophecies said that the Messiah wouldn't be famous and recognized by his own people (Isa. 52:2-3). But the Savior of the world, the true King of kings, didn't grow up in Jerusalem, or Rome. If he came to earth today, he wouldn't be born in Boston, or live in New York or Washington, D.C. He might even live in West Bridgewater.

The question for us tonight is this: How will we respond to Jesus? Will we see that he is the fulfillment of all of God's promises? Are we attracted to him—not just the "Christmas Jesus," but the real Jesus, as he is presented in the Bible? Or are we repelled by him? Will we worship him like the magi? Will we try to shut him up like Herod? Most non-Christians aren't as

evil as Herod, but still many people want to shut Jesus up. They do that because they realize what Jesus means. The Christian claim is that he is the true ruler of the world. He is the boss. He owns everything and he has the right to say how things should be.

Will be like the chief priests and scribes, who know the content of God's Word yet miss the point and not act on what we know? That's a temptation for many Christians today.

Jesus was born king of the Jews. He's the King of kings, the Lord of lords, who reigns above the world. He has come. How will we respond to him?