

FOR OR AGAINST THE NEWBORN KING  
MATTHEW 2:1-12

Have you ever noticed how people can interpret or react to the exact same thing in completely different ways? For example, a comment can be interpreted by one person as a complement, and by another as an insult. A speech can be inspirational to one, and condescending to another. Someone might read a book and be riveted on every page, while someone else might read the same book and be bored to death. A leader might elicit trust in one person, and arouse suspicion in another.

Indeed, for a variety of reasons, people can interpret or react to the exact same thing in completely different ways.

This happened with Jesus throughout His life on earth. And rarely were people's reactions to Jesus mild. They either loved Him or hated Him; they were either for Him or against Him. Some people viewed Him as God's promised Messiah; while others viewed Him as a fraud. Some called Him the Son of God, others called Him a child of Satan. Some were amazed by His teaching and hung on every word, and some were offended by His teaching and accused Him of blasphemy. Some were overcome with sorrow when He died, and some were overjoyed. Some rejoiced when He rose from the dead and couldn't stop talking about it, and some were incredulous and called it a hoax.

I suppose this shouldn't surprise us. But what *is* surprising is the passionate reaction to Jesus right after He was born, before He uttered a single word, before He did anything that would cause people to be for or against Him. The passage of Scripture we're going to look at this morning reveals two radically different, diametrically opposed reactions to the newborn King. These reactions tell us a lot about the individuals in the story, but they also provide insight on why people have always had such strong reactions to Jesus, both for and against, even today.

The story is found in chapter 2 of Matthew's Gospel. Let's begin by looking at **verses 1-2**. *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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."*

The Magi, commonly called wise men, were nobles and scholars from the Persian Empire. They were experts in the ancient writings and they were astronomers who studied the stars. We can assume from this narrative that they were also familiar with and respectful of Jewish Scriptures and prophecies.

The Magi, however, were not Jews. They were Gentiles from a thoroughly pagan culture—a culture that worshiped many gods—gods that were represented by images made of wood and stone. But somehow, in some way they felt a powerful pull that they determined to be of divine origin. They were convinced that a God previously unknown to them was trying to reveal Himself to them, and that He Himself was giving them signs and clues because He wanted them to search for Him and find Him.

And this was intriguing to them. They were excited because they felt that this God was drawing them, perhaps even *wooing* them, to Himself.

So they organized and assembled an elaborate search party and embarked on a long and arduous journey in order to find this special Someone.

And when they arrived in Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews, they were excited. When you read the narrative you get the sense that they thought everyone in Jerusalem

already knew about this special Someone, and that they must be excited, too. They asked everybody, “*Where is this the one who has been born king of the Jews?*”

Surely, since the citizens of Jerusalem were insiders, they *must* know. Surely, since this city was the information hub of Jewish happenings, they *must* know. But no one in Jerusalem had heard about the birth. This was news to them. And to be informed about it by some Gentile outsiders was troubling, to say the least.

Before we look at the response of the people in Jerusalem, I want to comment on one significant implication of this story. The Magi did not make this trip merely to satisfy their curiosity, or to scratch their scholarly itch. They made this trip because God was compelling them to make it.

It was *God* who made sure that when the exiled Jews returned from captivity in Persia, remnants of Hebrew Scriptures were left behind. It was God who directed the Magi to the appropriate prophecies from these Scriptures—prophecies that predicted the coming King. It was God who *illuminated* their minds, and God who orchestrated countless circumstances and events, including some cosmic activity in the night sky, so they would be compelled to pack their bags, hit the road, and track down the newborn King.

This trip was divinely initiated and divinely coordinated. Which reveals that God’s plan to redeem and reconcile human beings from their lost and sinful condition is a plan that includes *all* of mankind. Not just the Jews, the people with whom God had made a covenant, but Gentiles. Gentiles! Including Persians who had been the mortal enemies of Jews, who were idolaters, who were uncircumcised and unclean, according to the law—people of whom God had said, “...*they cannot tell their right hand from their left*” (Jonah 4:11), spiritually speaking.

The Magi represented human beings that were *not* considered God’s “people of promise”. God had *not* made a covenant with them. They were *not* the custodians of Scripture. They did not follow the law, and they were not ceremonially clean.

And yet these Magi were some of only a handful of people who knew that the Messiah, the King of the Jews, had been born, and it was God who revealed it to them. He didn’t reveal it to the VIPs of Jerusalem, like the priests working in the temple or the scholars teaching in the seminaries. He didn’t raise up a prophet or send an angel to publicly announce the arrival of the Messiah so that the entire Jewish population could celebrate.

No, He revealed it to lowly shepherds whose reputations were so tarnished and whose credibility so suspect that their testimonies were not admissible in a court of law. And He revealed it to nobles from a pagan empire—an empire that was ignorant of the one true God, an empire that was formerly an enemy of God’s people, an empire that wasn’t supposed to be privy to such information.

And the reason this is relevant to us is because it demonstrates that the birth of Jesus is *good news of great joy that shall be for all people*. And that includes you and me. God, in His grace, didn’t send His Son Jesus to this earth for a select few. He didn’t send Him to be the Savior of a single race. He sent Him to be the Savior and King of the whole world.

And that’s why the Magi were so excited. God was informing them that this Jewish baby was also *their* King. They also were included in God’s story of salvation. So is anyone who receives Him as their king, including you and me.

But...not everyone *wants* to receive Him as their king, not even those whom you might expect to receive Him. Look at **verse 3**.

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

Herod was the legally installed ruler of Judea and a convert to Judaism. He had been taught enough of the Scriptures to know that God had promised to send a deliverer from the lineage of King David, who would establish the kingdom of God on earth and rule in Jerusalem, the city of God.

You would think, as a convert to Judaism, the Magi's question would have caused Herod to rejoice and celebrate. "It's happening! This is God's time! This is what we've been waiting for! We get to see His salvation with our own eyes! We are the privileged generation!"

Instead, the question stirred up a hornets' nest. Herod was disturbed and all Jerusalem with Him. And the word "disturbed" is not merely a reference to being irritated or put out. It means they were really worried and scared. Of a newborn! Of a baby that hadn't yet spoken a word, let alone issued a decree. And so disturbed was Herod that we read in **verse 4**, *When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.*

I suppose it's possible to read this and be tempted to think that, by assembling all the priests and teachers of the law, Herod is doing his own due diligence because *he* wants to worship the newborn king just like the Magi. But as we read on we discover that he's only employing the services of these Hebrew scholars because he has already hatched a sinister plot to destroy this baby.

Look at **verses 5-8**. *"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.'"*

*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 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" (Matt. 2:3-8).*

We find out later in the chapter that this was a ruse. He was attempting to manipulate the Magi into divulging the whereabouts of this newborn because he viewed Him as his rival. He viewed Him as a threat to his own kingdom. He sensed that he was about to lose power and influence to this newborn King. It didn't matter to him that this baby might be the long awaited Messiah whose coming had been predicted by ancient prophets. That's okay to talk about in the synagogue; that's okay to discuss in the theological institutions. But when all of that speculation turns into reality, when one is actually confronted with this king's sovereignty, and when it threatens one's *own* sovereignty, that's too personal. That's going too far.

"Not on my watch!" said Herod. "Not when it interferes with my rule."

And I want to pause, once again, and comment on a very important implication of Herod's response to the newborn king that is relevant to all of us.

It's easy to dismiss Herod as an evil king whose malicious motives and manipulations are exceptional. I would like to suggest, however, that he, too, is representative of the human race. In other words, we are more like Herod than we know.

You see, we are born into this world with a nature that makes us want to sit on the throne of our own lives. We inherited that nature from our first parents, Adam and Eve, who chose self-rule over God's rule in the Garden of Eden. We aren't born with a natural affinity for and a commitment to the kingdom of God; we have an affinity for and a commitment to the kingdom of self. We are self-anointed, self-appointed sovereigns who want to make our own rules and call our own shots and do our own thing and go our own way and write our own stories and control our own destinies.

And so when we are confronted with the news that there is another King who has come to set up his rule in our lives, it's not *good* news for many. It's disturbing, just like it was for Herod. Because if we allow Him to set up His rule in our lives we must abandon our allegiance to self-rule and be dethroned as the kings and queens of our own lives.

And many people, like Herod, are not willing to do that. Even though self-rule is ultimately the cause of pain, heartache, and destruction. Even though self-rule results in guilt, regret, shame, and brokenness.

And so the king that was born two thousand years ago is still a threat to many. He is still not welcomed by many because He's not merely a cute baby in a manger; He's a *king*. A *conquering* king. He came to set up His righteous rule in our hearts. He came to set us free from bondage to self-rule and establish His kingdom within us.

And when you are ready to receive Him as your king and submit to His rule, you cannot help but respond to Jesus like the Magi. Look what Matthew says in **verses 9-12**. *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. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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 and of incense and of myrrh (Matt. 2:9-12).*

They worshiped! These dignified, honorable, educated men were compelled to bow down and fall on their faces on a dirt floor, an indication that they recognized His sovereign rule over them. An indication that they were giving Him their allegiance. A baby in diapers! A baby who was probably not even conscious of their presence. Yet it's as though they couldn't help themselves. They *had* to worship!

The same was true of several in the Christmas story when they found out that Jesus was God's Son, sent by Him to be that promised, long-awaited king. There was Mary His mother, and Elizabeth His aunt, and unsuspecting shepherds in a remote pasture near Bethlehem, and angels who sang about His birth to them, and Simeon who was told by the Lord that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah with his own eyes.

Please understand that all these responses to Jesus were not engineered or manufactured or coached. They simply saw this newborn baby, Jesus, and they were *compelled* to worship. Involuntarily. Spontaneously. Joyfully. Exuberantly.

Do you know why? Because the *truth* of God becoming a man, is enough to blow *anyone* away if we take just a few minutes to stop and think what it really means. That's all it takes. Just a few minutes to ponder God becoming flesh. And as we do that, like one author says, we just have to "wait for our eyes to adjust to the dim light emanating from the manger, to come, to see, to behold—and to truly celebrate." (Katelyn Beaty, CT, Nov. 23, 2015)

And the reason we celebrate is because God became flesh and lived among us for one simple and yet incomprehensible reason: He loves us. *"For God so loved the world*

*that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).* Sending Jesus into this world was His method of rescuing us from our lost and sinful condition and restoring us to a place of intimacy and harmony with Himself. He became flesh so that we could become His friends forever.

And that’s the *truth!* The same God who *made* the world, came and *lived* in the world so that by His death He could save us from our sin. And He did it because He loves us so much!

When your eyes are opened to that truth you cannot help but worship.

I mentioned earlier that people can interpret or react to the exact same thing in completely different ways. We saw how it happened with the newborn king right after He was born, before He uttered a word or issued a decree. The Magi, responding to God’s initiative and guidance, went searching for the newborn king until they found Him, and when they found Him they gave Him their devotion and allegiance. Herod, on the other hand, was threatened by the newborn king and did everything in his power to destroy Him.

Two radically different responses.

I also told you that this happened with Jesus all throughout His life on the earth. And it still happens today.

Which begs the question: How have *you* responded to Jesus? Are you for or against Him?

Some of you might be thinking, “Well I’m *neither* for *nor* against. I’m neutral. It’s not that I hate Him like Herod did, or like the Pharisees did. I just don’t really think about Him, except for a little bit at Christmas and Easter. I’m indifferent.”

I need to tell you that being neutral or indifferent about Jesus is a form of rejection. There’s just less emotion attached to it. It’s ultimately no different than what Herod did, because those who ignore Jesus never receive the gift that He came to give, a gift that must be received personally by every person if they are to benefit from it.

That gift is forgiveness of sins, and peace with God, and eternal life in heaven. That gift is being in a personal relationship with the One who died on a cross for your sins and rose from the dead to defeat death and who ascended into heaven and now sits on the throne as the Sovereign Ruler of all.

Have you received that gift? The Christmas story is not complete until you do.

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**MAIN IDEA:** REACTION TO THE NEWBORN KING IS PASSIONATE, BOTH FOR AND AGAINST

THE SHOCKING VISIT OF THE WISE MEN (1-2)

THEIR IDENTITY (1)

THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES (2A)

THEIR EAGERNESS TO WORSHIP (2B)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR PARTICIPATION

THE SHARP REACTION OF KING HEROD (3-8)

HIS UNUSUAL IDENTITY

HIS POLITICAL DISTURBANCE (3)

HIS THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION (4-6)

HIS DECEPTIVE DIPLOMACY (7-8)

THE CULMINATION OF THE WISE MEN'S SEARCH (9-12)

TAKING HEROD AT HIS WORD (9A)

DIVINE GUIDANCE (9B)

ABUNDANT JOY (10)

EXUBERANT WORSHIP (11A)

ROYAL GIFTS (11B)

DIVINE WARNING (12)