

## Matthew 2A

- Have you heard the story about the Texas nativity scene?

A small Texas town had a nativity scene in the town square. Everything looked as you would expect with a cradle, a baby, animals, and wise men. But the wise men were all wearing firefighting outfits and firemen's helmets. A visitor asked a local why the wisemen were dressed like firemen, and the local replies, "Because the Bible says the wise men came from a fire (pronounced "afar" in Texan).

- An old joke, but it's biblically correct
  - So tonight as we move into Matthew Chapter 2 we're going to be looking at those firefighting wise men
  - But interestingly, what we're not going to learn much about is Jesus' birth
  - Because Matthew didn't chose to cover the details of Jesus' birth at all (Luke gives us those details)
- Instead, Matthew moves directly to describing the immediate effect Jesus' birth had on the world
  - And in particular the effect Jesus' arrival had on two very different audiences: a Jewish king and Gentile magicians
  - So let's start reading the story that we all know so well (or think we know)

**Matt. 2:1** Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,

**Matt. 2:2** "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."

**Matt. 2:3** When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

**Matt. 2:4** Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

**Matt. 2:5** They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

**Matt. 2:6** 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,

Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;  
For out of you shall come forth a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel.”

[Matt. 2:7](#) Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.

[Matt. 2:8](#) And 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.”

[Matt. 2:9](#) After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.

[Matt. 2:10](#) When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

- Matthew briefly mentions the birth of Jesus, noting when and where it happened
  - The place was a little town of Bethlehem
    - Bethlehem is about 6 miles from Jerusalem as the crow flies, which was probably a 2 hour walk in Jesus’ day
    - Today it’s about a 20 min drive from Jerusalem and it’s under Palestinian control in the West Bank
  - Bethlehem means the house of bread and it was best known in Jesus’ day as the hometown of King David
    - That connection is no accident, of course
    - As we learned in our first weeks of this study, Matthew had two themes for his Gospel
    - First, that Jesus is the eternal king that God promised to David
    - Secondly, that Jesus is the Savior Who would bless all nations that God promised to Abraham
  - So to help us recognize the Messiah when He arrived, God told us beforehand that the Messiah would be born in David’s hometown
    - That prophecy is given by the prophet Micah
    - Herod’s advisors knew of this prophecy and they tell Herod about it in v.5

- Matthew reminds us of the prophecy by quoting Micah in v.6
- Micah said one day that little town would have the great honor of bringing forth the future eternal ruler of Israel (Micah 5:2)
- Micah's words were written over 700 years before Jesus was born
  - For centuries, the rabbis in Israel knew and taught that Bethlehem would be the place of Messiah's birth
  - And here we find Matthew boldly proclaiming that Jesus was the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy
  - But how did these magi know about it?
- The second thing Matthew noted about Jesus' birth was the date: he said it happened in the days of Herod
  - He's referring to Herod the Great, a ruthless tyrant who ruled Judea for 37 years and died in 4 B.C.
    - At this point, we need to understand a little history to appreciate Matthew's account of this man
    - The area we call Israel today was called Judea in Jesus' day
    - It sat between Syria in the north and Egypt in the South
  - This entire region was conquered by the Roman Empire in 63 BC
    - After conquering the region, Rome permitted some of the previous Jewish rulers to continue governing the territory under Roman authority
    - Those rulers weren't actually Jewish...they were Idumaeans
    - Idumaeans were Edomites who descended from Esau, the son of Jacob who sold his birthright for a bowl of stew
  - But the Idumaeans practiced Judaism and therefore they claimed to be Jewish, but that claim didn't fool the true Jews
    - The Jewish people knew that true Jews descended from Jacob and not Esau
    - So the Jewish people despised these pretenders and their Roman backers

- Of course, the difference between a Jew and an Idumaeen was lost on Roman authorities...they didn't care
  - So they forced the Jewish people to accept these governors
  - And in 39 BC, the Romans Senate named one of these rulers, a man named Herod, as the King of the Jews over all Judea
- For the next 35 years, Herod ruled over the territory of Judea with an iron fist, backed by the power of the Roman army
  - History named him Herod the Great because of his impressive building projects including the massive Second Temple of Jesus' time
    - But we should have called him Herod the Paranoid because he lived in constant fear that the Jews would kill him
    - He built massive fortresses to protect himself and killed anyone he thought might try to take his throne
    - He put many of his family to death during his reign, including his own children
  - As his death approached, Herod ordered that a large group of the most distinguished and loved men in Judea be arrested and held in prison
    - Herod commanded that on the occasion of his death, these men should be executed also
    - Since Herod was so hated for his tyrannical rule, he knew that the Jews of Judea wouldn't mourn his passing
    - So by executing these beloved men, Herod could ensure that the entire nation would be in mourning when he died – if not for him, at least for someone
    - Thankfully, Herod's successor decided not to carry out Herod's order and the men were released
- Going back to the text, Matthew tells us Jesus was born in the days of Herod, which means that Herod was still alive and ruling over Judea at that time
  - We know Herod died in 4 BC
    - And a careful review of the Gospels and of historical records from the time points to 5-4 BC as likely the years of Jesus' birth

- So Matthew is telling us that the true King of the Jews was born during the reign of a false king of the Jews
- Notice how Matthew repeats Herod's title "king" in v.3 again
- He wants to emphasize this contrast, because it's about to become a point of major contention in Matthew's story
- Herod receives special visitors who tell him they are in town to visit the king of the Jews
  - Can you imagine the expression on Herod's face when he heard them asking to see the king of the Jews?
  - These guys had some nerve asking Herod where they could find the king!
  - Remember, Herod lived his entire life in paranoia thinking someone else would come along to take his throne
  - So I think it's safe to say Herod was not pleased by what he heard from these guys
- Matthew calls Herod's visitors "magi" which is the name for a certain kind of magician or sorcerer from Babylon, present-day Iraq
  - Magi were astrologers who served in the court of the king of Babylon for centuries
  - We can trace magi all the way back to the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the book of Daniel, about 600 BC
  - Matthew says these magi came from the east, which confirms they came from Mesopotamia
  - Which means they walked about 700 miles, like walking from San Antonio to Kansas City, MO
- So why did these men walk that far?
  - When Herod asks that question, they tell Herod it's because they saw a star appear to them while they were in the east, in Babylon
    - Somehow, these magicians knew that the appearance of a special star was a sign that the Messiah had been born in Judea
    - And therefore they had come to worship Him

- Their answer just raises a bunch of new questions, doesn't it?
  - For example, how did the magi know about the promise of a Jewish Messiah?
  - And how did they come to understand that a star appearing means His birth had arrived
  - And why would Gentiles, eastern astrologers no less, want to worship a Jewish Messiah?
- To get our answers, let's look at a few key details in the story
  - First, according to v.2, the star appeared in the east in Babylon
    - Conventional thinking assumes the star moved with the magi from the east to the west leading them to the Christ child
    - But that's not what the text says
  - The text simply says they saw the star in the east and by that one sighting, they knew to start their journey to Judea
    - They then traveled to Judea without a star guiding them, for they already know the way to Judea
    - But they only knew the words Daniel wrote...they hadn't read the words of Micah
    - So these men don't know where in Judea the king would be born, so they do the next best thing...they go to the palace
    - Naturally, they assume Herod must know where his own successor would be
  - Their choice to go to Herod is our best evidence that the magi weren't being guided by the star at this point
    - In fact, we don't see mention of a guiding star until v.9 where it reappears to guide the magi to Jesus in Bethlehem
    - In v.10 it says they rejoiced over seeing the star again, so only now has it reappeared it seems
    - The star then moves with them until it eventually rests on the house of Mary and Joseph
- So obviously this is no ordinary star

- In fact, given how it behaves, it wasn't a star at all
  - The only reasonable explanation for a bright light that moves over the Son of God would be the Shechinah glory of God
  - That's the name for the brightness that accompanies the glory of God
- The last time men witnessed the glory of God was at its departure from the temple of Jerusalem shortly before Babylon destroyed the city
  - You can read about that moment in the book of Ezekiel (Chapter 10)
  - For centuries before, God's glory had occupied the Holy of Holies in the Temple
  - But then – because of Israel's sin – it departed, and for 600 years it's been gone...until now
- Isn't it interesting that the Lord removed His glory from Israel on the occasion of the Babylonian destruction on the city
  - And now after 600 years, it returns being accompanied by Babylonian magi?
  - It's like God is saying to Israel I've ended my time of exile from among you. The Babylonians' coming was the symbol that I'm gone and the Babylonians' coming back is the symbol that I'm back
  - My glory is now ready to return and dwell among you again in a new and special way
- So that explains how the magi found the Christ...the star, the Shechinah Glory of God, led them to Him
  - But how did they know to follow the star in the first place and why did they have any interest in the Messiah?
    - Remember these men were astrologers employed in Babylon to serve the Babylonian court with predictions and prophecies
    - They were part of distinguished brotherhood of astrologers that included men like the prophet Daniel
    - Daniel became a magi when he was taken captive as a young Jewish nobleman by Babylon in 600 BC

- God gave Daniel the ability to interpret prophetic dreams for the Babylonian king
  - Daniel also wrote a prophetic book foretelling the Messiah's arrival, which is the book of Daniel in our Bible
  - In his book in Chapter 9, Daniel specified the year the Messiah would arrive in Israel
  - And interestingly, Daniel chose to write that part of his book in the language of the Babylonians, in Aramaic
- So for nearly 600 years, Babylonian astrologers had a book written in their own language that predicted the precise timing for the Messiah's arrival in Judea
  - Daniel tells us he eventually became the leader of all Babylonian astrologers
    - While in charge, we must assume Daniel taught his fellow astrologers to anticipate the arrival of Messiah in the appointed year
    - And we know Daniel worshipped Jehovah while serving in the court
    - So those Gentile magi would have understood the power of Israel's God and of His promise to save them by His Messiah
  - So as Daniel's appointed year arrived, the astrologers began looking to the sky for a sign, believing in what Daniel taught them
    - And when that mysterious star appeared, they were ready to follow
    - They journeyed to Jerusalem to find the king
- So now back to Herod...he hears the magi story about the star, so asks the magi for the exact timing of the star's appearance
  - Obviously, Herod was trying to calculate the birth date of the child so he could know how old the child might be now
    - Matthew doesn't record the magi's answer, but given the distance they traveled, the star must have appeared many months earlier
    - So if you always imagined the magi visiting Jesus in the manger on the night He was born, that isn't accurate

- They likely arrived a year or longer after Jesus was born
- In v.3, Matthew said Herod was troubled by the news of another king in Judea, and so Herod made all of Jerusalem feel his pain too
  - To misquote an old saying, when the king ain't happy, ain't nobody happy
  - We can understand why a paranoid king found the birth of a rival troubling
  - But Herod practiced Judaism (supposedly), so why didn't he embrace Jesus the way the magi did?
  - After all, if Gentiles from the land of Israel's enemies were willing to worship Jesus, why wouldn't a so-called Jew in Judea?
- The simple answer is Herod was more interested in maintaining his position of power on earth than in serving the living God
  - He valued his temporary happiness over an eternity of peace with God
  - Herod didn't want another king
  - And he's not alone
- Year after year, every time Christmas rolls around, the world hears the same message Herod heard, that of a King born to rule the world...
  - And year after year, many react the same way Herod did
    - Instead of asking where do I find Jesus, the world is troubled by the mention of His name
    - For them, this good news is anything but good
    - In fact, we've reached the point where even saying "Merry Christmas" can get you into trouble
  - The world is troubled for the same reason Herod was troubled
    - The intrusion of God into our world troubles ungodly and disobedient hearts
    - The Gospel pricks our conscience
    - It reminds us that God is not ambivalent about how we live and that one day, we must give an account before our Creator

- The world reacts to the news of Jesus in the way a child reaching into the cookie jar reacts when he looks up to see Mom watching from the kitchen doorway
  - The world hates the suggestion that there is someone or something with power to judge them for their choices
  - So rather than submit to that authority and seek His mercy, they reject the message altogether or try to silence it
  - Just like Herod rejected Jesus and tried to silence Him too
- In Herod's case, he knew there could only be one king and that the only way a new king could rule was if an existing king stepped down
  - So although Herod said he wanted to worship this new king, he was lying
  - Herod wasn't prepared to turn over the throne of Israel to anyone
  - More importantly, he wouldn't relinquish the rule of his heart to the God Who came to offer him forgiveness and redemption
- Friends, that's truly what's at stake in this familiar story
  - There's a new King in town...are you willing to worship Him or are you looking for ways to deny Him his throne?
  - Have you made a place for Christ in your heart, as the Savior worthy of your worship?
- If you and I could speak to Herod today, I know he would tell us that he wished he had welcomed the new King gladly in his day
  - Herod would tell us that the glory he enjoyed during his earthly rule was nothing in comparison to the glory of Christ's eternal heavenly throne
  - He would plead with each of us not to push the Messiah away as he did
- Herod's worry over Jesus' arrival reminds us of Matthew's first theme: Jesus is the rightful eternal King Who rules in the line of David...He's the son of David
  - And those magi remind us of Matthew's second major theme: Jesus is the Savior for all nations that God promised, the son of Abraham

- These Gentiles went to extraordinary lengths to find and worship a Jewish Messiah
- They heard the promise in the word of God spoken through Daniel
- Having believed that word, they then waited patiently for centuries for that word to be fulfilled
- So that when the time came to meet this Messiah, they jumped at the opportunity
- They came to Him bowing before Him to worship
  - They were willing to do what Jesus' own people were not willing to do in that day
  - They gladly walked through the door God has opened for all nations to receive salvation through Christ
- That door is still open for all people today
  - But you don't have to walk 700 miles to find Jesus
  - As Paul says, Jesus is as close as your own mouth, for you only need to declare Jesus as Lord
  - Doing so because you believe He is the One God promised to send for you to save you from your sin
  - For we all have sinned and fall short of the glory, the perfection of God, so we all need a Savior
- That's what the Bible tells us to do if we have faith in Jesus Christ, just as the magi acted in faith to do as Daniel told them
  - Let's take a look at the rest of the magi's story to finish tonight

**Matt. 2:11** After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

**Matt. 2:12** And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

- The magi are led by the star to the house where Mary and the Child, Jesus, are staying

- Notice they are in a house at this point, which makes sense
- It's been a year or more since Jesus was born...
  - He's not an infant in a manger somewhere
  - By now he's a toddler and the family has found a home to rent
  - Which means our nativity scenes are all wrong...the shepherds from the field and the magi never crossed paths
- Originally, Jesus' parents were living in Nazareth
  - But they traveled to Bethlehem because a Roman census required families to return to their ancestral homes to be counted there
  - Joseph's ancestors were from Bethlehem, so he took Mary there shortly before Jesus was born
  - And they stayed in Bethlehem a year or longer after Jesus' birth
- Somehow, the Lord has restrained the family so they would be available for the magi when they visited Jesus
  - I love that detail because it shows what God is willing to do to make sure those who seek Him will find Him
  - God summoned those magi and He made sure His Son stayed in Bethlehem long enough for them to get there
- I think He does that for all of us in a sense
  - God puts a call on our heart to know Him and to come worship Him
  - And you don't have to worry that you'll miss Him
  - He makes sure we find Him if we go looking
  - We don't discover God on our own, He reveals Himself to us in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ
- Then in v.11 we're told that as these men finally reach the child, they fall down and worship Him
  - What a strange scene that must have been to anyone watching
    - You have to understand that these magi were impressive dudes

- The very fact that Herod was willing to grant them an audience and then didn't kill them for worshipping another king tells you something about the power and prestige of these men
- They were impressive, wealthy and powerful men
- On top of it all, they would have been dressed in the finest clothing, majestic like a king themselves
- So now imagine these guys arriving at a modest Bethlehem home in all their splendor after traveling over 700 miles to see this king
  - And then they reverently walk in and bow to the ground... before a toddler rolling around and babbling on the dirt floor
  - That moment must have looked incredibly strange even to Jesus' parents
- These men were the first recorded Gentiles to worship the Messiah in Person
  - And yet they faced exactly the same test that everyone who has ever believed in Jesus Christ has also faced
  - They had to be willing to accept on faith that Jesus was their King, their Intercessor, their Savior
- Those men had no more proof that Jesus was Messiah than we have today
  - They had the word of God from Daniel telling them about the Messiah and how to find Him
  - But we do too
  - They had the glory of God pointing the way in the form of a star
  - But the Bible says we have the Spirit of God leading us to Jesus
- And just like us, when the time came for them to enter that little house and bow down to worship Jesus, they had to take a step of faith
  - In that moment, they encountered a Jesus Who wasn't sitting on a throne
  - He didn't perform miracles or speak words of wisdom, and He wasn't surrounded by angels or a court of worshippers

- He was probably drooling and may have needed his diaper changed
- Nevertheless, those men were moved by faith to worship
  - Their faith led them to take that long walk
  - Their faith gave them the courage to confront Herod
  - And that same faith caused them to humble themselves in worship before a young child
- After worshipping the Lord, they proceeded to give Him gifts, for that was the custom in that day
  - When dignitaries from a foreign land came to pay respects to a greater king, they brought gifts
    - Of course, you couldn't give a king just any gift
    - You have to give a gift worthy of them, something that reflects their honor and importance
  - But what do you get for the guy who has everything?
    - God owns everything already
    - In truth, you can't give God anything valuable enough to equal His glory
    - So the best you can do is give Him gifts that symbolize His glory
    - Which is what these magi did
  - Matthew tells us the magi presented three types of gifts to the Child Christ
    - Because there were three types of gifts, people have come to assume there were three magi
    - But that's an assumption only, and there's no reason to think it's true
    - All we know from scripture is there was more than one magi since the text refers to the magi as "they"
    - But there could have been 2, 3, 7, 20, 100 (I like to imagine 100 magi crammed into Mary's living room personally)

- The first type of gift they gave Jesus was gold
  - Obviously, gold was very valuable then just as it is today
    - We don't know how much gold they gave Jesus, but even a small amount of gold was precious
    - One gold Roman coin of that day, called an *aureus*, was worth about three months' salary for a soldier or laborer
    - That's about \$3,300 today
    - So Jesus' family probably received a considerable amount of money
  - But as I said, God already owns everything, so Jesus didn't need the money (later in the Gospels, Jesus pulls a coin from a fish)
    - So these magi aren't trying to make Jesus wealthy
    - The men were demonstrating their faith in Jesus by bringing him a gift that symbolized His kingship
    - Jesus was their King and so He received what kings receive, gold
- The second type of gift was a valuable spice called frankincense
  - Frankincense is a resin produced from the sap of certain trees in Arabia and Africa
    - When it is burned, it creates a strong incense
    - It was the main ingredient in the incense God commanded to be burned on the altar of incense in the tabernacle (Exod. 30:34)
    - The priests would burn the frankincense and its smoke would rise up in front of the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies
    - Eventually, it would waft over and around the curtain and enter into the presence of God behind the curtain
  - In that way, burning incense became a picture or symbol of our prayers
    - Revelation 5 tells us that our prayers rise up like incense to God
    - And they reach God by way of an intercessor, Christ who brings our petitions before the Father

- So these men gave Jesus frankincense because they had faith in Jesus as their High Priest
  - A priest burns incense on the altar before the presence of God as a way of interceding for man
  - Just as Christ lives to intercede for us
- Finally, they gave Jesus myrrh, a most unlikely baby gift if there was one
  - Myrrh is another resin spice that comes from the sap of a different tree
    - Myrrh is also native to Arabia and quite expensive
    - It's very fragrant and often used in perfumes
    - It was also used in the tabernacle service (Exod. 30:23)
  - But it's most common use was in making an anointing oil used on dead bodies prepared for burial
    - Dead bodies don't smell very good, so to help cover that odor for a while, the body would be prepared with spices and oil
    - Jesus' body received this treatment after He died
  - So these men bring Jesus a symbol of His coming death, a death that would become a payment for their sin
    - What faith these men obviously had in Jesus!
    - They were even willing to acknowledge Jesus' coming death as a sacrifice for their sins
    - And they made this confession through this gift even as Jesus was still just a baby
  - These men knew Jesus was their eternal King, their High Priest and their Sacrificial Lamb
    - They gave Him gifts to represent all three
    - And in the process, God used these men to make Jesus' poor family temporarily very wealthy
    - Next week, we find out why Jesus' family needed that wealth
- But for now, ask yourself do you know what these magi knew about Jesus? Do you have the faith these men had?

- Or are you like Herod...the king who thought he had everything, but actually had nothing?
  - Everyone in the world is like one or the other of these two
  - Everyone is either trying to rule their own heart or they have placed their faith in Jesus as their King
  - You're either praying to Jesus as your High Priest, or you're praying to yourself and no one else
  - You're either depending on Christ's payment for your sin, or like Herod, you will one day pay that price yourself
- Those magi heard the word of God and placed their faith in that report
  - And I urge you to do the same tonight
  - Please your faith in Jesus Christ, your King, your High Priest, your perfect sinless sacrifice given to save you from your sins
  - You only need to confess your faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior and you will be saved