

JESUS: BORN TO BE WORSHIPED

SERIES: THE MESSIANIC PROPHECIES OF JESUS

by Ron Ritchie

There is such a spiritual hunger today to find someone or something to worship. A recent book by Ted Harrison entitled *Elvis People* was introduced in the *American Health* magazine with the headline: "Elvis Makes Leap from King to God." Harrison's book illustrated how idol worship can get out of hand. He was amazed that Elvis' popularity had increased since his death and likened it to a new religion. He noted that this new religion really took off at a British pop concert when the master of ceremonies yelled out, "Who's going to live forever?" and the swaying audience responded, "Elvis! Elvis!" Harrison said it reminded him that he had seen something similar at a gathering of born-again Christians. He found that Graceland has now become a pilgrimage site. Some fans described the singer as a bridge between them and God, and others stated that he had the power to heal their physical problems, while thousands claimed to have seen him in resurrected form.

If we get bored with worshipping ourselves or another person, we can find many who are worshipping power or possessions. But the bottom line is that we were created and then commanded to "love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). (It was Satan who came along and suggested we disobey that revelation and decide for ourselves whom or what we should worship.) And among the spiritual remnant of this and every generation there are men and women and boys and girls who truly hunger to worship the one and only living God and his Son Jesus Christ.

This is the subject we want to look at this morning as we continue our study of the prophetic scriptures that speak of the coming of the Savior, the Messiah, the King who can save all of us from our sin, from the fear of death, and from the power of Satan.

Let Them Bow Down Before Him

Psalm 72:1-2, 8-11

David wrote a prayer for his son Solomon, who foreshadowed the coming Messiah, in Psalm 72. He asked God to bless the new king and asked that he rule with divine judgment and righteousness. Verses 1-2:

Give the king Thy judgments, O God,
And Thy righteousness to the king's son.
May he judge Thy people with righteousness,
And Thine afflicted with justice.

And verses 8-11:

May he also rule from sea to sea,
And from the River to the ends of the earth.
Let the nomads of the desert bow before him;
And his enemies lick the dust.

Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents;
The kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts.
And let all kings bow down before him,
All nations serve him.

David was saying, "Lord, my son Solomon is about to be enthroned to serve you, the King of kings, and he will need your righteous judgment and wisdom to rule over your people. Please extend his kingdom from the Great Sea [the Mediterranean] to the Red Sea, and from the great Euphrates River to the deserts in the south.

May Jerusalem be his throne and all the world come and bow down to him, from as far away as the great deserts to the southeast, the western ports of Spain, the Greek islands, and the southern nations of Yemen and Arabia. May they all bring gifts, and may they honor and serve him." Here was the warrior-king praying for his son Solomon, the prince of peace whose reign would bring forty years of peace to Israel. This all foreshadowed the coming Messiah who is reigning in heaven now, but one day will reign in Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah wrote of the future kingdom of the Messiah in 60:5-6:

"The wealth of the nations will come to you.
A multitude of camels will cover you,
The young camels of Midian and Ephah,
All those from Sheba will come;
They will bring gold and frankincense,
And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD."

In these words of David and Isaiah you can see that the Scriptures keep foreshadowing not only the coming of the Messiah but also the establishment of his righteous kingdom. We have already seen other promises of God: first that Eve would have a male descendant who would crush the head of Satan (Genesis 3:15); secondly that a virgin would give birth to a son and call him Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14); thirdly that the government would be on the shoulders of this son and he would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6); and lastly that out of Bethlehem would come from the Lord One who will be ruler over Israel (Micah 5:2). Together these prophetic scriptures placed hope in the hearts of the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles all around the known world that Messiah was coming, and that once he came he would be worthy of their full-hearted worship.

As we saw last week, it was prophesied in Micah 5:2 and then fulfilled in Luke 2:6-7 that "while they were there [in Bethlehem], the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." This event was immediately followed by an announcement to some shepherds in the fields surrounding Bethlehem by an angel of the Lord: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). Therefore, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the most natural thing for the believing remnant to do was to fall down and worship him. Unfortunately, only a few shepherds (and a few hundred thousand angels!) showed up for his first coming to earth. But then the word of his birth began to spread--to the strangest places....

We Have Come to Worship the King of the Jews
Matthew 2:1-2

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east [at its rising], and have come to worship Him."

These words have led many scholars to think that Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem for a few weeks; some have even suggested it was several months if not a year (see Matthew 2:16).

Herod the king was an impressive character who left quite a mark on the hearts of the Jewish people. He lived from 74 BC to 4 AD and was made king of Judea by the Roman senate in 40 BC. Rome gave him an army, and he carved out a kingdom over which he finally ruled with an iron fist in 37 BC. Emperor Augustus increased Herod's territory until it included all of Palestine as well as the border regions of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. By this time he had indeed become "king of the Jews" even though he was not a Jew but an Edomite, and was basically hated by the Jewish people. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Herod was capable, crafty, and cruel on the one hand, and a great builder on the other. He enhanced Jerusalem with a theater, an amphitheater, and a hippodrome as well as a luxurious palace for himself on the western edge of the city. He also rebuilt the temple of Zerubbabel (which dated back to 516 BC).

What can we discover about the magi? It is known that they were a caste of wise men specializing in astrology,

medicine, and natural science. Many scholars have tried to determine where these men came from, and apparently it was somewhere in Persia or Babylon, lands which we now call Iran and Iraq, respectively, which are east of Palestine. The prophet Daniel some five hundred years earlier had influenced his generation of Babylonian wise men about the Jews' worship of the one and only living God and about their hope for a Messiah (Daniel 2:48; 5:11). Perhaps they had been calculating the time the Messiah was to come from Daniel's prophecy. And who knows what influence the Holy Spirit had in the hearts of these few men among the millions in their country who had no clue that a great light had come to dispel the deep darkness of a world sitting in sin, shame, and guilt.

This was a season when the visible activity of angels was in full flower: An angel of the Lord appeared to the priest Zacharias, then the angel Gabriel came to Elizabeth and Mary directly, and an angel came to Joseph in a dream. Angels appeared to the shepherds in a field outside of Bethlehem (Luke 2:9-14). So perhaps an angel was also sent to announce the birth of Messiah to these God-fearing wise men, and they responded with joy. Their motivation to travel from their country of Iran or Iraq to Palestine and then to the capital city of Jerusalem was not to make another trading trip, but to find the new baby king of the Jews and worship him. They had no problem believing that he had been born or that he was the new king of the Jews. Their only question to the citizens of Jerusalem was, "Where is he, that we may worship him?"

How many magi came to worship him? The modern hymn says, "We three kings of Orient are...." But in reality these wise men traveled in large trading camel caravans for safety's sake, so that many wise men could have come bearing many gifts for the new King of the Jews, in the three categories of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (this fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 60:6, which we just saw).

Among the many interests of these wise men was the study of the stars, so it would not be out of place to say that one night as they gazed at the heavens, they suddenly saw a new star, one they had never seen before, hanging over the eastern sky. Scholars have suggested that it was one of the following: a genuine star in the same sense that the sun is a star, the planet Jupiter, the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of the fish, or a comet behaving erratically. But this star was distinctive in several ways. (1) It appeared first in the eastern skies and was quite different from anything they had ever observed, and by the prompting of the Holy Spirit these God-fearing men began to prepare to follow it westward toward Judea (Matthew 2:2). (2) The star led them first to Jerusalem. There is no evidence that the common people, King Herod, or the scribes saw the star. The magi found out from the scribes that the Messiah was to be born in the small village of Bethlehem according to Micah 5:2. (3) The star that only the magi saw began to move again ahead of them, but now instead of continuing its westward course, it took a left turn and headed five miles south to Bethlehem. (4) Then this moving star stopped over the place where Jesus lay. (5) We can conclude that this star was under the control of an outside agent.

In this brief description of the star we can see that it was not a normal star, but one that was created and controlled by God in order to lead a group of God-fearing Gentiles to the King of the Jews, the Messiah, and the hope of the world. These magi did not worship the star but followed the star to get to Jesus.

We might wonder why God used a star to guide these magi. Well, it was just another wonderful token of God's love. In the past God had used a variety of means of communicating his love to mankind. He spoke to men through nature (Romans 1:19-20). He appeared directly to Abraham, who was living in the moon-worshipping culture of Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2). He used the burning bush with Moses (Exodus 3). He spoke to the false prophet Balaam directly and then through his donkey (Numbers 22). He used the light by night and the cloud by day to lead Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21). He used angels to speak to his prophets and his righteous remnant. In this case he selected a star to lead some God-fearing Gentiles to his Messiah so that they could fulfill their deep spiritual hunger to worship him.

The Christian community has been informed by a variety of valid sources that we are now living in a Post-Christian society and that because of our new pluralistic culture, Christianity is no longer a major influence in the lives of the people around us. But in spite of that information, this church certainly was delighted and at times amazed at how many spiritually hungry people came to listen to the Christmas concerts that our choir and orchestra provided for this community. If you were there you could see the love and life of Jesus in the faces of the singers and musicians, and his joy spilled over into a dark community. Some folks came just to enjoy a Christmas performance, but instead they discovered the love of Jesus, and I hope some

ended up worshipping him in their hearts as the wise men of old did.

This eastern caravan had arrived in Jerusalem and began to ask the merchants, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" It is obvious that the local populace did not know what the magi were talking about, so finally their presence, their question, and the purpose for their visit came to the ears of King Herod, who had thought he was the king of the Jews!

Not All Wanted to Worship the King of the Jews

Matthew 2:3-8

And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet,
'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.'"
[Micah 5:2.]

Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him."

The political problem at this moment was that there was one too many kings of the Jews. Here was King Herod, who had been declared king of the Jews years earlier by Rome and who had been fighting since then to gain the respect and loyalty of the Jewish people. And suddenly he was told that a group of magi were in town looking for a child whom they called "the King of the Jews" and wanted to worship. Herod was now an old man (in the last year of his life on earth). His heart was filled with fear, suspicion, and guilt. He had recently killed his beautiful princess and his two favorite sons, Alexander and Artio bulus, for fear they would try to take away his throne. (These murders were reported to Emperor Augustine, who responded that he would rather be Herod's hog than his son, for he would then have a better chance of life.) Herod had also destroyed the supreme court.

Now in the wake of all this death and destruction, he called for his scribes in order to review the data about the times, season, and place of a coming Messiah. They informed the king that the child was prophesied by Micah to be born in Bethlehem, some five miles south of the capital. Based on that information, the king felt secure enough to have the magi secretly brought into his presence. The king wanted to know more about the star: when had they first seen it, how long had they been on the road, etc. He was calculating the age of the child (see Matthew 2:16). He then asked them to report back to him when they found the child so he could worship him also. But while the magi wanted to worship the King of the Jews, Herod really wanted to kill him forshadowing the hearts of the Jewish religious leaders.

"There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to his own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." (John 1:9-12.)

The magi, their servants, and the rest of the caravan, having traveled hundreds of miles from the east to Jerusalem, had just five more miles to go before they would be able to worship the true King of the Jews.

Jesus: Born to be Worshiped

Matthew 2:9-12

And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way.

It must have been evening by the time they left the palace of Herod to begin the short trip to the little town of Bethlehem. As they walked out into the night and naturally looked up into the heavens, they saw what the king and the scribes did not see---the star, hanging over Jerusalem at that moment; but as I have said, it then took a left turn and began to move south toward Bethlehem. Then the star "stopped on a dime" over the house which it appears Joseph had secured after the birth of Jesus in the cave.

These faithful, obedient, God-fearing Gentile magi following the leading of God's star were about to be rewarded after all those months of preparation and travel. As they walked into the home of Mary and Joseph with the floodlight of the star above the house, they saw the baby Jesus, and their first action was the one they had planned all along. He was revealed to them by God to be the King of the Jews, the Messiah, God's anointed One, the Son of God. Isaiah had called him "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father [Father of Eternity], Prince of Peace" (9:6). And now we know him as the only one who could deliver them from their sin, shame, guilt, fear of death, and the power of Satan. This One deserved to be worshiped. They thanked God for sending his Son to the earth as the King who would be above every king, the one who would rule in justice and righteousness. The Messiah, the "King of the Jews," would bring the blessings of salvation to the Gentiles as well.

Notice that they did not worship the star, Joseph, or Mary, but only the One due worship: Jesus. Also, these magi were a symbol of a remnant from among the Jews and Gentiles who love and willingly bow down before their Lord and Savior in our world today. At that moment the Jewish nation missed his first coming, as the world even among the religious elements has missed the meaning of his first coming. But all will be gathered together at his second coming, and all will bow their knee to him and confess him as King of kings.

They worshiped the newborn King, and then they offered the Child the gifts fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah 60:5-6, which we have already seen, foreshadowing in his first coming the total fulfillment in his second coming:

"The wealth of the nations will come to you...
They will bring gold and frankincense...."

Gold was a symbol of purity. Frankincense (pure incense) was taken from a tree in South Arabia and Somalia for use in Jewish meal offerings (Leviticus 2:1), and when placed on the altar of fire was a symbol of prayer and thanksgiving to God. In addition they brought myrrh, which was also taken from the sap of a tree with odoriferous wood, namely the Balsamodendron of Arabia. It was used by women to make them more desirable (Esther 2:12) and was also used by women in their bridal processions. At times myrrh when mixed with wine would be used as an anesthetic (Mark 15:23). And finally, it was used in preparing a body for burial (John 19:39-40). It was used by man to make his life more pleasant, his pain less dreadful, and his burial less repulsive. The late Bishop Sheen in his book *Life of Christ* said:

They brought three gifts: Gold to honor His Kingship, frankincense to honor His divinity, and myrrh to honor His Humanity which was destined for death. The crib and the Cross are related again, there is myrrh at both.

I received a phone call on Tuesday from a grieving woman I did not know who had given birth to a premature baby boy. The doctors told her his chances of survival were very slim. She wanted to know if I would come to the hospital and pray for him. Dave Beggs joined me the next morning, and we met the woman, her four-year-old son, and her mother. We were taken to a special room just off the premature nursery, and in a few moments the woman returned with her baby wrapped in white cloth in his portable crib. I had been told

his name the day before, but when I saw him for the first time chills ran up my spine, for here lying before us was David (in Hebrew, "Beloved"), whose life was hanging on a thread. All I could think of at that moment was how small and helpless was the child called Jesus, of the House of David, when he came into this world. And just for a moment I could sense how the wise men of old felt when they saw Jesus and then by faith bowed down and worshiped him as their Lord and Savior, the promised Messiah.

Thank God that his Son grew up, willingly gave away his life on the cross for our sins, and then was raised from the grave by his Father so that all of us would have the opportunity to worship him and experience the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

We prayed for David and asked the Lord Jesus to either heal this child or take him to himself forever. We then worshiped Jesus by telling him how much we loved him and needed him not only at that moment but every day of our lives. It was a very humbling and joyful experience.

What or whom are we willing to bow down before and worship today? We are surrounded by men and women who, like Herod of old, want to be king and would kill, in some sense, anyone who would seek to take their place. At times we find in our own hearts a desire to be king. It is a dangerous position in which to be found, for there is only one God-anointed King over the universe, the nations, and our hearts; and his name is Jesus. Jesus is no longer a baby in a manger, but now reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords in heaven, and one day to come we will see him reigning on earth from Jerusalem. I submit to you, based on the prophetic scriptures and the example of the magi, that we all should fall down before him and worship him who is the only One worthy of worship.

I found a Christmas card depicting a little boy gazing at the bright star over Bethlehem. The verse by Christina Rossetti read:

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part--
Yet what can I give Him,
I give my heart.

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