

EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 2:1-12

QOHELET WEB MINISTRY

JOHN TELGREN

The book of Matthew is one of four canonical books that recount the ministry of Jesus. Even though the genre of Matthew contains elements similar to a biography, it is not a biography in the strictest sense. Some scholars call the genre a “gospel,” recognizing that this genre is unique to the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament (Aune, 22-26). The purpose of Matthew is not merely historical or biographical, but theological. Therefore, Matthew’s choice of detail and his ordering of the material is to make a theological point.

The book of Matthew claims no author. However, the title with its ascription to Matthew goes all the way back to the second century (Hagner 1986, 283; Aune, 18). The difficulty with Matthean authorship lies in the synoptic tradition. In parallel passages, Matthew improves the grammar of Mark, which means that Matthew obviously used Mark as a source (Hagner 1993, xlvii). It is difficult to see why an eye-witness would need to use a non-eyewitness source such as Mark to write a Gospel. Therefore, some scholars reject Matthean authorship (Meier, 627). Some believe that an unknown Greek speaking person who knew Aramaic and/or Hebrew wrote this Gospel (Brown 1997, 172).

It is difficult to discern the purpose of Matthew. It is likely written to those who have some sort of Jewish background, given the strong appeal to Old Testament fulfillment and parallels. Many scholars believe that the author wrote Matthew sometime after the fall of Jerusalem. Jewish and gentile relations became more difficult in this time period, so Matthew’s purpose may be to address this friction by its partially universal focus (Meier, 624). The problem I see with trying to determine a specific problem for Matthew’s alleged community is the genre does not seem to be suited for such a task. Why not write an epistle to address a specific problem? I believe that if Matthew addressed a problem it was in a more general way.

Specific problems would require something more like an epistle. Matthew's overall purpose seems to be to preserve the teachings of Jesus in the context of his earthly ministry.

There are several proposals for the structure of Matthew. In most proposals, Matthew 2 falls into an introductory section of the book.

The first two chapters of Matthew employ many Old Testament quotations using the word “fulfilled” *plerōthe*. Most of the Old Testament quotations in Matt 2 are not predictive prophecy, which can make it difficult to see what Matthew was trying to do. They should not be viewed as “proof texts.” Instead, it is better to see them as *sensus plenior*, an interpretation where Jesus offers the fuller sense of scripture (Hagner 1993, lvi).

The synoptic problem is not pertinent to a discussion of Matt 2 because the material it contains is unique to Matthew.

There are those who believe that Matthew 2 was originally two narratives. This includes a Herod narrative and a Magi narrative, which Matthew blended together (Nolland 285). The obvious problem with this proposal is that the Herod and Magi material in Matthew 2 are dependent on each other (Luz, 130). One does not make sense without the other.

There is no solid evidence for the pre-history of the material in Matthew 2. However, non-Matthean language and style is not prominent in chapter two. This makes it likely that Matthew was the first to put this narrative into writing (Luz, 130).

Some doubt the historicity of the Matthew 2 narrative because it is unique to Matthew (Luz, 132-133). Others doubt its historicity simply because it “sounds like” a legend (Albright, 13). However, this alone does not negate the possibility for its historicity. A quick look at the other gospels reveal that neither Mark nor John mention any infancy narratives for Jesus either. So the infancy of Jesus was obviously not an emphasis in the early preaching and teaching

concerning Christ, which alone could account for its unique appearance in Matthew. If this story were a legend, there does not appear to be strong pre-literary evidence for its inception and growth as is typical of legends.

The genre of this narrative is Haggadah, which has as its purpose to convey a theological truth. This does not negate the strong likelihood of historicity (Hagner, 125).

Matthew 2:1 begins a new section using “now” *de* as a marker. Verse 13 also begins with “now” *de*, which indicates another sub-section of this narrative.

The tone of the infancy narratives in Luke and Matthew are different from each other. It is typical for modern readers to combine the infancy stories from Matthew and Luke into a continuous narrative. However, this destroys the message of both narratives (Boring, 140). Unlike Luke, Matthew shows that Jesus was rejected by the Jewish rulers from the very beginning (Hare, 15). Matthew places Jesus in the context of Jewish messianic expectation (Johnson, 192). From the beginning of Matthew, Jesus is a king. There are also similarities between Matthew 1-2 and Exodus 1-2 which are likely intentional. As Moses was a deliverer for Israel, Jesus will also be a deliverer.

Matthew 2:1-12 divides up into six scenes (Newman, 32). Verses 1-2, when the Magi arrive in Jerusalem. Verses 3-6, when Herod calls the teachers of the law. Verses 7-8, when Herod summons the Magi. Verses 9-10, when Herod instructs the Magi to find the child for him. Verse 11, there the Magi worship the child. And finally, verse 12, where the Magi return to their home.

Verses 1-2. The first verse is all one sentence that continues into the next verse. Some believe it is better to end the sentence at the word “Judea,” and begin a new sentence with “In the days of Herod the king...” (Newman, 32). This would make the fact that Jesus was born in

Bethlehem more than just a passing statement. It becomes a theological point with roots in the Old Testament as we shall see.

This narrative introduces a theme of conflict between Jesus and the ruling authorities, which continues through Matthew (Luz, 129). The text introduces Jesus as “King of the Jews,” and Herod as “Herod the King,” who opposes Jesus the king. Technically, Herod was not a “king” but a client ruler for Rome (Blomberg, 148). Matthew’s purposeful use of the word “king” for Herod served his purpose to emphasize the kingship theme in the infancy narratives. He uses the word “king” three times in the first three verses to emphasize the conflict between Jesus and Herod.

The kingship theme begins in verse one by portraying Jesus as a Davidic King born at Bethlehem, which was also the birthplace of David (Baur, 309). In verse two, it portrays Jesus as a legitimate king, because unlike Herod, Jesus was “born” king of the Jews (Baur, 312).

Another theme these first two verses introduce is worship. The verb, “worship” *proskuneo*, appears in verse 2, then again in verse 8, then 11, which is the climax of this narrative. The text introduces this theme with an element of surprise (Patte, 32). After introducing Jesus and Herod, it says “behold” *idou*,” or “look! magi from the east...” Baur notes that Matthew shows the gentile magi as being the first to utter a confession of faith in Jesus, and a gentile centurion to be the last to utter a confession (Baur, 319). This is likely a literary anticipation of Matt 28:19. In this verse, Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples of all the “nations,” which was a common Jewish designation for gentiles.

The text does not identify what the magi were and assumes the readers already know. The only description beyond the actual word magi is that they were from the east. They may have been from Babylon, which had a significant Jewish population. This would have

explained their familiarity with Jewish messianic expectation (Hagner, 27). As a result of the sparseness of information for the magi, there has been much speculation over what they were. Some of the possibilities scholars have put forth over the years for their identity include Persian priests, magicians, or astrologers (Newman, 33). People have also called them kings, and “wise men.”

The identification of the magi as “kings” did not come about until after the time of Constantine when the church acquired political power (Powell Jan 2000, 2). The medieval church saw this interpretation as a legitimizing force for Christian monarchs.

As a reaction to this, the renaissance saw a shift in the interpretation of magi from “kings” to “wise men (3).” The church was regaining knowledge, which could have been the cause of the imposition of “wise men” on the word, magi. Magi never meant “wise men” *sophoi*. This interpretation is wrong as the interpretation of magi as “kings.”

The most likely identification for the magi out of this list is probably astrologers. It fits better with the context with the mention of the star. However, there are still two other possibilities.

In Greco-Roman literature, magi are usually not kings, but servants of kings (Powell July 2000, 464). Herod’s meeting with the magi does not appear to be a meeting between two kings, but between servants and a monarch (470). Herod would not have asked another king to go find the child and report back to him, but he would have asked such a thing from a servant. Therefore, it is possible that the magi were not kings themselves, but possibly dignitaries of kings.

This next possibility is what I believe to be the correct one. The author expected the readers to know what magi were because he did not explain it. The best way to find out how

they would have understood magi would be to look at how the word is used in the literature of the times.

In Greco-Roman literature, magi are sometimes seen as good, and sometimes as bad (Powell, July 2000, 5). However, there is no way to know how familiar the original readers of Matthew were with Greco-Roman literature. Therefore, this is perhaps the weakest indicator of how the original readers of Matthew would have regarded the magi. Jewish literature is by far a much stronger indicator of how they would have seen the magi.

Jewish literature never portrays magi as wise (6). Pharaoh's magicians are magi in Midrash. Balaam is a magi in the Palestinian Targums. It is certain that the original readers of Matthew were familiar with the Septuagint. Magi appear in Daniel 2. There, they are ineffective and powerless. The situation exposes them as fools.

The book of Acts mentions two magi. These include Simon in chapter 8, and Elymas in chapter 13. In both cases, these men are charlatans. Their trade is easily exposed. So, the original readers of Matthew understood the magi as in a negative way, usually as fools (8).

This raises the obvious question as to why God would reveal the birth of Jesus to gentile fools. A reading of Matthew reveals an ideological perspective in which God's revelation to the magi fits (Matt 3:9; 4:18-22; 9:9; 11:19, 25; 12:42; 13:54; 21:16; 23:34). Matthew 11:25 expresses the book's ideological point of view well. God rejected those who were wise and powerful while the weak and the "fools" were the ones who accepted God's message (Powell Jan 2000, 9). The magi pericope expresses this ideological point of view with the account of the worship from the magi. Neither Herod nor the chief priests and scribes received the announcement of the Messiah. Ironically, the "foolish," gentile magi seem to understand the significance of the birth of Jesus more than Herod or the chief priests and the scribes.

If this is the correct view of the magi, then Matthew highlights the aspect of the Kingdom of Heaven where the norms of power and wisdom are turned upside down.

As far as the star, it appears twice. The magi mention it in verse 2, and the narrator mentions it again in verses 9-10. Many have tried to find natural explanations for the star, such as comet or an alignment of planets. However, this text makes it clear that this was a miraculous appearance since the star will later guide the magi right to where Jesus resided.

Hagner offers an alternate translation of we saw his star “at its rising” rather than “in the east” for *anatole* (Hagner, 27). It is uncertain which translation is preferable, since the rising of a star could come from the east, the two ideas could be connected. The former interpretation fits with an interpretation of Numbers 24:17 which many have regarded as a Messianic prophecy. However, it is unlikely that this is what Matthew had in mind. With all of the other Old Testament quotations he uses in the infancy narratives, this would have been a great opportunity to use Numbers 24:17, but he didn’t. Beyond the star’s guidance of the magi to Bethlehem, it is uncertain what the significance of the appearance of the star meant to the original readers.

Verses 3-6. Luz dismisses the detail about the fact that all Jerusalem was troubled along with Herod as a theological embellishment (Luz, 135). However, it is not unreasonable to think that they would be troubled instead of rejoicing, given what we know about Herod’s character. His reputation for ruthlessness in suppressing possible tyranny is well attested to in history. Augustus once said that he would rather be Herod’s pig than his son. This is because Herod executed three of his sons due to suspected treason (Sanders, 19). We also know that Herod committed genocide during his reign (Matt 2:16). Knowing this about his character, it is

understandable all of Jerusalem would be troubled along with Herod. Herod is troubled because he feels threatened. The people are troubled because they fear how he might react.

There is an insignificant textual variant in verse 4 according to the textual apparatus of Nestle Aland's Greek text. The phrase, "of/from them" is omitted in two mss.

Herod inquired where the *Christos* was to be born. *Christos* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Mashiach*, anointed one.

Another minor variant appears in verse 5 in some Syriac and Coptic mss. They add *Michaiou* after the phrase, *dia tou prophetou* (Metzger, 8). This was obviously an editorial addition to help future readers know which prophet the Chief priests and scribes were referring to.

Verse six has a textual variant at the end of the first line. Instead of Bethlehem, "land of Judah" *ge Iouda*, D reads Bethlehem "of the Jews" *tes Ioudaias..* Another reading is Bethlehem "land of the Jews" *ge tov Ioudaion*. It is understandable how these variants could have come about. Judah and Judea are very similar in spelling. This is fairly insignificant, especially in light of the fact that Judea is a later name for the same general area.

The quotation of Micah 5:2 in verse six does not follow the regular pattern of Matthew's formula quotations in the infancy narratives which usually use the word *pleroo* 1:22, 23; 2:15; 2:18. The exact wording of the quotation differs from all known texts of Micah 5 (Luz, 130). It appears to be a hybrid of both the LXX and the MT. Albright makes the unnecessary conclusion that the reason Matthew does not use *pleroo* is that Matthew himself doubts the historicity of the narrative (Albright, 15). The difficulty with Albright's conclusion is this. If Matthew were building a case for the Davidic Kingship of Jesus, so why would he use doubtful material? Since this quotation apparently has very little literary relationship to

either the LXX or the MT, it is more likely that it simply was not his own contribution. Instead it was simply the words of the chief priests and the scribes.

It is difficult to sort out the Micah five quotation in Matthew 2:6. Where did it come from? Are the differences Matthean modifications, or did they come from some place else?

One of the first differences in the quotation comes from the first line. Matthew begins in typical semitic fashion with a conjunction: “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah...” The LXX reads, “And you, Bethlehem, house of Ephratha...”. Likewise, the MT reads, “And you, Bethlehem of Ephratha...” Why the difference? Hebrew poetry often uses antiquated phrases and older names. “Judah” in Matthew could merely be a contemporization of the more antiquated name, Ephratha (Gundry, 91). In prose literature, the more modern designation, “Bethlehem of Judah” appears (Jud 17:7; Ruth 1:1; 1 Sam 17:12).

The second line says, “by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,” The MT reads, “you are small to be in the thousands of Judah.” Similarly, the LXX reads, “you are few in number to be in the thousands of Judah.” It is uncertain why Matthew reads so differently. One possible explanation could be that Matthew reflects a targumic interpretation of the prophecy in Micah (Gundry, 91). The targum prefixes the preposition, *k* in front of *z’yr* in Mic 5:2, which softens it.

However, a more likely explanation is that it may just have been understood that Bethlehem, even though it was small, was a great city. It was the birthplace of David. In addition to this, the context of Micah five indicates that a great ruler would come from Bethlehem. Even though Bethlehem was a small town, it was not an insignificant place. Matthew may be reflecting nothing more than an indirect, verbal, interpretive quotation.

The next difficulty in the second line involves the difference between “rulers of Judah” in Matthew, and “thousands of Judah” in the MT and LXX. “Thousands” sometimes meant “clan” or “family” in Hebrew, and was at times used of cities. So the reference to the “thousands of Judah” in the MT and LXX are speaking of either clans or cities. Matthew’s use of “ruler” in place of “thousands” could be a result of a mistranslation. Thousand *’lp* and ruler *’lwp* are nearly identical in spelling. In some cases, it appears that ruler is spelled without the waw, in which case the radicals of the two words would be identical. In Matthew’s version of the quotation, the repetition of the word “rulers” *hegemosin* in verse two and “ruler” *hegoumenos* in verse three makes better poetry than using the word “city” or “family”.

The next line reads, “For out of you will come a ruler.” The MT reads “From you to me will come a ruler to be...” The LXX reads, “Out of you shall one come to me to be a ruler...” Matthew uses *hegemosin* for the Hebrew participle, *moshel*. The LXX uses the nearly synonymous *archon*. Once again, this may merely be an indirect, verbal quotation. Matthew does not include “to me” in his quotation.

There is a very significant difference in the last line. The MT of Mic 5:2 ends the sentence with “in Israel”, and the LXX with “of Israel.” However, Matthew adds five more words before the word Israel. Matthew’s reference to shepherding God’s people could be an allusion to verse 4 in Mic 5. However, this line matches a verse from 2 Sam 5:2. The MT reads, “you will shepherd my people Israel.” The LXX likewise reads “you will shepherd my people Israel.” Matthew renders it, “...who will shepherd my people Israel.” The substitution of “who” for “you” was merely to join the two quotations together.

It is uncertain why the text of Matthew joins the two quotations together. The verb “to shepherd” is often used in the context of kingship. Perhaps the text is merely emphasizing the

theme of kingship by expanding the last line of the quotation to include a verb indicating what kings do. They shepherd the people.

Verses 7-8. In this scene, there are no significant textual variations. The text refers to Jesus as “the child” rather than the “king.” This portrays Jesus not only as a Davidic king, but also a humble king (Baur, 312). The theme of worship continues in this scene. In verse two, the magi sought out Jesus in order to worship him. In verse eight, the text shows the contrast between the magi and Herod. Herod also seeks out the child in order to worship him. But his intentions were to destroy the child as the rest of the chapter shows.

Verses 9-10. There is one minor textual variant in this scene. Verse nine records that the star stood directly over where Jesus was. Codex Siniaticus and Vaticanus both use an Aorist Passive verb for “stood.” A couple of later manuscripts use an Aorist Active verb. The older reading shows that the star did not move on its own, but it was God who moved it. Therefore, the magi did not reach the house by their own astrological arts, their pagan wisdom, or any such thing. It was God himself who guided them to the house.

Verse 11. There is one minor variant in this verse. Some late mss read that the magi “met with” the child and his mother instead of “they saw” the child. The difference is insignificant to the narrative. This scene is the high point of the narrative. Once again the verb, *proskuneo* appears.

The magi bring gifts to Jesus of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Many have speculated on the significance of these gifts. Obviously, Matthew thought it significant enough to include this detail.

Gold and frankincense are items associated with monarchies (Hare, 14). Thus Matthew may be highlighting the kingship theme by adding this detail. However, it may be nothing

more than the fact that these items were considered most precious, which is why the text calls their gifts “treasures.” So the magi wanted to honor Jesus with their “treasures.”

There is a possibility that the significance of these items lay with the Hebrew scriptures. Some see an indirect citation of Isa 60:6 and Psa 72:10-11 in these gifts (Brown 1993, 187). The obvious problem with the Psalm citation is that it is almost certain that the magi were not kings as we have seen above. An indirect citation to the Isaiah passage also has difficulties. Since Matthew so freely uses quotations from the Old Testament in the infancy narratives, why did he not do so here? The obvious answer is that Matthew did not intend to correlate the detail about the gifts with any Old Testament passage of scripture.

Verse 12. God warned the magi not to return to Herod. Some see a “dream genre” in the narratives of Matthew (Gnuse). In this genre, God reveals his will through the use of dreams. The telling of these revelations typically have a fairly consistent literary form. However, this scene does not delineate the genre in verse 12, but only mentions that God spoke to them in a dream. So the magi leave and do not follow Herod’s instructions. In the end, the magi and the child both outsmart Herod. The theme of conflict between the *legitimate* king of the Jews and Herod the king closes in this scene with Herod being unable to reach Jesus.

The story of the magi’s worship of Jesus seems to serve two purposes in the overall narrative. First, it highlights from the beginning that the Jews rejected Jesus. Second, it shows that Jesus was not just for the Jews, but that unlearned gentiles could worship Jesus as well.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albright, W.F. and C.S. Mann. *Matthew*. The Anchor Bible. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971.

Aune, David E. *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*. Library of Early Christianity. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987.

Baur, David R. "The Kingship of Jesus in the Matthean Infancy Narrative: A Literary Analysis." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 57 (Apr 1995): 306-323.

Blomberg, Craig L. "The Liberation of Illegitimacy: Women and Rulers in Matthew 1-2." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (Winter, 1991): 145-150.

Boring, Eugene M. *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New Interpreters Bible. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

Brown, Raymond Edward. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.

_____. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Gnuse, Robert. "Dream Genre in the Matthean Infancy Narratives." *Novum Testamentum* 32 (Apr 1990): 97-120.

Gundry, Robert Horton. *The Use of the Old Testament in Saint Matthew's Gospel*. Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1967.

Hagner, Donald A. *Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, 1993.

_____. "Matthew, Gospel According to." In *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by Geoffrey Bromiley 3:280-288. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.

Hare, Douglas R.A. *Matthew*. Interpretation. Lousiville: John Knox Press, 1993.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Writings of the New Testament*. rev. ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew: A Continental Commentary*. Translated by Wilhelm C. Linss. Minneapolis: Augsbrug, 1989.

Meier, John P. "Matthew, Gospel of." In *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 4:622-641. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Metzger, Bruce. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. 2nd ed. New York: American Bible Society, 1994.

Newman, Barclay M. and Philip C. Stone. *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*. UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988.

Nolland, John. "The Sources of Matthew 2:1-12." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60 (Apr 1998): 283-300.

Patte, Daniel. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

Powell, Mark Allan. "The Magi as Kings: An Adventure in Reader-Response Criticism." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (July 2000): 459-480.

_____. "The Magi as Wise Men: Re-examining a Basic Supposition." *New Testament Studies* 46 (Jan 2000): 1-20.

Sanders, E.P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 2:1-12

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO
DR. JOHN T. WILLIS AND DR. WENDELL WILLIS
AS PART OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR BIBL 627.J1

BY JOHN TELGREN

ABILENE, TEXAS
MARCH 22, 2002