

The Ninth Day of Christmas: Foreigners in Search of Wisdom

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Welcome back for this, the ninth day of Christmas. Today I'm continuing my series in the echoes and the symmetries of the nativity and infancy narratives in the Gospels. Today I'm going to be returning to the story of Matthew chapter 2 to look at the characters within that chapter once again, particularly the characters of the Magi.

Now the Magi come from the east, they're associated with places like perhaps Persia or Babylon, that sort of area, and it's significant maybe in the context of some of the Messianic texts that we have referenced from the Old Testament, that those texts were given in the context of invasion from those countries, from Assyria, from Babylon, from places like that, but yet here they are presented as visitors who bring with them worship, who bring with them gifts to the newborn king of the Jews. Other things to notice, we talked about the parallels with the Exodus, but with this theme reversed, that now the magicians, as it were, are coming from the east to worship the deliverer of the people, the new Moses, whereas Pharaoh and his court is Herod and the chief priests and the scribes, so there's a reversal there.

The Magi follow the star, they follow this light that leads them on this journey into the site of Israel and to worship the king there.

And that is again a significant parallel with Israel being led by the pillar of cloud and fire into the promised land through the wilderness. What other connections can we see here?

[1 : 36] Well, I think one of the most obvious ones is with the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In chapter 10 of 1 Kings, we read, Now when the Queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions.

She came to Jerusalem with a great retinue, with camels that bore spices, very much gold and precious stones. And when she came to Solomon, she spoke with him about all that was in her heart.

And it goes on talking about his wisdom and then all the different aspects of his kingdom and his servants and his houses.

Later on, it goes on to say, Blessed be the Lord, your God, who delighted in you, setting you on the throne of Israel. Because the Lord has loved Israel forever, therefore he made you king to do justice and righteousness.

Then she gave the king 120 talents of gold, spices in great abundance and precious stones. Then never again came such abundance of spices as the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

[2 : 41] Also the ships of Hiram, which brought gold from Ophir, brought great quantities of almogwood and precious stones from Ophir. And the king made steps out of the almogwood for the house of the Lord and for the king's house, also harps and stringed instruments for singers.

Then never again came such almogwood, nor has the like been seen to this day. And King Solomon gave the Queen of Sheba all she desired, whatever she asked, besides what King Solomon had given her according to the royal bounty.

So she turned and went to her own country, she and her servants. Now this should be very familiar to us from the story of Solomon. But when we read the story of Christ and the visit of the wise men, there are some notable parallels here.

The gifts that are brought, the one that comes to see the king that they have heard tidings of from abroad. And we also see them returning to their own country at the end of it.

It's bracketed in a similar way. So what is the significance of this? Well, Solomon was the wise son of David and people came from overseas to meet him.

[3 : 54] This was a sort of foreshadowing of the nations coming in and being blessed by Israel. And in Deuteronomy, we see that the nations were supposed to see the wisdom of Israel and come to it as a wise and an understanding people.

That no other people had a law quite like they did and that they could learn from them as foreigners. Now here we see wise men come from the east. Again, wisdom themes. It's important to recognize that these were sages.

The Magi were associated with thinking about wisdom. And these are themes that are very familiar to us from reading the story of Solomon and reading stories of reading something like Ecclesiastes or wisdom.

That Solomon is associated with wisdom and he attracts wise men from different parts of the world. And he attracts the Queen of Sheba, who's interested in finding out about his reign and his wisdom. In the same way, the Magi come from the east to find out about the wisdom of this one who has come, Jesus Christ, who is wisdom incarnate.

[4 : 59] So there's an important theme there that we see developed. I think there may be other things that are going on within these texts. There are some echoes that may be connected to the end of Christ's story that are perhaps less pronounced, but are worth reflecting upon.

I don't know quite what to make of them yet. One of the things that we see within the beginning of Matthew that we don't see for the rest of Matthew until near the end is reference to dreams, warning dreams.

And so Joseph has a number of warning dreams. And then the wise men have a warning dream. And what we have in the case of Matthew is one other dream that's mentioned later on. And that's the dream of Pilate's wife, who warns him not to be involved with Christ because she suffered many things in a dream concerning that man.

It says, While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, have nothing to do with that just man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him.

[6 : 07] But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. So there's a similar situation. There's a threat to Jesus from Herod and his court, from the chief priests and from the scribes, the leaders of the people.

This is the same group that's associated with the attempt to take Christ's life in his infancy. There's a very significant parallel here. There's an attempt to take Christ's life. And then, following that, in the context of that, there is a dream, a warning dream, given to a Gentile that could be involved in delivering Christ.

And yet it doesn't follow through. It's as if it's a possible route that was never taken. There's this line of hope that's thrown out there that Pilate could have grasped pulled of, but he doesn't.

And so, perhaps we're supposed to read that in parallel with the story of the wise men. That the wise men responded to the dream and they went against Herod, whereas Pilate did not respond to the dream given to his wife and go against Herod and the people.

And for that reason, there is a different end to the story at this point. Other things that might be interesting, the reference to King of the Jews. Again, there are no real references to Christ as the King of the Jews in the Gospel of Matthew until the end.

[7 : 42] There's a reference at the beginning and there's a reference at the end. Now, of course, King of the Jews contrasts with Herod himself, but it also creates this connection between these two parts of the story.

So, Christ is proclaimed King of the Jews and he's sought as the King of the Jews by the Magi. And then at the end, he's the one who's ridiculed and ironically called King of the Jews and put above his cross as well.

And so, there's a similar theme going on there as well. I think that is probably something that we should notice. Now, the interesting one, I'm not sure what to make of, is the connection between the bringing of spices.

And what we have at the end of Matthew is not a bringing of spices, which is interesting. We have it in other Gospels. And so, if it's a literary connection that Matthew is drawing, he does not draw it within the text himself.

And so, I'm a bit uncertain of what to make of it. Because in the other Gospels, we have spices being brought to the tomb. Spices that were associated with the tomb.

[8 : 54] And that is something that the women bring on the morning of the resurrection. And it's something that Joseph of Arimathea brings spices for the tomb.

And Nicodemus as well in John's Gospel. So, these are interesting things. These are figures from outside the group. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

It's interesting. They should be involved at that point. In some ways, that might be some parallel with the wise men. But I don't think it's drawn in a literary form within the text of Matthew itself.

So, I'm not sure what to make of it. What else could we say on this? Well, I think that that connection maybe highlights the significance of the Joseph character again.

Joseph is the one who rescues the body of Christ. Just as Joseph rescues the infant Christ and brings him into Egypt. So, Joseph of Arimathea takes the body that would have otherwise been mistreated and buried in a pauper's grave or something like that.

[10 : 02] But he takes that body and he wraps it and he makes it safe. And so, that's an interesting theme that we can see connecting Joseph at the beginning and Joseph at the end of the Gospel.

There are a lot more things that I can say on these. If you want to have any more thoughts, feel free to ask me a question on my Curious Cat account. I'll continue this series again tomorrow. And, Lord willing, you are having a good Christmas and hope that you've enjoyed this.

God bless. Thank you for listening. God bless.