Sunday, December 20, 2020

Lesson: Matthew 2:1-2; 7-15; Time of Action: 5 or 4 B.C.; Place of Action: Jerusalem and Bethlehem

Golden Text: “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11).

I. INTRODUCTION. Christmas scenes showing the shepherds and the wise men together are incorrect. The shepherds found the Christ Child in the manger. The wise men found the Child in a house months later. The birth of Christ was the most exciting event in history. It was greeted with reactions ranging from joy to violence. In this week’s lesson from Matthew’s account of the visit of the wise men, we find three reactions to Jesus: the religious leaders ignored Him, Herod hated Him, and the wise men worshiped Him.

II. THE LESSON BACKGROUND. Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth skips over the events mentioned in Luke 2:1-20. In those verses, we are told that a Roman Empire-wide census was taking place and the head of each Jewish household had to register in his native city. Even though
Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, in the northern province of Galilee, God arranged for His Son to be born in Bethlehem. Since Joseph and his ancestors were from Bethlehem, he returned there with Mary his betrothed wife. God prompted the Roman emperor Augustus to decree that a census be taken of the whole Roman world (see Luke 2:1-3). Although Mary was pregnant and ready to give birth, she and Joseph had to obey the imperial command and travel to their ancestral home of Bethlehem to register for taxation (see Luke 2:4-6). The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem must’ve been very uncomfortable for Mary, but it was the only way that God’s plan could be fulfilled. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the local inn was filled, forcing Joseph and Mary to stay in a shelter for animals. When Jesus was born, Mary wrapped Him in long strips of cloth-like bandages (see Luke 2:7). Not long after the birth, shepherds who had been living out in the fields in the district around Bethlehem paid the family a visit (see Luke 2:8-20). Sometime later, probably about two years, the family had moved into a house (see Matthew 2:11). This is where our lesson begins.

III. THE QUESTION FROM THE WISE MEN (Matthew 2:1-2)

A. The arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1). Our first verse says “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.” Matthew first tells us that “Jesus was born in
Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king.”
The town of “Bethlehem” was about five miles south of “Jerusalem” and was the village King David was from (see I Samuel 16:1-13). “Judaea” was the name of the third district of Israel (Samaria and Galilee were the other two) and was west of the Jordan River and south of Samaria. It included much of what was earlier called the southern kingdom before the Babylonian Captivity. Both “Bethlehem” and “Jerusalem” were located in “Judaea.”
Second, we are told that the birth of “Jesus” took place “in the days of Herod the king.” Actually, “Jesus” was born toward the end of the reign of “Herod the king.” This was “Herod the Great” who reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. Even though “Jesus” was the rightful Heir to Israel’s throne, “Herod the Great” was reigning. He had been given the title of “king” by the Roman emperor despite the fact that he was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau and therefore he was not a Jew. “Herod” maintained his position through terror. He was so suspicious of possible rivals that he even murdered his wife and some of his sons. He was so evil that the Roman emperor Augustus once said that it was better to be Herod’s hog than his son (Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary). Third, we are told that into this unstable situation “came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.”
Here “wise men” is a translation of the Greek noun “magoi” or “magi.” The term refers to individuals who were acquainted with the interpretation of stars and possibly dreams. They seem to have been Gentile dignitaries who served as official advisers to powerful monarchs (see Daniel 2:2, 48; 4:6-7; 5:7). These men were from “the east” meaning “east” of Palestine. They probably came from the
region of Babylonia or Persia where astrology was a prominent and honored profession. If this is the case, they traveled at least seven hundred miles to Jerusalem. So, it certainly wasn’t an overnight trip. It was logical for the “wise men” to journey to “Jerusalem” to look for the great King of the Jews, because it was the religious and political capital of the Jews. “Jerusalem” served as the seat of “Herod’s” government. Note: It has been traditionally assumed that there were three wise men and they were kings, or astrologers from different lands. However, the Bible does not identify them, nor does it tell us how many there were. Tradition has even invented three names for them. It is accepted that there were only three “wise men” because they brought three different gifts (see Matthew 2:11). But nowhere does the Bible state how many there were. We could even infer from the stir they caused in Jerusalem that they were a large delegation; but how many there were is not important.

B. The inquiry of the wise men (Matthew 2:2). The wise men continued their search “Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.” When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, it appears that they first asked around “Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east.” The first question we might ask here is how did they know that a new “king” had been “born” in Judea? The Bible does not give any details as to how the wise men determined that a new “King of the Jews” had been “born.” However, the phrase “for we have seen his star in the east” could shed
some light on that for us. The wise men claimed to know about the Messiah’s birth through “his star.” If they were astrologers from Persia, as some scholars believe, being acquainted with messianic prophecies may be traceable back to the time of the Babylonian Captivity. Perhaps they had learned from Jews living in Babylon both during and following the Captivity that a “star” would signal the coming of the Messiah (see Numbers 24:17). Some Jews like Daniel and his companions, had developed strong influence in the land of their captivity (see Daniel 2:48-49; 3:28-30). The fact that these wise men had “seen his star in the east” means that they saw the “star” while they were still in their eastern land. The wise men then gave their reason for seeking the “King of the Jews.” They had “come to worship him.” The term “worship” can mean “to make obeisance” or “to pay homage” to men as well as to God. However, it is likely that these men recognized divine qualities in the One they were looking for (see Matthew 2:11). In addition, it seems unlikely that they would travel 700 miles or more to an obscure country simply to honor a mere man.

IV. THE INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO THE WISE MEN (Matthew 2:7-8). Verses 3-6 are not part of our printed text, but in those verses we are told that when King Herod heard about the wise men looking for the One who was born King of the Jews, it upset him as well as everyone else in Jerusalem (see Matthew 2:3). Then Herod called a meeting of all the leading Jewish priests and teachers of the law and asked them where the Messiah would be born (see Matthew
2:4). They answered him, by quoting Micah 5:2: “And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel” (see Matthew 2:5-6). The remainder of our lesson continues with verse 7.

A. Herod gathers additional information from the wise men (Matthew 2:7). This verse says “Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.” From the religious scholars, “Herod” learned where the new king could be found. He then proceeded to find out when the child had been born. Therefore, “Herod…privily called the wise men.” The term rendered “privily” means “secretly” or “privately.” King “Herod…called the wise men” to come to a private meeting with him. Undoubtedly the secrecy of this meeting was intended to avoid arousing anyone’s suspicions about “Herod’s” real plans (see Matthew 2:16). When “Herod” met with the wise men, he “enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.” The term “enquired…diligently” means to ascertain or gather information exactly or accurately. Perhaps it was after a fair amount of shrewd questioning that “Herod” determined the precise “time the star appeared” to the “wise men” while they were still in their homeland east of Palestine. This information would help “Herod” discover the age of the Child.

B. Herod gives the wise men directions (Matthew 2:8). This verse says “And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child;
and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.” After his private meeting with the wise men, Herod “sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child.” This implies that they were authorized by Herod to make whatever inquiries they thought were necessary in order to locate the Christ “Child.” Herod went on to instruct the wise men saying “and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.” Once the wise men found the “Child,” they were to return to Jerusalem and tell Herod where He was. Herod said that he wanted to know where the “Child” was so “that I may come and worship him also.” Of course he was only pretending to want to “worship” the “Child” as the wise men would do. His dishonesty was matched only by his cruelty. Note: Herod’s real desire was not to “worship” the Messiah, but to eliminate Him, because Herod viewed Jesus as a challenge to his rule. He wouldn’t hesitate to have any potential competitor to his throne murdered. The wise men, having no previous contact with Herod’s wiles, were unaware of his intentions. They would have carried out his wishes to return to him after locating the “Child” if God had not intervened as we shall see later.

V. THE WORSHIP BY THE WISE MEN (Matthew 2:9-12)

A. Finding the Child (Matthew 2:9-10).
1. (vs. 9). This verse says “When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.” The phrase “When they had heard the king” means that the wise men paid close attention to what the king had to say concerning where they could find “the young child.” Then “they departed” from the king’s presence. As they prepared to go to Bethlehem “lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.” In other words, the same “star” that they had seen in their homeland “in the east” reappeared and went ahead of them until it arrived at its final destination. The wise men didn’t have to waste any time wandering around aimlessly looking for the Jewish king. They were led by “the star” from Jerusalem to Bethlehem until “it came and stood over where the young child was.” The phrase “stood over where the young child was” conveys the idea that “the star” remained stationary directly over the specific place where the Christ “Child” was living. God intervened to direct the wise men to the One whom they had come to worship. **Note:** The peculiar activity of “the star” seen by the wise men suggests that it was a heavenly signal specially prepared by God and not some group of planets or an appearance of a comet as some people suggests. The timing and location of this celestial phenomenon was God’s miraculous sign leading to His Son. It caused the wise men to rejoice exceedingly (see Matthew 2:10) because it directed them to the newborn King. When the Son of God was born on earth, God made sure that those who
sincerely sought Him would find Him. The same thing is true today! Those who sincerely seek Jesus will find Him (see Jeremiah 29:12-13). God will see to that!

2. (vs. 10). This verse goes on to say “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” The reappearance of “the star” thrilled the wise men so much that “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” Clearly, they were eager to locate the Saviour and pay Him homage. Therefore, they overflowed with delight having successfully found the Messiah. **Note:** The wise men’s journey pictures the life of faith that Christians have entered into. Our life of faith may include long stretches in which we may not see any outward signs of God’s approval or blessing. It may also include unfulfilled expectations. But at key points along life’s journey, God will step in and give evidence that we are on the right path and that our journey is pleasing to Him. As a result, our faith is strengthened, and like the wise men, we “rejoice with exceeding great joy.”

B. The wise men’s encounter with the Christ Child (Matthew 2:11). This verse says “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.” It is widely assumed that the wise men visited the Saviour on the night that He was born. Traditional manger scenes show both the wise men and the shepherds standing
or kneeling close to the manger. The phrase “And when they were come into the house” strongly suggests that the wise men didn’t visit the Saviour on the night of His birth. More than likely, this happened sometime later, somewhere between a few months to two years (see Matthew 2:16) after Joseph and “Mary” found a “house” to live in. Jesus was no longer a newborn infant in the stable “lying in a manger” (see Luke 2:12, 16). He was now a “young child” living in a “house.” Upon arriving at “the house” where Jesus was, the wise men “saw the young child with Mary his mother.” In keeping with the reason for their mission (see Matthew 2:2), the wise men showed the utmost respect for the King of the Jews. First, they “fell down, and worshipped him.” The idea conveyed here is that they bowed down low to the ground in worship to the Saviour.

Note: It’s interesting that the Scripture does not say that they gave this same honour to Herod, although he was in the height of his royal grandeur. But they gave this Child the honour of bowing down and worshiping Him not only as to a king (then they would have done the same to Herod), but as to God. The attitude of worship the wise men demonstrated is worthy of our careful emulation. We exist to adore Christ and to bring Him honor through our faithful service. We are directed by God the Father to pay homage to the Son (see Matthew 17:5; John 4:23-24; Romans 14:11; Revelation 5:11-14) with every aspect of our being.

After prostrating themselves in worship, the wise men “opened their treasures.” The word rendered “treasures” refers to a box or chest in which valuable items were stored. Out of these “treasure” chests, the wise men “presented
unto him gifts” they had brought to the Saviour. They were offering items worthy of being given to a great King. Matthew lists three items that the wise men presented to the Christ Child, “gold, and frankincense and myrrh.” Just as it is today, “gold” was a greatly valued metal in the ancient Near East and it was highly sought after by kings. “Frankincense” comes from trees of the balsam family and is used as a perfume (see Exodus 30:34). “Myrrh” was also used as a perfume (see Genesis 37:25; Exodus 30:23; Esther 2:12) and for embalming as well (see John 19:38-40).  

Note: The wise men certainly had not been ordered to bring gifts to the Saviour. Their offering was a voluntary contribution. This reminds us that what we give to the LORD should be given willingly from the heart. God does not want us to give to His work grudgingly or out of compulsion. As II Corinthians 9:7 states, “God loveth a cheerful giver.” Many scholars believe that there is a symbolic significance to the three gifts Jesus received. They believe that the “gold” symbolized Jesus’ royalty as King; the “frankincense” symbolized His deity since it was an ingredient used in sacred incense; and “myrrh” symbolizes the reason that Jesus came—to die for the sins of mankind since “myrrh” was used in ancient times for embalming. Whether these gifts really had a symbolic significance is debatable, but it can hardly be debated that these gifts had a practical purpose. In the days to come, Joseph, Mary and Jesus would spend time in exile in Egypt (see Matthew 2:13-15), and they would have no regular source of income. These expensive gifts when converted to cash would provide the resources needed to sustain them until they returned from Egypt to
Nazareth. For sure, the awesome hand of God was working in all of this.

C. The departure of the wise men (Matthew 2:12). This verse says “And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.” Now that the wise men had completed their mission, they prepared to return home. The guidance of God that had brought them to Bethlehem continued with them as they departed. Matthew writes “And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.” By means of “a dream” the LORD instructed the wise men “not to return to King Herod.” The spiritual commitment and faithfulness of these foreign dignitaries is seen in their response. They obeyed God’s command and “departed into their own country another way.” The words “another way” means that the wise men took a different route home that bypassed Jerusalem. Note: We may wonder if the fact that the wise men did not return to Jerusalem and to “Herod” accomplished anything. After all, “Herod” became so angry when he discovered it that he sent soldiers to kill all the young male children around Bethlehem (see Matthew 2:16). Although the wise men’s disregard for “Herod” didn’t prevent the slaughter, it did provide time for Joseph to escape with his family into Egypt (see Matthew 2:13-14). The wise men disappeared into the East and “Herod” died within a short time. Yes, there are times when our devotion and faithfulness to Christ requires us to change our plans. It’s not always
easy or convenient to follow God’s leading and obey His commands. However, we do it because we know that His plans are always the best.

VI. THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT (Matthew 2:13-15)

A. Another angelic message (Matthew 2:13). This verse says “And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the LORD appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” After the wise men had left Bethlehem to return home (see verse 12), an “angel” again appeared to “Joseph in a dream.” He instructed “Joseph” to get up and take his family quickly, “and flee into Egypt.” The reason “the angel” gave Joseph for this move was “for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.” In other words, “Herod” had murderous intentions for “the young child” Jesus. Undoubtedly “Herod” was afraid that this “young child” whom the wise men called the “King of the Jews” (see verse 2), would be a threat to his rule. The “angel” also instructed “Joseph” to “be thou there until I bring thee word.” He and his family were to remain in “Egypt” until the “angel” returned to him with further instructions.

B. Joseph’s continued obedience (Matthew 2:14-15).
1. (vs. 14). This verse says “When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt.” In the previous verse, the angel had told Joseph to get up and that’s what he did. It appears that he didn’t waste any time. We are told that “When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night.” Evidently, Joseph and his family left that very “night, and departed into Egypt” to escape Herod’s murderous plans. For Joseph and his family, this was a total disruption of life; an inconvenience beyond words. But when the Word of God came to him, Joseph once again obeyed immediately and began the seventy-five mile journey to “Egypt” that same “night.” In the months that followed, Joseph willingly stayed in Egypt, no doubt using the financial resources from the gifts of the wise men to get safely settled in “Egypt.”

2. (vs. 15). Our final verse says “And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the LORD by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.” We don’t know where in “Egypt” Joseph took his family to live, neither are we told exactly how long they had to stay. What we do know is that they were in Egypt “until the death of Herod.” Whenever “Herod” finally died, they would return to Israel. We are told that the reason Joseph and his family remained in Egypt until “the death of Herod” was “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the LORD by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.” What is clear from the whole episode of the flight into “Egypt” is that God was in control. Like Joseph’s (Jacob’s son) brothers centuries earlier, Herod “thought evil against” God’s chosen One, but
“God meant it unto good” (see Genesis 50:20). God turned “Herod’s” wrath to His own purpose, using the evil king to bring about the fulfillment of an Old Testament messianic prophecy by the “prophet” Hosea (see Hosea 11:1). The Scripture passage that was “fulfilled which was spoken of the LORD by the prophet” Hosea was “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” This passage of Scripture that Matthew mentioned appears to refer to the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt in the days of Moses. This has prompted much discussion from Bible scholars as to how Jesus’ return from Egypt relates to what the prophet Hosea recorded. **Note:**

**The key to understanding how the Hosea and Matthew passages relate to each other lies in the close connection between the nation of Israel and the Messiah. Israel and its history have a typological significance, foreshadowing and pointing to Jesus Christ.** Israel was God’s elect nation (see Deuteronomy 7:7), and Jesus was also God’s elect (see I Peter 2:6). Israel was God’s “son” (see Hosea 11:1) and so was Jesus God’s Son in the fullest sense (see Matthew 3:16-17; II Peter 1:16-18). Jesus, the Son of David and therefore the Heir to Israel’s throne, is the sinless embodiment of Israel. All the promises made to Israel find their ultimate fulfillment in Him. So what does all this mean in connection with our Scripture passage?

Because Jesus and Israel are so closely identified, when God told of Israel being brought “out of Egypt,” He was also referring to the time when Christ would return from Egypt. Of course, Hosea didn’t know any of this when he gave his prophecy. This fulfilled prophecy is a good example of how we must interpret Old Testament prophecy in the light of the New Testament. It should
also make us think twice when we are tempted to believe that we have God’s plans all figured out. We must approach Scripture, and particularly prophetic passages with humility and an awareness of the limits to our knowledge. And let us not forget that many Old Testament prophecies can have a double meaning, ultimately being fulfilled in the New Testament (compare Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:18; Isaiah 7:1-16 and Matthew 1:23).

VII. Conclusion. God’s Son had been born into the world, and it was God’s plan that His Son’s existence would be witnessed by Magi from the East. Those mysterious men followed a mysterious star to Jerusalem where a paranoid king directed them to Bethlehem under false pretenses. In the end, Jesus was worshipped as the King and presented with gifts. God’s great plan of redemption could not be stopped by Satan or any of his human instruments. Through the study of this week’s lesson we should gain a fresh vision of a great God who is able to perform what He has planned. As the men of the East worshiped Christ, so should we also as we commemorate His birth.
Sunday, December 20, 2020: “Called To Worship” Commentary (The ISSL Curriculum for Christmas)

***The International Sunday School Lesson Curriculum***