

# Wise Men Seek Him

Matthew 2:1-12

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As children (and sometimes also as adults) our favorite part of the Christmas celebration was getting gifts. The excitement of finding out what gifts people had specially picked out for you was always fun and memorable. Even as adults, it is fun to receive gifts, but it is also fun to give gifts, and we hope to give gifts that genuinely show our love and care for the people to whom we give them.

The first Christmas gifts, however, weren't toys, clothing, or gift cards. They were items that are generally foreign to us and seem like odd choices to give to a baby. Even more foreign to us than the gifts is the men who brought them to Jesus. The Wise Men are an integral part of the Christmas story, though we don't know much about them. Their example, however, has much to teach us about how we should relate to Jesus. So, this morning we're going to unpack the story surrounding the coming of the wise men to offer their gifts to the newborn king.

## Their Journey

Matthew's gospel is the only one that records this part of the Christmas story. Here is what he had to say about these men.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking,  
<sup>2</sup>“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:1-2, NLT)

Matthew says that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod. Last week we mentioned that Herod the Great died in the year 4 BC. He had been appointed as the king over the nation of Israel by the emperor Caesar Augustus. Herod had shown himself to be adept at maintaining control of the people and keeping the peace with Rome. As such, he enjoyed a long reign.

It is during Herod's reign that Matthew says some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem asking for the newborn king of the Jews. Unfortunately this is all the information Matthew really gives us about these men. Theories abound about their identities and how many of them there were. There are even traditions in the church that give these men names, physical descriptions, and list their locations and the gifts they brought to Jesus. In truth, we don't really know anything for certain about these men. With that said, most scholars seem to agree on a few things.

**First, is that these men likely traveled from one of the nearby eastern empires.** Of course, we can't know this for sure, but it does make sense. If this is true, then it would likely indicate these men were from either Persia (modern day Iran) or Babylon (modern day Iraq). If that is the case, then these men may have traveled upwards of 1,000 miles to come to Jerusalem to find this king.

**Second, they were likely well-educated.** They may have had some familiarity with the Jewish religion, and clearly were people who studied the stars. They concluded that this star they had seen indicated there was a child who would be born the king of the Jews. This is what led them to make their journey.

**Third, they were probably wealthy.** The gifts they bring are all expensive items, and the fact that they give them to Jesus is a sign of their wealth. In addition, simply making the trip itself would have been an expensive undertaking.

**Fourth, we don't know how many there were.** Tradition (and a famous song) tells us that there were three kings who traveled to pay homage to Jesus. We don't know if these men were kings (most think probably not), and we don't know how many of them there were. We assume there were three men because they brought three gifts, but there could have been many more. All we know is there must have been at least two (since Matthew uses the plural, men).

Whatever the case was, these men became convinced that they should follow a star to the land of the Jews to greet and worship the newborn king of the Jews. Understandably, their first stop was in Jerusalem, the capital city. It would make sense that a newborn king would be found in the capital of the nation. That was how they ended up in Jerusalem, asking where they could find this king.

## Meeting Herod

When they asked around about this newborn king, they eventually ended up at the palace, before the current king, Herod.

<sup>3</sup> King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote: <sup>6</sup> 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.' " <sup>7</sup> Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. <sup>8</sup> Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!" (Matthew 2:3-8, NLT)

Apparently, word of the wise men's arrival got the attention of King Herod, whose ears understandably perked up at a newborn king of the Jews. That was his title, and the existence of a rival to the throne would require investigation. Though Herod had been the king for a long time, he was not a full-blooded Jew. He was not of the line of Judah, which was where the true Jewish king would descend from. So if there was a rival who was born of the line of Judah, he was a definite threat to Herod.

So Herod began to do some investigating on his own first. He called together the religious experts and asked where the Messiah was supposed to be born. Herod

claimed to be a Jew, and followed Jewish law to some degree, but he was far from an expert in the scriptures. For the experts in religious law, this was an easy question. They quoted from Micah 5:2, which clearly stated that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The pieces of the picture were beginning to come together for Herod.

He called the wise men to the palace where he could question them and offer to help them by letting them know where this child might be. He asked when they first noticed the star, likely so he could have an idea of how old this rival king might be. He surely tried to get as much information from them as possible before sending them to Bethlehem. Before they left, Herod asked that when they found the child, they come back and let him know so that he too could go and worship him!

Of course, this was a lie. Herod had no intention of worshiping Jesus. Herod had a reputation for murdering anyone who he deemed as a threat or who was no longer useful to his purposes. He had killed every member of the dynasty before him when he took power. When he became tired of his wife, he had her executed, along with her mother. He had three of his sons executed. He had killed roughly half of the Sanhedrin. And as he neared the end of his life, he had arranged to have a number of prominent Jewish leaders arrested with orders that on the day he died, they should be executed, that way he could ensure that people would be in mourning when he died (because otherwise they probably would have rejoiced!) His murderous tendencies were so renowned that even Caesar Augustus had taken note, remarking that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son!

Needless to say, Herod pretended to be a friend of the wise men, helping them along in their search, while simultaneously plotting to kill this threat to his throne.

There are some striking contrasts in this part of the story. There is the obvious contrast between the wise men and Herod. Herod saw the existence of Jesus as a threat, knowing that his own power was at risk. As such, Herod sought to eliminate Him.

This is the way many people approach Jesus today. It is somewhat surprising how often people who claim that Christianity is a myth, that Jesus never lived, and that such beliefs are for the weak minded, go to great lengths to try to extinguish Christianity and silence Christians. If it's all a myth, what does it matter? If it's for the weak-minded, why argue so strongly against it? The answer is simple—because Christianity is a threat to their power and to their own way of life. People do not want to submit to Christ, so they try to attack Him, discredit Him, and eliminate Him. Those who take this approach will find themselves no more successful than Herod in their endeavor.

On the flip side, we see the wise men, who may have been powerful men in their own right. They were surely men of means, likely quite comfortable in their homeland, and yet they made a long journey to come and worship this king. They came to submit to Him! What a stark contrast with Herod!

There is another contrast as well, but this time with the religious leaders and the wise men. Herod sensed that the Messiah might have been born and requested the insight of the religious leaders. They told Herod the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, but apparently didn't decide to check out Bethlehem for themselves! The Messiah may have been born a mere 8 miles away, but they did nothing. These wise men had traveled possibly thousands of miles, willing to do whatever it took to reach the king.

This is a reminder to us that we can have all the religious knowledge in the world, but if it doesn't motivate us to action, then it is of little value at all.

## **In Bethlehem**

After they left Herod, they took off toward Bethlehem.

<sup>9</sup> After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!

<sup>11</sup> They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. (Matthew 2:9-12, NLT)

Matthew tells us the star that had led the men to come to Israel from the east now led them to Bethlehem. This has led many people to question what this star was. People have proposed many natural phenomena to explain the star of Bethlehem: Halley's comet was visible near this time, there was a unique conjunction of Jupiter and Venus in the sky that made for a very bright "star", and many other ideas have been proposed. But none of these natural phenomena can explain how the wise men could have followed the star to discover the house where Jesus was. To me, this really leaves only one explanation: this was a supernatural sign God used to announce Jesus' birth.

If that is the case, it reminds us that God speaks to people in all sorts of ways. These wise men from the east likely had very little, if any, knowledge of the Messiah, but they recognized that this star in the sky was significant. Somehow they knew this star meant they should travel to Israel. We don't know how they arrived at this conclusion, but we do know God spoke to them in a language they would understand to draw them to Him. This was a reminder that Jesus was not only the Savior of Israel, but of the world.

Matthew says they entered the house where Mary and Joseph were staying (meaning this was likely some time after Jesus had been born, since they were no longer in a stable). So, despite all the pictures you see on Christmas cards, it is unlikely that the wise men were present at Jesus' actual birth. Still, they came to pay homage sometime shortly thereafter.

This is when the men offer their three famous gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These items are relatively unfamiliar to us, but each had their own significance.

Gold was a fitting gift for a king. It was a valuable treasure, and a common offering for a king. Frankincense would have been used in worship. Incense was a way of honoring God. How fitting that these men brought incense to worship the Son of God! The last gift, however, is a bit more perplexing. Myrrh was used in preparing dead bodies for burial. What a strange gift to bring to a child! But what a fitting gift for *this* child. Jesus was born so that He could die. He would offer himself as a sacrifice to save His people from their sin.

We don't know if the wise men truly understood the theological significance of these gifts, or whether they were simply valuable items they could give to the newborn king, but their gifts do end up being prophetic of the life and ministry of Jesus. These valuable gifts may have also provided the financial resources to make it possible for Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt and live for some time before returning to Nazareth once the threat of Herod had passed.

There is one more lesson these wise men teach us though. Herod had told them to return to him and tell him the location of the child so that he too could go worship Him. We don't know if these men knew of Herod's reputation or recognized that he never intended to worship Jesus, but we do know that God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. As such, they took a different (likely longer) route home. To their credit, they chose to obey God rather than men. They understood that disobeying the Lord would ultimately carry far greater consequences than disobeying Herod. The lesson is that it's never wrong to do what is right. These men were willing to disobey a man who seemed to have great power and could potentially kill them, and instead chose to obey the Lord. They were willing to be inconvenienced to do what God said. We might have come up with many excuses not to do what God asked—they did not.

We face many similar decisions each day. We must choose whether we will obey God or men. The stakes are rarely as high for us as they were for the wise men, but the decisions we make are no less important. We must decide for ourselves whether we will bow to the pressures of our world or stand firm with the Lord, no matter what the world might try to do to us.

We know that after the wise men failed to return, Herod eventually took matters into his own hands and ordered that all male children 2 years old and younger in Bethlehem be killed. God had already warned Mary and Joseph to flee, so they were in Egypt when this occurred. Though Bethlehem was small, and thus the number of children killed was likely only a dozen or two, it was still a heinous act. Some question why such a heinous act is not recorded in history anywhere but the Bible. The answer is simple: Herod murdering people wasn't really newsworthy. He killed people all the time. So the only things that got written down were the murders of important people. Sadly, the murder of dozens of children in Bethlehem was just another day under Herod's rule.

Because of this threat, Jesus spent his first years in Egypt. Later on, when Herod the Great had died, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus returned home, settling once more in Nazareth, where Jesus was raised.

## Conclusion

This is a multi-faceted story that has much to teach us. These strange wise men who show up seemingly out of nowhere are a fascinating part of the Christmas story. But as we conclude, I want to encourage you to learn something from the worship of the magi. We've talked about the significance of the gifts they brought to Jesus, and I want to encourage you to pattern your own worship of the King after their gifts to Him.

**First, offer your myrrh.** Myrrh was a symbol of death. We know that Jesus ultimately died so that we might be forgiven and set free. But our offering to Him must be our own willingness to lay down our lives for Him. Jesus calls us to a new life in Him. In order to experience this, we must lay down our old life, our old habits, our old patterns of thinking and allow Him to remake us as He desires. We must die to ourselves so that we might live with Him.

**Second, offer your incense.** Incense was symbolic of Jesus' deity. Priests were to regularly burn incense as a fragrant offering to God. We too are to worship Jesus as God. There is much emphasis in Christian circles on accepting Jesus as our Savior, and that is an important element, because we are in desperate need of a savior. But that is only part of the equation. We must also accept Jesus as Lord. We must recognize that Jesus is in very nature God, and we must submit to Him as such. We must live in obedience to Him and worship Him as He requires. Part of this is spending regular time worshipping Him. That includes going to church, but it is more than that. It means coming to Him in prayer, it means studying His Word, it means acknowledging Him in our lives each and every day. Jesus is not to be worshiped once a year, or even once a week. We must worship Jesus each day of our lives. When we recognize Him as God, worship is a natural consequence.

**Third, offer your gold.** Gold was a frequent gift that would be given to kings. Jesus is the King of Kings. What makes gold a good gift for a king? The simple fact that gold is assigned great value in our world. One of the ways we worship Jesus is by laying at His feet the things that are most valuable to us. In so doing, we demonstrate that He is of ultimate value in our lives. There are many things we value greatly, the question is are we willing to sacrifice them for the Lord? We must offer to the Lord everything we have. It might be money, power, position, popularity, comfort, or any number of things. Whatever it is that occupies greatest importance in our lives, we must offer to the Lord. We allow Him to use these things as He sees fit in our lives. We give up our control of the things our world values and we give it to Jesus instead. In so doing, we demonstrate that He is of far greater value to us.

These wise men traveled a long distance to come worship the King. Their offerings serve as a pattern for us as well. I pray that this Christmas you will offer similar gifts to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

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