

The Wise Men

Matthew 2:1-2

OPENING ILLUSTRATION: A new Christmas tradition has become the “norm” in many households. The tradition of the Hallmark Christmas movie. The Hallmark channel begins airing their Christmas movies at the stroke of midnight on halloween and they continue until mid - March from what I can tell.

The plot is somewhat predictable. As a matter of fact, 75% have the same actors. They all have that “almost kissed, but interrupted by a phone call moment”. They all have the girl meeting a guy she thought was the taxi driver, but instead he is just a part time model who works at the local fire dept. Then there is the old boyfriend who comes into the story about half way through the movie.

And ladies be honest, you all are looking for those Hallmark moments throughout Christmas...

JOKE: I read about one couple were in a busy shopping at the mall just before Christmas. The wife suddenly noticed that her husband was missing and as they had a lot to do, so she called him on his cell phone.

The wife said " Where on earth are you, you know we have lots to do."

Cue cheesy piano music...He said “Honey, you remember the jewelry store we went into about 10 years ago, and you fell in love with that diamond necklace? I could not afford it at the time and I said that one day I would get it for you?”

Little tears started to flow down her cheek and she got all choked up...

"Yes, honey, I do remember that shop." she replied.

He said, "Well, sweetheart I am in the gun shop right next door to it." It's not always a Hallmark moment...Well you don't get more Hallmark than Matthew 2, but it's straight out of the pages of HISTORY.

TEXT: Matthew 2:1–12 (ESV)

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, **wise men from the east** came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

1. Who were the Magi?

All we are told in Matthew is that they were wise men from the East. Most likely from Persia.

The word **Magi** is *transliterated* from the Greek rather than *translated*.

- **Transliterated** means the modern translators sought to give English equivalents to the letters.
- **Translated** means they sought to find an English word that means the same thing.

When no English word seems to convey the same meaning, the word is transliterated rather than translated. That is why some of your translations will say, “Wise men” and others will say, “Magi”.

- Magi - Transliterated
- Wise Men - Translated

But the term, “Wise men” Doesn't fully convey who these men probably were.

We've got nativity scenes set out in our homes with the **three wise men** bowing before baby Jesus in a stable while the oxen and sheep are lowing over to the side. We sing songs about these men, “**We three Kings of Orient Are**”.

We are never told in scripture that there are three wise men - that is an assumption because of the three types of gifts. What were they? Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

The best scholarship suggests that this was likely an envoy of Priests perhaps as many as 20-30 men who served as advisors to the ruling class of Persia. They were highly educated and gave themselves to seeking insights that may be helpful to the King of Persia. They were a mixture of Philosopher, Sage and Scientists of the Ancient World.

Most likely they didn't arrive on camels, but rather the great Persian horses.

You see these types of people throughout the Old Testament:

- **Egypt** - We see that Pharaoh surrounded himself with such men. They would try to duplicate the miracles of Moses in the court of Pharaoh. But remember what happened? When they turned their rods into serpent, the staff of Moses devoured theirs. So the Prophet of Israel was great.
- **Babylon** - We see them summoned in order to interpret the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar. They couldn't but remember Daniel, the prophet of Israel could.

So they knew something was special about these Jews. The first account of one of these Magi that we see in scripture is likely that of **Balaam**.

Many Theologians believe that Balaam was the first of the Magi.

He was hired by the King of Moab to put a curse on Israel (Numbers 22). But it didn't work. He wasn't able to curse Israel. As a matter of fact God gave Balaam a word -

Numbers 24:17 (ESV)

17 I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

So the first one to prophecy about a star rising in Israel is Balaam. Now if it is correct that Balaam was the first of the Pagan magicians - it makes sense that they interested in the celestial sign that pointed to a King in Israel.

Well, that's who they were...

2. Why did they come?

Why make an arduous trip over 1000 miles through the dessert to visit a child?

Several things seemed to converge that would cause their trip to make sense.

There was a **common expectation** at this time that something big was about to happen in Israel.

- **The Roman Poet Virgil**

Virgil, who died about 22 or 23 years before Christ was born, in his "Fourth Eclogue" writes of that universal expectancy.

*Descends the firstborn
Child of promise.
The wondrous seed of god.
Lo, at thy coming,
How the starry spheres
Are moved to trembling*

- **Suetonius** wrote, "*There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world.*"
- **Tacitus**, the famous Roman historian, tells of the same belief that "*there was a firm persuasion...that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judaea were to acquire a universal empire*".
- **Josephus**, in Wars of the Jews, said that the Jews had a belief that "*about that time one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.*"

So for some reason educated people were expecting a ruler to arise in Israel. Not only these Roman Philosopher, Historians and Poets... but also men of Babylon and Persia. Why would they make such an assumption.

Let me show you what I believe lead them to this conclusion:

Daniel incidentally is considered a prophet not only in Christianity, but Judaism and Islam as well. All agree he prophesied during the Babylonian Exile.

It was during this time that the questions of, **“how long oh Lord”** was paramount in the mind of the Jews. Through Daniel - God answers that question in **Daniel 9:24-26**

In Daniel 9 - God tells them the exact year that Messiah would arrive. He points to a moment in History and tells them you can expect Messiah to arrive 483 years. If you do the math it comes to the very year Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

So you would expect that the Jews of Jesus day would be expecting it, looking for it... but that's not what we see... but rather the NT begins with these pagan magi looking for it, anticipating it. Just based on Daniel they could ascertain when it should happen.

BUT - Jewish Priests and Prophets typically began their ministry at the age of 30. So they KNEW that they were living during the period when Messiah would be born.

Now if the scriptures could get them VERY CLOSE to the time of Jesus birth - God gave them a sign to clue them in that it had happened... a STAR. Remember Balaam prophecy?

Knowing all they knew about Old Testament Prophecy and seeing the Star these ancient scientist sages made a death defying trip to pay homage, to worship the new born King of the Jews.

Now it is very important that you don't miss that - they came to worship the new King. But wait a minute where did they go when they arrived in Israel? To Jerusalem. **Who did they meet with?**

Herod - the King of the Jews. But we have NO indication that they worshipped Herod. Why would they worship the one born? Because the scriptures tell us he was much more than a regular King.

As a matter of fact when Herod consults his scribes to see where Messiah would be born - notice the passage they quote.

Matthew 2:2–6 (ESV)

² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ “ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

That was an Old Testament Quote from Micah 5:2. But if you read Micah 5:2 it says one more thing that Matthew didn't quote:

Micah 5:2 (ESV)

² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, **whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.**

So a ruler will be born... **but this ruler preceded His birth.** This ruler would be God in the flesh. The Magi knew it, all of Israel knew it, and Herod knew it.

Today, friend I want you to see that the first coming of Christ was foretold with remarkable specificity. If you see all of the evidence it takes more faith NOT to believe.

3. What did they Bring?

A. They Brought Worship

11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.

That word for fell down and worshipped, means to be thrown violently to the ground. Listen, these men see Jesus and the immediately went face down to the ground and worshipped Him.

Worship is declaring worth with the entire person.

Worship comes from an old English word “worth ship”. It’s about worth.

Illustration: yesterday I saw some of the most extravagant worship I’ve ever witnessed. I wasn’t at a church or revival. I was at the SEC Championship.

Grown men - ahhhhhh ruff, ruff, ruff! At the start of the game they raised hands.

Some of same folks would say, I don’t think that’s necessary in church.

But notice, when they got their worship right...

B. They Brought Treasure

11b. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

It was customary to bring a gift when you visit a King.

Many have speculated about the purpose of these gifts. Scripture really doesn’t tell us. We know that Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh were some of the top exports of Persia. So it could just be that, but there does seem to be prophetic significance in the gifts.

- **Gold** - may have been a tribute one would pay to a King. They were acknowledging that this boy would one day rule.
- **Frankincense** - was a resin used in priestly worship. It was burnt as incense. It symbolized our prayers rising to heaven.
- **Myrrh** - was used to embalm the dead. It was an expensive ointment. As a matter of fact this is what the ladies Brought to Jesus grave on the first Easter.

When it comes to Christmas you have to prioritize your gift giving.

I mean, you don't put the same amount of care in choosing an anonymous gift for an office party that you put into a gift for your wife, right? And you would think that the more important that a person is to you, the more care you put into their gift.

How important is Jesus to you? How much priority and thought have you put into what you will give him this Christmas? Learn a lesson from these wise men.

Can I challenge you to consider something as we near the year’s end?

1. Have you tithed this year? How about catching up?
2. Consider what some have done - stocks.
3. Others have donated timber rights.
4. Others have sold land and donated the proceeds to the church.
5. Some have just had a really good year and been able to write a very generous check to FBC. For many, that’s an extra \$100, for some it’s an extra 100K

6. I read this week - When people in their 20's and 30's deposit in IRA accounts, they are mostly unaware those funds will ever be subject to income tax. When they reach 70 1/2, they realize the tax code requires them to take a "minimum required distribution" (MRD). For most, the amount they are required to withdraw as taxable income is 3-4% of the account balance. The average value of an IRA is \$600,000. It's easy to see that adding over \$20,000 dollars to their social security and other taxable income would cause concern.

NOTICE: When they got there worship right and their giving right....note what happens

¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Notice - when they came to Jerusalem they had to get o Herod and get instruction from the scribes as to where Jesus was to be born. They opened the Bible and showed them Bethlehem right? But notice, when they worshipped right, and gave right, God spoke to them directly.

Could it be that the reason you don't sense God speaking to you is because you don't worship Him as you ought nor give to Him as you ought?

Here is the KEY to experience God to the fullest this Christmas. **WORSHIP HIM FULLY and GIVE TO HIM GENEROUSLY.**