

Matthew 2:1-23
Wise Men Worship Him
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One of the most fascinating elements of the Christmas story is the visit of the Magi, the Wise Men from the east. In reality, the Bible tells us very little about these mysterious worshipers of the Christ child, but legends about them have developed over the years, legends abounding in detail. And these kings from the East appear in historical novels such as Ben Hur.

According to one tradition, the Magi of Matthew chapter two were three kings with one from each of the three division of the human race descending from the three sons of Noah:

one from Asia, a descendant of Shem,
one from Africa, a descendant of Ham, and
one from Europe, a descendant of Japeth.

Another tradition identifies the three kings as

Melkon, king of Persia,
Caspar, king of India, and
Balthasar, king of Arabia.

This is all very interesting, but we must recognize that these details are not found in the Bible. The Bible does not say that there were three wise men. All the Bible says is that the wise men brought three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Bible does not tell us their names, their races, or their native countries.

But what the Bible tells us is all that we need to know. What we want to focus on this Lord's Day is the Biblical significance of the wise men, and also to contrast their attitude toward the Christ child with that of the Jerusalem scribes and King Herod.

I'm not going to focus in detail on who the Magi were. I will merely say that the ancient Magi in the kingdoms of ancient Mesopotamia were priestly philosophers who were schooled in ancient wisdom. They were valued for their insight, and they were counselors to kings. They also studied astronomy.

These particular Magi from the East somehow knew about the Biblical prophecies regarding the birth of a king of the Jews who would also be the divine Messiah. We can only assume that this resulted from the influence of men such as Daniel who had served in both the Babylonian and the Persian empires a few centuries before the birth of Christ.

I'm also not going to go into any detail about what exactly was this star which the wise men saw. We can't answer this question in any detail because the Bible has given us very little detail. All we know is that the star was something in the heavens which only these astronomical experts noticed and understood as something significant. Everyone in Jerusalem was surprised by the wisemen's message about a star in the East. No one in Jerusalem had paid any attention to it.

The star in the east was something that could signify that the Messiah, the king of the Jews, had been born. The text does not

say that the star led them to Jerusalem. The text says that the wise men had seen a star, a star which they somehow understood to be His star, a star which belonged in some special way to a newly born king of the Jews. So they came to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews, to make further inquiries.

At Jerusalem, they learned from the scribes that the prophet Micah had said that the Messiah would be born in the city of Bethlehem, which was only five miles from Jerusalem. The wise men did not need guidance to get them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, but somehow on that short journey, the star went before them, as the pillar of fire had gone before ancient Israel. They followed its guidance until the star in some fashion stood over where the young Jesus then lived.

That is all we know about the star. To go significantly beyond that and dwell upon it would be to engage in a mania for the marginal, a taste for the trivial. This reminds me of a statement Spurgeon once made about a minister of his own day:

"He is great upon the ten toes of the beast, the four faces of the cherubim, the mystical meaning of badgers' skins, and the typical bearings of the staves of the ark, and the windows of Solomon's temple: but the sins of business men, the temptations of the times, and the needs of the age, he scarcely ever touches upon. Such preaching reminds me of a lion engaged in mouse-hunting ..."

I will not engage in speculation on the nature of the star of Bethlehem, but I will make an application. If God can use the

relatively feeble light of a star to bring men from pagan nations to the worship of the Savior, then beloved, God can use you and me. In Philippians 2:15, the apostle Paul exhorts us to shine forth as lights in a darkened world. Let us shine forth with Christ honoring lives and gospel witness, and following the example of the star of Bethlehem, let us lead men to the worship of the Savior.

Let's now return to the subject of the wisemen and see what we can learn from them.

First, the wisemen honored Jesus as the newly born King of the Jews. When they came to Jerusalem, they asked the question, "Where is He who has been born king of the Jews?"

Over the centuries, there had been many kings of the Jews, but the Magi were talking about a special king, a king with His own special star in the heavens. Centuries before, when Israel was wandering in the wilderness, God had used a pagan prophet to utter a prophecy about the Messiah under the figure of a star. The Holy Spirit had caused the pagan prophet Balaam to prophesy, "... a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel ..." (Numbers 24:17).

King Herod knew enough to associate this new King of the Jews who had His own star with the Messiah or, in Greek, the Christ. He did not know enough to know where the Messiah would be born. So King Herod gathered the chief priests and the scribes together and asked them where the Christ would be born. They knew the answer off the top of their heads. The referred King Herod to Micah chapter 5, verse 2, which says:

2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting."

The Messiah would not only be from the lineage of David, he would also be born in the city of David.

And from this prophecy we learn just how special this Messianic king would be. Though His human nature would originate through a divinely enabled conception in the womb of the virgin Mary, yet His "goings forth [were] from of old, from everlasting." Or, as the Gospel according to John puts it, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The wise men recognized Jesus as the prophesied Messiah, and so should we.

Secondly, the wise men honored Jesus as the Ruler of the Nations. Jesus was born as King of the Jews, and these men were not Jews. Yet they came to worship Jesus just the same.

The Gospel according to Matthew is the gospel written especially for the Jews. One of its purposes is to remind the Jews that the Messiah is not only the King of the Jews but also the Savior of the world and the Ruler of the nations. In Isaiah 49:6, God speaks to His Messianic servant these words:

6 ... 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'

When the Magi came to the young Jesus as representatives of the Gentiles, they fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies, but perhaps the most appropriate is Isaiah 60:3:

3 The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

The Gospel according to Matthew opens with this account of the Gentile Magi coming to Israel to worship the young Jesus. And the Gospel according to Matthew ends with the resurrected Jesus giving His disciples a commission to disciple the Gentile nations. Jesus told them to disciple the nations because He has all authority in heaven and on earth. His authority is not merely local but global, and not merely global but cosmic.

The Gospel according to Matthew begins and ends with an emphasis on Jesus as a universal Messiah who came for Gentiles as well as for Jews.

Thirdly, the wisemen worshiped Jesus.

They had to travel a great distance for this privilege. They didn't travel just a few miles down a paved road in the comfort of a modern car. They traveled a great distance, probably riding camels through the desert.

When they worshiped Him, they fell to the ground. Luke tells about the coming of the lowly Jewish shepherds on the very night Jesus was born. Luke doesn't say anything about the shepherds bowing to the ground. Here is all Luke tells us:

- 15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us."
- 16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.
- 17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.

Yet Matthew tells us that the Magi, dignitaries from a noble race, bowed down before Jesus and worshiped Him. They were the firstfruits of that prophesied harvest of homage which we read about in Philippians chapter 2:

- 9 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,
- 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,
- 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

They rejoiced at the privilege of coming to Jesus for worship:

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

Notice how Matthew piles word upon word to stress the depth their heartfelt joy: "The rejoiced with exceedingly great joy." Their worship was not grudgingly or of necessity.

God loves not only the cheerful giver but also the joyful worshiper. The Lord loves those who can cry out in sincerity:

Psalm 122:1

1 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD."

Psalm 84:1-2, 10

1 How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts!

2 My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

10 For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

There is no greater privilege than to cry out with the church on earth and the church in heaven with the heavenly host:

"You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power"

and

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!"

Those who have no inner compulsion to meet with God's people on the Lord's Day to sing God's praises and to publicly acknowledge God's worth, are of all people to be most pitied. Their souls have dried up, and they have lost contact with what is most essential to their fulfillment as human beings.

The wisemen rejoiced, and finally they worshiped with costly gifts. Not that God has any needs. Not that God can be bribed, or that we can buy His favor.

When we bring gifts as an act of worship, we are saying:

Jesus, You mean more to me than these costly gifts.
Jesus, You are my great treasure, my pearl of great price.
Jesus, I value the privilege of worshiping You.
Jesus, I desire the honor of contributing to Your kingdom,
the honor of making an eternal investment,
the honor of being one of God's chosen means
to reach His predetermined ends.

Let's now contrast the attitude of the wisemen with that of the chief priests and the scribes in Jerusalem.

The chief priests and the scribes had the bright light of God's revealed Word. The wisemen had only the feeble light of a star. Yet the wisemen had eyes to see. The chief priests and scribes read the old testament scripture with a veil over their eyes.

The Magi lived a great distance from Bethlehem. The chief priests and scribes lived only five miles away. Yet the chief priests and scribes did not make the trip and they had no gifts to bring. They were indifferent. They had left their first love. They had a form of godliness but denied its power.

Finally, let's contrast the attitude of the wisemen with that of King Herod. All of Jerusalem was disturbed when the wisemen came and spoke about a newly born King of the Jews. All of Jerusalem knew how jealous King Herod was of the title "King of the Jews." They were afraid of what King Herod might do. King Herod saw Jesus as a threat because King Herod wanted to be King.

We must not be like the chief priests and scribes, religious people who know the Bible and who attend church but who are indifferent to Jesus and His worship.

We must not be like Herod who was hostile to Jesus because he did not want to submit to Jesus' lordship.

We need to be like the wisemen.

They acknowledged Jesus as King. They sought Him. They worshipped Him. They brought Him sacrificial and costly gifts.

Let us pray:

O Sovereign Lord of the universe, just as you sent the star to bring the wisemen to Bethlehem, we ask that you would send to us the light of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, that

we, like the wisemen of old, might find Jesus, worship Jesus,
and serve Jesus with exceeding great joy.