

§025. The Magi Visit (Matt 2:1–12)

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, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’” Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, “Go and search diligently for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.” When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way..

Purpose

The purpose of this passage is to show that notice was served on Israel's hierarchy that its Messiah had come, and to record the fact that Gentiles were apprised of their Savior's advent.

Exposition

This passage, like the other dealing with Christ's birth, has been much embroidered onto, so it is necessary to return to the biblical facts and to eliminate

the accumulated frills and myths. The passage leaves three points obscure: the nature of the star, which could pinpoint a house, the origin of the 'wise men,' and our Lord's age at the time of this visit. Scripture gives us a few basic facts from which we can work. Let us discuss these before we consider the narrative as this will aid our understanding of this event.

The New Testament uses two Greek words for star, 'astron' and 'asteer.' Wherever 'astron' is used (Luke 21:25; Acts 7:43; 27:20; Heb 11:12) it plainly means a physical celestial body, but this is not the case for 'asteer' which clearly denotes an angel in Rev 1:20. Notably, this understanding of a spiritual being usually makes the better sense whenever 'asteer' is used (Matt 24:29; Mark 13:25; I Cor 15:41; Jude 13; Rev 1:16, 20; 2:1, 28; 3:1; 6:13; 8:10, 11, 12; 9:1; 12:1, 4; 22:16). Now, this list is exhaustive except for Matt 2:2, 7, 9, 10; so, on that reasoning, the 'star' which the wise men saw was a spiritual being, an angel, if you like. That explains how a 'star' could move from the east to the south (see exegesis) and then stand so precisely over Jesus' home that it directed the wise men to this particular house. The popular theories suggesting this 'star' was a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter or Mercury, etc., all falter on this point, for they cannot explain how this celestial phenomenon moved around the sky and identified a particular house in Bethlehem, as, dependent on the viewer's position, it would have appeared to be over every house in the city, just as the rising moon can be positioned over every house in your block, or city, if you will only move to the correct viewpoint! It is remarkable that some Bible scholars point out the impossibility of a star leading the magi to the house in which Jesus lived, yet fail to do the word study on 'asteer' which provides such a simple and rational explanation to this problem.

The Bible neither tells us how many wise men there were, nor exactly where they came from. Firstly, it is useful to know that the Greek word translated 'wise men' is 'magos,' and that this term originated in the lower Mesopotamian basin. Originally a Median tribe, the magi were a hereditary priesthood, often possessing great political power and functioning as king-makers in the Median, Babylonian, Persian, and Parthian empires. They first appeared in the seventh century BC, and had a strong tradition that favored the exercise of sacerdotal and occult powers; furthermore, prophetic powers

were ascribed to this hereditary priesthood. They were monotheistic, believing in one beneficent Creator Who was opposed by a malevolent evil spirit. The principal element of their worship seems to have been fire. Pliny writes of magi in Chaldea, Egypt, Armenia, Ethiopia, and Gaul; of these only Chaldea lies east of Palestine, so is the only attested area which fits the biblical narrative. Some suppose there were three magi because of the three species of gifts, but there is no other basis for this conclusion. Indeed, early church tradition held there were twelve magi, later tradition reduced them to three, even later tradition gave them names—Melchior, Balthasar, and Caspar—linking the gifts with them in that order.

The Septuagint of Daniel uses ‘magi’ for the kings’ advisors (1:20; 2:2, 10, 27; 4:4; 5:7, 11, 15) which supports the conclusion suggested above. So the magi were not Eastern kings, but did come from the lower Mesopotamian basin. How did they know what the star meant? Again, we cannot say, for there is no Old Testament prophecy about such a star (unless it be Num 24:17), yet something led Abram to Palestine from the same region. Could it be that traditions about him endured for twenty-one centuries, and that these magi knew of the Abrahamic Covenant? If so, when they saw an angelic presence did they put two and two together and follow the same 1,200 mile route Abram had used twenty-one centuries previously? Maybe, but we cannot be sure.

We cannot establish Jesus’ age at this visit precisely, but Matt 2:9 uses a Greek word which usually describes a child over eighteen months old whereas Luke 2:16 uses the normal word for baby, thus suggesting a gap between these two events by indicating Jesus was no longer a baby at the magi’s visit. Clearly, He was more than six weeks old as the dedication ceremony had passed, for, firstly, the immediate flight into Egypt precludes this possibility, and secondly, had the magi arrived prior to this, their gift of gold would have enabled Mary to sacrifice a lamb rather than a turtle dove. Equally clearly, Jesus was not older than two years (§27). Further, Joseph’s family lived in a house by this time (v.11), so the days of the cave in the feed lot had passed.

Now let us work from these facts. The magi’s journey from lower Mesopotamia was twelve hundred miles long and may have taken three months, but, as

camels (a usual mode of transport) can cover fifty miles a day and a three month journey requires only a daily stage of thirteen miles, that period must be regarded as a maximum. How, then, does this reconcile with the two year period of 2:16 (two years-or nine months longer, if Mary's pregnancy is added to the period)? Even if they came from Vladivostok (about as far east as can reasonably be posited) the journey would be completed in a year at an average of twenty miles per day! We can reconstruct the facts sketched above into the following theory which seems to harmonize with all the biblical details.

The 'asteer' did not lead the magi to Jerusalem, but merely appeared in the east (which apparently means their home country), for it reappeared when they left Jerusalem and then led them to Jesus (v.9). The report of its second appearance indicates that the 'asteer' only 'appeared' and gave no verbal instruction. Acts 7:2 records a similar event which occurred twenty-one centuries earlier in the same locale, "The God of Glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia," and 'glory' echoes Luke 2:9 which is associated with an angel! Presumably, the magi needed to research the phenomenon they had witnessed in order to understand its meaning, because, as at its second appearance, no instruction was given (we know their knowledge was imperfect as they first went to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem). This research led them to the Abrahamic event, and thence to the Scriptures which the Jews had brought into exile (the exile extended into their area). This research, maybe including Daniel (himself a magus of his day), made them realize that the event to which their attention was being drawn was the advent of the Messiah whom the Jews expected. Furthermore, the timetable in Dan 9:24–25 would have provided tentative confirmation that the time was ripe for the Messiah's advent. Having reached this conclusion, they naturally presumed the Messiah, the Jewish King, would be born in the Jewish capital and thus arrived in Jerusalem.

The manifestation Abraham saw was God Himself (Acts 7:2), and as the Messiah was to be 'God with us' (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23) and because of their monotheism, a logical, though faulty, conclusion would be that God had not entered the virgin's womb at the time of His manifestation to the magi. Even if they completed their complicated research expeditiously, it would still have

seemed prudent to wait until at least the likely birth date before embarking on their journey in order to avoid anticipating the Messiah's arrival, especially as Judea was unlikely to welcome Parthians after their 36 BC invasion (see later). So the magi's departure could well have been delayed until nine months after the manifestation. Their reasoning, if as presumed above, would have been wrong, for the manifestation marked the birth, not the incarnation of the Son, but, lacking the wisdom of hindsight, this hypothetical conclusion does not seem unlikely. Moreover, the intricacy of their likely research could readily have taken a year. This suggests they arrived to worship Jesus when He was about one year old, which suits the Greek noun used to describe Him. This theory also explains the magi's visit to Jerusalem and their joy at seeing the 'aster' again, which they then realized was not the Messiah Himself, but only a similar manifestation to that which prompted Abraham to emigrate from their homeland two millennia earlier.

Finally, it seems that Herod, known neither for half-measures nor for being squeamish about executions, saw some ambiguity in the magi's report and took no chances. He could be relied on to be conservative, and not knowing whether to interpret the date of the manifestation as indicating the time of birth or conception, he would be likely to double the longer period just to be sure. This explains how he executed all boys of two years or less (Matt 2:16). So history suggests a reconciliation between a reasonable time for the magi's visit and the age of the innocents massacred by Herod.

So much for speculation—now let us return to the biblical record. We do know that the magi arrived in Jerusalem, the capital of the chosen people and went to the king's palace (where else would you look for a newborn king?). However, when they made their inquiry it stirred up the city, throwing it into confusion (that is what the Greek word translated 'troubled' means). So these men, thinking they had come to join a throng worshipping this long-awaited Child of blessing, found instead that they had stirred up a city which hitherto was ignorant of Him! Note well that all the city was agitated (v.3), so the chief priests and scribes knew what the inquiry was all about, yet they would not undertake an hour and a half's walk to see the Messiah for themselves (Bethlehem is only five miles from the temple). What apathy!

Herod was in his late sixties at the magi's visit. He had an absolute

paranoia about someone usurping his throne, and was ruthless in quelling anything that he saw as a threat to his reign. Deaths at his hands ran into thousands; he even executed two of his own sons by strangling (probably about three years before the magi's visit) as he suspected them of plotting to take his throne, and had earlier executed another son and wife for plotting against him. By leaving the magi to go to Herod, God ensured that 'official' Israel was notified of the Messiah's birth. Herod represented Israel politically; the chief priests and scribes represented the nation religiously. The Messiah is to be both Priest and King; so both sectors, religious and political, were apprised of His advent.

Traditionally, there was a close political affinity between the Persians and Jews (some historians feel Jews were involved in the plot that placed Cyrus in power), so the paranoid Herod would have been suspicious of a visit from the magi, traditionally king-makers, proclaiming the birth of a new king, especially as the Parthian Empire (which included the Persians and magi) was outside the Roman Empire. The Parthians had invaded Palestine around 36 BC and swept the Romans and Herod out of the country, and Herod had only been able to regain his throne after three years. The magi very possibly traveled with an escort of armed cavalry for protection in their journey into foreign territory and this could easily have contributed to Jerusalem's agitation (v.3).

Herod, ever fearful of plots to overthrow his throne, may well have imagined that the magi's inquiry was a political ploy, especially as he could have regarded the term 'born' as slighting his lineage and an accusation of usurpation (history tells us Herod displayed considerable concern about his lack of a lineage!). Herod was apparently convinced after his questions that so notable an event as his enemies coming to visit him was not, after all, a political ploy, and must therefore represent a very significant circumstance. It is notable that his immediate reaction was that the magi were inquiring about the Messiah (v.4), for this demonstrates that messianic expectations were so high at that time that the natural supposition was that the magi were referring to the Messiah; so Herod asked where the Messiah was to be born. This background helps us understand why Herod secretly summoned the magi to appear before him.

The magi apparently made no secret of their experience in the East, and

this event seemed so significant to Herod that, wily fox that he was, he armed himself with the biblical information on the locale of the Messiah's birth, and then invited the magi to a secret meeting. It seems that their earlier inquiries had been addressed to officials of Herod's court, not the king himself (this is to be expected, for foreigners could surely not simply arrive and demand an audience with the king!). The magi were no doubt very impressed to be called into the aged monarch's presence, so it is easy to understand how he duped them as he played on their religious fervor to set up his plot to kill the new pretender to what he considered to be his throne.

The context suggests that Herod's meeting with the magi took place late in the afternoon (the talk of dreams suggests that immediately after the worship in Bethlehem the parties retired for the night—as the 'star' was probably an angel, this word does not necessarily indicate night). The magi, in stark contrast to the chief priests and scribes, wasted no time in traveling to Bethlehem. I imagine it was as they approached Bethlehem that, behold, the same bright manifestation they had seen in the East again appeared before their caravan. However, on this occasion it was in the south, not the east, for the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem runs south. No wonder they were overjoyed (v.10), for the reappearance of this manifestation and its ability to move around held the promise that it would avert the necessity for a diligent search of Bethlehem as Herod had foreseen (v.8). This bright manifestation, like the pillar of fire which led Israel in their Exodus, led them into Bethlehem until it poised itself over the very house in which the child Messiah was! The concerns over locating the Child which they doubtless discussed as they left Jerusalem were all dispelled; there was no doubt whatever that they had found the correct child. It is not hard to understand their joy, nor their immediate worship of the Child!

The magi's three gifts represent a Gentile tribute to their King, a tribute offered through the faith of these men who were wise indeed. The one common feature of these three gifts is that they were traditionally offered to royalty; so these Gentile magi certainly acknowledged Jesus' Kingship, His right to rule over the Gentiles. Furthermore, this action fulfilled the prophecies of Ps 72:10, 11, 15 and Isa 60:6, yet it is notable that Matthew, the Gospel which most frequently draws attention to fulfilled prophecy, does not identify

this action as a fulfillment of prophecy, thus establishing that it does not in fact go overboard in a search for fulfilled prophecy. What is clear is that the Gentile acknowledgment and Jewish apathy at Jesus' advent foreshadowed the events recorded in Acts and subsequent history.

The Old Testament frequently links gold to kings, so this gift recognized Jesus as a king, and indeed this is appropriate, for He is the King of kings! It is noteworthy, too, that the gift of gold was received just in time to finance the sojourn in Egypt, so God had provided for His Son! Furthermore, we can wonder whether this gift was not in fact an endowment which enabled Joseph to care for the Son of God, for a significant amount of gold would care for a poor family for a lengthy period. Frankincense was used to compound the exclusive incense for the inner sanctum, the Most Holy place, God's residence on earth (Exod 30:34–38), and the Old Testament sees incense as God's special prerogative (Exod 30:37; Ezek 16:18). So this gift was a supreme act of worship recognizing the young child as divine—God truly with us (Immanuel). The first two gifts thus recognize Jesus as the human race's ultimate King and also as God. Myrrh was one of the most valuable gum resins and, besides being used as a spice or medicine (this myrrh is not to be confused with Old Testament myrrh which is a different gum), was particularly used to embalm corpses (it was used in embalming Jesus [John 19:39–40]). This gift thus recognized the significance of Jesus' death, and as His office of Savior pivots on His sacrificial, atoning death, this gift interprets as recognizing Him as Savior, an insight the magi could have gleaned from Isaiah 53.

One final point on these gifts warrants noting. It was the Eastern custom for any person seeking an audience with a king to bring him gifts, so the magi were only adhering to custom. However, it was also the custom for the king to give a reciprocal gift. In Jesus' case He gave the ultimate gift in return, for in acknowledging Him, these gifts demonstrated the magi's faith in Him as the Son of God and Savior of the world. Consequently, we know from the consistent teaching of the New Testament that they received the gift of eternal life from Him. Now, neither all the gold in the world nor all its expensive fragrances can buy this the supreme gift for which, in one way or another, the whole human race strives. Their journey was marvelously

and generously rewarded—they found eternal life. Again we find the magi representing the Gentile nations, for they have particularly benefited from this gift of eternal life brought by God's Son. This principle holds good to this day: believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and Savior of your soul and you will find eternal life—give him the gift of your faith and He will give you the gift of eternal life!

I imagine the magi and Joseph and Mary retired for the night relaxed, and praising God. Joseph and Mary had at last seen the sort of worship for their Son which they knew was His due. At last the world had given Him appropriate recognition and the morrow would probably bring the Jewish recognition they craved for Him, for had not Herod told the magi that he wanted to worship him, just as these Gentiles had? The magi, too, would have been well relaxed as God had supernaturally granted their holy quest success.

Then both parties had dreams which disturbed them greatly. By the next morning, Bethlehem was as though the Child and the magi had never existed, for they had all mysteriously disappeared in the night. The magi returned secretly by another route, probably going south of the Dead Sea and via Arabia to avoid passing close to Jerusalem and Herod. Joseph and Mary would have started on the same route, headed for Egypt, but at Hebron their paths would have parted. Bethlehem, who ignored the Son of God when the shepherds announced Him, had no need to disturb her composure over the mysterious visit of the magi. Everything was back to normal—or so they would have thought.

Application

1. Unlike Herod, priests, and scribes, reject any arrogance and respond to it by worshipping Jesus
2. Imitate the humility of the wise men in recognizing Jesus as the King and worship him
3. Never think or act as if we are smarter than God (Herod trying to cheat the wise)