

## "The Faith of the Wise Men"

**Lesson Text:** Matthew 2:1-12    **Devotional Reading:** Isaiah 49:1-6

**Background Scriptures:** Micah 5:2-4; Matthew 2:1-12

### Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.' "

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

### LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To summarize the encounter between King Herod and the wise men.
- **Biblical Principle:** To emulate the wise men's faith in reaching Jesus.
- **Daily Application:** To celebrate Jesus and offer our hearts to Him in worship.

### HOW TO SAY IT

Idumean	Id-you-me-un.
magoi (Greek)	mah-joy.
Zebulun	Zeb-you-lun.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Still Seeking Jesus?

The Christmas season reveals many sayings that try to encapsulate the meaning of the holiday in just a few words. One saying is "Christ is the reason for the season." Another sign proclaims, "Let's put Christ back in Christmas." These sayings are self-explanatory. After all, why have a season bearing the name of Christ without consideration of Christ himself?

Even asking that question shows the absurdity of some secular Christmas traditions. Should Christmas remind us of cola-drinking polar bears in red mufflers? Clydesdales hauling a beer wagon? A snowman coming to life? Or is there something more important?

Another saying requires a bit of knowledge of the biblical Christmas story to make sense: "Wise men still seek him." This saying is based on the account in the current lesson.

## LESSON CONTEXT

The text for study involves a mysterious star. This invites consideration of the distinction between astronomy and astrology. In modern times, we make a clear-cut distinction between those two areas of inquiry. But the two were blended together in the ancient world. *Astronomy* is the scientific study of the sun, moon, stars, planets, etc.; *astrology* combines that study with the belief that the so-called gods orchestrate the appearance, positions, and movements of heavenly phenomena and, therefore, reveal information about divine plans for the future (omens). Astrology is practiced today in the form of horoscopes associated with the zodiac.

In the Old Testament, astrologers are mentioned most notably in the book of Daniel (Daniel 2:2, 10; 4:7; 5:7, 11; see also Isaiah 47:13). The people of Israel were warned about pagan occult practices; astrology, being a type of divination, was one of those (Deut. 18:10–11; Jeremiah 10:2). And moving from consulting the stars to worshipping the stars was an all-too-easy step to take (Deut. 4:19; 17:2–5; Jeremiah 8:2).

The ancient Greek translation of the book of Daniel designates such men as *magoi*, from which we derive our modern word *magician*. But words change meaning over time, and how ancient people viewed *magoi* is not to be equated with the contemporary role of a magician who uses sleight of hand to entertain audiences. Instead, this word describes men of wisdom; we surmise they were astrologer-scholars. This same Greek word *magoi* is behind the English translation “Magi” (wise men) in Matthew 2:1, 7, 16.

### The New King Is Born: Matthew 2:1–2

Matthew relates the nativity story with simplicity: *Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem* (meaning “house of bread”) *of Judaea* was a village located five miles south of Jerusalem. It was the original city of Joseph’s ancestors. According to Luke 2:1–7, Mary and he traveled there from Nazareth and Jesus was born in a stable after they arrived there. Bethlehem was also the birthplace of King David (1 Samuel 20:6).

The phrase *the time of King Herod* sets the context of a specific ruler in an identifiable time frame. This is the king known as Herod the Great, who ruled 37 B.C. – 4 B.C. as the first Roman puppet-king of Judea. The name *Herod* occurs in the New Testament about 40 times, often referring to different people—it’s a challenge not to get them confused! The Herod in view here died in 4 B.C. Therefore, the events in the lesson take place shortly before that (compare Matthew 2:19).

### 1. What geographic and historical details did Matthew provide regarding the account of Jesus’ birth? (Matthew 2:1a–b)

These *Magi* (wise men) from the east were perhaps the priestly caste among the Persians and Babylonians, and most definitely experts in the study of the stars. Tradition claims there were three royal visitors who were also kings. However, there is no real historical evidence to verify this. All we are told in the text is that there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. The tradition that there were three wise men seems based on the fact they offer three gifts to Jesus in Matthew 2:11.

### 2. Who were the Magi and where were they from? (Matthew 2:1c)

God gave these wise men a special sign, a miraculous *star* that announced the birth of the King. The star led them to Jerusalem, seeking to “worship” one whom they thought was to be born a king, on the basis of their calculations of the stars. It is unlikely that this star could only have been a natural phenomenon since it led the wise men to Jerusalem and later to Bethlehem. It was clearly a divine manifestation used by God to indicate the fact and place of the Messiah’s birth, and the place of His reign.

The wise men interpreted the new star as a sign that the newly arrived King of the Jews was important enough to be worthy of their worship. Although not specified by Matthew, this is often seen as a fulfillment of the “Star out of Jacob” prophecy of Numbers 24:17. Whether these men were Jews or not, this

realization had touched them profoundly—so much so that they were willing to come to Jerusalem at enormous cost and considerable danger.

### **3. What was the wise men's purpose in traveling to Jerusalem? (Matthew 2:2)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

In what ways can seeing creation lead you to worshipping God? (Psalm 46:10)

#### **Digging Deeper**

How would you respond in worship in this regard?

### **The Old King Is Troubled: Matthew 2:3–8**

The wise men's inquiry, ("Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?) did not sit well with the paranoid *King Herod*. Naturally, such a question, seeking the birth of a new king, would upset Herod, the current ruler. He quickly gathered the *chief priests who* ruled Jerusalem's temple, and *teachers of the law*, who were the experts in the Jewish Scriptures, often called upon to interpret fine points of the Law of Moses.

Herod was no expert on prophecies. Even so, he was apparently aware that the Jews believed a Christ was coming, the chosen *Messiah* of the Lord. (*Christ* and *Messiah* both mean "anointed one"; John 4:25.) Herod connected these prophecies with the inquiry of the wise men. Therefore, he *asked* (probably more like demanded) the religious leaders to reveal the birthplace of the Messiah, believing it must be specified in the writings of the prophets. While this would give an answer to the wise men, Herod had a more devious motive in learning the location, as we shall see.

### **4. How did King Herod respond to the wise men's inquiry? (Matthew 2:3-4)**

In response, the religious leaders quoted Micah 5:2, on the precise designation where the Messiah would be born, *Bethlehem in Judaea*. Here, the prophet Micah predicts that Bethlehem of the tribe of Judah shall be the place where the "ruler" of Israel shall originate. The Ruler who will come from Bethlehem is none other than the child-ruler predicted in Isaiah 9:6-7. It is significant to note that Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries. Their prophecies of the coming of the Messiah interrelate to one another.

The Gospel of Matthew shows great interest in fulfilled prophecy. Micah's prophecy checks many boxes. It recognizes the relative insignificance of Bethlehem, still valid in Herod's day. It foretells the raising up of a new ruler from this city. And it indicates this person would not be a mere city ruler or district supervisor. Instead, the prophesied Messiah would *shepherd my people Israel*.

### **5. How did the religious leaders reply to Herod's inquiry of the Messiah's birthplace? (Matthew 2:5–6)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

How might your congregation's influence in your community remind people of Jesus?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How will your congregation glorify the Lord locally? nationally? globally?

The word *secretly* indicates that *Herod* had dismissed the religious leaders in order to meet with the wise men alone. He set aside his rage in favor of putting on his happy face for this meeting. Ancient astrology was based on keeping precise records, so the wise men would have known *the exact time the star had appeared*. The response of the wise men is not given. But we know the answer must have been at least four months prior to this meeting since that's the time required for the wise men to have traveled to Jerusalem. However, the wise men's response was important to Herod because it determined the time window of his murderous decision in Matthew 2:16.

Since we know Herod's real intent and how things turned out (see Matthew 2:13–18), the story becomes downright sinister at this point. His expressed desire to *worship him* is a flat-out lie. But since Herod had been helpful to the wise men, they had no reason to suspect ulterior motives. So they took his words at face value.

## **6. What did Herod inquire and request of the wise men? (Matthew 2:7-8)**

### **What Do You Think?**

How do believers discern whether to obey or disobey government leaders?

### **Digging Deeper**

How do Daniel 3; Romans 13:1–14; Titus 3:1–2; and 1 Peter 2:13–17 inform your answer?

## **The Child Is Worshipped: Matthew 2:9–12**

The wise men were once again guided by the star which went before them. This again indicates the supernatural nature of this star. "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."

When the wise men arrived, they found the "child" (not a baby) with his mother in a "house." This would indicate that the family had now moved out of the stable into a rented home in Bethlehem.

## **7. What aided the wise men in their continued travel to find Jesus? (Matthew 2:9–11a)**

Upon entering the house, the wise men *bowled down and worshiped* Jesus. The wise men were not empty-handed in their worship of the young child. They presented Him with costly gifts fit for a king (see Isaiah 60:6). We easily understand the value of a gift of *gold*. While Matthew does not specify the form of this precious metal, it was likely coins. These were perhaps a vital resource for the family's subsequent flight to Egypt and return to Nazareth (Matthew 2:13–23).

*Frankincense* was considered the finest incense in the ancient world (see Exodus 30:34; Revelation 18:13). The word comes from Old French and means "pure incense." Made from the resin of the *Boswellia* tree and imported from southern Arabia and Africa, it was prized for its use in religious ceremonies and as a costly sacrificial offering.

*Myrrh* is an aromatic resin of the *Commiphora* tree. It was (and remains) valued as an ingredient in perfume; it was also used for anointing and in preparing a body for burial (John 19:39). It also had medicinal uses, both as a type of antiseptic for wounds and as a type of pain reducer (see Mark 15:23). Both frankincense and myrrh were extremely valuable and served as a compact treasure for Joseph and Mary, providing further resources beyond gold.

## **8. What did the wise men do when they found Jesus? (Matthew 2:11b)**

### **What Do You Think?**

How will you bring your best gifts to Jesus?

### **Digging Deeper**

Who will you share those gifts with as an act of worshipping God?

The wise men, unsuspecting of Herod's treachery, needed to be *warned in a dream* by God not to report back to that tyrant. This warning served to protect not only the child Jesus but also Mary, Joseph, and the wise men. Herod's intent all along was to have this potential king killed, and the others could have very well ended up feeling the despot's wrath as well (compare Matthew 2:16).

The wise men left Bethlehem by *another route*, a road that would not take them through Jerusalem. For Matthew, this further confirmed that God was orchestrating the birth and protection of the Messiah.

## **9. Who gave the wise men a warning? Why? (Matthew 2:12)**

## **What Do You Think?**

How can a believer discern whether a dream is from the Lord or not?

## **Digging Deeper**

What Scriptures inform your response?

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Offer Thy Heart**

There is a carol about the wise men is the nineteenth-century composition called "The Three Kings" by Peter Cornelius. True, it has many of the legendary aspects of their story in presuming that they were kings, that they came from Persia, etc. However, the lesson of the carol is still powerful, though, and speaks to us today about one stanza that implores the audience to travel with the kings to Bethlehem and offers hearts to the infant King of kings.

Most of us don't have much gold to offer Jesus. And if we even had any frankincense or myrrh, how would we offer those? But we can offer Him sincere hearts in worship. He is the Son of God, the true Messiah. At this time of year when we remember and celebrate the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem, may we offer our most precious gift: our hearts.

## **PRAYER**

Father, help us to emulate the faith of the wise men! As they let nothing stop them from reaching Jesus, may we do so as well. May the faith that allowed them to thwart the plans of a powerful opponent be ours as well. May we offer Your Son, Jesus, no empty-handed worship. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Wise men and women seek to worship King Jesus only and fully.