

“Meeting the Magi”

Matthew 2:1-12

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 17, 2023

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You probably have some misconceptions about the nativity scene as it concerns the wise men. How many were there? How old was Jesus when they arrived? Maybe you don't know how they found out about the coming Messiah. Stephen Davey takes us behind the scenes of the account of the wise men from Matthew 2. As he does so, Stephen reminds us that the reactions to Jesus when he was a toddler in Bethlehem are the same responses to Jesus that people still have today. Which response is yours?

Without a doubt, one of the things I love about this season is the music.

Obviously, the music about Christ's incarnation could be sung year-round, but there's nothing wrong with reserving it for special times. It's a good idea to save things for special seasons.

Now, there are well-meaning believers who think we shouldn't celebrate at all, given the pagan origins of many of the things related to Christmas.

That's certainly true. The Romans decorated their temples with mistletoe; they believed mistletoe had magical powers to bring peace into your life.

By the 5th century, all of these trappings had become a part of the church's celebration of Christmas.

The Puritans tried to rule out any and all celebration of Christmas. They passed a law in 1644 that made Christmas Day an official working day. It became illegal to make plum pudding or mince pie in December, that would be proof you were celebrating Christmas.

So can the Christian observe Christmas Day, or the Christmas season, or Easter Sunday for that matter?

The Apostle Paul wrote in **Romans 14:**

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord.

Romans 14:5-6a

In other words, in this New Testament dispensation, no day is any more special than another day and that includes the Sabbath.

But if you choose to make one day special—like December 25^t or one season special—make sure you observe it in honor of the Lord. In other words, use it for the glory of God.

Two weeks ago, I interviewed a couple in our new members class—a couple from India with Hindu families. They had come to faith in Christ years earlier and now live and work here in the Triangle. He's the captain of his cricket team, which has grown exponentially in this area. He and his wife invited all their teammates and families to their home to take them through the elements of the Christmas tree and the ornaments and the star, and they tied it all to the gospel of Christ.

This is a wonderful season to highlight the incarnation of our Savior.

And by the way, if you decide not to observe something because it has pagan origins, you'd better not study too much history.

In fact, in a few weeks, don't refer to the month of January, named after Janus, the god of change and new beginnings.

And don't drive a car manufactured by Mazda, that company name came from the Persian conquering god named Ahura Mazda—their supreme god.

And you might want to take the fish symbol off your bumper, that was the symbol of the womb of several pagan goddesses.

In China, the great mother goddess Kwan-yin was often portrayed in the likeness of a fish.

In Egypt, Isis the mother goddess was the Great Fish of the Abyss.

Her symbol could be a fish when drawn sideways or drawn vertically to represent her womb.

The early Christians borrowed this pagan symbol and gave it a new meaning; in fact, they used it to mark their secret meeting places. Because the symbol was so common, nobody noticed.

In Greece, the fish goddess, Aphrodite Salacia, was worshipped by her followers on Friday. So, on Friday, they ate fish in her honor.

So don't eat fish on Friday.

In fact, don't even say the name Friday, that's the name of another goddess. And Friday was her special day designated for feasting. So, stay away from that too—your pizza parties on Friday need to stop.

Don't wear clothing or shoes from Nike because Nike was the Greek goddess of victory; you don't want to acknowledge her.

So just imagine: you're trying to avoid any connection with paganism, but you're wearing your Nike pullover, driving your Mazda, a fish symbol on your bumper, it's Friday, you're at Burger King picking up a fish combo, and you're on your way home to hang some mistletoe!

You're in deep trouble. Or maybe we're missing the point.

Christmas time is a wonderful opportunity for us to exalt Jesus Christ in our community and we take full advantage of it.

The fact that we observe Christmas isn't the issue. *Why* we observe it is.

So much of the Original Christmas Drama is lost in the church, not because of pagan traditions, but because of poor exposition of Scripture related to this original scene.

So, we've been exploring what actually happened, as described in Scripture. And what happens next, for our edification today, is picked up in the Gospel by Matthew, so turn there to one of the most misunderstood scenes in the typical Christmas play.

Turn to Matthew, chapter 2 and now verse 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, 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." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Matthew 2:1-3

I'll bet they were!

And of all the things they could have said to upset Herod and the Jewish people, for different reasons, it would have been this question, ***"Where is He who has been born, king of the Jews?"***.

You'll notice he did *not* ask, "Where is He who *will be* born one day?" but, "**Where is he who has been born?**" In other words, "It's already happened; there's nothing you can do to stop it!"

But here's the shocking part of what they asked: they were asking for the whereabouts of the "**King of the Jews**!"

If you had been standing there, you would have seen Herod's face flush crimson red.

This was the man known as Herod the Great!

He had finally gained the favor of the Roman emperor, and the Roman senate had agreed to grant him his life-long wish to carry the title, "King of the Jews."

He was the King of the Jews.

Herod was an Edomite, that is, he was a descendant of a long line that began with their forefather Esau.

You might remember that Esau and Jacob were twin brothers. And when it came time to bless the oldest twin, which would have been Esau, Jacob deceived his blind father Isaac into giving the blessing to him instead.

And a portion of that blessing, going all the way back to **Genesis chapter 27**, went like this in **verse 29**:

"Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you."

Genesis 27:29a

Jacob received that blessing and Esau resented it. And so did his descendants for the next 1900 years.

But now, 1900 years later, Herod gets his wish. The Roman senate bestows on him the title, "King of the Jews."

It's as if Herod is saying, "The birthright has returned to Esau where it belongs. The descendants of Jacob will now bow down to the descendant of Esau; the Jews will bow down to me!"

In his final 2 years of life, Herod's paranoia of being overthrown became so terrible that he murdered three of his sons; he will soon order all the young boys to be killed in Bethlehem to try and kill this King of the Jews.

Herod was *an* antichrist, and there is a demonic battle taking place behind the scenes.

Now it was during these last 2 years of his reign when this group of wise men showed up unannounced and asked, **“Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?”**

The wise men had no idea that this question just lit the fuse for an explosion that will soon affect everyone.

And that’s because it isn’t just anybody asking this question, go back to **verse 1 again in the latter part:**

Behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.

Matthew 2:1b

Your translation might call them magi, which comes directly from the Greek term for them; the word *magi* gives us our words magic, magician, but more closely aligned with the word magi is the word magistrate.

The magi were high ranking statesman in the kingdom of Babylon, and then the Mede and Persian kingdoms.

Herodotus, the ancient Greek Historian, tells us that the magi were trained in the arts and sciences. They were the university professors and the political power-players all rolled up into one.

They were also priests of the Persian religion, which was still in full force when Jesus was born.

Their national religion was called Zoroastrianism. I know that sounds like they worshipped Zorro and wore black capes.

Actually, they wore white robes and tall hats.

Their primary temple had an altar with fire that was never allowed to burn out; it had been supposedly lit by their chief god, whose name was Mazda—the name of that car you’re going to sell this week.

No Persian prince ever became king without having been tutored by the magi, and only when the magi determined the heir to the throne to be ready would the prince be crowned king.

The magi were called the Kingmakers, and Herod knew it!

And here they are!

By the way, **Matthew** doesn’t tell us how many magi were in this group. Early church tradition said there were 12, but the church later changed the number to 3.

We don't know why; it was probably because the church couldn't fit 12 wise men into the Christmas play.

But I would agree with a larger number simply because of their assignment.

This would have been a large caravan, traveling some 2,000 miles over mountain ranges and through valleys, traveling with servants to cook and set up their tents at night, shepherds who would be tending their herds that will be their provision for the journey, and a large contingent of soldiers would have accompanied them on this mission to not only protect them but to protect the gold and other costly gifts from bandits along the way.

So, rewrite the Sunday school picture you might have in your mind. These aren't three guys riding their camels into Jerusalem with some gift boxes in their baggage.

It had taken them months to plan their journey, and many more months to complete their journey.

The question is, why would they take all this time and trouble to travel to Jerusalem and even more, why would they be interested in a Jewish Messiah?

To begin to answer those questions, you have to travel back 600 years, to the time when the Jewish people were conquered and many of them were deported to this Kingdom of Babylon.

Among the deported Jews were several Jewish teenagers who graduated at the top of their class from the university of Babylon.

They had impressed their Magi professors so much that they were appointed to top political positions in the kingdom of Babylon.

You know several of them by the new Babylonian names they were given: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The valedictorian among these Jewish young people was renamed Belteshazzar, we prefer to ignore that Babylonian name and call him by his Hebrew name, Daniel.

Daniel becomes the leading wise man, the leader of the Magi. Later on, Darius the Persian King who conquered Babylon, retains Daniel as second in command.

For decades, Daniel is evidently having a group Bible study in his apartment.

And after 70 years of godly influence by the life and teaching of Daniel, many of the magi come to faith in Israel's Messiah.

And we know that because 600 years later, spiritual descendants of Daniel show up in Jerusalem saying, again, ***note what Matthew records in verse 2:***

“For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship Him.”

Matthew 2:2b

Not to promote His political ambitions, not to introduce Him, not even to crown Him, but to worship Him!

These magi were already believers, ready to worship the Savior.

So here is this entourage of wise men, representing a long line of believing magi that stretched all the way back to Daniel.

But there’s still another question here: why would a star prompt their journey now? How would they have connected some cosmic light with the birth of the Messiah?

I’m so glad you asked that, so close to Christmas!

Daniel had at his disposal the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Daniel would have personally known the prophet Ezekiel who was prophesying in Babylon; Daniel had access to the prophecies of Isaiah.

Listen to one verse that Daniel evidently taught his Magi coworkers from **Numbers 24:16:**

“The oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, ... 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.”

Numbers 24:16-17a

Here in this Old Testament passage, the Messiah is called a rising star who will reign in the land of Israel.

Another passage Daniel evidently taught in his home Bible study group was from **Isaiah’s prophecy in chapter 60:**

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Isaiah 60:1-3

These are the same prophetic images of the Messiah’s star, rising in brightness, in the land of Israel.

Now I've read interesting articles and speculations from well-meaning people about some special astral alignment that occurred at Jesus' birth; the problem with that view is that it doesn't fit the narrative of Scripture.

You need to understand that the magi weren't led to Jerusalem by just any star.

The Greek word for star (*aster*) can be translated simply as 'brilliance' or 'radiance.'

- This was the light that guided the people of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness (**Exodus 13:21**).
- This was the brilliant light that knocked Saul of Tarsus to the ground and blinded him for days (**Acts 9:3**).
- This was the vision of John the Apostle as he saw the light of Christ's face shining like the sun (**Revelation 1:16**).

These Persian magi were being led by the light of God's shekinah glory; it was miraculous; in fact, the narrative implies that they were the only ones who saw it.

And don't miss the fact that the light led them to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem, where Jesus was. Did the GPS system go down? No, this was the divine plan: the announcement would be made to the nation Israel that their Messiah has been born.

So, they arrive and ask Herod, ***"Where is this one, born king of the Jews?"***

Now notice verse 4:

And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [Herod] inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: '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.'"

Matthew 2:4-6

The Jewish leaders knew the address of the newborn Messiah, but they didn't care enough to travel 5 miles from Jerusalem to check it out.

They had memorized the prophecy of Micah; they just quoted it to King Herod; they knew the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Listen, they knew the Scriptures, but they missed the Savior.

There are a lot of people today who can tell you the story of Christmas, but they've never traveled to the cross of Christ and claimed Him as Savior.

Well, these wise men eventually leave Herod's palace and head to Bethlehem.

Let's move down to verse 9:

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Matthew 2:9-10

So, once they leave Herod's palace and head to Bethlehem, this star, this shining brilliant light, suddenly appears again. Somehow it turned off and now it turned back on again.

And we're told here that it **came to rest over the place**, verse 11 says, **the house where the child was**.

The light literally hovered, rested, stayed above this house.

This word means "to stand." This same word is used in **Matthew 13 and verse 2:**

And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.

Matthew 13:2

This wasn't some star somewhere in the sky sending starlight down toward the town of Bethlehem; this was more like a spotlight hovering over—illuminating—just this one house in the neighborhood.

Their journey of 2,000 miles would have taken months to travel, with several weeks or even months to prepare beforehand, which is why when they finally arrived in Bethlehem, they never went to a stable.

Verse 11 says:

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

Matthew 2:11a

They didn't come to a stable, they entered a house. I know this is going to mess up a lot of Christmas cards. I'm not trying to hurt Hallmark, but three wise men never knelt down next to a cow and a sheep.

We're told here that the magi **saw the child**; not a *brephos*, the Greek word for baby; but *paidion*, the typical Greek word for child.

So, by the time the magi had arrived, Jesus would have been a year or more old, a little toddler walking around that house.

We're told here that the Magi fell down, in true oriental fashion, and worshipped Jesus.

So, imagine this scene: unannounced to Mary—unexpected—Joseph is evidently at work, Mary is perhaps sweeping the floor, Jesus is playing with his favorite toy.

This entourage shows up and stops traffic; everyone crowds around as they kneel before Jesus, who's probably hiding behind Mary's skirt—wide-eyed—as He receives worship from the Kingmakers of the Persian empire.

And they brought gifts, **verse 11 says**:

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

Matthew 2:11b

They gave Him gold.

Seneca, the Roman philosopher who lived during the days of Christ, wrote that in Persia no one ever approached the king without a gift of gold.

The wise men are declaring that Jesus is royalty.

They gave Him frankincense.

That was a substance from the Boswellia tree, used by the Old Testament priests in their ceremonies of intercession.

This is frankincense for our High Priest!

They gave Him myrrh.

This was a rather strange gift for a child.

It was a sweet substance that came from a small thorn tree. Gum from the tree's sap was mixed with wine to form a narcotic, pain eliminating beverage. This will be the drink offered to Christ on the cross and He will refuse to deaden the pain (Mark 15:23).

Myrrh was also formed into a sticky, sweet smelling substance they would use to wrap a corpse—wrapping strips of linen around the body, kept in place by this sticky substance.

So, the Magi gave myrrh to the One who would die and be wrapped with it in a tomb.

- Gold for the King.
- Frankincense for our great High Priest.
- Myrrh for our suffering Savior who will die to redeem His bride from every nation on planet earth.

In these few verses you can see three responses to this announcement in the original Christmas drama.

Cultures change, but the responses of mankind do not change.

You have anger and defiance from Herod; he wanted nothing to do with a rival to the throne of his own heart and life.

You have apathy and disregard from religious people who knew some Scripture, but didn't want a Savior.

But then there are those who claim Jesus as their Messiah.

So to this day: there are those who hate Him, as Herod did; there are those who ignore Him, as the religious leaders did; but there are those who worship Him, who join the entourage of the Magi and together we praise Him as our King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

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