

MATTHEW 2:1–12. (EHV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, when Herod was king, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him. He gathered together all the people’s chief priests and experts in the law. He asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, because this was written through the prophet:

You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are certainly not least among the rulers of Judah: because out of you will come a ruler, who will shepherd my people, Israel.” [Micah 5:2]

Then Herod secretly summoned the Wise Men and found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report to me, so that I may also go and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. Then the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stood still over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with overwhelming joy. After they went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Since they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

We still have our Christmas decorations up for one last Sunday. That’s because we still have one more biblical account associated with Jesus’s birth that we haven’t covered yet—today’s Gospel, the visit of the Wise Men from the east.

While the other accounts connected with Jesus’s birth are relatively straightforward, this one is shrouded in mystery. Who were these Wise Men? Where exactly in “the east” did they come from? And what was this star that caused them to set out? And how did they know that this star indicated the Messiah’s birth, when we don’t have any prophecies in the Old Testament saying that there would be such a star?

Sometimes it’s good, even fun, to get clever with the theme and parts of a sermon. But today, since this account is interesting and mysterious enough on its own, I’m going to keep it simple and straightforward. Our theme is simply: The Wise Men from the east worship Jesus. In the first part, we’ll look at the historical details of their visit. In part two, we’ll answer the question: What does this account mean for us?

1. History

So first, who were these Wise Men, and what was this star that they followed? The bottom line is that we cannot and do not know *exactly* who these Wise Men were and *precisely* where they came from, other than from the east in relation to Israel. But we can take a pretty good guess. In the original Greek of Matthew these men are called magi, a word related to our English words *magic* and *mage*. We use the word *mage* for a kind of wizard or magician. The only magi expressly mentioned in the Greek translation of the Old Testament were the magi of

Babylon mentioned in Daniel. In our English translations, they are usually called enchanters or spell casters. And from the perspective of Israel, Babylon was in the east.

As our English translations “enchanters” and “spell casters” suggest, the magi of Babylon were connected with occult practices or dark arts that were strictly forbidden by the Lord. They were enchanters who spoke incantations over pagan sacrifices and interpreted troubling dreams, abnormal historical events, and strange signs in the sky. And they did none of this by God’s revelation or power, but by either the devil’s power or according to their own clever whims and fancies.

But the Babylonian magi in ancient times had at least one vital connection to the true God—the prophet Daniel. The Bible says that King Nebuchadnezzar actually appointed Daniel as the “chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon” (2:48), after God enabled him to interpret a troubling dream for the king. Daniel may have reformed the practices of the Babylonians wise men and magi, and through his influence many Babylonians learned of the one true God and the Messiah who was to come. Daniel’s influence also extended into the Persian Empire, after the Persians defeated the Babylonians. The story of Daniel in the lion’s den, for example, took place during the time of the Persian Empire.

If the Babylonian and Persian wise men paid attention to Daniel’s prophecies, they would have had a good idea of when the Messiah would appear. But Daniel seems also to have acquainted them with other parts of Holy Scripture, so that those who listened to him also knew who the Messiah would be and what he would do. Perhaps Daniel also wrote texts that were used by the magi in the succeeding generations, texts which did not appear in the Bible but which also testified about the Messiah.

So it seems likely that the Wise Men or magi from the east who visited the infant Jesus were from Persia, men who lived in modern-day Iraq or Iran and were the occupational descendants of the magi under Daniel. I don’t know if these Wise Men had ever engaged in the forbidden occult practices that magi were typically associated with. By Jesus’s day the word *magus* had become more widespread and sometimes had a more general usage to denote what we today might call moral observational scientists—men who carefully observed the world around them and used what they learned to teach life lessons and give sound advice. Whether these Wise Men were still ignorantly clinging to some godless practices or not, they knew about the Messiah and were looking and waiting for him, looking for any sort of sign that he had been born. They were longing for his appearance and for his salvation.

Around the time they were looking for the Messiah to be born, the Lord arranged objects in the sky in such a way that these magi, who studied the stars, saw the way things were arranged and either said, “The King of the Jews is going to be born soon,” or, “The King of the Jews has been born.” They were so sure of what they saw, especially with one star in particular, that they set out at once for the birthplace that made the most sense to them—Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews. They arrived in Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?” “King of the Jews” was one of the titles for the Messiah, taken from 2 Samuel and Jeremiah. From a couple details in the Bible, we can infer that the Wise Men arrived in Bethlehem more than forty days after Jesus was born.

But what did the Wise Men see in the sky? That is more difficult to answer. The Bible says that the star they saw rose in the eastern sky just like all other normal stars. So it was not a

pole star, which is fixed in the sky. It also does not appear to have been a supernatural star. If there were a huge, twinkling, out-of-the-ordinary star in the sky like the kind commonly depicted on Christmas cards, King Herod and his advisers would have already known about it and would not have had to ask the Wise Men when it appeared. It also does not appear to have been a star that appeared only to the Wise Men. If they told Herod, “We’re the only ones who can see it,” he probably would not have taken their inquiries seriously, unless God supernaturally intervened. It seems more likely that the star the Wise Men saw was something occurring naturally that everyone could see, but which only had special significance when the Wise Men explained it. Whatever they saw also appears to have indicated not only *that* the Messiah had been born, but also *when* he was born, since Herod used their information about the star to correctly determine an age group to which the Messiah belonged.

We also know that the same star that caused them to set out appeared ahead of them as they traveled south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and it eventually stopped or stood over the place where the child was—whether that was simply the town of Bethlehem or the particular house that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were staying in by that point. This detail has led some people to surmise that the Wise Men’s star was a planet, since planets can actually stop their movement in the sky and reverse course from our perspective, because of the way their orbit appears to us in relation to earth’s orbit.

In case anyone thinks that this falls into astrology, which God forbids, that isn’t necessarily the case. God himself tells us in Genesis 1 that one of the reasons he put the stars in the sky was so that they could serve “as signs.” The book of Job tells us that it is God who organized the heavenly bodies into constellations—constellations like Leo, the lion, which is a symbol for Judah in the Old Testament, and Virgo, the virgin—and he has those heavenly bodies and constellations appear in certain places at certain times (Job 9:9; 38:31–33). David tells us in Psalm 19 that the sky is proclaiming the work of God’s hands.

So while phenomena in the sky are not original sources of truth, they can be signs from God *confirming* his Word and its truths and marking important stages in world history and God’s plan of salvation. Remember, God is the one who created the sun, moon, and stars, and who wound up the clock of the sky and set it into motion on Day 4 of creation, and he knew everything that would happen after that and where all the heavenly bodies would be when those things happened. So we might imagine world history like a slide show, and the special phenomena in the sky like a presenter pausing to draw attention to certain slides and highlighting certain pieces of information with a laser pointer.

Whatever this star might have been, it caused the Wise Men to set out for Jerusalem, since they thought that the Messiah or King of the Jews would be found in the capital city of the Jews. In Jerusalem, the chief priest and experts in the law informed them through Herod that Micah had prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, so the Wise Men headed there instead. They ultimately found the child and his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him and presented him with expensive gifts that seem to reflect a knowledge of the child and his mission. Gold was a gift fit for a king. Frankincense was associated with sacrifices and was offered up to God. And myrrh was used in burials.

Even though Herod pretended that he wanted to worship the child too, God warned the Wise Men in a dream not to return to Herod. So after an apparently brief stay, they returned to their country by a different route. That's the history.

2. Meaning

Now let's move on the more important question: What does this account mean for us?

First, the fact that Jesus accepts the Wise Men's worship shows us that Jesus came for all people, regardless of nationality, reputation, or record. That means Jesus also came for you.

Consider also the Wise Men's sacrifice of time and distance. They were willing to travel perhaps 900 miles, perhaps as many as 1,300 or more, to worship the infant Jesus. The Wise Men's trip would have taken roughly forty days, maybe longer. That means they traveled anywhere from perhaps fifteen to thirty miles a day for about forty days or more, and at the end they appear to have stayed in Bethlehem for just a day or even just part of a day.

Whenever you think the Church is robbing you of time and energy with its worship schedule and its distance from your home, witness the worship of the Wise Men and see not what a burden has been imposed upon you, but what a treasure you have. They worshipped the incarnate Jesus, the born Jesus, the infant Jesus. We not only worship the infant Jesus, but also the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus. They heard nothing intelligent from Jesus's lips. We hear his very voice loudly and clearly through his Word. They perhaps got to hold him all wrapped up. In the Lord's Supper, we touch and taste the very body and blood he sacrificed for us on the cross, the price of our salvation.

Consider also the Wise Men's devotion to God's word. When the chief priests and experts in the law showed Herod and the Wise Men from Micah 5 where the Messiah was to be born, the Wise Men listened to God's word and found Jesus where God's word said they would find him. That is, in fact, the only place you can find God—namely, where he says in his Word you can find him: in his Word, in baptism, and in the Lord's Supper. Many people look for God in signs he hasn't promised to give, in their own emotions, in nature, and the list could go on. Others know where to find him, but like the chief priests and experts in the law, don't actually listen to God's word that they know and thus don't actually seek him out like the Wise Men did. Listen to where God says he is found, and then seek him and find him there.

Finally, consider the Wise Men's faith, which is what made all of the other aspects of their worship pleasing to God in the first place. Think of what they saw: A young woman probably living in a rented house in a backwater town, doing her best with her husband to make ends meet, and a baby boy. Now remember, they came expecting to find a king, "the King of the Jews." And this is what they find.

What would you think? Wrong address? A waste of a trip? Would you at least have reservations keeping you from giving the expensive gifts you had brought?

These moral observational scientists put out of their minds what they are observing and cling only to God's word. God's word, probably passed down from Daniel, had told them about the birth of this king. God's word had led them to Jerusalem. God's word had pointed them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. And God's word spoken through Mary's mouth confirmed that this was the Son of God. And so, no matter what this child looked like or what the situation looked like,

this child was their king, their savior. They fell down and worshipped him and presented him with the expensive treasures they had brought.

Without this faith, no time used up or distance traveled for church is actually sacrificed to Jesus. Without this faith, God's word is just a collection of facts or legends for your head that don't really do you any good. Without this faith, neither the smallest penny nor the largest check in the offering plate means anything to God. But with this faith in Jesus as your Savior, a faith that does not care one bit for anything your reason and senses tell you to the contrary, with this faith comes everything else—a desire to listen to his Word, a desire to sacrifice time, talents, and treasures to him, a desire to live each day to his glory.

May God give us the faith of the Wise Men, so that we, too, may inherit the eternal glory Jesus has won for us, and in the meantime may imitate the Wise Men's dedicated worship.
Amen.