

**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.

Who were these Wise Men? In the original Greek of Matthew they are called magi, a word related to our English word *mage*. We cannot and do not know exactly who these Wise Men or magi were and precisely where they came from, other than from the east in relation to Israel, but we can take a pretty good guess. The only magi expressly mentioned in the Greek translation of the Old Testament were the magi of Babylon. And from the perspective of Israel, Babylon was in the east. The magi of Babylon were connected with occult practices 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 whims and fancies.

But the Babylonian magi in ancient times had at least one vital connection to the true God—the prophet Daniel. King Nebuchadnezzar actually appointed Daniel as “chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners” (Dan 5:11). Through Daniel’s 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.

From Daniel’s prophecies, the Babylonian and Persian magi would have had a good idea 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 Matthew's magi were from Persia, men who lived in modern-day Iraq or Iran and were the occupational descendants of the enchanters under Daniel. I don't know if they 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 observed the world around them and used what they learned to teach life lessons and give sound advice. Whether these Wise Men were still 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 Jesus was 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 very 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. We can deduce from the details of Mary's sacrifice of purification and the expensive gifts that the Wise Men gave Jesus that they arrived in Bethlehem more than forty days after Jesus was born.<sup>1</sup>

What did they see in the sky? That is more difficult to answer. It does not appear to have been a supernatural star or a star that appeared only to the Wise Men. Otherwise King Herod and his advisers either would have already known about it and would not have had to ask the Wise Men when it appeared, or would not have taken the Wise Men's inquiries seriously. 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 to correctly determine an age group into which the Messiah must have fallen.

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 and has them each appear in a certain place at certain times. 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. We might imagine world history like a slide show, and the special phenomena

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<sup>1</sup> According to Luke 2:22–24, Mary offered the minimum sacrifice required by the law of Moses for her purification—a minimum allowed to poor people who couldn't afford anything more. This would have been dishonest if the Wise Men had already paid their visit and given Mary and Joseph their expensive gifts dedicated to Jesus. Note, however, that the Wise Men's gifts certainly came in handy for Mary and Joseph when they were forced to flee to Egypt not long after the Wise Men's visit (Matt. 2:13–15). They certainly would not have been able to afford that trip without the Wise Men's gifts.

in the sky like a presenter pausing to draw attention to certain slides and highlighting certain pieces of information with a laser pointer.

There is much more we could surmise or guess about with regard to the Wise Men's star,<sup>2</sup> but let's move on to the more important question of what the Holy Spirit wishes to teach us through their visit.

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 twenty to thirty miles a day for about forty days, and they appear to have stayed in Bethlehem for just a day or even 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 what a treasure you have. They worshipped the incarnate Jesus, the born Jesus. We worship 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.

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, 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?

These moral observational scientists put out of their minds what they are observing and cling only to God's word. God's word 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.

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance: <https://www.breadforbeggars.com/2019/01/what-was-the-magis-star/>

Without this faith, no time used up or distance traveled is actually sacrificed to Jesus. Without this faith, God's word is just a collection of facts or legends for your head knowledge. Without this faith, neither the smallest penny nor the largest check 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.

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