

“The Miracle of the Magi”

Matthew 2:1-12

This is a transcript of the 5th Message in the series “The Miracle of Christmas” preached December 26, 2021.

No nativity scene or Christmas play is complete without them. They don’t speak a word – but stand silently in the background – holding ornately decorated boxes – wearing crowns or turbans – with camels in tow.

I’m speaking of course o the Magi (or Wise Men or Kings, depending on who’s telling the story).

Thanks to the famous Christmas Carol, “We 3 Kings,” they’re better known than even the more pivotal NT figures like the Apostle Paul or John the Baptist.

But, what we *think* we know about these “visitors from the east” doesn’t come from the NT as much as from traditions about them that have accrued over the centuries.

Their journey was filled with wonder, mystery, and a little suspense. So, many have tried to supply the missing details.

Who were they? Why did they come? From where did they come? How many were there?

The Magi’s visit is one of the least understood roles in Christ’s nativity. But I think it’s one of the most important. Let’s see if you agree.

Today we’re concluding our 5-part Christmas Series called “Experiencing the Miracle of Christmas.” Throughout December, we explored 5 miraculous elements of Christmas. We’ve studied “The Miracle of the Moment,” “the Message,” “the Method,” at Friday’s Christmas Eve Service we looked at “The Miracle of the Manger.” And today we conclude with “The Miracle of the Magi.”

The Magi appear in only 1 of the 4 Gospels: Matthew’s Gospel. Therefore, we have less information about these mysterious characters – than the others. And what you THINK you know about them – is probably wrong. Much of what we think we know about the Magi comes from the Christmas carol, “We 3 Kings.” Great song - But it makes some assumptions.

Let’s begin with the facts. Let’s read about the Magi in Matthew 2:1-12.

The first thing “We 3 Kings” Fans notice is that Matthew doesn’t say exactly how many Magi there were. Most infer there were 3 because they brought 3 gifts. And under a strict “one gift per person” rule – where nobody comes to a Christmas Party “empty handed” – we deduce there were 3. But we don’t know that for sure.

The Carol also calls them “kings.” The Greek word is “magos” from which we get our English words “magic” and “magician.” It’s a Persian word that means - “experts regarding the stars.” Namely, “astrologers.”

In the Prophet Daniel’s time, about the 6th century B.C., “Magi” were known as “dream interpreters.” But by the first century A.D. they were a mixed bag of men interested in dreams, magic, astrology, and the future. Some were no doubt honest inquirers, but some were charlatans, too. They were likely Persians or Babylonians.

But Matthew doesn’t delve into specifics. All we know is that they came “from the east” sometime “after Jesus was born” during the time of King Herod.

If you have a Nativity Scene on your mantle – like this set from Sears – manufacturer of fine religious paraphernalia - you likely have THREE kingly figures visiting Jesus with 1 or 2 representative shepherd figurines. That implies that the Magi arrived at about the same time as the shepherds. But, that’s not likely.

Details in our passage point to a date up to a year after Jesus was born.

1. Notice in Matthew 2:11, Jesus is no longer called a “baby” or an “infant.” By the time the Magi arrive, Jesus is called a “child” - a different Greek word for someone a bit older.
2. Verse 11 also says the Magi visited Mary and Jesus in a “house.” So, apparently Joseph moved the family out of the barn into better accommodations.
3. Moreover, when King Herod launches into his murderous attack in v. 16 – he looked to kill all the male children of Bethlehem aged 2 and under. That would suggest he thought Jesus was now within that age span.

What we DO know for certain is that these guys were “stargazers.”

And how do you get the attention of a “stargazer?”

You send a star! A star is the perfect invitation for Magi – nearly irresistible.

What was this “star?”

There's lots of speculation as to whether it was an actual star, a light, an angel, or the glory of God – but whatever it was - it got their attention.

And it worked sort of like GPS. The Magi locked-onto the star and followed it to their destination.

So, into Jerusalem come the Magi, mesmerized by the star. Jerusalem was used to strangely-dressed foreigners – that was nothing unusual. (Like seeing Elmo in Times Square – it's just part of the landscape – you don't give it a 2nd thought.) But, it was the Magi's inquiry that got King Herod's attention.

This was the infamous “Herod the Great.” Herod was wealthy, politically adept, intensely loyal, and an excellent administrator. He beautified the Jerusalem Temple to such an extent it was even admired by his foes.

But, he loved power, taxed the people mercilessly, and was incredibly jealous. At the time of Christ's birth, he was ailing from an uncertain disease. And this increased his paranoia.

Josephus, the Jewish historian of that day, called Herod “barbaric.” Another writer called him “the malevolent maniac.” He murdered 45 of the 70 members of the Jewish Sanhedrin who opposed him. He seized their property and added it to his personal wealth.

On 2 occasions he ordered that his favorite wife be killed if he failed to return from a critical mission – just to ensure she'd never be married to anyone else if he died. He finally killed her anyway, as well as her grandfather, her mother, his brother-in-law, and three of his sons, not to mention numerous other people. He was continually writing to Rome for permission to execute one or two of his sons for treason.

So - into this “Herodian Hurricane” rode the Magi's caravan. They came asking, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?”

Now - everyone knew - Herod was “king of the Jews.” But the Magi weren't looking for Herod. They were asking - “Where is the REAL king of the Jews?”

Herod had been APPOINTED “king of the Jews” - by Rome... but the Magi were looking for the one who is BORN to be king of the Jews.

To be “born” king of the Jews was not a friendly message to Herod’s paranoid ears. He knew the Jews were looking to be free from Roman rule. So he immediately felt threatened by the potential of a Jewish king. And if Herod was disturbed – the whole city was on edge.

The rationale the Magi gave for their search must have seen a bit “sketchy.” They said they saw this new king’s star in the east and they’d been following it until it led them here - to Jerusalem.

The Star reminds me a bit of the Bat Signal. A powerful light beam the Gotham City Police Department used to summon Batman when they needed his help.

The Magi may have connected the star with an OT prophecy about a king. There’s a cryptic prophecy in Numbers 24:17 by a man named “Balaam.” He was an influential eastern figure who could have been from the same region as the Magi. We don’t know for sure.

In any case, the star led them 750 miles from home to the city of Jerusalem. Now, at first, this seems a bit like a failure. Remember, Joseph, Mary & Jesus weren’t living in Jerusalem – they were in “Bethlehem.” So, the star failed to get the Magi all the way to Bethlehem. It stopped short! There were still 5 miles more to go!

Did the star “burn out” before it got the job done?

Like a couple strands of my Christmas lights this year. *Or did somebody accidentally unplug it?*

Not likely. In fact, I think this detail is crucial to understanding the story. The Magi weren’t in “Jerusalem” by mistake. God wanted their question asked there. God wanted them to ask in Jerusalem, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?”

The question spurred Herod to find out what the Scripture said concerning the Messiah. As a result, he called in the Jewish chief priests and teachers and asked them where the Christ was to be born.

The priests quoted the relevant Scripture, Micah 5:2:

NIV Matthew 2:6 "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 be the shepherd of my people Israel."

From this, the Magi learn that the birthplace of the King is not Jerusalem – it’s Bethlehem. *So, why did the star lead them to Jerusalem and then stop?*

It appears the Star directed them to Jerusalem so they could hear the Scriptures – from the Jews - because “salvation is from the Jews.” (as Jesus told the Samaritan woman in John 4).

God used the star to focus everyone’s attention on a Messianic Scripture. *What effect did the Magi’s appearance and question have on them?*

The Jewish Leaders appear apathetic. Even though for generations the Jewish People had been anticipating the Messiah, the arrival of these Magi apparently generated no excitement on their part.

- The Jewish Leaders didn’t inquire about the Star from the Magi.
- They didn’t accompany the Magi down to Bethlehem.
- They knew the Scriptures, but they refused to follow the Light.

Which is weird since they had the most information about the Messiah & the least distance to travel. But they didn’t send anyone to Bethlehem to check it out.

That's like spending hundreds of dollars and several hours decorating your front lawn with Christmas lights – and not ever bothering to read the Gospel. It shows: you can know about Jesus – but never bother to meet Him.

Herod had a different response. When Herod heard there might be a new “King of the Jews” - he got paranoid. Kings don't like to hear there's a new king in town. That would endanger their privileged position. Herod read this as a threat.

So, Herod feigned a desire to worship the new king - apparently, fooling the Magi. But it was actually hypocritical humility and devotion. Herod's true intent is clear from verses 13-18: He began planning a massacre to exterminate the new baby king. That would prove unsuccessful.

But the Magi, in verse 9, decided to press on to Bethlehem. Having learned from the Jews the appropriate Scripture about the Messiah, they heed it, and start off on the last 5 miles to Bethlehem.

This appears to be the correct response because - as they did – the star reappeared – and went ahead of them.

Could the star have led the Magi directly to Bethlehem?

Clearly, yes, it could have! The Star had already brought them 750 miles to Jerusalem! That's over a month's journey by caravan in Bible times! It led them through the most difficult part of the journey. But the Star would not take them the last 5 miles – from Jerusalem to Bethlehem – even though it was only a couple of hours on foot – at most.

Why?

Because the star refused to usurp the role of the Jews and their stewardship of the Scriptures.

God was laying down a paradigm for all to see. Jesus is the King of the Jews – but not only of the Jews – but of the Gentiles, too!

Here are a bunch of Gentile outsiders – called “uncircumcised heathen” by the Jews – flirting with the occult – living apart from Christ – excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel – not knowing the covenant promises God had made to Israel – having no hope and without God in the world.

And God arranges a way to attract them to the Jews – to hear the Scriptures – and subsequently to have an encounter with Jesus.

This was always God's plan for Israel.

God had told Abraham ...

NIV **Genesis 12:3** I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and **all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.**"

Israel was to be a kingdom of priests – who lead the world to Christ.

And so here - God used the Jewish Leaders in that role – albeit unwittingly. They don't even know their doing it. They're simply obeying Herod – because they fear Herod – who is a maniac – rather than fearing God.

So, “*How did the Magi find Jesus?*”

The complete answer is not by “The Star.” That's only partly true. The Star led them to Jerusalem – to hear the Scriptures – But it was the Scriptures led them to Jesus.

The Star acts as the drawing power of the Holy Spirit. He leads the Gentiles to the Jewish Scriptures – convicting and convincing them of their need to repent and believe the Gospel.

And so - when the Magi arrived at the house and saw Jesus – they were overjoyed! And they bowed down and worshipped Him.

Ironically, the people the furthest away and with the least information – are the most determined to worship the Messiah. They're not just pleased to hear about Jesus – they're overjoyed to know Him personally.

After bowing down – they presented their famous, lavish gifts. Gold for a king. Incense for divinity. Myrrh for his death.

It's unlikely the Magi intended the symbolism we attribute to these gifts. If they didn't know Bethlehem was Christ's birthplace – it's unlikely they understood details about His divinity or atonement. Even the Jews didn't understand that. Not even the disciples, after 3 years of Jesus' teaching – had a handle on Jesus' divinity and substitutionary death. So, it's likely these Magi were just giving what to them were expensive gifts – worthy of a king.

But Matthew, writing this about 50 A.D., certainly intended for US to understand. These Gentile leaders were prefiguring the wealth that the OT prophets said the Gentiles would one day present to Israel's Messiah.

The Magi foreshadow the extension of the Gospel beyond Israel to the Gentiles. This will become clear by the end of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew records Jesus' Great Commission: "to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations."

So, here at the beginning of Jesus' life – all the way to the end – Matthew is presenting a Messiah who is more than just Israel's savior. Jesus is the savior of the whole world! Of Gentiles, too!

So, these Magi are far from just a decorative embellishment to your "Sears Nativity Scene." These Magi from the east illustrate the radical message of grace. They become the first Gentiles to recognize and worship the Messiah.

And they're there by direct invitation of God! They are supernaturally led to Jerusalem to hear the Scriptures from the Jews which leads them to the Savior in Bethlehem.

This whole encounter broadens our understanding and deepens our appreciation for Christmas. It fulfills God's promise to Abraham that "through Abraham all peoples on earth will be blessed." It confirms that the Gospel is for everyone – Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, near or far – everyone who'll bother to seek Him – and put their trust in Him.

The "The Miracle of the Magi" is that God brought NEAR those who were FAR to WORSHIP the King.

It's confirmation of God's invitation to the entire world to come to Christ and be saved.

If you haven't already – I hope you'll follow the Magi's example – and seek Christ. Jesus promised that if you seek Him – you'll find Him.

He invites everyone – no matter how far away you feel – or how little you think you know – to find salvation in Christ.

I promise you: Christmas is just the miracle you've been looking for.