

VISITORS FROM THE EAST

Rev. John R. Annable, University Baptist Church

JANUARY 12, 2025

The Magi Visit the Messiah **MATTHEW 2:1-12**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem² 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."³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ 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.⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: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 shepherd my people Israel.'^[b]"⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ 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."⁹ 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.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ 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.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Every year we celebrate the birth of the Christchild. We do it in many ways sharing the traditions of our families and society that are the result of years of living with family and friends in the various communities and nations from which we come. We sing songs about a reindeer with a red shining nose, white Christmas, and even the country song I heard entitled "**Grandma got run over by a reindeer.**"

Then there are songs of a more religious nature. We sing "**Beautiful Star of Bethlehem**" and the one we sang a few moments ago, "**We Three Kings of Orient Are.**" And many others we have sung the last few Sundays.

It is appropriate that we look at the story of the **Wise Men** today because this past Monday, **January 6**, we celebrated the beginning of Epiphany, a time we take special note of the Wise Men's journey to visit the Christchild, the baptism of Jesus, and his first miracle of turning the water into wine at the wedding fest.

But recently I was reading an article written by a youth pastor and he was suggesting that there are some traditions and some songs that are difficult to deal with in groups of college students who are that stage when they start asking some serious questions about their faith and the Bible. They are often troubled by what they hear us talking about as compared with the stories as recorded in scripture. They look for the truth and become suspicious about what they hear us say and what the writers of our scriptures say.

There are a couple examples of this I would like to share. The first is an article I read in the Illinois Baptist written by Meredith Day Flynn. If you get a copy of Illinois Baptist in the mail you may

have already read it. Her articles are always on the back page.

It is an example of the importance of words we use around Christmas.

Let me read it to you quickly.

The second example of this sort of thing was what I wanted us to look at in more depth is the confusion surrounding the song entitled, "***We ThreeKings of Orient Are.***"

Those who have a mind like the one I had when I was in college would probably have had a teacher write on one of your religion or philosophy exam papers after he or she had graded them, as one said to me, "***I think you must be a rebel at heart.***" It wasn't that I was rebelling against the faith because I had already accepted the call upon my life to be a pastor. I just like to look at things the way the Bible tells it.

In the article written by the youth pastor, he was saying he felt it was better to be honest with youth particularly when they are at the stage in life where they are deciding whether they will **stay** or **walk** away from the church.

The **song** says, "***We three kings.***" **Matthew** says "***wise men from the east came to Jerusalem...***" The **bible** did not say there were **three**, in fact it is suggested that people traveling the distance they probably traveled would more than likely come in larger groups. We have probably come up with the idea that there were **three** of them because of the three gifts that Matthew mentions they bring to the Christ child.

The song says, "**We three Kings.**" Matthew says they were "**wise men**" which could mean a variety of things.

In fact, writers over the years have called them "***magi***" which might suggest they were astrologers or some suggest even fortune-tellers, etc.

Often we find these wise men in our nativity sets with crowns on their heads which may be the case because of the gifts that are mentioned. They are gifts meant to be brought to a king because of the costly nature of them. They certainly were probably not on the preferred gift list of the **boy** Jesus.

Tradition has come up about them and **that tradition** has said were three and that their names were Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, but again **Matthew tells us none of this**. Since the Bible does not say, we have no way of knowing whether the tradition is accurate. Mark, Luke, and John do not mention the story of the Wise Men or the star. **Luke** mentions the **angels** who came heralding the birth and it was the **shepherds** who came to find him in a manger. Those considered to be at the very bottom of the economic scale in those days. **Matthew** tells of wise men who were of a different economic level and they found him in a **house** bringing expensive gifts.

Why would the different gospel writers tell us different stories, adding some, taking others away? Well, we have to remember that each gospel writer has a different purpose for writing and probably a different audience as well. It could very well be that Matthew was intentional in bringing a Gentile into the story of Jesus as an illustration that **Jesus came to save the whole world**; because the first 17 verses of his gospel tells us of Jesus Jewish lineage.

But, while we are on the subject of who these men might have been we might need to remember that if they came from an eastern country it would have taken some time for them to organize themselves, decide they wanted to make a long journey in search of someone they were not sure they could find, and then travel some distance. It would require some time for this to take place, so although the **wise men**, or more commonly, for our nativity scenes, the **three kings** who are common figures at the manger, would probably not have found him in his temporary shelter in a

manger.

It might also explain why the paranoid King Herod had all the male babies two years of age and younger to be killed when the wise men did not come back as Herod had commanded them. Herod wanted no one else to be alive that might be a threat to the idea that he was the King.

The **wise men** were guided to look for the King of the Jews by a miraculous stellar event, the **“Star of Bethlehem,”** which they called **“His star”**.

If you wanted to find the house that I live in you would have to follow what many in my community call the **Star of Brush Hill**. It literally shines right over the house where I live because it is a bright 4-foot star with LED light shining from my roof during the weeks of Christmas.

But **this star appears to the Wise Men**—not to the **shepherds** keeping watch over their flock at night—not to anyone else who recognized it as something unusual or announcing a world changing event.

The **wise men** often looked to the stars for guidance in eastern lands and putting together the star they saw with some writings in the Book of Daniel and Zechariah they decided to take a long trip bearing expensive gifts, that Matthew says, they thought would go to the one who would be called King of the Jews.

So, they came to Jerusalem and asked concerning the birth of Christ, and they were directed to Bethlehem ([Matthew 2:4–8](#)). They followed God’s guidance joyfully ([Matthew 2:10](#)). When they arrived in Bethlehem, they gave costly gifts to Jesus and worshiped Him. God warned them in a dream against returning to Herod, so, in defiance of the king, they left Judea by another route ([Matthew 2:12](#)).

I started on this verbal journey a few minutes ago by making reference to an article from a youth minister. He was writing about a group of people who are often, at that age, beginning to make decisions about whether to stay in the church or leave it based upon the message they heard from the church both in word and in actions.

So, why Do the Magi Matter for Youth Ministry?

Despite the layers of misconception added by tradition, there are valuable lessons these mysterious characters of the Nativity story can teach modern-day teenagers. Here are five of those lessons that come to mind.

They Sought a King That Didn’t Belong to Them

This group of foreign Gentiles set out on a considerable journey to meet and honor a king who was to be born. They were probably astrologers who served in the Zoroastrian temples of Persia, searching the stars for prophecies and omens. In this regard, it is noteworthy that these very men who sought to worship Jesus were of the same category who were denounced multiple times in passages like Isaiah 47:13-15. Their theology was idolatrous, and yet, by the mercy and providence of God, they sought Jesus anyway. This is the story of many Christians, who accidentally stumble their way to Jesus.

They Bowed and Worshipped

The Christmas story provides profound and inclusive accounts of worship. Jesus was worshipped by the lowly (shepherds) and the prominent (Magi). Both came to celebrate and honor the newborn king. The Magi recognized the differences between Godly kingship (Jesus) and worldly kingship (Herod), which is why they did not honor Herod’s instructions to tell him the exact birthplace of the child they sought. Additionally, the arrival of these learned, foreign men who chose to travel a

great distance to worship Jesus gives us a glimpse into God's heart to draw Gentiles and graft them into the family of God (Romans 11:11-31). **God's house is a house of prayer for all nations** (Mark 11:17). Like the wisemen, Jesus calls people from all nations and tongues to bow down and worship him. He calls everyone from all walks and backgrounds to bow and worship.

They Gave Generously

They brought the rare and expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh as gifts for Jesus. They chose to visit a king they did not know or owe their allegiance, a journey that likely took months. As the Magi discovered, giving their time and possessions caused great joy to spring from their hearts (Matthew 2:10). God calls us to give to him cheerfully and joyfully from our hearts, not with reluctance or obligation.

They Were Obedient

Most Bible scholars believed these men had access to ancient Jewish scrolls because of the Jewish diaspora during the time of Israel's exile to Babylon. These scrolls tell of the Messiah's coming, through whom God would deliver His people. These foreigners, who had their own king, obediently followed what they knew of the Torah and came to see the new king. Their obedience did not end there. When an angel warned them to be cautious with what they learned of Jesus's location, they returned home another route, bypassing Herod. We will eventually face a choice between honoring the Lord's command and honoring the world's expectations.

Just Because a Message is Popular Does Not Mean it is Right

In many ways, the story of the magi told today is a blend of the truth found in the Bible and tradition added over the last 2000 years. The biblical story is more than sufficient to tell the greatest story ever told – why embellish the details? Young people, and older people, are searching for truth and need to learn discernment to identify what is actually true from what seems true. We must rest in the truth found in the scriptures and teach people to know the difference between biblical truth from tradition, popular opinion, and hearsay.

This was the concerns and teachings of a youth minister, but what about our ideas of what is said and what has been added to the story about the wise men.

These magi are **not** religious insiders. They are **not** those who came to celebrate Passover they are definitely what many would call outsiders. But yet they come from some distance to worship while those who lived nearby were not aware of a star. In fact, the Jewish religious leaders did not understand what God was doing.

How do they know to worship Jesus? How can they already understand his divine purpose? And how do they hear a warning in a dream not to go back to Herod the Great? They hear and obey the warning and return home by going a different direction.

Could it be that right here in the Christmas story God is challenging our assumptions, messing with our definitions of **whom God chooses and uses for God's purposes?** Is God reminding us that we need, right from the beginning of Jesus birth, that we should be prepared to hear his warning that we should not put boundaries around the people God chooses or the nations God chooses or around what we think God should be doing? Our boundaries keep people out, and on our worst days they discourage folks from coming to the Savior.

Jesus came among us to remind us that outsiders are welcome in his kingdom and He has come among us to walk with us on our journey toward the Kingdom he brings around us.