

Week 2 - The Magi: Mysterious Worshippers - Matthew 2:1-12

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction

As we continue our mini-series on the supporting cast of Christmas, we come this morning to those our ESV Bible refers to as “wise men,” those mysterious gift-bearers from the east who round out our nativity sets and Christmas plays.

Unfortunately, most of what we think we know about those wise men is the product of our own imaginations and traditions that have been handed down to us for so long that we have ascribed them the status of facts.

And that’s true of much of the familiar Christmas story as we imagine an innkeeper who turns Mary and Joseph away with a harsh “There is no room for you here!”

Neither Matthew nor Luke mentions an innkeeper; we simply assume there must have been one.

We also imagine angels hovering over the stable where Jesus was born and laid in a manger, even though Scripture only records the angels announcing Jesus’ birth to the shepherds.

Come to think of it, we imagine the stable too.

Now, I don’t want to be “that guy” who comes along every Christmas and tries to spoil everyone’s fun by pointing out the inaccuracies of our historical traditions.

I recognize that our nativity scenes, Christmas pageants, and carols are meant to represent the overall picture of Christmas as it’s found in the gospel accounts.

Therefore, we make allowances for poetic license and don’t require strict literalness.

And I recognize that anyone who has spent any time under biblical preaching is already aware of those things and doesn’t need an annual Grinch to spoil the season - so don’t worry, that’s not what today’s sermon is about.

However, I do think it’s essential for us to separate fact from fiction, especially in the case of these traveling mystery men, because it helps us better appreciate them and what they did.

To paraphrase Ronald Reagan, “So much of what [we] know just isn’t so,” and the truth is much more fascinating than the fiction we’ve created.

Let’s begin by looking at some falsehoods we have accepted about these “wise men.”

I. The falsehoods about the magi

Perhaps the most significant falsehood is that there were three of them.

Well, actually, there may have been three, but we can’t say that with certainty because the Bible doesn’t say.

That hasn’t proven to be a barrier to a good story, though.

Tradition even goes so far as to provide us with the names of the three: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, and if you ever find yourself in Cologne, Germany, you can visit their bones stored in an ornate gold container in the cathedral there.

But back here on earth, the truth is, we don’t know how many there were - we only know that there were at least two because Matthew uses the plural “men” when speaking of them.

We get the whole idea of there being three from the three gifts that they present to Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, assuming that each was given by an individual wise man.

It’s more likely that the entire delegation presented the items as one combined gift and that the traveling party was far more than three individuals, given the stir they caused when they arrived in Jerusalem.

It’s widely recognized that the wise men would have likely had camels to carry their supplies and the gifts, while the wise men may have been likewise mounted on camels or horses.

It's also likely that they had servants traveling with them to care for their needs and guards to ensure their safety, as they were men of some importance, although not kings, regardless of what the song says.

There is simply no way that our traditional image of three guys of mixed races riding alone on camels across the desert is correct.

Desert travel in those days was only attempted by large caravans, and some scholars estimate their troupe might have included as many as 300 people.

The second major fallacy is that they were present on the night of Jesus' birth.

I already touched on that in my introduction, but our text shows that the wise men came to Jerusalem "after Jesus was born."

What we aren't told is how long it was after his birth that they arrived.

However, we can make some inferences from the biblical text - we just have to do so while reminding ourselves that we are indeed inferring these matters because the Bible doesn't give us a direct answer.

The first clue we want to notice is that Jesus and his parents are residing in a house [Matthew 2:11] when the wise men arrive.

Somehow, they had found lodging in a home - perhaps the influx of visitors had subsided once the census was completed, making room available.

We aren't told how or when it happened; it's just clear that their situation is different than it was on the night of Jesus' birth.

Besides, it seems evident that, even if the star were first visible on the night of Jesus' birth, it would have taken the wise men some time to travel to Bethlehem, making it impossible for them to arrive the same night.

So, we know the number of wise men was likely not three, and they didn't arrive on the night of Jesus's birth.

But we are still left with some lingering questions regarding the wise men.

II. The questions surrounding the magi

For instance, we don't know the precise origin of the wise men as we're only told they were "from the east."

Scholars generally agree that the wise men most likely hailed from Persia, which we know today as Iran.

The word "magi" comes from the Persian *magus*, which means "magician."

In this context, it denotes a person with an unusual capacity for understanding based on astronomy and astrology; these men studied the stars intently, noted their positions and movements, and made inferences based on those things.

Those in power often consulted the magi - especially in pagan societies.

Babylon had perfected a council of these advisors to the king long before Christ's birth.

Magi were among those mentioned in **Daniel 2:2** who could not reveal the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

And it appears that Daniel was later appointed to lead this council of magi in **Daniel 2:48**.

While serving in that capacity, God continued to bless Daniel with prophecies concerning the future Messiah, which Daniel carefully preserved in writing - and that will prove to be important in just a few minutes.

Just as importantly, under Daniel's leadership, the magi became devoted seekers of truth more than mere practitioners of the occult.

And while they were still primarily interested in observing and studying the movements of heavenly bodies, Daniel also began to teach them about the one true God of Israel.

So, while the precise origin of the wise men remains a mystery, we have clues that point us to the strong possibility that they came from Persia and were influenced by Daniel, who lived and died some 600 years before them.

Perhaps that's why we can look fondly upon these particular wise men even though their profession was typically looked down on as charlatans, as we see in **Isaiah 47:13-14**.

Still, these men were students of the heavens and, as astronomers, they took note of a phenomenon our text refers to as a "star" that suddenly appeared in the night sky.

They were also astrologers who saw meaning in the movements of heavenly bodies and looked to them as a source of revelation - something akin to reading one's horoscope.

Naturally, as soon as it appeared, they got busy trying to discern what this new "star" could mean.

And that brings us to yet another mystery because the Bible doesn't tell us how they figured out that the star signaled the birth of the new king of the Jews.

However, it seems logical to assume the magi kept records of their observations and that Daniel's writings would have been a part of that library of knowledge.

I can easily imagine them scurrying off to the dusty library to look for clues.

After all, they expected momentous earthly events to be accompanied by heavenly phenomena, and, as seekers of truth, they would have wanted to find a basis for their conclusions.

So, it's not a stretch to envision them searching through the scrolls and coming across Daniel's prophecy of weeks in Daniel 9.

And when the timeline fit, they would have naturally made the connection that this star heralded the one Daniel had written about.

Ultimately, we must acknowledge that God was behind this understanding, and it had to have been a divine revelation regardless of how they connected the star with the newborn king.

But that leads us to our next mystery: what exactly was the sign they saw that's referred to as a "star?"

There's a rule that we should always apply when we set out to interpret Scripture that says:

When the common sense makes good sense, seeking another sense is nonsense.

That means that we should understand every word of the Bible according to its primary, ordinary, literal meaning unless its immediate context and the illumination of the rest of Scripture clearly indicate otherwise.

For example, we should expect the language found in the poetic portions of Scripture to be picturesque and less literal than the language of historical prose.

I mention that because, while it doesn't solve the mystery, it does help us make some determinations.

Let's look at the text and see what clues it reveals.

First, the word translated as "star" is the Greek *aster*, which is the normal word for a star or other celestial body.

My Greek lexicon says the word is used 24 times in the New Testament, and when I looked them up, most of the uses are of a heavenly body, but in other cases, it can refer to an angel.

But, if we apply our rule from above, it seems best to understand the use of *aster* in our passage as referring to an actual heavenly body and not an angel.

Subsequently, many Bible scholars have adopted one theory or another to explain it.

Some say it may have been a comet, a supernova, an alignment of planets, or some other natural phenomenon that would explain a brighter-than-usual light appearing in the night sky.

However, evidence in our passage suggests that the star the magi saw wasn't a natural phenomenon after all, and perhaps the better explanation is that it was a supernatural occurrence that science can't explain.

First, the text indicates the star appeared and then disappeared.

The wise men say to the people of Jerusalem, "We saw his star when it rose and have come."

Notice they didn't say they followed the star to Jerusalem, only that they saw it, past tense, and have come.

Then, in verse 9, we read how the star they "had seen when it rose," again past tense, now leads them to Bethlehem.

It seems likely that the star and their recognition of its meaning got them started on their journey but then vanished until it was needed to give further guidance.

Also, heavenly bodies appear to move from east to west across the sky due to the earth's rotation.

So, if they did follow it toward Jerusalem, that would make sense.

But when it is said that it "went before them" to Bethlehem, that's moving from north to south, and natural stars don't do that.

The last bit of evidence is that the star is said to hover directly over the house where Jesus was.

Let's review the evidence again:

1. It suddenly appeared in the night sky.
2. It appears, disappears, and reappears.
3. It moves from east to west and north to south.
4. It comes to rest and hovers over a single house.

It seems pretty apparent that it could not have been a regular star, but we still can't say for sure what it was.

While it remains a mystery, I think the best solution I have heard is that it was either something akin to the pillar of cloud and fire that guided Moses and the children of Israel or an angel sent by God to direct the wise men.

Either of those solutions would fit the evidence, but we can't be dogmatic because, again, God didn't choose to tell us.

Another question that is somewhat easier to answer is why the wise men first went to Jerusalem.

We find a clue in their question in verse 2 [**Matthew 2:2**] when arriving in Jerusalem, they asked, "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*"

It seems only logical when searching for a king to begin one's search in the capital city.

They naturally expected the people and leaders they encountered there to know where to find the future king.

But we want to recognize that our text doesn't say that the star guided them to Jerusalem.

I believe they saw the star, determined its meaning, and headed to what they thought was the most logical place to find a king.

The wise men saw a sign in the heavens and were divinely inspired to travel some 900 miles minimum to find him.

In those days, a journey of that length would have taken 4-5 months, perhaps longer if they traveled further.

That means that even if they saw the star on the night of Jesus' birth, understood its import, and headed out immediately, Jesus was 4-5 months old when they arrived.

And that doesn't allow for any time spent studying the records to determine the star's meaning, which could have taken them a significant amount of time if they had to go back 600 years to research Daniel's records.

But, in reality, we don't know when the wise men finally arrived in Bethlehem.

Matthew provides us with some clues, though.

And, while they don't pin the time down with precision, they do shine some light on the matter.

In verse 7 [**Matthew 2:7**], we read that Herod learned from the wise men when they had seen the star appear.

Then, if we jump down to verse 16 [**Matthew 2:16**], we see that Herod, in a rage, ordered the murder of all the male children in Bethlehem who were two years old and younger.

If we reasonably accept that Herod was acting on the information he had gleaned from the wise men, it seems apparent that they must have told him the star had appeared two years earlier.

But that still leaves us with a range of ages because God could have sent the star ahead of Jesus' birth to give the wise men a head start.

We find another clue the word Matthew uses to describe Jesus when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem.

In his gospel, Luke uses the Greek word *brephos* when referring to Jesus on the night he was born, and *brephos* means either a pre-born or newborn baby [**Luke 2:16**].

But Matthew uses the Greek word *paidion* in verse 11 [**Matthew 2:11**].

And *paidion* was the word used when describing a small child.

It *can* mean an infant, but it would be rare for anyone to use it to describe a newborn infant.

Furthermore, Matthew uses the same word in verse 21 [**Matthew 2:21**], describing the family's return to Israel after Herod's death when Jesus would clearly not have been a newborn.

Given all that, we can safely conclude that Jesus was between four months and two years old when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem, but that's as close as we can come to answering that question.

Having looked at what we know to be false and what we can't be sure of, let's turn our attention to the things revealed in our passage that are far more interesting and instructive.

III. The realities of the magi

First, we see that the wise men were attentive, studious, and diligent.

While those who typically practiced their art were charlatans, these men acted on what they saw and investigated to find the truth and acted.

They undertook a challenging journey of considerable distance at great expense.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they didn't go straight to Herod to inquire; it appears they went up to whomever they met and asked where they might find the one who had been born king of the Jews.

We'll learn more about Herod next week, but given his reputation, they might well have tried to avoid him.

After all, one typically wouldn't have gone up to a king in those days to talk about a new king who had recently been born; that could go quite badly.

But Herod eventually heard about the mysterious strangers asking about a new king, so he summoned them to come and tell him what they knew.

And Herod served as an unwitting channel of divine guidance as he pointed them toward Bethlehem on the advice of the religious leaders.

The point I want us to see here is that the wise men acted on the information they had and made the journey; they also persevered when things became difficult.

It had to be frustrating to have the people of Jerusalem, from the common folk of the streets to the religious leaders, shrug their shoulders and express ignorance of what was so evident and essential to them.

But they didn't get discouraged by a wrong turn or the apathy of those around them, and they did what it took to stand before the king they sought.

They also exercised faith.

Remember, faith is acting on what you trust or believe, which we see in verse 9 [**Matthew 2:9**].

It would be easy to miss, so let's slow down and look at that verse together.

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star they had seen when it rose went before them...

Do you see it?

It wasn't until they were on their way from Jerusalem that the star reappeared, this time to lead them directly to the very house where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were staying.

They had to act in faith and start moving before the star reappeared to guide them.

And they did so eagerly.

Notice how our text says [**Matthew 2:10**] that they "*rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*" when the star reappeared.

Think about how these guys had already endured a long journey of many months over many miles only to arrive at the place that seemed logical to find an ignorant and apathetic public and religious leadership.

I would expect they might be discouraged and wondering if they were mistaken.

But they remained enthusiastic and committed to their cause.

We might also expect they would be disappointed when they finally arrived in Bethlehem and saw the humble family living what had to appear to be a perfectly pedestrian life.

Surely, the scene before them of a young woman and a little boy living in a borrowed house wasn't what they expected.

Notice that Joseph isn't mentioned as being present when the wise men arrived - it's just Jesus and his mom.

Perhaps Joseph was at work - we aren't told why he wasn't there.

Maybe God intervened so that the wise men wouldn't get the impression that Joseph was Jesus' natural father.

Again, that's just speculation.

But the point is, nothing about the scene would make one think this child was a king.

From all outward appearances, he was just another poor child in the village of Bethlehem.

We aren't surprised to read that they brought expensive gifts fit for a king.

But it appears they didn't hesitate as they opened their treasure store and offered him the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh they had carried with them from their home country.

Tradition has attached significance to the three gifts that may or may not be accurate.

It's highly doubtful that the wise men gave them for any reason more than they were costly gifts fit for a king.

But it's been said since that gold is a gift that speaks of Jesus' royalty, frankincense is a gift that speaks of his deity, and myrrh foreshadowed his death.

And gold does symbolize the wealth and power of a king, frankincense is incense that was burned in the temple worship of the Lord, and myrrh is a perfume, an anesthetic, and a spice that was used to anoint a body for burial in those days.

As I said, it's doubtful that the wise men intended all that when they presented the gifts, but God may have intervened in their selection so that future generations would look back and see Jesus for who he is and why he came.

It's possible.

There's one more thing I want us to notice about the wise men, and I saved the best for last.

They came to worship Jesus.

They openly stated the entire purpose of their travels to the people of Jerusalem in verse 2 [**Matthew 2:2**] when they said, "*We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*"

Worship is the most significant word in the passage.

Far from being shocked and disappointed when they finally got to Bethlehem and found Jesus and Mary, our text [**Matthew 2:11**] says they walked in and "*fell down and worshipped him.*"

They came looking for he who had been born king of the Jews, but they didn't come to pay homage to him as an earthly king.

They came to worship him as Lord of heaven and earth.

The word "worship" alone doesn't tell us much about what they were thinking or how much they understood, but we see that by prostrating themselves in worship, they understood something of his divine nature.

We don't want to rush by or casually accept this.

We need to stop and envision the scene and its impact and significance.

These were worldly, wise, wealthy men, cultured, sophisticated, and powerful.

They traveled a long distance to see a young king and, undoubtedly, expected to find him seated on a throne surrounded by servants and all the trappings of royalty.

But when they saw him, they dropped and offered the only appropriate response: worship.

And, when the time for them to head home came, we see that they remained sensitive to God's leading as they heeded his warning to them in a dream and avoided passing through Jerusalem and seeing Herod again.

Conclusion

What about you?

Are your eyes open and observant, seeking to see what God has for you?

Once you catch a glimpse, are you diligent in studying to know the truth?

Do you take each next step according to the light you have and put your trust into action?

Do you persevere when circumstances seem to offer only discouragement?

Do you rejoice in what God reveals to you?

Do you readily and fully worship the Lord?

I don't know what the wise men's worship reveals about their spiritual status.

I want to think they became saved individuals - everything seems to point to the idea, but they disappear from the pages of Scripture at this point without it being stated directly.

But so much of our walk as Christ-followers operates just like we see in their case.

And so we would do well to follow their example.

Let's pray

Matthew 2:1-12 (page 807)

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; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he 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."

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 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. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.