

The Epiphany of Our Lord

As far back as anyone can remember, every Christmas pageant has included them: Three kids dressed in robes of some sort bringing gold and two other gifts they can't pronounce to the baby Jesus. This is the story of the Wise Men from the East found only in the Gospel of Matthew. This story is called the Epiphany of our Lord. **Epiphany means "appearance of God"** for his divinity appeared to the Magi.

Though the number of wise men is not mentioned in the Bible, they have long been counted as three, likely because of the three gifts noted. What we know about the Wise Men we find in Matthew 2.

STAR-GAZERS FROM THE EAST

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, during the time of King Herod, the wise men from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, **"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"** (Matthew 2:2). These Wise Men are called **"Magi from the east"** (μαγοι in the Greek). **Probably from Babylon or Persia they were scholars and philosophers** who were trained in medicine, history, religion, prophecy, and astronomy, as well as what we would call astrology and interpretation of dreams. [Astrology is the belief that there is a connection between the position of the stars and human destiny. In the beginning astrology was connected with man's search for meaning. The ancients studied the skies in order to find the answers to the great questions of life – Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?]

These learned men had observed something unusual in the night sky and were compelled to follow the sign. They concluded it was a sign that a Jewish king had been born. It shouldn't surprise us that wise men in Babylon should pay attention to signs for a Jewish king. 500 years earlier a large contingent of Jewish leaders and scholars had been led as captives to Babylon. A generation later they returned to Jerusalem, but they left behind a colony of Jews and body of learning whose influence spread among the Babylonians and then the Persians. It would not be unusual for Babylonian or Persian scholars to know Jewish history and biblical prophecies. Some might even have converted to the Jewish faith.

It was a journey of a thousand miles from Persia to Israel. Most of our pictures of the Magi show three guys riding camels across the deserts. But that's not the way you travel from Babylon to Jerusalem – you follow rivers North, go West across Syria, then South to Israel. There is no way under heaven the Magi traveled 1,000 miles by themselves. In those days, **the only way you traveled was in a large caravan**; necessary for protection.

The Magi would have swept into Jerusalem with a military escort along with their servants, baggage carts, and tents, and perhaps the company of other travelers. The total party could have amounted to more than 300 men. No wonder all of Jerusalem was buzzing. And it seems the Magi had no trouble gaining an audience with Herod. That fact alone attests to the size of their entourage and their importance.

They knew a baby had been born but they didn't know exactly where. They knew he was a king but didn't know his name. So they stopped in Jerusalem to get directions. Apparently they assumed that everyone must know about this baby. King Herod – who had gotten himself appointed “king of the Jews” by the Roman Senate – occupied the royal palace in Jerusalem. I wonder if he looked at the night sky and saw anything unusual. **Did King Herod notice what the Magi saw?** I doubt it. I wonder how many times I've missed signs from God? How about you?

But at the palace the Magi didn't find what they were looking for. How many of us chase a star, hoping to find whatever it is we believe we need to find: a career, a goal, an achievement, a dream, or a person?

STAR OF WONDER

They asked the whereabouts of the new king and added: ***“We have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him.”*** (Emphasis on “his star.”) Remember: the Wise Men were students of the sky. In those days it was not uncommon to associate the birth of a great ruler with unusual heavenly phenomena. You might say that if God wanted to get a message to these guys, he picked the perfect way.

What was ***“his star in the east?”*** Frankly, we don't know. The Greek word in the Bible, (αστερα) just means “star,” which could include planets or other bright objects in the sky. Over the years there have been four main theories about “his star”:

1. Halley's Comet. The nearest appearance was in 11 B.C., probably too early for the birth of Christ.

2. Supernova. This is an exploding star that suddenly fills the sky with light in a brilliant, blinding flash of light. These are unpredictable and very rare and there is no record in any astronomical records of a supernova in the years surrounding the birth of Christ.

3. Conjunction of Planets. This is probably the most popular theory. One version suggests that in 7 B.C. Jupiter, Mars and Saturn came together in a very rare conjunction that only occurs once every 125 years. Another possibility is a conjunction of Jupiter and Venus in 2 B.C. The conjunction could explain why the Magi saw it and the people of Israel didn't. Conjunctions don't attract the attention of people who don't normally watch the skies. They aren't highly visible phenomena like comets or supernovas or meteor showers. But to anyone

who watched the stars regularly, a “triangular” conjunction like the one in 7 B.C. would certainly attract extraordinary attention.

4. A Supernatural Light. This theory suggests that the “star” was not a natural phenomenon at all, but rather was a light placed by God in the atmosphere especially for the Magi to see. Those who hold this view point to the “shekinah” glory of God in the Old Testament. At certain points in history God revealed himself as a bright light in order to guide his people. Think of the pillar of fire with which God led Israel in the wilderness.

EVIL CALCULATIONS

The reaction of Herod is fascinating. Matthew 2:3 says that, **“When Herod heard the news, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”** (Emphasis on the word “disturbed.”) The Greek word here (εταρεχθη) means “stirred up.” Herod was old and sick, tottering on an unstable throne. The idea of a baby who was actually “born” king of the Jews was a direct threat to him. He probably felt threatened by all this excitement.

Herod turns to the scribes and priests to ask where is the Christ to be born? The scribes already know the answer. **700 years earlier the prophet Micah had predicted the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem** (*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”* Micah 5:2). That was common knowledge in Israel. Little children learned that in Sabbath School. It’s hard to believe that Herod didn’t know it – but then he wasn’t really a Jew, only the king. If you add what the scribes knew to what the Wise Men figured out, you could easily conclude that the signs of Jesus’ coming were clear. It has been said that **God always speaks loud enough for those willing to hear.**

So, now Herod knows where the king is to be born but he doesn’t know when. **“Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.”** He didn’t tell them why he wanted to know and you have to read on in the story (through verse 16) to find out the answer. [He gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years and younger, in accordance with the time he learned from the Magi. Quite ruthless, I’d say.]

Herod asked the Magi to go to Bethlehem as his representatives, find out where the baby is, and report back to him so he can go and worship him. Herod is lying of course. He doesn’t intend to worship the newborn king, but to kill him. Evidently the Magi have no reason to suspect his motives. Why should they? If they have come so far to worship the child why wouldn’t Herod do as much?

So the Magi went – it’s only six miles - and **“on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.”** Did

you hear that? **“They worshiped him.”** There was nothing to make you think he was a king. The Magi had met King Herod but they did not worship him. To the baby they gave the honor due a king. What Herod craved, the baby received.

GIFTS FIT FOR A KING

The last detail in this story is the one for which the Magi are most remembered: **“Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh”** (verse 11). The gifts in themselves are expensive and represent a worthy tribute. But beyond that, **these gifts represent who this child would become**. (*May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to him. May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him gifts. Psalm 72:10*).

The gold represented the wealth and power of a king. Frankincense was used in the temple worship of the Lord. It represents his deity – He is truly God born in human flesh. Myrrh is a kind of perfume made from the leaves of the *cistus* rose. After a person died, myrrh was used to anoint the body and prepare it for burial. **John 19:39** tells us that, **“Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds”** as Jesus’ body was prepared for burial. The gift of myrrh represents Jesus’ suffering and death. Did the Magi understand all this? Maybe not, but God arranged it so that their gifts to the Holy Child would point us to who He is and why He came.

FOUR ABIDING TRUTHS

What can we learn from the Christmas story of the Wise Men?

1. If the Wise Men can find Jesus, then so can you. They crossed a distance barrier, a culture barrier, a language barrier, a racial barrier, a religious barrier, not to speak of a hostile king. It wasn’t easy for them to find Jesus, but they did. If they found him, then so can you.

2. If God can use a star to reach these wise men, then He can use anything to reach anybody. Sometimes we despair of seeing our friends or family members come to Christ because nothing we say seems to have the slightest effect on them. This story ought to give us great hope. God can use a star, a book, a tract, a television show, a song, several people over the course of time, a chance comment, or anything he desires. If God can reach the Wise Men, he can reach anybody.

3. If the Wise Men offered Jesus gifts fit for a king, then so should we. It’s good to remember that the tradition of giving gifts at Christmastime did not start with Santa Claus. It started with the Wise Men. Let’s not get hung up on gifts – Christmas isn’t about what you or I get. It is good to give gifts to each other; it is better to give gifts to Jesus. It is good to show our love to those we love; it is better to show love to the One who loved us when we were unlovely.

4. If learned and respected men worshiped Jesus, then so can you. It doesn't matter how much knowledge or accomplishment you have under your belt, set aside your pride and worship the One who is greater than all.

This year, every year, all during the year, God invites us to visit Bethlehem, and behold the baby who is King and God and Sacrifice. We know that He will arise to do His work and the world will see Him as He really is. Do you know Him for who He really is?

He really is the One who can make you whole. Don't leave here today without taking Him into your life.

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him." Matthew 2:2