

Visit of the Magi Matthew 2:1-12

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.
(English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- “Magi” (not “wise men” - KJV, ESV) were pagan astrologers whose divination skills were widely respected in the Greco-Roman world. Astrology had become popular, because of the “science” of the East, and everyone agreed that the best astrologers lived in the East. The Old Testament forbade such prognostication from signs (Deuteronomy 18:11; Isaiah 2:6, 47:11-15).
- Astronomers have offered various proposals for the appearance of this star in the first decade B.C. The ancients thought comets and falling stars predicted the fall of rulers; some emperors even banished from Rome astrologers, who issued such predictions. By this time, many Jewish people accepted the idea that the stars could accurately predict the future. Even though these Magi were both Gentiles and pagans, God chose to reveal himself to them.
- Many rulers feared astrological signs of their demise. The Emperor Nero later reportedly slaughtered many nobles in the hope that their deaths (rather than his own) would fulfill the prediction of a comet. Jerusalem was an important trade center, so the Magi must have come with quite an entourage for the whole city to notice them. Then again, many people resented Herod’s rule and rumors could have circulated quickly. King Herod, who was aware of broad currents of thought in the Roman Empire and sponsored pagan temples among Gentile cities in his realm, might have been especially apt to consider the Magi’s mission significant.
- “Chief priests” belonged mainly to the wealthy aristocracy of Sadducees. “Scribes,” in the narrow sense in which the term is used here, applies to experts in the Jewish law, of whom most were also teachers of the law. Herod exercised a great deal of influence over prominent leaders of the people, having forcibly removed most of his political opponents.

- Micah 5:2 predicted Bethlehem as the Messiah's birthplace, because the Messiah was to be a descendant of David, and Bethlehem had been David's hometown. It was a small town less than a ten-mile walk from Herod's capital, Jerusalem. The Magi came to Jerusalem because that was where they expected to find any Judean king, perhaps one of Herod's sons. It is remarkable that the scribes would know where the Messiah would be born, yet not act on that knowledge either positively (Matthew 2:11) or negatively (2:16).

- Herod's deceit resembles that of an earlier tyrant, the Pharaoh (possibly Seti I), who instructed the midwives to kill Hebrew boys at birth (Exodus 1:16).

- The text might imply only that the star appeared to move due to the Magi's own movement. Even had the object been close enough to earth to calculate its relation to Bethlehem, that town was so close to Jerusalem that any distance would have been negligible unless the object was only a mile high. The description of God leading the Magi by a moving, supernatural sign may recall how God had led his people by the fire and cloud in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21-22).

- Incense and myrrh were treasures characteristic of the East, and the Mediterranean world typically imported such products from that region (1 Kings 10:10; Psalm 72:10-11, 15).

- Most kings reacted with hostility to potential usurpers and to astrological predictions of their demise. Thus, the Magi needing to be warned through a dream not to return to Herod suggests their naiveté, an innocence Jews rarely expected of Gentiles. Most people in the ancient world paid attention to special dreams (e.g. Joseph in Matthew 1:20); some even had rules on how to interpret them, and the Greeks thought that Magi were especially adept at dream interpretation.

Questions:

- + Why are Magi from afar rather than local Jews more interested in seeing Jesus in Bethlehem?
Historically, why have Gentiles been much more interested than Jews in knowing about Jesus?
How interested are you in knowing about Jesus, and why? What would increase your interest?
- + Why would both Herod and "all Jerusalem with him" be troubled by the news of the Magi?
If the Jewish leaders knew that Christ would be born in Bethlehem, why didn't they go there?
If you heard the story told to Herod, would you have gone to Bethlehem? Why or why not?
- + For the Magi, the star confirmed the identity of Jesus. What confirms his identity to you?
Seeing the star prompted the Magi to rejoice. What prompts you to rejoice in the Lord?
- + After worshiping Jesus, the Magi gave him costly gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
What gift or gifts does Jesus want most from you? When will you give him what he wants?