

SERMON SERIES:
GOD IS WITH US
Witnesses to His Coming

Grace Christian Church
206 Marco Ave, Panania | gracepadstowpanania.org.au



VISIT & GIFTS OF THE MAGI

(Matthew 2:1-12; Micah 5:2-5a) Ross Pogson

At this time of the year, we continue our celebration of the Christmas story with the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. We all like receiving presents at Christmas or on our birthday, don't we? In Bethlehem, the infant Jesus was visited by mysterious Wise Men, sometimes called Magi, who gave Him special presents. They weren't just random gifts, but they have been given special symbolic meanings, as we will find out later. In Western Christian tradition this visit is celebrated by a feast day on 6th January, called the Epiphany, meaning manifestation or appearance.

To understand this special event, we have to ask several questions, which I will attempt to answer - who were the Wise Men, how many were there, where did they come from, how did they know when & where to go, what was the star they saw, how did King Herod react to their news, and what did their visit and gifts mean? We follow their visit in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 2.

Who were the Wise Men?

The Scriptures call them Wise Men or Magi. Traditions from about 200 AD call them Kings, as in the 1857 Christmas Carol, "We three Kings from Orient are," by John Henry Hopkins." They have been described as Royal Astrologers, Magicians, interpreters of dreams, or Advisors to Kings. Magi were an old and powerful hereditary priestly-sage caste among both the Medes and Persians and were well-educated in medicine, religion, astronomy & astrology (the same in those days), divination, and magic. If they were Astrologers & Astronomers systematically scanning the sky every night, they would have noticed a new star where there wasn't one before. They followed Zoroastrian religious traditions. By Medieval times they were even given names and countries of origin: Gaspar (Caspar) from India, Melchior from Persia, and Balthazar, from Babylon, but there is no real evidence for this.

How many Wise Men were there?

Note that I haven't said '3 Wise Men', because the Scriptures don't really tell us exactly how many there were. However, there were 3 gifts, so all down the ages, traditionally it has been assumed there were 3 Wise Men. We know there were more than one, and there could have been more than 3, but we just don't know. As a compromise 3 will do, or we will risk contradicting some well-loved Christmas Carols.

Where did the Wise Men come from?

They came from the East. The countries east of Israel include the lands of the Medes and Persians, later incorporated in the Parthian Empire, and the Mesopotamian lands between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, home of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Popular tradition

has also associated them with Arabia or India, but Persia or Babylon are common guesses. They do appear to come from one, not several countries, as Matthew 2:12 says "... they returned to their country by another route."

How did they know when and where to go?

When arriving in Jerusalem they asked:

"Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east (some translations say 'as it rose') and have come to worship him..."

There was an ancient tradition linking signs in the heavens with momentous events, or the birth of a King or important person. So, a star had appeared at a certain time in the east and they had associated that event with the appearance of a King, but not any King, the King of the Jews. Note they had come to worship One who was already a King, born a King, not one who was merely destined to be one in the future.

Did they know the prophesy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." (although the word 'star' may have several overlaid meanings here, as is common in prophesy).

The star had led them into Judea and they went to Jerusalem, not immediately to Bethlehem. But why did they go to Jerusalem first? One explanation is that if you wanted to find news of a King, you would naturally go to the political and religious capital city of a country, where knowledge, news, rumour and the Royal Court were situated.

The Magi were well-educated men, so among their scrolls did they have a copy of the Old Testament Scriptures, specifically, the Book of Micah? Micah 5:2 says:

"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."

Perhaps if they knew this Micah prophesy, they would have gone straight to Bethlehem instead of Jerusalem, and it was the Religious Leaders and Herod who first told them about Bethlehem, or maybe God wanted them to go to Jerusalem first. Also, did they know Daniel Chapter 9, where there is some very precise timing (in numerical language) that could be linked to a timeline of future events about *"the coming of an anointed one, a Prince..."* (Daniel 9: 25). There is much that is unknown and can only be guessed here. Some Scholars have even suggested that these Wise Men were descendants of the Wise Men and Magicians of Babylon during the Exile, mentioned in the Book of Daniel, so they might have known about Daniel's prophecies (Daniel 5:11 says, referring to Daniel "... King Nebuchadnezzar.your father the King made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans and Astrologers.") However, we also can't rule out a direct revelation from God to the Wise Men.

What was the Star of Bethlehem?

What exactly the star was has been debated down the ages for over 2000 years, by people trying to explain it in what was known in scientific, or even astrological knowledge of the time. Explanations have included a Supra Nova or exploding star that suddenly increased its brightness, a close grouping (conjunction) of the major planets, a comet, or a miraculous new star. We really don't know what it was, but its appearance was like a star and God caused it to miraculously move and lead the Magi to the land of Judah and eventually to Bethlehem. It has been celebrated in several Christmas Carols, for example, "As with Gladness Men of Old" by William Chatterton Dix in 1859, and "Star of Wonder" by Tori Ames.

King Herod's reaction

When the Magi came to Jerusalem they asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him". News of this came to King Herod the Great, who was troubled and consulted the Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law, who instantly and without hesitation quoted the Micah 5:2 passage that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem in Judea – they knew their Scriptures, but perhaps not their meaning. So, they unintentionally affirmed that the birth of Jesus fulfilled a Messianic prophesy. The passage makes a distinction between the two villages called Bethlehem – the birthplace of Jesus was 5 miles S of Jerusalem, the other one was 7 miles NW of Nazareth. Herod then consulted the Magi secretly to find out the exact time the star had appeared. The last thing Herod wanted was the birth of a rival King to oppose him. Also, he would have been disturbed by their words ". .and have come to worship him," because that suggested the King of the Jews was more than a human king – God is worshipped, not earthly kings, so this King had Divine origins.

Herod sent the Magi to Bethlehem to search for the child and report back to him "...so that I too may go and worship him", which was a deception and far from the truth. Herod wanted to trick the Wise Men into finding the child for him, but for evil purpose, not to worship Him. A potential rival ruler was a threat to Herod. Herod had a bad track record with rivals, they usually ended up dead. He was not a nice man – he was jealous, suspicious, unstable, violent and paranoid. He even had members of his own family killed when he found them disloyal or threatening, even on unsupported rumours.

But was the child an immediate threat to Herod? - Herod was old and sick by then, and not likely to live until an infant had grown up to manhood to be a threat to him, but even as a child Jesus was still a threat to Herod's political structures and a rallying point for opposition. Herod had a guilty conscience, he knew he was not the rightful heir to David's throne, being from Idumea (Edom) and was only partly Jewish, having usurped power by aligning himself with Rome. Also, the religious leaders had aligned themselves politically with Herod, so if his powerbase was threatened, so was theirs. Perhaps Herod was worried that invaders from the East would join others in Israel to replace him with a King who was a descendant of King David, from the true Royal line, the long-expected Messiah. Note that the Priests, who should have been excited about the long-expected Messiah's birth, showed no interest in accompanying the Wise Men on the short journey to Bethlehem to also worship Him.

So, this was the kind of dangerous man who the Magi entrusted with their startling and disturbing news. Herod was disturbed '...and all Jerusalem with him'. No wonder all Jerusalem was disturbed, it was dangerous to upset Herod because nasty events usually followed. The Magi did not report back to Herod, being warned by God in a dream, and "...they returned to their country by another route." True to his character, Herod was furious and ordered the killing of all infant boys 2 years old and under in Bethlehem. How naïve of Herod to think he could ruin God's plans like this. Warned by God in a dream, Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

The visit of the Magi

After taking their leave of Herod the Magi headed towards Bethlehem, as verse 9 relates: "After they had heard the King they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."

They were not just happy, they were overjoyed – the star was leading them on further in their quest and to its conclusion. At the time of their visit, Jesus was no longer in the stable at the Inn, but was at a house, as Matthew 2:11 says: "On coming to the house, they saw the child (some translations say 'young child') with his mother Mary...". The Greek word 'paidion' used for 'child' here doesn't mean a newborn baby, but a young child. The star they saw in the east had led them to Judea, and disappeared for a while, then reappeared and led them to Bethlehem and the house where Jesus was. It is interesting that outsiders, the Gentile

Magi were the first to recognise what the Scriptures were saying about Jesus, that he was King of the Jews, and the first Gentiles to worship him, while those who should have known, the Pharisees and Scribes, did not and were indifferent.

The probable timing of their visit after Jesus was born suggests Nativity scenes which show the shepherds and the Wise Men together around the crib in the stable of the Inn are inaccurate - the Wise Men probably weren't there at that time. We don't know how long after Jesus' birth the Wise Men came – it could have been several months to over a year (Herod assumed *'two years and under'* for his attack on the infant boys of Bethlehem, maybe overestimating, as a margin of error, from the time when the Wise Men first saw the star).

The visit of the Magi confirms the Old Testament prophecies – it highlights the Royal and Divine identity of Jesus, confirms the Bethlehem origins of the Messiah's birth, and emphasises Gentile worship of Jesus.

The three gifts and their meaning

Ultimately, it is not who the Magi were, or where they came from, or how many there were that is important – it is their recognition of who Jesus was, and their confirmation of Old Testament prophecies. Their gifts and what they meant were very important too. In the Middle East at that time, it was customary and polite to bring costly gifts when visiting a great person or King – no-one came empty-handed. The three gifts of the Wise Men were some of the most valuable, rarest, transportable & marketable items of the day.

Gold was pure, precious and unchangeable. Frankincense was a gum or resin originally harvested from trees in the Arabian Peninsula, but now from Somalia, Yemen, Oman, India and Pakistan. Its name is from Old French words meaning 'noble or pure incense.' It was a component of the anointing oil used in the Tabernacle and Temple. Today it is used in perfumes, medicine and incense in religious rituals, especially in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Myrrh is an aromatic gum or resin exuded from the bark of small spiny tree species in the Arabian Peninsula and India. Its name means 'bitter'. It had antioxidant and antifungal effects. It was used in beauty treatments and perfumes or mixed with wine it was used to relieve pain. It was mixed with wine and given to Jesus at his crucifixion (but he did not drink it). In Biblical times it was also used for anointing the dead - Joseph of Arimathea brought 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body at His burial. It was a component of the anointing oil used in the Tabernacle and Temple.

In fanciful Medieval tradition, it was Gaspar (or Caspar), from India, who brought the gift of Frankincense, Melchior, from Persia who brought the gift of Gold, and Balthazar, from Babylon, who brought the gift of Myrrh.

The Scriptures don't tell us what the gifts mean, but traditional meanings have been given to them. In many interpretations the three gifts represent the roles of Jesus as King, Priest and Sacrificial Saviour. Gold, pure and unchangeable was the gift for a King. Frankincense pointed to the role of Jesus as High Priest, who offered the prayers of the people to God, and Myrrh pointed to Jesus' humanity, and his suffering & sacrificial death.

But what about us – what gifts would we bring to Jesus? We may not have gold, and incense of Frankincense and Myrrh, but our prayers and praise have been described as an incense reaching to God, as in Psalm 141:2 *"May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice."* We can also accept Jesus as the perfect gold standard of our faith. But ultimately, the best gift we can give to Jesus, is ourselves.