

Why Are the Wise Men Included in the Christmas Story? Matthew 2:1-12

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by Shafer Parker, Jr.
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Intro.

This message is not an attempt to explain the astronomical event known as the Star of Bethlehem. If you want information on that you can watch The Star of Bethlehem Documentary (2007) on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7YTE7WFB6Y>.

The only thing I will say about the “star” is that it was probably what the ancients referred to as a “wandering star,” but what today we would call a planet. Of the several wandering stars it most likely would have been Jupiter, the so-called “king star.” It’s movement through the heavens would have spoken volumes to eastern sky watchers.

Today I want us to focus on the eternal significance of the Bible story itself. Let’s ask, and at least try to partially answer the question: Why did God the Holy Spirit see fit to include the wise men in the Christmas story?

Let me give you an answer right away. The wise men are included in the story because they represent the Gentile world coming from the ends of the earth to worship God’s only begotten Son, the Saviour of the world.

More importantly, the recounting of the history of the wise men is at least the beginning of the fulfilment of Micah 4.

Micah 4:1 In the last days (don’t forget, according to Hebrews 1:2 the last days began with the birth of Jesus) the mountain of the Lord’s house will be established at the top of the mountains and will be raised above the hills. Peoples (*goyim*) will stream to it, 2 and many nations will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us about His ways so we may walk in His paths.”

Do you see how Micah’s prophecy applies to the wise men? Their coming to find Jesus was just the first trickle of what has since become a flood. “Peoples” streaming to the “mountain of the Lord.” Today the only truly world-wide religion is the faith described by the prophet Micah.

Show screen shot of video. <https://vimeo.com/113801439>

Today’s text

Matthew 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived unexpectedly in Jerusalem, 2 saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

That word “unexpectedly” is translated in the older versions as “behold.” “Behold, there came wise men from the east” (KJV) The original word means “to stare at,” like kids waking up one morning to find the circus has arrived and elephants and camels are walking down main street. That’s the feeling the people of Jerusalem had when the wise men arrived. “Who are these guys?” they were asking.

“Where did they come from? They want to know whaaaaat?”

When you think about it, “unexpectedly” captures the feeling of most of the people involved in the Christmas story. Zechariah didn’t expect Gabriel to show up in the temple to announce the miraculous birth of John the Baptist. Mary wasn’t expecting Gabriel to knock on her door either, nor was she expecting to be told that she would be mother to the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. And the shepherds certainly weren’t expecting an angel choir to announce Christ’s birth while they kept watch over their flocks at night. But now the city of Jerusalem is unexpectedly set abuzz by the arrival of these men from the east who are asking about the birth of a new King of the Jews.

But speaking of unexpected, sometimes a single sentence can unexpectedly hint at volumes of knowledge and insight. Certainly this is true of the wise men’s question: “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” For them the birth was real and the title was true.

Now I know it’s the day before Christmas and you’ve got a lot on your mind, but let me ask you to think with me about the significance of the wise men’s question. For them to just show up out of the blue searching for the King of the Jews indicates they knew a lot, wherever they were from. You can’t ask about the king of the Jews without knowing the Jews were expecting a king.

These wise men didn’t just know the Jews as an ancient ethnic group. They knew of the Jews’ significance in God’s story. They knew the world’s Saviour would come through the Jews. To the wise men this Jewish king was uniquely worth travelling long distances to see. They didn’t show up to honour Caesar Augustus when he was born, and they certainly didn’t show up to “worship” baby Herod. But now, here they were, all agog to find the newborn Jewish king.

I don’t know how much Biblical theology these wise men could put into words, but I do know what God means for His readers to understand. The birth of a Jewish king mattered then, and matters now, because of the significance God placed upon the Jewish people.

Exodus 19: 5 (God, speaking to Israel through Moses) Now if you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, 6 and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation.’ These are the words that you are to say to the Israelites.”

These wise men also knew something about the promised Messiah. They knew something about the O.T. and all the promises God has made. They knew something about God’s sovereignty and power because *they believed the entire universe had rearranged itself to announce the birth of the Jewish King*. That’s what the star meant to them! Thus they knew something about this baby king, who He was and from Whom He came. He is not just from David, and not just from the Jews. He is definitely not just from Mary and Joseph. Again, I don’t know how the wise men could have expressed their faith in words, but somehow they know that this king was from God.

How these men came to know these things we do not know. But we can be confident they knew them. We also know they believed what they knew. Their presence in Jerusalem is testament to their faith. Theirs was an epistle of James kind of faith. That is, they didn’t just talk the talk, they walked the walk, and it was a long, risky and expensive walk. They showed their faith by their works.

Application

Dear friends, like the wise men, we must believe the gospel is for the entire world. Actually, I don't have to try to prove the universality of the gospel, either logically or from Scripture. The fact is, today, 2,000 years after the birth of Christ, men and women from every race and nation are prepared to stand up and tell the world that in Jesus they've discovered all they need. In Him they have found the one path to true knowledge of God and true knowledge of themselves. How else do you explain why otherwise rational men and women boldly proclaim Jesus in parts of the world where the authorities are actively seeking to eliminate Christians.

Over here (North America) we have men and women, aided by a compliant media, who stand up to proclaim the superiority of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Communism, and so on. And too many people, having never lived in a world where one or another of these isms prevails, are too ready to buy what they are selling. But what many Canadians don't understand is, over there a growing number of people are standing up to declare with their life's blood, "I have found in Jesus what I could never find in (the religion of my childhood, or my country)."

The question is, do you have a wise men kind of faith? Are you prepared, like them, to invest your life in the continuing pursuit of Christ, who is not just king of the Jews, but King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

Remember, the continuing pursuit of Christ is about much more than merely locating Him, either in Jerusalem or in heaven. It's about knowing Him through a living faith in Him, and it's about finding in Him all that He has for you. This is how Paul puts it.

Phil. 3:12 It's not that I've already reached the goal or have already completed the course. But I run to win that which Jesus Christ has already won for me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I can't consider myself a winner yet. This is what I do: I don't look back, I lengthen my stride, and 14 I run straight toward the goal to win the prize that God's heavenly call offers in Christ Jesus. (GW)

This is the spirit of the wise men. This is the call of true faith, the kind of faith James describes, the kind of faith that is demonstrated by how we live. Are you pressing into Jesus? Does your daily prayer indicate you are seeking to discover your Lord active in your life, teaching you to forgive others because God, in Christ, has forgiven you, to love others because God, in Christ, first loved you, to live a pure and holy life because God, in Christ, "has not called us to impurity but to sanctification," knowing that this pursuit of purity is from "God, who gives you His Holy Spirit" (I Thess. 4:7-8).

Back to today's text

Matthew 2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born.

5 "In Bethlehem of Judea," they told him, "because this is what was written by the prophet (Micah (700 B.C., from whom chapter 4:1ff was quoted a few moments ago): 6 And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah: because out of you will come a leader who will shepherd My people Israel." 7 Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you find Him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship Him."

9 After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen in the east! It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed beyond measure. 11 Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and falling to their knees, they worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.

They worshipped Him

Let's unpack two Biblical prophecies: Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 60:3.

Psalm 72:8 (A so-called “Solomonic” psalm) May he rule from sea to sea and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth. 9 May desert tribes kneel before him and his enemies lick the dust. 10 May the kings of Tarshish (Hebrew euphemism for the farthest reaches of the earth) and the coasts and islands bring tribute, the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. 11 Let all kings bow down to him, all nations serve him.

Isaiah 60:3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your radiance. . . . 6 Caravans of camels will cover your land—young camels of Midian and Ephah—all of them will come from Sheba. They will carry gold and frankincense and proclaim the praises of the Lord.

It is impossible to declare with certainty that these prophecies are about the wise men.¹ But what is absolutely clear is this, the wise men were the beginning of the fulfilment of these prophecies, which continue to be fulfilled to this day. More importantly, these prophecies are fulfilled by everyone who comes to Jesus, and the wise men are our pattern.

More than anything, they were men of faith. In fact, it was because of their faith that they sought and found the Messiah. Apparently very few in Jerusalem could see Jesus. But the wise men could see him from thousands of miles away. Of course, the wise men saw more than a little baby. They saw all that is contained in that little baby, His divinity, His humanity, that He was a new start for the human race—our sin-bearer, the sacrifice for our sin, the One Who is the resurrection and the life, through Whom we come to the Father, the Giver of the Holy Spirit, Who by the Spirit comes to live in those who believe, Who by the Spirit grants us new life through which we can truly know and worship God and be shaped into His image, Who gave His life for us on the cross and calls upon us to give our lives for Him.

Like the wise men

1. We must seek until we find. (If you are truly seeking God you will only find Him after much opposition.)
2. We must worship Christ as King. (Heaven is not a democracy; that is the false god of the world.)
3. We must offer Him our lives. (What else does the gold, frankincense, and myrrh represent?)

¹It is from these passages (Psalm 72:10, Isaiah 60:3) that the wise men are sometimes called kings, a title that is rejected by many modern commentators. But the proper question is this. When significant passages (births, deaths, marriages, inaugurations, etc.) take place in the lives of royals (the wealthy, the famous, government leaders, etc.), who attends? Answer: kings visit kings; they do it out of a sense of responsibility. When a king dies, for instance, other kings attend the funeral. If the wise men felt a responsibility to worship King Jesus, this was partly because they were of that class. They were kings, or equivalent to kings.