

“Wise Men”

Matthew 2:1–12; John 1:10–13

Our journey with Christ can seem hard at times, but we now know where we are headed

The Christian journey is long and often difficult, making it hard for us to remember that “everything is gonna be all right.” Making one’s way on this journey requires an adequate vision of the destination. We need to see the world as God sees it as we make our way forward. And it is Christ who is our light, much as the star over Bethlehem was a light for all to follow – if they chose.



One problem we have is that we are “want-it-now” people and don’t appreciate that our retraining in the ways of Christ takes time. We often fail to grasp that the retraining moves forward, not out of our successes but out of our sufferings, large and small. Though our destination is certain, for Christ is certain, we often see it only dimly and, sometimes, not at all.

But we do not journey alone, for not only is God with us each step, we are accompanied by all people of faith, some who are alive now and many others who have passed on to be with Christ. The magi represent, therefore, the revealing of the Christ child to the whole world, Jew and Gentile alike. The twelfth day of Christmas is January 6, the day on the church calendar called Epiphany, which comes from the Greek word meaning “manifestation.” Epiphany celebrates the revealing of Jesus, the Son of God, to the world. This is the story of the magi.

The long journey to the light

We get the timing of this story all wrong. Our Christmas pageants and nativity sets have shepherds, animals, angels, Mary, Joseph, and three kings with camels -- all gathered around the baby Jesus. But this can’t be right. Even if the star had appeared over Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ conception rather than his birth, and the wise men had begun their journey that very day, they still might not have arrived in time for the birth.

Israel lies on the western side of the Jordan River, which sits in a great rift valley. On the eastern side of the river lies the Arabian desert. Thus, getting from Babylonia to Bethlehem necessitated going north along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and then southwestward through Syria into Galilee and then south to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was more than a thousand miles following what is called The Fertile Crescent. At times the magi and their retinue would have traveled through areas plagued with bandits. At other times, they would have passed through sparsely populated lands that offered little to eat or to drink. It would have been so much easier for them to simply stay home and wait for someone else to bring them whatever good news there might be. After all, they were men of great learning, prestige, and power. But despite the difficulties and uncertainties of the long journey, they chose not to stay, but to go. The star was there for everyone to see—but only these wise men went.

An uncertain destination

Not only did the magi know that the journey would be long and difficult, they only had a vague idea where they were headed. Indeed, chances are that Bethlehem was a most unexpected destination.

In Jesus’ day, large communities of Jews still lived along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what was once the center of the vast Babylonian empire. These Jews were the descendants of those who had chosen not to return to Jerusalem after the end of the exile in 538BC. The Book of Esther is set in just such a post-exilic Jewish community in Persia (the successors to the Babylonians). Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that these three learned men were familiar with the great Hebrew Scroll of Isaiah.

Who were these “wise men?”

“Wise men” in v. 1 translates the Greek word, *magoi*, which literally means magicians. It is why they are sometimes referred to as the “magi.” But these *magoi* were neither doers of tricks nor kings. Matthew never even says there were three. Because they came from the east, probably Persia or Babylonia, they were most likely astronomers and astrologers, readers of stars. Though they worked without telescopes, Persian and Babylonian astronomers were quite sophisticated in their understanding of the stars and planetary movement. Further, they believed that certain astronomical phenomena were signs of new kings, falling emperors, and other important events.

Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the star of Bethlehem – was it some sort of super-nova? An unusually bright star or planet? A conjunction of planets? Of course, in Matthew, it is just a star – not even a “bright” one.

Whatever the star was, these magi saw in the “star” a sign that something incredibly important was happening – a king had been born -- and they traveled westward in search of the answer.

Isaiah 60 speaks of a time when Jerusalem would be restored to greatness and wealth, when kings would come in procession, when other peoples would bring gifts of gold and silver, frankincense and myrrh. As Isaiah 60:1 has it, there would be a light shining so brightly that all the world would see it.

Not surprisingly then, the magi head for Jerusalem. And where do they go? To King Herod’s grand palace. Where better to find a new king than at the palace, the seat of power and wealth. Imagine the magi’s surprise when a few of Herod’s biblical scholars dug up the reference to Bethlehem as the place to find this new king. In terms of wealth and power, Bethlehem was dusty and inconsequential, worlds away from Herod and Jerusalem, though it was only about five miles down the road to the southeast. Surely, the magi never expected to find the child in such a place. Yet, their surprise did not diminish their joy. Perhaps it even heightened their sense of awe and wonder. It was a world turned upside-down by the unexpected power of God.

Sadly, it is in this moment of anticipated joy that darkness creeps into our story. The magi are called to appear before the king.

Herod the Great

The Herod at the time of Jesus’ birth (about 6BC) was Herod the Great, the founder of the family dynasty. In the struggle for control of Judea nearly forty years before Jesus’ birth, Herod had backed the right horse—the Romans—who had first been invited into Judea more than twenty years earlier. As a reward for his support, the Romans gave Herod the title of King, even though Rome’s power was usually wielded through a governor (e.g. Pilate, decades later). It is important to remember that even though Herod possessed a royal title, he had a master who was often harsh and demanding – Caesar, Emperor of Rome and its mighty empire.

So far as the Jews were concerned, Herod the Great was a pretender to the throne. He was not Jewish, much less from the House of David. Nonetheless, Herod set about to win the people’s devotion by launching a massive rebuilding of the temple. His architects and builders removed a portion of the mountaintop and built a structure into which we could have fit twenty-five football fields. In Jesus’ day, the project was still underway. It was finished just in time for the Romans to destroy it in the great war of 67-70AD. Herod also built the fortress at Masada, the massive citadel called Herodium, and the seaport at Caesarea. Despite his building program, Herod the Great was never able to earn the affection of the Jewish people. They still awaited a true king, anointed by God and from the line of David.

Herod the Paranoid

As Herod the Great approached the end of his life, he sank deep into paranoia and fear. He became so fearful of being assassinated that in 7-6BC, he ordered the killing of his once-beloved wife, Mariamne, and two of his sons, Alexander and Aristobolus. This was about the same time as the birth of Jesus. He also ordered that, upon his death, his son Antipater was to be killed and that a number of imprisoned Jewish elders were to be

executed as well. Herod wanted to make it seem that his subjects were in mourning when he died, even if they were actually mourning the elders!

One day, in about 6 BC, this paranoid and fearful royal beast finds out about a small group of star-watchers from the East, who had come to Jerusalem looking for a newly born King of the Jews. Herod's response to this unwelcome news is to call together a group of learned scholars. When he asks them what the Holy Scriptures have to say about the birth of this new king, they tell him that according to the prophet Micah (5:2) it will happen in Bethlehem, a small town about five miles south of Jerusalem and the ancestral home of the House of David. Herod then pointedly instructs these sages from the east that they are to find this baby and report back to Herod – "so I too may go and honor him." What a self-damning statement. The old despot wants to find the baby only so he could kill him, for Herod is a destroyer.

Blessedly, the magi are no fools. They do find Mary and her baby. They worship this infant and shower him with gifts. Then, having been warned in a dream, they make a beeline for home – ignoring Herod and quickly putting themselves out of his reach.

When Herod finds out that the Magi have outwitted him, he erupts in a cold rage, ordering soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill all the infant boys two years and under. Herod's massacre of the innocents is cold and brutal and, sadly, too typical of a harsh and vicious world. Some wonder why such an event would not be recorded outside Matthew's gospel. The answer is simple; such barbarity was far too common in the world of gladiators and coliseums to warrant much notice.

Perhaps the thing to focus on here is Herod's fear of Jesus. To those who know Jesus, feeling threatened by him seems so odd, so out of place. How could we possibly fear the one who died to save us, to save the world? Yet, even in his lifetime there were many who feared Jesus, many who wanted to shut him up or worse. They were invested in the status quo, in their positions, in their wealth; the last thing they wanted was for their world to be turned upside down.

But that is exactly what the Christ-child was about. Out with the old; in with the new. The rich brought low and the poor lifted up. The kingdom of God, here and now. The marriage of heaven and earth. Recovery of sight to the blind. The oppressed set free. Yes, indeed, everything is gonna be all right!