

“Gifts Under the Tree”

Matthew 2:1–12

To whom are the magi bringing their gifts?

The Christmas story told by Luke and Matthew is a Jewish story through and through – until Matthew comes to the story of the magi, the wise men, the star-trackers from the east. Their arrival is marked on the Christian calendar by the Feast of Epiphany, which is celebrated twelve days after Christmas, on January 6.



The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek word, *epiphaneia*, meaning “manifestation” as in making someone or something readily apparent to the mind and the senses. Thus, Epiphany marks Jesus’ unveiling for the entire world, for the magi are Gentiles. In the Christmas story, it is the magi who make it clear that the baby Jesus will not grow up merely to be the Jewish Messiah, but to be the savior of all humankind.

A long and difficult journey

The magi are starwatchers from the east, probably the lands of what was once Babylonia. In all, the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was more than a thousand miles. 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 simply to 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.

Not only did the magi know that the journey would be long and difficult, but they also 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 chose 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.

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. Not surprisingly then, the magi head for Jerusalem. What better place 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. 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. Even so, they could not grasp the deepest truth that they were to set their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh before a child who bore the “exact imprint of God’s very being,” as the writer of Hebrews put it (1:3).

An “exact imprint”

If you have a coin in your pocket, you might pull it out for a moment. The coin will help us understand better what the writer of Hebrews meant by “an exact imprint.”

The Greek word translated “exact imprint” is *charaktér*, from which we get our word “character.” It is a word that was born in the world of engraving, particularly in the production of coins. In Jesus’ day, the emperor would employ an engraver to carve the emperor’s portrait and a few words (such as “son of god”) on a hard metal die or stamp. The engraver might carve a depiction of some notable event on another die. Then, the coin would be minted by placing a blank between the two dies and striking them with a large hammer. The resulting coin would be an exact impression of the original dies. The coin would be the perfect expression of the original. We can see how the word *charaktér* came to mean not only letters in the alphabet but also a person’s essential qualities. And in Bethlehem, this “exact imprint” lay in a manger before grown men who have come a thousand miles to bring gifts and to worship. It should, it must, boggle our minds and challenge our hearts.

A public event

There is a lot of pressure these days to make Christmas a private celebration, as if it matters only for Christians. But Christmas is a public event, the most public event ever. When John sees Jesus coming to the Jordan River, he exclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That is as public as it comes. It is through Jesus that the world is reconciled to God whether the world knows it or not. Because much of the world does not know the truth, we have a story we must tell. A public story. Everyone’s story. A story about the one true God who took upon himself our messy humanity so that we might live in a right and a loving relationship with him. Every Christmas we celebrate this story. Like the angels to the shepherds, we want to proclaim to people everywhere that Jesus is Lord. That our God, their Creator, has given us a gift we could never measure. Sometimes in our desire to tell this story, we forget Peter’s teaching: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). It is the gentle and respectful part that can be so hard for us.

Learning to live in a pluralistic world has not been easy for many of us. Must we rename a Christmas tree a Holiday tree? Must we withdraw Christmas from the public arena entirely? The challenge to Christians in our society is to learn how to be gentle and respectful with those who deny that Jesus is Lord, yet never surrender our claim that he is just that. How are we to be the light to the world? How are we to invite others into God’s family? How are we to live out Christmas?

Daily Bible Readings *More on the various Christmas stories*

Monday	Matthew 1:18-2:23	A Christmas story
Tuesday	Mark 1:1-15	Where’s the Christmas story?
Wednesday	Luke 1	Two births announced
Thursday	Luke 2	The birth of Jesus
Friday	John 1:1-18	John’s prologue
Saturday	Hebrews 1	A story of beginnings