

## The Magi

Matthew 2:1-12 (New American Standard Bible)

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, <sup>2</sup>“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.” <sup>3</sup>When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup>Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’” <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup>And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” <sup>9</sup>After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup>**After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.** <sup>12</sup>And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

## Introduction

This morning I will conclude my sermon series on the characters of first Christmas with the story of the magi. The Christmas story begins with Gabriel’s visit with Mary. It often ends with the magi’s visit to baby Jesus. Magi are traditionally known to us as “Wise men,” or (three) “Kings.” In the Bible, they are called “Wise men (KJV, NRSV), magi (NASB, NIV, NAB), or even astrologers (TLB, AB).” Let’s do some trivia on the magi.

## Content

**Who are they?** According to Herodotus an ancient Greek historian, “(μαγοι) magoi were members of a Persian priestly caste who specialized in astrology, interpretation of dreams, and magic” (The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol.4, 1084-1085). Obviously, when Jesus was born, they noticed in the sky ‘the star in the East’ (Matthew 2:2), understood the implications of it, and “acted appropriately, coming with gifts and worshiping the child” (Ibid.).

**How many wise men did visit Jesus?** The Bible doesn't specify the number of magi. At least more than two, because the original Greek in verse 2 is 'μαγοι' (pronounced 'mah-goh-i'), and that is the plural form of 'μαγος' (pronounced 'mah-goh-s'). So, you can pick any number between 2 and 12. Why '12'? Because "... *traditionally in Syria were twelve in number. In the west they came to be represented as three kings*" (TISBE, Vol. 3, p. 312). The number '3' seems to come from the number of gifts the wise men presented to the newborn King (Matthew 2:11).

**Did they have names?** I am sure they did. However, their names are not found in the Bible. Only in legends: "*Bithisarea, Melchior, and Gathaspa (6<sup>th</sup> century); Melkon king of Persia, Gaspar king of India, and Balthasar king of Arabia (14<sup>th</sup> century)*" (Ibid.).

**How did they become aware of the Messianic King?** The wise men's interest and knowledge in the Messiah might have come from their "*contact with the Jewish exiles in the east and from knowledge of the OT. Several OT passages foreshadow these events, although Matthew does not mention them. The Messiah is a star who will come forth out of Jacob (Numbers 24:17); the nations shall come to His light and kings to the brightness of His rising (Isaiah 60:3). Kings are to come worshiping and bearing gifts (Psalm 68:29, 72:10-15, Isaiah 60:6)*" (TISBE, Vol.4, 1084-1085). Based on their information on the Messiah, the magi followed 'the star in the East' all the way to Bethlehem until they reached the house where Jesus was (Matthew 2:9).

**How old was Jesus when the wise men visited?** Jesus was older than one month but not more than 2 years. Remember the shepherds? They visited Jesus and the family when He was one day old. However, the wise men visited the baby sometime later. How much later? Here are some clues in the Bible. First, Luke 2:21-24: <sup>21</sup> *And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.* <sup>22</sup> *And when **the days for their purification** according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord* <sup>23</sup> *(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD"),* <sup>24</sup> *and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS."* We got that 8-day wait for circumcision and naming. What about the days for the mother's purification?

Here's a clue found in Leviticus 12:2-4: "*When a woman gives birth and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days...* <sup>3</sup> *On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.* <sup>4</sup> *Then she shall remain in the blood of **her purification for thirty-***

**three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed.”**

So, folks, do the math here: **8** days of circumcision and naming of Jesus. Followed by **33** days of the mother’s purification. That’s the total of **41** days after the birth. Then the family went up to the Temple in Jerusalem to dedicate the child (Luke 2:22). Also, no one knows how much time is between the Jerusalem visit and the wise men’s visit.

How old was Jesus by the time when the wise men visited? Here’s what I can say: He was at least 40+ days old (at least a month-old), yet He was not older than two yet. How do we know? Because, King Herod slew all the male children in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were under the age of ‘two’: <sup>16</sup> *Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, **from two years old and under**, according to the time which he had determined from the magi* (Matthew 2:16).

**Application:** What lessons can we learn from the story of the magi? Three lessons: worship the King, bring gifts worthy of the King, and salvation for all, both Jews and Gentiles.

**Worship the King.** Matthew 2:11 says about the worship of the Messiah. **“After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshipped Him.** Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The magi travelled afar (about 1,500 miles one way) to Jerusalem and Bethlehem: not just to adore a newborn baby but to pay a proper homage to the newborn King. They travelled 3,000 miles altogether to bow down to the Messiah. We call it worship. Their trip was worth it. Every mile. Every hour of it, too. In the same token, folks, your travel to church every Sunday morning counts, because you worship the Lord. Every mile is worth it. Every minute of your time matters too, because you come to worship the King.

Think about this: we love Christmas. It is a great time of joy, peace, family gatherings, and exchanges of gifts. I noticed recently more people say, “Merry Christmas!” than before. Almost all the radio and TV stations broadcast songs such as “Joy to the World,” or “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” That’s a good thing. The sad thing is this, though: Many people don’t go deeper. They think of Jesus as the baby who has nothing to do with them. Looking at Him from an adult point of view, they treat Him like a cute little baby in a manger

for the rest of the year until next Christmas and for the rest of their lives! Seldom they come to Jesus as their King to bow down and worship.

Let us remember: Jesus is the King of all nations and races. He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. Both Jews and Gentiles come and worship Him. We bow down before Jesus. In fact, the Scripture says: *at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth* (Philippians 2:10). Worship the King.

**Bring Gifts Worthy of the Messiah.** It is customary to present gifts when you have an audience with the king. The wise men presented their best gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In fact, these gifts became very handy for the family of Jesus on their trip to Egypt and stay there until King Herod died. Now, think of your Sunday morning offerings, your gifts to the Lord. Each time you drop your offerings on the collection plate, don't forget, you are giving them to the Lord, not to the church, not to the pastor, but to the Lord of all. You are presenting your free will offering to the King whom you are having an audience with. Offering is more than money. In fact, in every worship, we are commanded to present our entire life to the Lord. Romans 12:1 says: *Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.* So, next time when you worship, offer your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice to God. Only those who do so truly worship the Lord. Bring gifts worthy of the Messiah.

**God Draws All to Salvation:** Jesus came for all people and their salvation. For the rich and the poor. For black and white. For entire humanity. God sent Him to us because He loves both Jews and Gentiles. He invites them all to salvation in Jesus Christ. Consider the background of the wise men, for example. They were Gentiles. Not the chosen people of God. Yet, in today's story, God called them to salvation in Jesus. He brought them into the presence of the Messiah through stars and dreams, in the ways that they would recognize and understand that Jesus is their salvation. Today, the same God still draws people to Jesus from everywhere even in the land where the Gospel of Christ is forbidden.

Here's one example. God is saving Iranians from sin and despair, one article says. Iran as you know is a Muslim country. Christians are persecuted there. However, the church in Iran is "the fastest growing church in the world" today. E.g., A Muslim young woman, *"Mariam was in desperate need of salvation. She was engaged to a violent, abusive man and was so depressed that she took 12 pills a day just to keep going. She had tried to kill herself five times unsuccessfully, feeling worse each time, thinking, "I couldn't even kill myself!" Then, she decided to hang herself. She took a length of strong wire from some electrical supplies*

*belonging to her brother and hid it in her room. Then, one afternoon she locked the door and twisted the wire into a noose. “If You actually exist,” she told God as she prepared to hang herself, “I want to touch You.” In her mind, she expected to touch God after she was dead. Mariam swallowed all the pills she had left, wrapped the noose around her neck and stepped off her bed. “For four seconds I called out to Jesus, to God,” she said. “And all of a sudden, just like a little baby is held over the shoulder of the father, I felt like I was over the shoulder of Jesus. I always desired to have been held like that by my father. I told [Jesus], ‘Please don’t put me down on the ground. I am scared to have my feet touch the ground.’ I wasn’t even embarrassed, even though this was a man I didn’t know. Somehow, I knew that He was Jesus, and He recited Psalm 91 to me. Of course, I didn’t even know what Psalm 91 was.” “He told me, ‘I won’t even let your foot hit a rock, a stone; I am going to protect you. Trust Me.’ At this point I woke up lying on my bed.”* Mariam got off her bed, wondering if the whole thing had been a dream or drug-induced hallucination. But when she looked down, she saw the wire that had been around her neck lying on the floor; the noose had been undone. And when she looked in the mirror, she saw a dark bruise encircling her neck. She began to cry, understanding that Jesus loved her and had saved her life. She knew, then, that she would follow Him anywhere and do anything He asked of her. Then her tears turned to laughter, as she was overwhelmed with the joy of salvation (The Voice of the Martyrs, Dec. 2019, special report). Mariam met the Messiah. She found salvation in Christ. Christ is for all people. He is the Savior of all.

## **Conclusion**

The story of the magi is a poignant reminder that Christ is not just a baby to adore but the King for all creatures to bow down and worship. Come and worship the Lord of all. God still draws all people, both Jews and Gentiles, to Christ. Praise God. Let us pray.