

2021 Christmas | The Coming of The Wise Men

Better Late Than Never

A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier
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I know we just celebrated Christmas yesterday—but I was hoping that you're all still in the Christmas spirit.

Because I'd like to share with you one more event in the Christmas story—and it's fitting that we'll be looking at it after the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus. It's fitting because this event also happened after Jesus was born as well—in fact, many months after He was born.

In every manger or creche in the world, and in every movie ever made on the birth of Jesus—we always see the **wise men there at the stable** along with the shepherds kneeling in honor of the newborn King of kings and bearing the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

I mean, that is a part of our understanding of the story of Christmas—a **tradition** that the wise men were there in Bethlehem right after Jesus was born to pay Him homage.

Unfortunately, like many of our Christian traditions it is wrong—if you don't believe me, turn with me to Matthew Chapter 2 and I'll show you.

Matthew 2:1-3 (NKJV)

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." ³ When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod the Great

- **King Herod (also known as "Herod the Great")** was one of a number of rulers in the Herodian line that were in power before, during and even after the time of Christ. **The title Herod the Great refers not to Herod's greatness as a person or king**—but to the fact that he was the eldest son of Antipater.
- At the young age of 25 he was appointed by Rome to be the governor of Galilee and Judea—with the hope that he would control the Jews who lived in that area.
- **Later the Roman Senate named him "King of the Jews,"** a title that the Jews detested because Herod wasn't even Jewish—he was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. Herod was a cruel, paranoid little man (he was only about 5 foot tall) who held tightly to the reins of power and brutally dealt with anyone he thought might be a threat to his throne.
- Over the years **he killed many people** including his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law, two of his sons and even his own wife because he thought they might be conspiring against him!
- Five days before his death **he had a third son executed** which prompted Augustus, the Roman Emperor, to say that **it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.**

Now with that as background you can understand why when the wise men came to Jerusalem and asked—*"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?"*—how that news caused Herod and the whole city to be deeply troubled (verse 3).

The word 'troubled' in the Greek means to *"shake violently"*—Herod shook with a jealous rage—the people shook from abject terror at what Herod would do in light of this news. You see after Herod had killed all his supposed enemies and had finally come to a place where he felt his throne was secure—suddenly these Persian wise men showed up announcing a new threat to his reign.

REFLECTION: Have you met people who are troubled about the Good News of Jesus?

Wise Men from the East

➤ The term *"wise men"* is the Greek word *"magoi"* from which we get the word *"magi"*.

Few biblical stories are as well known yet so clouded by myth, legend, and tradition as that of the *magi* or *wise men*, mentioned by Matthew. During the Middle Ages legend developed that they were kings, that they were three in number, and that their names were *Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior*.

➤ Because they were thought to represent the three sons of Noah, one of them is often pictured as an Ethiopian. However, **they are never called "kings" in the New Testament**—but rather are simply called *"magi"* a word we get the English word *'magician'* from.

We do not know how many magi there were—from the three gifts listed in Matthew 2:11 (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), many people have assumed there were three of them. But when their caravan arrived in Jerusalem there were enough of them to trouble the *whole* city (apparently many more than three)—so who were they? Well, Herodotus, the Greek historian, says that the Magi were originally a Median tribe—the Medes were part of the Persian Empire.

➤ **So it is believed that these Magi were Persian wise men—scholars, who were skilled in philosophy, medicine, natural science—and in the study of the stars.**

Their title connects them with *magic*, but they were probably more like *astrologers* (their presence in the biblical record is by no means a divine endorsement of astrology any more than Simon the Sorcerer mentioned in Acts 8 is a divine endorsement of sorcery).

They were teachers and instructors of the Persian kings and were looked upon as men of holiness and wisdom.

Matthew 2:1-2 (NKJV)

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East...

What the wise men seem to be saying is that this 'star' first appeared to them while they were still in Persia (the East) and led them all the way to Bethlehem to see the Christ-Child.

REFLECTION: How might you explain the presence of the "Magi" at the manger scene to a non-Christian?

The Star

1. What Was This Star?

There's been a lot of speculation about this star—I mean, was it a real star; was it a supernatural star created by God just for these wise men to lead them to Jesus, or was it really an angel (angels are sometimes called stars in the Bible)?

- I personally think that this "star" was no ordinary star (the Greek simply refers to an illuminous light source in the sky)—I believe it was something miraculous created by God for this occasion.

2. How did they know it was "His star", the King of the Jews?

The bigger question is—*"how did they come to associate a star with the coming of the Messiah, the King of the Jews—in the first place?"* For that matter how did these Persian wise men even know about the Messiah of Israel?

- To answer that question, you need to remember that 600 years earlier Daniel was taken captive to Babylon where he was assigned a place with the wise men of Babylon.
- Later, Babylon was overthrown by the Medes and the Persians where Daniel once again rose to a place of prominence among the wise men of the Persian court.
- Because of Daniel's high position and great respect among them, it seems certain that the Magi learned much from him about the one true God, the God of Israel, and about His promise to send a King who would defeat evil and establish a world-wide Kingdom over which He would reign from Jerusalem.

Daniel had read the prophecies of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2) who foretold of this coming King—

Jeremiah 23:5-6 (NKJV)

⁵ "Behold, *the* days are coming," says the LORD, "That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; A King shall reign and prosper, And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. ⁶ In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell safely; Now this *is* His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

So, it seems obvious that Daniel taught the wise men of Persia the prophesies of the coming Messiah from the Jewish Scriptures—prophecies that they passed down from one generation of wise men to the other—one prophecy in particular that associated the coming of the Messiah with a star:

Numbers 24:17 (NKJV)

"I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter [a King] shall rise out of Israel..."

God must have supernaturally revealed to the Magi that the star that appeared to them in Persia—was the very star that God had predicted would point to the birth of the Messiah.

Matthew 2:1-2 (NKJV)

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "**Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.**"

- **This star appeared at the time of Jesus' birth**—which is when the wise men first saw it. The distance from Persia to Bethlehem is roughly a thousand miles as the crow flies. A journey of that distance, on foot, would take at least **4 or 5 months** in and of itself.
- When you add the time, it took the wise men to prepare for a trip of that distance—all total it would have been at least a year possibly **18 months** from the time that the wise men first saw the star pointing to Jesus' birth till they actually arrived in Bethlehem.
- **We know for sure that the wise men didn't get there at the same time the shepherds did because Matthew tells us (Matthew 2:11) that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were now staying in a house rather than the stable where Jesus was born (Luke 2:7).**

But listen, it doesn't matter that these wise men didn't come to Jesus at the same time the shepherds did—it only matters that they came to Jesus!

REFLECTION: What does The Star of Bethlehem appearing before the birth of Jesus mean to you?

I have named this message: "*The Coming of the Wise Men [to Jesus] Better Late than Never!*"

We don't all come to Christ at the same time—some come to Jesus sooner in life while others come later in their life—the important thing is that you do come to Him—**before it's too late!** Why did these wise men make this lengthy and difficult journey to see the Christ-Child—what did *they* say was the reason:

Matthew 2:2

..."Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to **worship Him.**"

The whole purpose for Jesus coming to the earth the first time was so that God could seek and save those who would become true worshippers.

John 4:23-24 (NKJV)

²³ But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. ²⁴ God *is* Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

- Jesus came to save us from sin and ultimately from hell that's true—but that was only a necessary prerequisite to God's ultimate goal which was **to gather to Himself a community of people who would worship Him in spirit and in truth forever.**
- It began with the Magi who said, "*Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? **For we have seen His star...and have come to worship Him***"—and it continues to the present.

**This is the real message of Christmas—
God gave to the world the gift of His Son to save us from our sin—
so that we, in turn, could give to Him the gift of worship.**

- Worshipping Jesus means that **we step down off of the throne of our life** to have Him sit down as King—the One who now is in control of our lives (**salvation**)! Then we continue to **worship Him every day thru obedience**—which for Christians is to offer Him obeisance (**worship**).

REFLECTION: How do you "worship" Jesus?

- However, for many that is absolutely unacceptable—as was the case with King Herod.

Matthew 2:3-6 (NKJV)

³ When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ⁶ *'But you, Bethlehem, in*

the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "

Herod assembled the Jewish religious leaders to find out where the Christ was to be born. These priests and scribes immediately quoted the prophecy of Micah (5:2) which identified **Bethlehem of Judea** as the King's birthplace.

Matthew 2:7-8 (NKJV)

⁷ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.

⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

- **Herod pretended to honor the Christ-child** with words of devotion—but it was nothing more than a ruse to deceive the wise men.
- You see—**Herod planned to do away with this Child** as soon as He could be located.

Matthew 2:9-11 (NKJV)

⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

- The word translated "**young child**" refers to a 'toddler' or 'small child'—not a newborn baby.

Again, notice that the Magi went to the "house" where Jesus was there's no mention of a stable or manger. The gifts they offered Jesus are significant the gold represents His Kingship; the frankincense represents His Priesthood; and the myrrh His sacrificial death.

- **These gifts were very costly**—maybe Daniel had taught them what King David said about worship many years earlier when he said, "*I will not worship the Lord with that which costs me nothing.*" (2 Samuel 24:24)
- These wise men understood that nothing less than costly gifts was worthy of their **act of worship**.
- The word '**worshiped**' here means "*to make obeisance,*" "*to reverence,*" or "*to pay homage.*"

Matthew 2:12-15 (NKJV)

¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they [the Wise Men] departed for their own country another way. ¹³ Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." ¹⁴ When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, ¹⁵ and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "*Out of Egypt I called My Son.*"

- Egypt was a natural destination for the family's escape—it was not far away (the border was only about seventy-five miles from Bethlehem). Also, Egypt was a well-ordered **Roman province well beyond Herod's**

jurisdiction, and it had a large Jewish population—roughly one million strong. The treasures given by the wise men would have been **more than enough to finance the trip.**

Matthew 2:16-18 (NKJV)

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."

- The wise men must have told Herod that **the star proclaiming the Messiah's birth had appeared more than a year before their arrival in Jerusalem**—which would have been the right time frame.
- **By this time Jesus was a year to a year and a half old and living in a house in Bethlehem** with His mother and stepfather. The wise men were warned by God not to go back and tell Herod where the Christ-Child was living, so they returned to Persia without passing thru Jerusalem—thus by-passing Herod's jurisdiction.
- **Insane with fury that the wise men had betrayed him**—Herod decided to kill all the male children in Bethlehem and its surrounding districts (Ramah) **two years old and under** to ensure that this Child—this "King of the Jews" would never ascend to the throne.

You see Herod was king, not only of Judea and Galilee but also and especially of his own life—and as such he was determined not to let anyone remove him from that place of **absolute rulership.**

- There are many like Herod today who reject Jesus because they're not going to turn over control of their life to anyone—**they alone are going to reign over their life as king no matter what!**

You may not realize this but in some ways the Christmas story being presented here by the Holy Spirit in Matthew Chapter two—is the tale of two kings.

- **First, we see King Jesus presented**—*He is the true King, the King of kings and the Lord of lords* who has the divine right to reign and to receive worship and honor.
- **The other king we see presented here is a usurper to the throne**, someone who has no right to reign and receive worship—his name is Herod.

Herod represents every stubborn rebel that has ever lived who refuses to yield to Christ's reign over their life.

REFLECTION: How might you share the Gospel with a stubborn rebel who opposes the kingship of Jesus in their life?

We see the rebellious heart of man portrayed in defiance against his Creator’s right to reign over our lives in William Henley’s classic poem *Invictus* (quoted by Tim McVeigh before he was executed for his part in the Oklahoma City bombing in April of 1995)—

*“Out of the night that covers me black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance, I have not winced nor cried aloud. Under the bludgeoning of chance my head is bloody but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears looms but the horror of the shade. And yet but the menace of the years finds and shall find me unafraid.
It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.”*

This is exactly what Oswald Chambers meant when he said, *“Sin is blatant mutiny against the rule of God.”*

- **At His First Coming Jesus came to save us from our sins**—and the greatest sin man is involved in is the sin of *“self-deification”* and *“self-worship.”* In other words, **it’s the sin of denying Jesus His rightful place on the throne of your heart as King**, while you continue to make your plans, do your thing and be the god and ruler of your life.
- **The wise men were really wise because they bowed the knee to the King of kings and worshipped Him.**
- **Herod, well he played the fool as he refused to bow the knee to Jesus’ rule over his life.** Even though he offered Jesus ‘lip-service’ pretending to be someone who loved Him and wanted to offer Him worship also—it was all a ruse.

That description fits so many today who come to church and offer Jesus ‘a kiss’—but like Judas they betray Him with their lives.

REFLECTION: Who do you identify most with—Herod or the wise men?

Herod lived two-thousand years ago—do you think he regrets today the decision he made back then?

More importantly two-thousand years from now how will you feel about the decision you’re making today as to whether or not you are going to let Jesus be King over your life?

There is an old bumper sticker I used to see a lot—*“Wise Men Still Seek Him”*.

**Be a wise man or woman—come to Him,
kneel before Him**

**and become a worshipper of Him
in Spirit and in truth—
you will never regret that decision!**

As I said earlier—I have named this message—*"The Coming of the Wise Men—Better Late than Never."*

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Reach out to us [here](#).

Want to know more? Click [here](#).