

Introduction: There is a knock on the door. He opens the door partway and sees, on an oddly luminous night, wealthy foreigners.

“Who is it, Joseph?”

“Mary, please bring Jesus here. These men are asking for the King of the Jews.”

What a wondrous night when God the Father revealed and confirmed the dignity and royalty of God the Son in His early humiliation. What a wondrous night when God the Holy Spirit attracted certain esteemed Gentiles who saw a sign in creation, who were redirected by the Scriptures, and who worshipped God in the flesh. Wise men still adore Him.

Outline: A. Attracted by God’s Word in the Creation (2:1-2)
B. Redirected by God’s Word in the Scripture (2:3-10)
C. Worshipped before God’s Word in the Flesh (2:11-12)

A. ATTRACTED BY GOD’S WORD IN THE CREATION (2:1-2)

1. What we do not know

Their names -- By the end of the sixth century, the wise men were named Melkon (later Melchior), Balthasar, and Casper.

Their number -- There were probably more than three, or at least they were with an entourage of scores or hundreds, for it would not be safe for a small group to travel a thousand miles over desert wastes that were infested with bandits.

Their origin -- Most likely they traveled from ancient Persia, which is now Iran, or from the part of Babylonia that may now be Iraq.

Their vocation -- They belonged to the learned class, advisers of kings. If they were Persian Magi, they were of a class of religious people: scholars, and monotheists. If they were Babylonian Magi, they were astrologers, or astronomers. Magi is used to refer to magicians, sorcery, or is used to refer to greatness.

Their language – What languages did they know? Babylonian? Arabic? Aramaic? Greek? Latin? Hebrew?

Their source -- Perhaps they were familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, and knew of the expectation of a coming Messianic King. It was the land of Daniel’s captivity (6th century BC). They may have known about Daniel’s 70 weeks’ prophecy; and also Balaam’s prophecy about “A Star out of Jacob” (Num. 24:17).

Daniel, 600 years prior to this, was made “ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon” (Dan. 2:48) and “chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers” (Dan. 5:11).

We are not given a detailed description of the star. We are not told how the Magi connected this star with the birth. We are not told how many Magi there were, how they dressed, how they died, or where they were buried. All that and much more is purposely left in the shade in order that against this dark background the *light* may shine forth all the more

brilliantly These wise men, whoever they were, wherever they came from, *came to worship him!*

2. What we do know

Their certainty -- King of the Jews = Messiah. His kingly status was not conferred on Him later; it was His from birth. The title the Magi gave Him was placed over His cross (Mat. 27:37). This was the conviction of Nathanael who confessed to Jesus, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49).

Their guidance -- Some scholars have indicated that it was likely a comet’s tail that give guidance to the people in their sojourn. Johannes Kepler, for example, argued that there was an unusual conjunction of the two planets in the constellation Pisces in 7 BC that would have given off an extreme luster. Still others say that these men, perhaps being astrologers, had seen in their astrological charts the appearance of certain stars that heralded the birth of a great king. The other possibility is that the star that led these men to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem was a specific creation by God for this particular event, something like the shekinah glory cloud that led the people of Israel in their wilderness wandering. It would be very difficult to follow the tail of a comet, or even an inordinately bright conjunction of two planets, to Jerusalem and then from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. This may be an account of a miraculous work of God to guide the men to the proper place.

This was not a star such as others that our astronomers observe and study. It appeared and then vanished; finally it reappeared, moved on before the Magi, and then stood above where the child was in Bethlehem. This star is a miraculous phenomenon, vouchsafed to these Magi by God in order to lead them to Jesus. First its mission is to start them on their journey; next its mission is to guide them to the very house where Jesus was to be found.

Their arrival -- At Jerusalem, the city of the king; Herod was not regarded as a Jewish king. At the house; 40 days after birth sacrifice of two doves or pigeons as substitute for those indigent (Luke 2:22-24). The journey from the east would have taken some time, so the Magi arrived perhaps as much as a year to two after Jesus had been born. On or near Jesus’ first birthday?

B. REDIRECTED BY GOD’S WORD IN THE SCRIPTURE (2:3-10)

Terror of Herod (2:3) -- Herod was troubled because the birth of a foretold king would pose a clear and present threat to his position. Had he known the time of his own death in 4 BC, he would not have had to worry about a child’s coming of age and eventually replacing him.

Herod is deeply troubled. In this “all Jerusalem” joins him, not because most of the people would have been sorry to see Herod replaced or because they were reluctant to see the coming of King Messiah, but because they well knew that any question like the Magi’s would result in more cruelty from the ailing Herod. Herod the Great (37-3 BC), got his throne, and kept it, by crimes of unspeakable brutality. Of his ten wives, his paranoia had led him to murder his favorite wife and three of his sons.

Teaching of Micah (2:4-6) -- The prophet Micah (Mic. 5:2), 8th century BC and younger contemporary of Isaiah, had predicted the exact town in which the Messiah would be born, namely, Bethlehem. In the prophecy is the unusual linkage between king and shepherd, like unto David who was the great shepherd king. So Jesus comes not only as a King for His people but also as a good shepherd who came to tend and care for His sheep (John 10:11).

Treachery of Herod (2:7-8) -- Such treachery! How evil is the heart of man. Herod said he wanted to come and worship the Child King, but he really wanted to kill Him.

Trek of wise men (2:9-10) -- Their journey from the East was long and dangerous. Most likely they traveled from ancient Persia, which is now Iran, or from the part of Babylonia that may now be Iraq. The travel was significant. When the guiding star brought them to Mary, Joseph, and the Child, they were filled with joy. They could have found the exact house through discreet inquiry since (Luke 2:17-18) the shepherds who came to worship the newborn Jesus did not keep silent about that they saw.

Significantly they left alone. No numerous delegation from Herod's palace accompanied them to help in discovering the Child and to join in worship of the Messiah King. Were the magi struck by this significant circumstance? They went on alone.

The road to Bethlehem, a journey of only two hours, was direct and most easy to find; the magi needed no guide. Hence the surprise marked by "lo" at the appearance of the star.

C. WORSHIPPED BEFORE GOD'S WORD IN THE FLESH (2:11-12)

1. Adoration of Jesus (2:11)

Seeing Jesus with faith -- His kingly status was not conferred on him later; it was his from birth. The title the Magi gave him found its place over the cross (Matt. 27:37). Their hearts must have beheld what their eyes did not see. We do not read that they brought gifts to Herod even when they had their audience with him.

Worshipping Jesus with reverence -- They went in to worship Him. We must wonder what Mary and Joseph thought when the entourage came bearing treasures and falling on their knees with their face to the ground, not kneeling, but a posture of worship.

Honoring Jesus with gifts -- God the Father will ensure that His Son will be glorified despite all obstacles (John 12:23). Mary was forced to give birth to the Messiah in a less than ideal setting (Luke 2:7). Herod is plotting to kill Him (Matt. 2:16). Yet God has led foreigners to bow before the King of the Jews.

The first gift was gold which was the only fitting gift to give a king in the ancient world. Gold was the metal of royalty, and the fact that gold was lavishly spread at the feet of Jesus' parents, and Jesus Himself, is another indication that the men were paying homage to Him as a king.

The second gift of frankincense was used in the ancient world as incense, primarily by priests in worship. Central to Jewish worship in the tabernacle and then in the temple was the

altar of incense, which was tended by the priests. It symbolized the sweet aroma and fragrance of the prayers of God's people to Him. Matthew in his Gospel makes much of Jesus' being both a king and a priest.

The third gift, myrrh, is the strangest of the three. The chief use of myrrh among ancient people was for anointing the dead at the time of their burial. When Jesus died and was laid in the tomb, women came early in the morning with precious spices in order to anoint His body, and myrrh is what they would have used for that occasion (John 19:39).

Taken together, there was one gift for a king, one for a priest, and one to signify death. This should not surprise us in light of the announcement made to Mary and Joseph when they took the Child to the temple where they were told, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35). Another possible summary of the gifts is that gold reminds us of His royalty, frankincense of His deity, and myrrh of His humanity.

The wise men probably do not have such things specifically in mind when they present their costly gifts. The parents were poor, and, except for the gold brought by the wise men, escape from Herod may not have been possible. These presents are resources that can potentially finance their sojourn in Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15).

2. Abandonment of Herod (2:12)

Arrested by a dream -- Perhaps Joseph and the Magi compared notes and saw their danger; amid their fear and uncertainty, the dreams led them (vs. 12-13) to flee. The Magi might have gone around the north end of the Dead Sea, avoiding Jerusalem, or they might have gone around the south end of the sea. Return of the wise men may have paved the way, in their own country, for later preaching of the Gospel.

Antithesis of the characters -- A message is brought, under highly exceptional and remarkable conditions, that the King of the Jews has been born. These national leaders take no kind of pains to find out whether or not it is true. They hope that it is not, for they do not want to have to decide between rival claims. The only person who takes any trouble in the matter is Herod, and his aim for the newborn King of the Jews is His destruction. Pagans, who had nothing to guide them but smatterings of science mingled with much superstition, nevertheless are so kindled with enthusiasm by the signs which God, by means of these imperfect instruments, had granted to them, that they take a long journey and make careful investigations, in order to pay due reverence to the new Ruler who has been sent into the world.

Conclusion: Matthew begins his Gospel with ambassadors from Gentile regions coming to Jesus and concludes with Jesus sending apostles to Gentile people.

We are reminded of prophecies that are in line with this remarkable incident.

Psalm 72:10 = The kings of Tarshish and of the isles Will bring presents; The kings of Sheba and Seba Will offer gifts.

Isaiah 60:6 = The multitude of camels shall cover your land, The dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD.

Malachi 1:11 = “For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, And a pure offering; For My name shall be great among the nations,” Says the LORD of hosts.

We might wonder what impact this visit of foreign dignitaries had on Jesus or Mary or Joseph. How close was this visit to Jesus’ first birthday? Was he walking?

We marvel at how God the Father honors the Son in his astonishing humiliation. John Calvin comments, “They might have been put off by this unbecoming sight, for Christ was so far removed from royal estate as to be poorer and lower than any urchin of the street.” Here is the paradox of apparent insignificance and real greatness.

We notice the various expressions of God’s Word (in the creation, in the Scripture, in the flesh) and its power to draw Gentiles. Do you reflect the hostility of Herod, the indifference of the Sanhedrin, or the adoration of the wise men to God’s Word?

The importance of the visit of the Magi is recorded when they ask Herod, “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” (Mat. 2:2). That theme of “worship Him” is repeated in verse 8 and 11. This is a very important testimony to the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is amplified in Matthew 4:10 where, in the wilderness, Jesus confronts the devil and says, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.” Jesus as a baby received that worship. Jesus as a man declares that only God is worthy of that worship. That tells us that Jesus is God come in the flesh.

John Calvin observed, “We see many who do not cease to make merry, although they make war on God.” May the Lord grant you the insight of the wise men so that you adore the King of the Jews. Wise men still adore Him.

Psalter selection: 47A, 67A, 68B, 87, 72ABC [BPS]