

Many of you remember the American Journalist... Harry Reasoner. He was an anchor for ABC's World News Tonight... and the founder of CBS's 60 minutes. ... Reasoner who died back in 1991... was known for his low-key... unflappable delivery... that came across as though he was only there to give you the facts... With his "I-dare-you-to-find-me-wrong" look on his face, he seemed to always say... "These are the facts... I don't care what you do with them... because I'm not here to tell you how to think..." ... I read a quote of his... that I think is pretty amazing... for such a distinguished journalist to read on air.

If Christmas is the anniversary of the appearance of the Lord of the universe in the form of a helpless babe, it is a very important day. It's a startling idea, of course. My guess is the whole story that a virgin was selected by God to bear his son is a way of showing his love and concern for man. It's my guess that in spite of all the lip service given to it, it's not an idea that's been popular with theologians.

"It's not an idea that is popular with theologians..."? I think what he meant by that... is that Christmas is for the common man. The common man gets it. The common man accepts the truths that surround His birth.

I wish this was true. But it isn't.

Christmas has been inundated with stories and traditions and beliefs... which have been added to the Biblical record. The common man has also accepted so much of the false and questionable narrative... as true. ... So maybe they get some of it... and miss some of it.

So here is a spoiler alert... Our passage this morning in Matthew chapter 2 is a stark reminder... that our traditional picture of the Christmas story is in need of some tweaking. ... Today we're going to debunk some traditions and perhaps a favored Christmas carol or two... as we consider what the

Scriptures teach about the magi who... came from the east to visit Jesus. And if you've ever sung "We Three Kings," this passage may cause you to rethink these familiar lyrics.

The point of highlighting some of our mistaken Christmas notions is not to take the joy out of this holiday... rather... we need our false notions of these events and our watered-down versions of their significance... to be obliterated by the Word of God.

When we understand what Scripture actually says... singing is indeed a fitting reaction to the birth of Jesus. ... In fact... worship... praise... and very importantly... **surrender** (the sacrificial offering of our lives)... are the only appropriate responses... that we can have... to the *appearance of the Lord of the universe in the form of a helpless babe*. ... We get a glimpse of this kind of worship-filled response as we consider the magi in Matthew 2.

But this example of the Magi's worship... is not all we can expect to glean from today's passage. ... In these verses... we will learn about the global purpose of God... in all of history... and the ultimate purpose of God for our lives. ... Third we will stop and take a closer look at Matthew's shocking use of the Old Testament... in telling us the story of Christ's birth. What does Matthew quote...? What are these passages about...? And why are they appropriate for Matthew's use. As we have seen in the two prior weeks... we can let our confidence soar... in the beauty... trustworthiness... and consistency... of this age-old document... called the Bible.

Here is one thing that I hope you will pick-up... right away. Matthew informs his readers... that even at Jesus' birth... the religious teachers who

knew the most... (as Harry Reason implied about all theologians)... failed to act on the truth. They responded with lethargy... no action at all! Those you would expect to act immediately... did not... while pagans... whom one would never expect to come to the Jewish Messiah... did just that.

Matthew 2:1-6

Now... in verse 1... we are introduced to the magi (magoi), translated as "wise men." ... There's a bit of mystery surrounding these guys. ... They weren't just wise men in general... they were known to be astrologers (gasp!) — students of the stars. ... We don't need to think of David Copperfield... Harry Houdini... or Chris Angel... although the word magician comes from this word (magoi.) ... But it important for me to say... that there are some things we do know... and some things we don't know... from Scripture about these mysterious men.

First... we'll look at **what we don't know**. ... Even though most believers traditionally picture three wise men at the manger scene... Scripture doesn't tell us their number. ... (The idea of three wise men probably comes from the fact that these men bring three gifts... which we see... later in the passage.) ... There could be 10... 30... or 300 of them...we simply don't know. All we do know is that there were more than one... because it is written as a plural (magoi – more than one.) We also know that there were enough to cause the whole city of Jerusalem to be tremendously stirred up. In light of Jerusalem (which regularly had visitors) being disturbed ... Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum says this implies that there were considerably more than three of them.

So the idea behind the popular Christmas carol... "We Three Kings..." though well-intentioned... is conjecture... (perhaps... even bad conjecture.) In fact... we're not even told that they were kings. ... Magoi... or magi... were experts in astrology... the interpretation of dreams... and other secret arts... They were enchanters... sorcerers... diviners... and soothsayers.

Pagan... Gentile... astrologers... Who would have thought...? This is so unbelievable ! There is so much irony for us to marvel at... about the birth of the Messiah. God is way beyond our understanding... and our ways. Pagans sought the Messiah... while the Jewish religious leaders sat and did nothing!

Another thing we *don't* know about these magi is **their names**. ... Tradition tells us that their names were Melkon (later Melchior)... Balthasar... and Gasper. ... According to some traditions... one was Ethiopian... one was Indian... and one was Greek. ... It has also been claimed that they were all baptized by Thomas... and a bishop in the twelfth century even claimed to have found their skulls. ... You can believe what you wish... but none of this is mentioned in Scripture.

What is most important about these magi is what we do know. First... we know where they were from: it is the east. ... Obviously that's a pretty general statement about geographic origin... and it leads to a variety of possibilities about their specific starting point (Babylon, Persia, Egypt, and the Arabian desert have all been mentioned). ... The only thing we know for sure is that they were from the east... which helps us debunk another line of a popular Christmas carol—"The First Noel." ... We sing... "They looked up and saw a star... shining in the east... beyond them far"... but

Matthew 2 says... that these wise men were **from** the east (in verse 1)... not that the star was shining in the east. ... The wise men actually needed to go west in order to find Jesus.

Another thing we know about the wise men is their **prominence**. These were high-ranking officials with power and influence. ... When we picture these men... we shouldn't think of them as an isolated star-gazing club. These men were well-respected... with roles in in their societies of both religion and politics... back in their own lands. ... They almost certainly had a high position... wherever they came from.

Their position is evident in the wealth they brought with them... which would necessitate that they could not travel... without the help of many others... for their personal safety... and to ensure that their treasures got to Jesus.

We learn about the class of men... known as Magi... in the book of Daniel... ... Daniel wrote much of his book in Arabic... the language of Babylon... which is where I believe these men were from. ... And it's obvious that these men were influenced by Jewish teachings. ... It was through their study of the stars... and their knowledge of Jewish teaching... that drew them to set out on such a long journey to worship the One born King of the Jews.

They did not ask "if" Christ had been born but "*where*." And they called Him "*King of the Jews*." That title was never acceptable to the religious leadership of Jerusalem. They refused to give Christ that honor; yet the magi, from a foreign country, showed this honor and belief in Christ. Such a

profession of faith in this inquiry was a strong rebuke to the Israelites of that day.

But **how** did these pagan Gentile astrologers know that a Jewish King had been born...? ... Jews would have known from Scripture that a Messiah King was to be born... but how would Gentile astrologers know...? Why would they chose to make a long journey to find Him and worship Him...?

The pairing of a "star" with the Jewish born Messiah... has an Old Testament background in the story of Balak and Balaam in Numbers 22.

The book of Numbers recounts the journey of God's people from Mount Sinai to the edge of the promised land... and as they journeyed... the Israelites grew in power and might. ... This scared Balak. Balak was the king of Moab. ... So Balak called for Balaam... a magician — a seer.

Balaam had been summoned from the eastern mountains to curse the people of Israel. ... But the story gets funnier and funnier... as it continues. You may recall how Balaam's donkey stopped in the middle of the road three times. Balaam did everything he could to get it to take him to King Balak... but the donkey would not budge. ... Finally the donkey spoke out with a human voice... and warned Balaam not to go. ... Now... you'd think such an event would cause Balaam to go back home. ... But instead... Balaam had his eye on the big-fat paycheck from King Balak. ... When Balaam arrived... God made it clear to Balaam... that he was not to curse the Israelites... but to bless them. Balaam obeyed God and blessed Israel three times. Balaam's final blessing came with a prophecy... as well... We find it in Numbers 24:16-17:

*The oracle of one who hears the sayings of God
and has knowledge from the Most High,
who sees a vision from the Almighty,
who falls into a trance with his eyes uncovered:
I see him, but not now;
I perceive him, but not near.
A star will come from Jacob,
and a scepter will arise from Israel.*

The last two lines tell of a scepter that will arise from God's people... referring to one who rules... and a star that will come. ...This prophesied King associated with a star... is One... Who will... as the passage continues... deliver the people of God from their enemies (24:17-19).

Among the Jews... Balaam's prophecy was widely regarded as a Messianic prophecy... a picture of the coming Anointed One. The Jews always understood it this way.

But... the prophecy of a star—a light—to whom the nations would respond is not only found in Numbers. Toward the end of the book of Isaiah, the prophet tells of coming glory for God's people:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord shines over you.
For look, darkness covers the earth,
and total darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will shine over you,
and His glory will appear over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your radiance.
Raise your eyes and look around:
they all gather and come to you;
your sons will come from far away,
and your daughters will be carried on the hip.
Then you will see and be radiant,*

*and your heart will tremble and rejoice,
because the riches of the sea will become yours
and the wealth of the nations will come to you.
Caravans of camels will cover your land—
young camels of Midian and Ephah—
all of them will come from Sheba.
They will carry gold and frankincense
and proclaim the praises of the Lord. (Isa 60:1-6)*

Once again, we have the promise in Isaiah: Nations will come to the light of God's people. ... These nations would bring riches and gifts for worship.

Then we read Matthew's account of the pagan astrologers. ... Consider how striking it is... that in Matthew's Gospel... a book aimed specifically at a Jewish audience... the first people we see worshipping Jesus... are magi from the nations! ... This is clearly a picture of God drawing those nations to the Jewish Messiah. ... This promised Messiah is not merely the King of the Jews - He is King of all peoples.

I believe that the magi came from Persia... (the land of Babylon.) ... Ever since the Jewish captivity in Babylon... the people of that land would have had access to the Jewish Scriptures. Just think how their interest in Jewish Scripture would have been thrust full-speed ahead by Daniel. Daniel saved the lives of the entire society of Babylonian wise-men... by interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream. For that... Daniel was made head of the King's wise-men... and no doubt many became believers. ... So... for centuries... wise-men from the East would have known... and been looking for... the promised Messiah-king.

What made them start looking for the star Balaam prophesied...? Daniel gave them a timeline... through his prophesy. Daniel chapter 9 spells out a

specific time frame... so they knew exactly when to start looking for it. When it was time... they started watching for the star... When the star appeared... what joy must have flooded them. ... They were ready!

The wise men journeyed from the east to the west... estimated by some scholars as a journey of hundreds or even a thousand miles... in order to find that star... which had appeared... and then disappeared. ... Their natural stopping place was Jerusalem... the capital city of the Jewish people. ...They were certain that this was where the child would be... but as they began asking around about this One born King of the Jews... all they got were blank stares. ... No one knew whom these men were talking about... which set the stage for their encounter with King Herod.

When King Herod was notified of the arrival of the wise men and their reason for coming... the opposition to Jesus officially began. ... Verse 3 says, "*When King Herod heard this, he was troubled (deeply disturbed) and all Jerusalem with him.*"

We have in King Herod a world leader intimidated by Jesus. ... Some background on Herod will help us understand his concern even better. Herod had been given control of Judea by the Romans in approximately 40 BC... and he was considered the "king of the Jews." ... He was a vicious... bloodthirsty tyrant. ... Whenever he suspected anyone of plotting to take over his rule... he would have them killed. ... He even went so far as to murder wives and sons... at various times... when he didn't trust them! ... So when Herod heard that officials with power and influence have journeyed to Jerusalem to find a baby born "King of the Jews"... Matthew says that he is "disturbed"... which is really quite an understatement.

The word for "disturbed" literally means "in turmoil" or even "terrified." Herod was threatened by the announcement of One Who would supposedly usurp his reign. ... Many other people in Jerusalem... including religious leaders... are troubled as well.

Next we read in verse 4 that Herod called together the chief priests and scribes... the second group that opposed Jesus. ... Matthew writes... "*and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people he*" (Herod) "*inquired of them where the Messiah would be born.*"

In this case we see religious leaders indifferent to Jesus. Here is a quick breakdown of these religious leaders and what they represent:

- **Chief priests: Representing Jewish worship.** Despite God's purposes in appointing priests, these religious leaders had essentially become a group of corrupt, religiously oriented politicians at the time of Jesus birth.
- **Scribes: Representing Jewish law.** The scribes were basically lawyers who knew, taught, and interpreted the Jewish law (both Old Testament law and the traditions that had developed around this law), which is frightening given the way we see them opposed to Jesus throughout His ministry.

The spiritual state of the priests and the scribes is a sobering reminder that mere knowledge of the Scriptures is not enough. You can know the text well yet still miss the point. May God keep us from this kind of deceptive rebellion in our own lives and in our own churches.

When Herod inquired of these Jewish religious leaders as to where the Messiah was to be born... they quoted from the Old Testament... revealing that He would be born in Bethlehem. ... What is startling... is that these men who knew of the Messiah's birthplace... did absolutely ***nothing*** about it. ... Again... it is a dangerous thing to know the Word... and fail to respond. These religious leaders were indifferent to Jesus... and this indifference and apathy soon developed into outright opposition.

Matthew 2:5-6

The prophecy cited by the religious leaders was a quotation from the Old Testament prophet Micah. Matthew basically paraphrases this quotation, adding a couple of things for interpretive reasons. He wanted to emphasize certain aspects of Micah's prophecy that help us understand the significance of what was happening with the coming of Jesus.

Micah 5:2 (ESV)

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Instead of saying "Bethlehem Ephrathah," Matthew says, "Bethlehem, in the land of Judah." ... You may recall from chapter 1 how intentional Matthew has been... not just about telling a story... but more specifically about weaving through this story the theme of Jesus' lineage in the line of Judah (1:2) and the line of David (1:1,6).

By mentioning Judah in his citation of Micah... Matthew is referencing Jesus' kingly line. ... He's reminding readers that the place where King David was born becomes the point where King Jesus is born. ...

Bethlehem... a town in the land of Judea (another name for Judah)... was known as the place where King David was born and raised. ... And since Matthew is constantly tying Jesus to David... it becomes clearer why he mentions Judea three times in chapter 2 (verses 1,5,6). ... Only a member of the tribe of Judah could qualify for the throne of David.

A second slight change Matthew makes... is in speaking of Bethlehem. Matthew says that it is "by no means least among the leaders of Judah." Christ's birth means that a relatively insignificant village becomes an extremely important city in God's plan. ... Bethlehem... a small village five or six miles south of Jerusalem... is hugely important in the context of redemptive history. ... Matthew says a "leader" will come from Bethlehem—another clear paraphrase of Micah 5:2—before adding, "who will shepherd my people Israel." This language of shepherding is important... and it too stems from the Old Testament.

In 2 Sam 5:2 the Lord had said to David, "You will shepherd My people Israel and be ruler over Israel." This picture of King David and the Davidic line as a shepherding line would continue throughout the Old Testament (Ezek 34:11-24; see also Isaiah 40:11 and Jer 31:10). ... There of course were kings who failed over and over again in shepherding Israel... including David himself. ... However... all of this was pointing to the fact that one day a good shepherd... the perfect shepherd... would come... and He would... as King... lead God's people back to their God. ... This is precisely what we see in the person of Jesus. ... Matthew shows us that the One who reigns as the King will rule as a shepherd.

In verses 7-8... it becomes apparent that Herod is scheming... As we'll find out... King Herod had no intention of worshiping anyone else as "king of the Jews." He wanted Jesus dead... no matter what it took.

Matthew 2:7-8

Knowing when the star first appeared would give Herod help in knowing approximately how old the child would be at this time. This would help Herod to know what ages of children to kill in Bethlehem so he would be sure to kill the Christ-child.

Herod pretended kindness... and it seems that the wise men... at least at this point... believed this to be his true intention. ... In reality... Herod intended killing. ... He was plotting to murder Jesus... so he sent the wise men away on a five- to six-mile journey to Bethlehem.

Matthew tells us what happened next...

Matthew 2:9-10

This is actually the first time that we see the star move, and it literally—supernaturally—led the wise men to Bethlehem.

OK... now let's just stop at this place in the story... and ask ourselves a very practical question. (Matthew's first century audience may not have caught this right away... but today we have the advantage of increased knowledge and science.) I'm telling you... there is no way in the world a literal star can do what Matthew says this star did.

Our sun is a star. It is one of the smallest stars in the Milky Way Galaxy... and much smaller than billions of other stars. The sun... and all the other

stars do not burn out and then re-ignite to burn again. The sun and all the other stars do not move. They are stationary. But Matthew says this one did. It moved and it led them. ... And how can a star (like our sun) come over a single house to indicate “this house... not any other...”) How close would it have to come... to point to one particular house. If a star got within a hundred miles... a thousand miles... or even a million miles... our entire planet would immediately disintegrate... we would melt instantly. ... So how can a star settle over a single house and point to it...?

I don't believe this star was a star like our sun... or the billions of stars that make up our galaxy. In Greek... the root of the word “star” is “radiance”... or “brilliance.” This “brilliance” was (in all likelihood) the Shechinah glory. Just as this same Shechinah glory appeared to the shepherds to announce the Messiah's birth... it was also used to announce His birth to the Magi... and lead them. This unusual brilliance in the sky is what led them... appearing... disappearing... then reappearing and showing the correct house.

Like the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that led the people of God through the wilderness in the Old Testament (Ex 13:21)... the star led the wise men to the place where Jesus was. They must have been ecstatic... for Matthew says in verse 10... "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly..." Seeing the child Jesus was the culmination of their journey.

Matthew 2:11-12

These eminent men from the east... nobles of nations... are bowing down and worshipping a baby! ... You only bow down when you are in the

presence of one far superior to you, as if to say, "*I am low, and you are high.*" ... That's exactly what the wise men were saying.

It was customary, particularly in the ancient East, to bring gifts when approaching a superior. Some commentators say that these gifts don't represent any particular type of symbolism, but rather they are collectively a picture of an extravagant, costly offering before this baby born King of the Jews.

Matthew 2 gives us a powerful... and... in many senses... prophetic picture of joyful, reverent worship. This text has the potential to change everything about how you think about your life... your job... your family... and the entire world around you.

These twelve verses teach us that the global purpose of God is the glad praise of Christ among the peoples of the world. ... Consider how God accomplishes His purpose in this particular text. ... He used the events of history... going all the way back to Balak... and Balaam... who tried to curse the Israelites. Then He used the events of Daniel's day during the Babylonian captivity... like a time-capsule that was opened at the designated time. In order to lead the wise men... God also directed nature.

God was drawing nations to His Son's birth. Matthew's aim is to show us that Jesus is born King of the Jews... but he goes beyond that as well. Jesus has come... right in line with the promise to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3... to bless God's people *for the sake of all peoples*. ... So don't be like the Jewish lawyers who had their noses in the Scriptures... but who missed the main point of the text. ... Instead... see what the astrologers saw—the promised King. ... God was... and is... drawing the nations to Himself. But

how is God doing all of this? How is He directing nature and drawing nations to Himself?

First, He sent Jesus...the Messiah. ... The invitation at the beginning of Matthew is clear: Come and see the King! ... God invites the magi... and He invites you... to see His Son and to joyfully offer your life as a worshiper.

Worship involves joyful... affectionate... uninhibited praise. ... Like these powerful... influential men in Matthew 2... we should be overwhelmed... bowing down in homage and humble worship. ... We give to Christ the extravagant offering of our lives... everything we have... and everything we are. ... We lay it down before Jesus... and we do it joyfully. ... He is the King.

After God sent Jesus the Messiah... He sent the church. Much of what Matthew is setting up in these opening chapters... will find resolution toward the end of the Gospel. ... At the beginning of Matthew the message to the nations is clearly to come and see the King. ... And at the end of Matthew... Jesus tells His disciples to go and spread the kingdom to the nations! ... More specifically, "Go... and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). ... Joyfully offer your life as a worshiper... and then passionately spend your life as a witness.

The God Who for thousands of years has sovereignly used history... the God who sovereignly directed these magi to the Messiah... is the God who has sovereignly arranged your life and every detail in it — your family... your job... your background... your victories... your mistakes... and your

relationships. ... This God wants to use your life to make the glad praise of Christ known among people everywhere. ... Whether you're leading coworkers to joyfully worship Christ... or a friend... or a former friend... God wants to use you. ... Every believer has the responsibility and the privilege of spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Live for this purpose. ... Die for this purpose. ... Give your life and your possessions and your plans and your dreams for the cosmic... global purpose of God—the glad praise of Christ among all the peoples of the world.

