

The Wise Men and the Questions They Pose

Well, here we are in a New Year—we'll all have to get used to writing "2020." New Years is a time of celebration, but it's kind of sad too because I really hate to see the Christmas tree and decorations all come down. But, if your tree is still up—well, there's no problem with that. It just means that you are in pace with the traditional celebration of Epiphany. And Epiphany is the day set aside to celebrate the wise men coming to pay homage to the Christ child. In fact, the twelve days of Christmas actually begin on Christmas Day and ends tomorrow on January 6. And since Epiphany won't be here until tomorrow that means that it's still fair game to give one more sermon dealing with the coming of Jesus Christ to dwell with us in this world.

With that in mind, I'd like to ask you a question that J. Vernon McGee asked his listeners many years ago about the wise men who visited Mary, Joseph and the little Jesus there in Bethlehem. His question starts out with what many might recall as being a biblical quotation. And the quotation is this: ***"Behold there came three wise men from the east to Jerusalem."*** Sound familiar? And so the question is this: ***Can you tell me in which book of the Bible that this would be found?"***¹ Well, in reality, this isn't found anywhere in the Bible because nowhere in the Scriptures does it say that there were ***"three wise men"***! I guess that we probably pick that idea up from Christmas cards. When Dr. McGee played that one on his congregation, he concluded that ***"a great many people know more about the Christmas story from Christmas cards than from the Bible, and therefore they have many inaccurate impressions."***²

So let's take a look at the biblical passage dealing with the wise men to make sure that we get the story straight—because there are both facts and mysteries that we need to be aware of. Actually we started that part of the story last week when the wise men arrived in Jerusalem and announced to King Herod that they were looking for the ***"new born king of the Jews."***³ We'll pick up from there and consider what the rest of the story actually does tell us. This is what we find: ⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!" ⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and

myrrh. ¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. Matthew 2:7-12 (NLT2)

Now, in order to get our facts straight regarding what we just read—and to make sure we have more than a “Christmas card” understanding of the events, I would like for you to consider five questions that arise from this scripture?

1. First, who were the wise men and where did they come from?

Well, Matthew 2:1 states that the wise men were “*Magi*” came from the east⁴--which gives us two significant clues as to their identity. First, the word *Magi* is a Latin word derived from the Greek word *mágoi*. The term is used in the Book of Acts in a very negative way and refers to magicians or sorcerers.⁵ And the practices of magicians and sorcerers were condemned by Levitical law.⁶ But here in Matthew’s Gospel, these “*magi*” are looked upon quite favorably because they were not involved in such forbidden practices. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, some *mágoi* were members of a Persian priestly caste who were experts in astrology and were very much interested in the movements of planets and stars.⁷ And that is in line with that second clue Matthew gives us as to the identity of these particular wise men. It’s the clue that makes reference to these wise men as being “*from the east.*” If these wise men were Persians, they would have lived in what is modern-day Iran. Similarly, there would have been “*magi*” in ancient Babylon which is now modern-day Iraq, and so it is possible that these wise men may have originated from there as well.⁸

There are even some biblical scholars who support the view of the early Church fathers, Justin Martyr and Tertullian, who contend that the wise men may have come from modern-day Yemen in the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula. To make this argument, they point to the fact that gold, frankincense and myrrh would have been readily available in Yemen, and a likely choice of anyone bringing precious gifts to a new-born king. The problem with this view is that the biblical text indicates that the magi came from the east, not from the south as would be the case with Yemen.⁹

And then there are other theologians who hold out the possibility that these wise men each came from different areas in the “*east.*” They may have been star-gazers from various countries and who were searching the night skies when this new star appeared and eventually joined together in a Gentile band following that star all the way to Bethlehem.¹⁰

I, personally, believe that Persia is probably where the wise men came from. For those who just finished up our study of the Book of Esther, you may recall that there were strong pockets of the Jewish communities in Persia, so it is not out of the question that these wise men could have been proselyte converts to the Jewish faith. Or maybe they were just early scientists and star-searchers yearning for

answers as to the true Creator of all things. Perhaps, they had heard of the Jewish prophecies of a coming Messiah and the hope that He would bring to the world. Maybe they were instilled with the hope that that star would lead them to **Someone** different from the politicians and religious leaders who surrounded them, but offered no lasting hope of anything better. After all, biblical scholars are generally in agreement that people in all of the regions surrounding Jerusalem were aware of the Jewish claims that such a Messiah would soon be coming.¹¹

It is one of the great ironies of history that these Gentile wise men from distant lands found the Jewish Messiah in the person of Jesus and worshipped Him, while the Jewish religious leaders who were all so well-versed in the Old Testament prophecies, never recognized Jesus for who He was and is. And, instead of worshipping Him, they nailed Him to a Cross. In this regard, the irony continues on today in that there are many wise men and women in China, Africa and South America who understand the hope of Jesus Christ and worship Him, while those in this country linger in their palaces not unlike King Herod and his religious consultants, either too busy or indifferent to worship the Lord. That is a sad irony, indeed.

2. The second question for you to consider is this: Since these verses don't actually mention how many wise men may have shown up, what is a likely number?

Well, quite honestly there is no way of knowing the exact number because, as we have seen, the Bible does not give us that information. The number three, of course, comes from the fact that there were three gifts offered to the Christ Child, and so the assumption is that there must have been a gift from each wise man. But, that is not necessarily the case. As Vernon McGee once joked, there could have been 300 wise men with a gift from each group of 100.¹² In any event, the total number of travelers from the east would have been quite large because any group of dignitaries (even if there were only 3 wise men) who were traveling over bandit-infested, desert-like terrain for about 500 to 1,000 miles would have traveled with a small army of attendants. There were strength in numbers and bandits were less likely to attack a large well-armed group than just a group of a few. And as a practical matter, the arrival of only three men into Jerusalem would have hardly gained much attention at all. But, when the wise men entered the city with their fairly large group of camels and a sizable entourage of attending personnel, it probably looked like a small invasion that was likely to cause the stir among the people that Matthew describes in his Gospel.¹³ So while we can't say for sure the number of the wise men, the traditional view of **three** wise men does makes sense—but, they likely had a lot of people with them as well. And yet, in the final analysis, we won't know that for sure until we meet those wise men face to face, later on, in a different realm than this one.

3. Question No. 3 is: What were the wise men following?

Of course, we know that they were following what has been described as a “*star*.” But what was this “*star*”? There has been as much speculation about this as any other biblical topic that you could think of. It has been popular recently to offer scientific explanations. For example, it has been suggested that the “*star*” was actually a *supernova*. A supernova is a very distant star which explodes and, in so doing, it appears much brighter than normal—sometimes appearing with such intensity that it can even be seen during the daytime. The difficulty with this is that there is no record of any supernova appearing near the time of Jesus’ birth. Another popular explanation is that the Star of Bethlehem was actually *Halley’s Comet*. While it is true that Halley’s Comet would have been visible in 12-11 B.C., that time frame is just too long before Jesus’ actual birth date, which we now believe to be around 6 or 5 B.C. And finally, there is the “*conjunction of the planets*” theory. This theory does have the advantage of being closer to the time of Jesus’ birth when the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars all aligned so closely together that they may have appeared to be a single, new bright star. Interestingly, the planet Mars is sometimes connected with the End Times, as well as with the Hebrews themselves. And Saturn was held by some to be the mascot planet of Palestine, while Jupiter is associated with the ruler of the world. And who could ignore the fact that these three planets just happened to appear within the constellation of Pisces—the fish, which was held by ancient astrologers to be the constellation representing Israel. With all these astrological signs converging, it is not difficult to see why some ancient astrologers—particularly if they were familiar with Jewish prophesy—could have seen all of this as a fulfillment of the prediction found in Numbers 24:17¹⁴ concerning the Messiah who would arise as a “*star*” out of Israel.¹⁵ So certainly the alignment of these planets would have been quite appropriate near Jesus’ birth. But, the difficulty with all of these theories is that none of them account very well for the fact that the “*star*” that the wise men were following had been *moving* and then *came to rest* over Bethlehem. Supernovas, comets or planetary alignments don’t move and then come to rest over anything—all they do is *move* in the night sky.

So what do we make of this “*star*”? Well, rather than trying to come up with an answer based on the natural sciences, perhaps it would be best to turn to the supernatural for an explanation. And, in this regard, we can begin to see that the Star of Bethlehem was nothing short of a miracle—it was a supernatural event powered by the Hand of God to signal the supernatural conception and birth of the Savior of the world.¹⁶ It was seen by those with eyes to see and the will to follow. That these wise men who did the “*following*” were Gentiles from far beyond the pale of traditional Judaism is all the more

miraculous and mysterious. And yet we should not be surprised by this since the God we worship “*moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform*”¹⁷—to borrow the words of an old Christian hymn.

4. The fourth question is this: Once the wise men saw the star, how long did it take them to get to Bethlehem? And this is an important question because it reflects upon how old Jesus may have been when they arrived in Bethlehem.

New Testament scholars give a range of answers to this question. Some say the travel time would have been about six weeks to a couple months if coming from Persia, or a bit longer if from Babylon. If Jesus was born when the wise men first observed the star, this would suggest that Jesus would have been at least 1½ to 2 months old when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem.¹⁸ Others says that by the time the Wise Men identified the star, prepared for the journey and started traveling, it would have taken at least a year or more for all of this to have happened and to have completed the trip. So, under this view, Jesus would have been least a year old when the magi arrived.¹⁹ Still others hone in on King Herod’s interrogation of the wise men whereby he apparently surmised that the wise men had first observed the star two years before the arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem—thus, increasing Jesus’ age to 2 years old by the time they got to Bethlehem.

And notice something else here. Where does it say that the wise men found Jesus once they got there? In a manger, surrounded by shepherds? No—that is the Christmas card answer. (And don’t throw away your Christmas cards or Nativity scenes just because they show the wise men and shepherds all together. Those cards and nativities are symbolic in trying to bring the entire story together in one depiction—which they do very well.) But, Matthew 2:11 plainly states that the wise men found Jesus with Mary and Joseph, no longer in that manger in a stable, but in a **house**.²⁰ So, the biblical text is clear that the wise men did not show up on the night of Jesus’ birth as the shepherds did. Rather, they came several weeks or possibly months later and visited him as a “**child**” (notice it no longer refers to Jesus as a “**baby**”) and they found him in a “**house**.”²¹ But, in whose house?

Well, it is not impossible that it may have been a house occupied by Joseph’s own relatives. You see, Mary and Joseph had come to Bethlehem from Nazareth to satisfy the Roman emperor’s census.²² As it turns out, archaeologists have recently found pottery in Bethlehem that have unique characteristics to ancient pottery also discovered in Nazareth. Scholars believe that this may indicate a migration of Joseph’s ancestors from Bethlehem in the south up to Galilee in the north where Nazareth is located. Thus, it could well have been that the Roman census required Joseph to return to Bethlehem where his

family's real estate, including a *house*, was located.²³ If so, shame on those relatives for not acting any better than that inn keeper on the night of Jesus' birth!

Now there are many other questions that we could delve into when examining these few verses from Matthew's account of the Christmas Story, but in the interest of time, we'll conclude with #5.

5. And the final question is this: Why would Matthew even include this story of the wise men in his narrative?

After all, Matthew's Gospel was initially intended as a message to the Jews and this part of the story makes the Jews—with the exception of the shepherds—look pretty bad. In turn, it makes the Gentiles look pretty good. So you might have expected Matthew to have omitted the wise men altogether. And yet he didn't because this is one of the most important parts of the Christmas Story. It tells us that we can find Jesus when we search for Him with all of our hearts²⁴—that's what the wise men did. So, who are the *Magi*? Well, I hope that we are. I hope that we seek not only that baby in a manger but the Risen Lord as well.

And there is something else here that we don't want to miss. It was not so much that the wise men were coming to Jesus as it was that Jesus was coming to them. You see, God meets you wherever you are in life. And He met those Wise Men where they were in their own little astrological world of star study and He used their interest in science to spark a desire in them to span hundreds of miles over dangerous lands to find their Savior. Now, I expect that God may have come to thousands of other astrologers who were not so wise, because they rejected that call to come, just as people today reject God's call and, indeed, become very foolish men and women. Although these magi were pagans, God chose to reveal Himself to them—and these 3, or 30, or 300—they *responded*. God has revealed Himself to us as well in the person of Jesus Christ.²⁵ It was the greatest revelation ever made to humanity and yet so many never respond to the call.

People in South America travel mile after mile along snake ridden rivers in little canoes to hear missionaries, like the one we support—Anna Moshenic, who share with them the Word of God. People in China and Africa risk secretly going to little home churches though, in so doing, they expose themselves to great persecution and even death. We have churches on what seems like every street corner, with people living only minutes away from them who can drive there in the convenience of their automobiles, yet few respond to God's call or bother to come and worship Him, even as the Wise Men did worship Him over 2,000 years ago. That is why this story of the wise men is so important—both the actual facts that we know about, as well as the mysteries that remain to be revealed.

The greatest of those mysteries is how a God could have so much love for you and me that He willingly sent His Son to make His own long journey to the manger and on to the Cross to bleed and die for us. So, in this New Year be **wise men** and **wise women**—follow in the steps of the Magi. Bow down and worship Christ, and offer to Jesus, as the magi did, your three greatest gifts. Offer to Him your **commitment**, your **devotion** and your **love**—for they are the gifts God longs for the most.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
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¹ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

² Ibid.

³ Matthew 2:2 [The wise men asked:] “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” (NIV)

⁴ Matthew 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem (NIV)

⁵ Acts 8:9 Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, (NIV) (See also: Acts 13:6, 8). Douglas Redford, comp., *New Testament Volume 1: The Life and Ministry of Jesus*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 61-62.

⁶ Leviticus 19:26 Do not practice divination or sorcery. (NIV)

⁷ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised Edition - Volume Four: Q-Z.

⁸ Douglas Redford, comp., *New Testament Volume 1: The Life and Ministry of Jesus*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 61-62.

⁹ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

¹⁰ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

¹¹ Douglas Redford, comp., *New Testament Volume 1: The Life and Ministry of Jesus*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 61-62.

¹² Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

¹³ Halley's Bible Handbook: Deluxe Edition.

¹⁴ Numbers 24:17 I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. (NIV)

¹⁵ Coffman Commentaries - Coffman Commentary: Matthew: Vol. I.

¹⁶ The MacArthur Study Bible.

¹⁷ “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” is a Christian hymn, written in 1773 by William Cowper from England. (Wikipedia.)

¹⁸ Coffman Commentaries - Coffman Commentary: Matthew: Vol. I.

¹⁹ Holman New Testament Commentary - Matthew.

²⁰ Matthew 2:11 And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (ESV)

²¹ NIV Study Bible.

²² Luke 2:1-4 ¹ At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. ² (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. ⁴ And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. (NLT2)

²³ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Biblical Background Commentary, New Testament*, 2nd Ed., Drowners Grove: IVP Academic, (2014) pp. 184-185.

²⁴ Jeremiah 29:13 You will seek me, and you will find me because you will seek me with all your heart. (TEV)

²⁵ John 14:9 Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (NIV)