

JOURNEY OF WISDOM

by Doug Goins

Regardless of our ages, the Christmas season tends to be a time of travel. All of us want to go home for Christmas to be with parents, relatives, family or special friends. During this season of the year the travel industry booms and there is lots of coming and going. As a small boy growing up in central Indiana we really did go "over the river and through the woods" to my grandmother's house almost every Christmas. I have vivid memories of traveling to Pittsboro, Indiana, during a snowfall, a 30-mile drive through beautiful farm country. Today, most of us fly over the rivers and woods and spend our time in busy airline terminals, but travel and holidays with the people we love is still important to us.

The biblical stories of Christmas recorded by Dr. Luke and Matthew tell of seasonal travel as well. They are stories of miraculous journeys, as captivating as any told by C.S. Lewis or Mary Stewart or J.R.R. Tolkien. They have characters in them that are as attractive as Prince Caspian, King Arthur, or Bilbo Baggins, and as mysterious as Gandalf, Aslan or Merlin.

We focus today on the Christmas journey of the wise men, or magi, recorded in Matthew 2:1-12. It is surely the most mysterious and exotic story in all the infancy narratives of Jesus. The magi seem to materialize from out of nowhere. As characters in the Christmas story they seem incongruous. Matthew gives us little detail about their nationality, the system of religious beliefs they represented, or how they knew the meaning of the star they had seen. They show up, give their gifts, and disappear.

The magi are surrounded by other characters in Matthew's account, people who should have journeyed with the wise men from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and submitted themselves to the authority of the newly born King of the Jews. This story is one of a long journey of wisdom. However, it is also a story of rejection; the refusal to investigate, to explore, to look for the Christ child. It is centered on the rejection of King Herod, the rejection of the leading Jewish theologians in Jerusalem, and the rejection of the general population of that city. None of them investigated or even acknowledged the birth of Jesus, let alone traveled with the magi to bow before this Child King of the universe.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "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." And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, '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.'"

Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the child; and when you have found him, report to me, that I too may come and worship him." And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And they came into the house and saw the child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshiped him; and opening their treasures they presented to him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way.

The rejection of King Herod (Matt. 2:1a, 3-8)

King Herod's rejection of the baby Jesus was based in hatred and fear. Matthew tells us in verse 1 that Jesus was born in the days of Herod the king, days of violent evil and wicked despotism in Israel. An Idumean who was half-Jewish and half Jordanian, Herod had made himself useful to the Romans during the Palestinian civil wars and insurrections against the government of Rome. Thus, the Romans placed their trust in Herod, first appointing him governor in 47 B.C. and then giving him the title of King of Israel in 40 B.C. He died in 4 B.C., probably within a few months of Jesus' birth.

Herod called himself "Herod the Great," and in some ways he deserved the title. He did keep peace in Israel for 43 years under Roman occupation. He was the builder of cities, and built the temple in Jerusalem that Jesus entered 33 years later. At times, Herod could be generous. In difficult economic periods he canceled taxes. When famine swept Israel in 25 B.C., Herod melted down his own gold plate to buy corn for the starving population.

However, Herod had serious character flaws. In addition to an enormous ego, he was insanely suspicious, which worsened as he grew older. Josephus, a Jewish historian of that period, called Herod "a murderous old man." Anyone suspected of being a rival for his power and

authority was promptly eliminated. He had his own wife assassinated, her mother, and then three of his own sons. Caesar Augustus said it was safer to be one of Herod's pigs than to be one of his sons. The ultimate example of his violent paranoia is seen in the preparations he made for his own death. When he turned 70 and was terminally ill, Herod moved from Jerusalem down to the garden city of Jericho. He ordered that a group of Jerusalem's most distinguished citizens be arrested on false charges and imprisoned, with the provision that they be executed at the word of his death. Knowing that no one would mourn his passing in Israel, he wanted to guarantee that tears of grief would be shed when he died.

This is the man that Matthew tells us was troubled at the news that magi from the east had arrived inquiring about the birth of the King of the Jews. The word "troubled" in verse 3 means agitated, shaken, in great turmoil. It is similar to the agitation of a washing machine when it is set for the heavy duty cycle. Herod was "shook up" at the arrival of these travelers from the east. He feared a rival, and probably feared, as well, that a rival to his throne would be welcomed by the nation.

In verses 4-6, he calls together an assembly of theological experts, specialists in messianic prophesy, to advise him. There is irony in this meeting because Herod hated religion. Thirty years before he had executed most of the Sanhedrin because he wanted to suppress religious faith in Israel. Since he wanted no competition in terms of political authority he especially wanted to discourage any messianic hope in the nation. Now, however, Herod needs the knowledge of these theologians to find out about the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah-Deliverer. He asks the question in verse 4 hypothetically: "If people still believed in the coming of the Messiah, where do the Jewish scriptures say that he would be born?" By asking it hypothetically, he allows the scholars to answer it without personally identifying themselves with messianic hope. Herod was a master manipulator.

His interview later with the wise men, in verses 7 and 8, is deceitful as well because he hides his true motives. The question he asks about the star is actually about the child's age. Since he wants to know the baby's age, the rising of the star would indicate his birth date. Herod had already decided to massacre the baby boys in Bethlehem under two years of age. Thus, if he could not find the one child who represented a threat, he would massacre them all. The end of chapter 2 unfolds that horrifying plan of the slaughter of the innocents. When Herod asks the magi to "Go find him so that I may worship him," it is frightening and hypocritical. His desires for worship are really murderous.

Herod refuses to join the magi in their journey of wisdom. His rejection is based in hatred and fear--hatred of anything and anyone that threatened his self-centeredness, and fear of a possible rival. The lust for power that had corrupted Herod we see at work in modern history--in Noriega's Panama, in Obote's Uganda, and Ceausescu's Rumania. Each of these men illustrate the great lengths to which self-seeking will go, even when it is in opposition to that which is known to be right and true.

The rejection of the Scribes and Chief Priests (Matt. 2:4-6)

The rejection of the scribes and chief priests was different than King Herod's. It was based in apathy, indifference. Herod assembled "all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. And they told him 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophets, "And you O Bethlehem in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" The language suggests that the invitation Herod extended to these men was not coercive. They came voluntarily to Herod's theological colloquy. Having attended seminary, and ministering in the university setting the last four years, I know how academicians love big words. Perhaps Herod gave the assembly an intellectually provocative title, such as "Motifs in Rabbinical Messianic Speculation: A Scholarly Symposium."

To their credit, these Old Testament specialists know their Bible, and they answer Herod's question about the Messiah's birthplace directly. In verse 5, they say yes, the prophecies say he will be born in Bethlehem of Judea just south of Jerusalem, and by implication not the Bethlehem up north in Galilee. In verse 6, they inadvertently paraphrase two Old Testament prophetic passages, conflating them to define the character and ministry of the promised Messiah. First, they loosely paraphrase Micah 5:2. Speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit 700 years earlier, the prophet Micah had written about the coming Messiah: "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity" (NASB).

The second phrase, a quote from 2 Samuel 5:2, is a statement the nation Israel makes to King David at his anointing as their king. "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel." Both of these references were accepted in the rabbinical writings of that day as being messianic, predicting a shepherd prince, a servant king, a pastoral leader for God's people. These verses depicted the kind of authority the king was to have, and the kind of authority to which the people must submit. Authority was an issue when Micah thundered denunciations against the false rulers of his time. Seven centuries to the future, he saw the revelation of a coming king, a true king, a ruler whose leadership would be eternal. Likewise, authority was an issue when David was anointed king in 2 Samuel, especially in light of Saul's dereliction of leadership, and his failure to be the shepherd king of Israel.

The theologians at this conference knew their Bibles and spoke truth to Herod, but they did not join the magi on their journey of wisdom. The rejection of the chief priests and the scribes was expressed in apathy and indifference. They knew it all, but they did nothing about it.

Historical biblical truth did not make the slightest difference to them. They were engrossed in religious activity, in doing theology, in temple ritual. Jesus meant nothing to them, and so they disregarded him. As the four gospels unfold the life and ministry of Jesus they present a frightening development in the thinking of these chief priests and scribes. Their apathy and indifference harden into outright opposition to Jesus during his three years of public ministry, and it ends in a frenzied lust for his blood. For us, it is an awesome warning, a warning that knowledge is no substitute for the obedience of wisdom which submits itself to the authority of Jesus Christ. It is a characteristic danger of all pastors, clergymen, and Bible scholars in any age. Although the scriptures permeate our lives, we can end up loving religious knowledge and history for its own sake, without a willingness to submit ourselves to the truth to which it points.

The rejection of all Jerusalem (Matt. 2:3)

Let me briefly address the rejection of Jerusalem. When verse 3 describes Herod's agitation and turmoil, the end of the verse says the entire city shared his reaction. This was the general population of Jerusalem, the common people. These were people who did not enjoy any special privilege, influence, or political or social power. They were people who did not have the biblical knowledge or the historical perspective of the scribes and chief priests, but they nevertheless reflect Herod's apprehension. Although some of the fear is certainly based in Herod's inevitable reaction, and how they might personally suffer if they became the target of his violent anger, they are selfish. Their submission to Herod's godless power was based in self-interest, and thus few in that capital city cared anything about biblical truth or issues of right and wrong. There was no general expectation of how God might fulfill his messianic promises through the One who was to come since they were ruled much more by public opinion than by biblical revelation.

So again, the magi went alone to Bethlehem. There was no entourage from the citizenry of Jerusalem to join them on their journey of wisdom. The rejection of the people of Jerusalem was based in opposition to anything that would upset the status quo in their economic, political or social stability. The same population 33 years later will be screaming for Jesus' execution, "Crucify him!" They end up no differently than Herod or the religious leaders, demanding the death of the Savior of the world.

For us, it is important to consider that the world is full of men and women who have no use for the authority of Jesus Christ. There are modern day King Herods, modern day religious leaders, and plain vanilla folk like you and me who say they have no need for him or his message. They maintain that their lives are fine, and want to maintain full authority and control of their circumstances. They would gladly destroy him rather than have him interfere in their lives. The person who desires sole authority in his own life has no place for the sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

The wisdom of the Magi (Matt. 2:1b, 7-11)

Now we come to the wonderfully contrasting theme of the wisdom of the magi in their quest for the King of the Jews, a journey that ends in submissive worship and adoration. I am personally relieved to arrive at this part of the story because so far this has been a depressing Christmas sermon about the rejection of the baby Jesus. The tension has been mounting, and it cries for relief. Matthew wrote the story this way, purposely intermingling these pointedly contrasting responses to confront us with our own reaction to the birth of Jesus.

Great legends and myths have grown up around these mysterious travelers. For example, from the biblical account we cannot be certain about the number of the magi. Tradition says there were three men because they gave three different gifts. We do not know their nationalities for sure, we do not know their names, or if they rode camels and wore bathrobes. Matthew does not seem to have Christmas card scenes or church Christmas pageants in mind when he records the event, but we can discover fragmentary information about the magi from biblical and secular stories.

Herodotus, a Greek historian of the period, describes the magi as a priestly class in Medea, or Persia, which is now Iran. They were active throughout Babylonia during much of Old Testament history. The book of Daniel in the Old Testament tells about their influence under King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon in the sixth century before Jesus was born. At its heart, the religion of magi was satanic, based on superstition and fear. They observed numerous demonic practices--sorcery, astrology, witchcraft, divination of dreams, soothsaying. In short, the magi of the ancient Near East were occult practitioners. Our word "magic" comes from their name.

The ancient world made little distinction between superstition and science. The science of astronomy was blended with the superstition of astrology, and the magi were experts at both. They were considered sages, the scholars of their time. They were also politically powerful since no Persian could become king unless he mastered the scientific and religious disciplines of the magi. They were not themselves kings, but the king-makers of the Middle Eastern world. Their political and legal expertise resulted in the highest legal code in Medeo-Persia. In the books of Daniel and Esther, in the Old Testament, their teaching is described as "the law of the Medes and the Persians." Our modern word "magistrate" is a direct descendant of the word magi. Daniel, the godly young Jewish prisoner of King Nebuchadnezzar, was appointed chief of the magi in Babylon because of his amazing wisdom, intuition and knowledge that came from the Lord God.

These details give us our first clues as to how our first century magi might have known about this one who was to be born in Israel as King of the Jews 1500 miles to the west. Although we are not certain how much Old Testament truth informed the magi when they came to Jerusalem looking for the Messiah, we do know that Jews stayed in Persia after they returned from exile in the sixth century B.C. These

people had the Jewish scriptures and additional Old Testament writings that were circulated throughout the Middle East when they were completed. We do not know how the magi knew the messianic prophecies had been fulfilled, but obviously the Lord revealed it to them some way and then confirmed it by a sign, the star. Perhaps they drew a connection between that star and an Old Testament prophesy in Numbers 24:17. Balaam, a prophet whom the text says spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, relates that a star was to come: "I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." Had they read that passage, it would have special significance to them as astrologers since it is the only verse in the Old Testament that mentions a star being any kind of sign. The phrase, "a scepter coming out of Israel," does suggest a king of the Jews.

What was the star? Was it a comet, some kind of planetary conjunction, or a supernova? I don't know. Planetariums purport various theories about the star at the Christmas season, as do astronomers who try to prove that it was some sort of natural phenomenon. Perhaps the star was a visible manifestation of the glory of God, like the pillar of light which led Israel by night, or like the glory of the Lord that shown on the shepherds when Jesus' birth was announced to them. We could discuss it at length, but Matthew is not concerned with scientific details. At the heart of his account is worship, the submission and the adoration of the magi for Jesus, for as soon as they arrive in Jerusalem, they announce, "We have come to worship him."

Look again at 2:9-11 as they leave the presence of King Herod: "they went their way, and lo, the star which they had seen in the east went before them, until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; 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."

Led by the star, the seven-mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem was a journey of wisdom and worship. The magi acknowledge in their action the right of this child king to reign and rule in their lives. Their worship was spontaneous and joyful. First, they prostrate themselves before the baby king, and then present him with gifts of great material value which also have great significance.

Gold is the most precious metal known to mankind, and has been the most common and appropriate symbol of royalty from earliest times. Frankincense, an exotic incense used in Jewish temple worship, was another rare and expensive gift for kingly royalty. For certain offerings, the priest would sprinkle frankincense over what was being offered to the Lord. This gift suggests that Jesus is more than a human king, he is the divine Son of God. And, finally, the gift of myrrh introduces an ominous note into the celebration of worship because it was a curious gift for a newborn king. Myrrh was an aromatic spice used in embalming the dead. When mixed with wine, it could be taken as an anesthetic. While Jesus hung on the cross, myrrh mixed with wine was offered to him. Thus, the magi's gift was a whispered warning of the suffering and death of this baby who was born to die for the sins of the world. It was a death that would be in fulfillment of the promise from the angel who spoke to Joseph in Matthew 1:21 saying, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Dag Hammarskjöld, a believer who became Secretary General of the United Nations in the 1950's, wrote in his journal, *Markings*: "How proper it is that Christmas should follow Advent. For him who looks toward the future, the manger is situated on Golgotha, and the cross has already been raised in Bethlehem." Whether the magi realized it or not, the child they were kneeling before would one day grow up to suffer and die for their sakes. As a result of that coming sacrifice, those magi--men whose lives had been spent in sorcery, magic and the occult--could be forgiven and transformed by his power.

Regardless of how the magi understood their significance at the moment, these three gifts in combination testified to the new King's royalty, his deity, and his death on behalf of humanity.

This certainly is an amazing Christmas journey of wisdom. Pagan king-makers with occult backgrounds offer themselves to the baby Jesus. If those men were alive today, in all probability, they would be New Age media personalities appearing on television talk shows. Yet, they end up giving their lives to the baby Jesus. The apostle Paul wrote years later, "[In Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). The wise men found true wisdom ultimately in the Lord Jesus Christ. The tragedy is that Herod, the chief priests and scribes, and the population of Jerusalem did not discover the treasure. Although they had the greatest advantage, in terms of the potential for discovery, they refused to investigate. In contrast, the magi, who had the least spiritual advantage, searched, discovered and worshiped.

Frederick Buechner is a Christian pastor, novelist and theologian who has written a monologue which thoughtfully examines the conflicting purposes at work in these characters, especially the motivation for the journey of the wise men. The following is an excerpt from one of the magi who steps into our modern world to reflect on their 2,000 year old journey of wisdom.

"Beware of beautiful strangers, and on Friday avoid travel by water. The sun is moving into the house of Venus, so affairs of the heart will prosper." We said this to Herod, or something along those lines, and of course it meant next to nothing. To have told him anything of real value, we would have had to spend weeks of study, months, calculating the conjunction of the planets at the precise moment of his birth, and at the births of his parents, and their parents back to the fourth generation. But Herod knew nothing of this, and he jumped at the nonsense we threw him like a hungry dog and thanked us for it. A lost man, you see, even though he was a king. Neither really a Jew nor really a Roman, he was at home nowhere. And he believed in nothing,

neither Olympian Zeus nor the Holy One of Israel, who cannot be named. So he was ready to jump at anything, and he swallowed our little jingle whole. But it could hardly have been more obvious that jingles were the least of what he wanted from us.

"Go and find me the child,' the king told us, and as he spoke, his fingers trembled together so that the emeralds rattled together like teeth. 'Because I want to come and worship him,' he said, and when he said that, his hands were still as death. Death. I ask you, does a man need the stars to tell him that no king has ever yet bowed down to another king? He took us for children, that sly, lost old fox, and so it was like children that we answered him. 'Yes, of course,' we said, and went our way. His hands fluttered to his throat like moths.

"Why did we travel so far to be there when it happened? Why was it not enough just to know the secret without having to be there ourselves to behold it? To this, not even the stars had an answer. The prophecy said simply that he would be born. It was another voice altogether that said to go--a voice as deep within ourselves as the stars are deep within the sky.

"But why did we go? I cannot tell you now, and I could not have told you then, not even as we were in the very process of going. Not that we had no motive, but that we had so many. Curiosity, I suppose: to be wise is to be eternally curious, and we were very wise. We wanted to see for ourselves this One before whom even the stars are said to bow down--to see perhaps if it was really true because even the wise have their doubts. And longing. Longing. Why will a man who is dying of thirst crawl miles across sands as hot as fire at simply the possibility of water? But if we longed to receive, we longed also to give. Why will a man labor and struggle all the days of his life so that in the end he has something to give the ones he loves?

"So finally we got to the place where the star pointed us. It was at night. Very cold. The landlord showed us the way that we did not really need to be shown. The room was sparsely appointed, but clean. Our breath came out in little puffs of mist. The man and the woman. Between them the King. We did not stay long. Only a few minutes as the clock goes, ten thousand, thousand years. We set our foolish gifts down on the floor and left.

"I will tell you two terrible things. What we saw on the face of the newborn child was his death. A fool could have seen it as well. It sat on his head like a crown or a bat, this death that he would die. And we saw, as sure as the earth beneath our feet, that to bow in submission before Him would be to share that death.

"And now, brothers and sisters, I will ask you a terrible question, and God knows I ask it also of myself. Is the Truth beyond all truths, beyond the stars, just this: that to live without Him is the real death, that to die with Him is the only life?"

"To live without him is the real death. To die with him is the only life." It is a Christmas paradox, life out of death. To live without Jesus is the real death. The rejection of Herod, the biblical scholars, the selfish Jerusalem citizens, and all those today who refuse to bow before the infant King of Bethlehem is the refusal to live life without his forgiveness and sovereign authority which results in living death. From a spiritual perspective, we all are the walking dead apart from Jesus Christ. To die with Jesus is the only life. Just as the magi's sacrificial journey of wisdom was taken at great cost, to follow Jesus will cost us everything. The choice to surrender to his authority, and experience the forgiveness of our sins and the removal of our guilt requires the willingness to die--to arrogance, hatred, fear, self-centeredness, apathy, indifference, and any kind of self-confidence.

The apostle John records the words of Jesus in his adulthood, as he explains this Christmas paradox of life out of death. Speaking of himself, Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 3:16-18; 5:24).

Our journey on Christmas day may be to the homes of family and friends, or to the Christmas dinner table, to the Christmas tree and the pile of presents, or to the television set. Wherever we travel on Christmas day we can only bring one of two attitudes to Jesus. There is no middle ground, or position of neutrality. We either bring an attitude of adoration or an attitude of rejection; life or death; belief or unbelief. In Jesus' own words, the result is either salvation or condemnation, eternal life or judgment. He is either the Lord of all, or he is not the Lord at all.

I pray you will echo the wisdom of the magi, and confess Jesus' authority over your life in the words of the Christmas hymn, *Who Is He In Yonder Stall?*

Who is He in yonder stall,
At whose feet the shepherds fall?
Who is He in deep distress,

Fasting in the wilderness?
'Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!
'Tis the Lord! the King of glory!
At His feet we humbly fall,
Crown Him! crown Him, Lord of all!

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