

WE HAVE SEEN HIS STAR

SERIES: THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

By Steve Zeisler

We're going to study Matthew 2, the story of the Magi's journey to see the infant Jesus. This story has always been fascinating to Christian thinkers. It has captivated poets, artists, and philosophers.

The team of us who went to Pakistan in October visited some friends in ministry there. In their director's office is a very large portrait of three kings. I was asking him about that, and he said, "That's one of my favorite accounts in whole Bible. It connects our part of the world to Jesus at the very beginning—our forefathers were among the first worshipers."

In the catacombs in Rome, where believers met during the earliest era of the Christian church, there is artwork dating back to the second century that depicts the visit of the Magi from the east.

Science fiction writers have even written stories imagining experiences of the Magi.

But if we just stick to what the Bible says, what stands out about the Magi is how startling their arrival on the scene is. Of course, everything about the narrative of Jesus' birth is startling—the appearance of Gabriel to Mary, the pregnancy of Elizabeth, the angels' announcement to the shepherds in the field. But the most startling of all is the arrival from out of nowhere of these folks who are intent on worshipping this Child.

When our children were little, we used to gather together with other families who had children roughly the same age as ours, and we'd put on skits re-enacting the Christmas story. I was usually a camel. But the younger boys clamored to be Wise Men. That was the coolest thing a boy could be in the story, because the Wise Men got to wear the brightest clothes and put towels on their heads.

The story remains fascinating, but sometimes it gets so overgrown with our traditions that we will do well to look carefully at what the Bible says. There are some powerful insights here. We should observe what the inclusion of these travelers from the east says about the God who called them there. We should also see what we can learn from their discipleship about what it means for us to be disciples of Christ.

Matthew 2:1-12:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and 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."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the Law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for out of you will come a ruler

who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Let's reexamine some of the familiar elements of this story.

“We have come to worship Him”

The Christmas song *We Three Kings* (1), to begin with, is misleading. The number “three” is not used of the Magi anywhere in the Scripture text. We don't know how many Magi there were. They did give three gifts, but there is no indication of how many were actually in their party. Some of the oldest traditions of the church envisioned twelve Magi who made the journey.

Not many details are given us here. We don't know what the Magi looked like. We don't know their mode of travel. We don't know a great number of things. But that makes the things that we do know particularly important to focus on. The words of these travelers are very important: “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We...have come to worship him.” That is at the heart of what these men understood their calling to be.

Another way that the Christmas song *We Three Kings* is misleading is that these men weren't kings. The Magi were a caste of scholar-priests. They would have been attendant at the courts of kings in the east. The difference between science and magic was not well drawn in those days, so they would have been astrologers in addition to being astronomers. They would have been students of the natural world and of religious texts, and they would have dabbled in interpreting dreams and knowing the future. One of their important roles was establishing kings. It was this caste of scholarly priests that placed the crown on the head of a new king when that was required. It was they who interpreted history, writings, religion, and the events of their day and decided, “This is the one who is now king, in place of his father; this one, not his brother. This is now the time for the crown to descend, rather than last year or next year.” They were the ones who set in place the structure that allowed a king to rule.

Matthew says that the Magi came from the east. We don't know precisely where in the east. There's a debate as to whether they were from Persia or Babylon. These were both on the far edge of the Roman Empire. They would certainly have been acquainted with Rome, although not as influenced by it as the regions around the Mediterranean. They probably knew some snatches of Jewish prophetic teaching. They may have known some or most of what Daniel wrote. They may have known the prophecy of a

very odd seer from the east in the time of Moses, Balaam, who was not a true worshiper of God, but who spoke true things from God. During the time of the exodus, he said of the Messiah to come,

“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.”

(Numbers 24:17)

Perhaps, since Balaam was from their region of the world, his prophecy was passed down to them. So when they had some indication of a star in the heavens, it was toward Israel that they turned, looking for “a scepter to rise.” They didn’t know very much at all, and what information they had was garbled. They didn’t know the history of the Jews or messianic expectations in any detail. But they were thoughtful, intelligent, studious, spiritually-oriented, and monotheistic (in their own way).

Another misconception is that the Magi came to the stable where Jesus was laid in the manger. We read in verse 11 that they actually visited the mother and Child in a house. Evidently they came a number of weeks after the birth of the Child. By then Joseph and Mary had been able to find shelter somewhere in Bethlehem.

The last thing I want to mention is the star. Matthew’s description of it raises more questions than it answers. Matthew is not particularly interested in telling us what kind of star it was, or what exactly happened. There are all manner of guesses. Some scholars say it was a comet that passed by. Others think it was a conjunction of planets, perhaps Saturn and Jupiter. That’s probably a good guess. Some think it was a supernova that burst into the sky near the time when Jesus was born. No one knows. But from a thousand miles away in the east the Magi could see some portent that rose in the western sky. They were astrologers and students of the heavens, and what they saw captivated them. They knew something important was taking place. What is very odd is that in verse 9 it says that the star stopped over a building in Bethlehem. How a star could be observable in the heavens from a thousand miles away to guide these astrologers, and at the same time be localized in this way, remains a complete mystery. Yet that was the experience of these men.

With that, I want to ask two questions for us to consider, as I mentioned. The first is what it says about our Father in heaven that he would call these men to come on the occasion of the birth of his Son.

Royal announcement

We can make a few observations. First, “the heavens declare the glory of God...” (Psalm 19:1.) When God’s royal Son, God himself given human form, descended from eternity into time, the heavens made an announcement. This couldn’t go without being recognized. The great Christmas carol *Joy to the World!* says, “Let earth receive her King” (2), but earth didn’t receive her King. The Son born on this earth was mostly rejected, denied, stiff-armed. Eventually his enemies attempted to murder him. But the Lord God, his Father, said, “There will be recognition of my Son’s birth. The heavens will declare the glory of God. Some will pay attention. They will see that the stars themselves are proclaiming his birth.” Luke, of course, tells us angels sang at the birth of his Son (2:8-14).

Second, God had decided there would be Gentile disciples to worship and welcome his Son at the beginning of his earthly life. Although he came as the King of the Jews, he came for everyone.

Third, God had determined that there would be royal recognition of his Son. These Magi were king-makers. They put crowns on the heads of the ones who would rule. They came and identified this One as the King of the Jews.

Fourth, he moved them to bring gifts that were not only valuable but also instructive of the life of his Son. They gave him gold because he was a King. They gave him incense because he was a Priest. They gave him myrrh because he would ultimately be the One who died for us (myrrh was an ointment applied to bodies being prepared for burial). The Lord God caused these men to honor his Son as King and Priest and Sacrifice.

Finally, recall Jesus' statement during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, shortly before his crucifixion. He came as King, riding on a donkey as had been prophesied, and hosannas filled the air. The crowds cheered, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:9; Luke 19:38; John 12:13.) The Pharisees said, "Rebuke your disciples!" (Luke 19:39.) But Jesus turned to the Pharisees and said, "If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." (Luke 19:40.) No one can shut up the reality that the King has come. There is going to be announcement. God the Father sent these travelers to this place to say, "My Son will have a royal welcome. He will be honored by gifts befitting such a One. The heavens are going to speak of him. The angels will sing. There will not be silence when my Son is born! Even though there is rejection on every side, I will honor my Son." How moving, then, to know that someday he would require this Son he loved and honored to die for us! These are some of the things we learn about God in observing the journey of the Magi to find the new King.

The second question I want to ask is what we can learn about discipleship from the Magi.

True discipleship

The first and perhaps most obvious thing to observe, which is often commented on, is how little the Magi knew in undertaking such an extraordinary endeavor. It was an arduous journey of a thousand miles, with hardship, cold, and struggle. It probably took months. These were only some members of the caste of eastern Magi, and presumably they were ridiculed by those who watched them set off on their journey. They paid a big price. They had seen a star, and they may have had some writings of prophets. They had very little certainty of payoff; little or no confidence that they would be welcomed or that they would find what they sought. They didn't know anything about how a King was to be born to the Jews. They had to ask questions. They came into the presence of evil, unaware. The fact they would trust Herod shows how little they knew of what they were getting themselves into.

What do these observations teach us? They say that the Magi were committed beforehand to obeying what they knew. They had already decided that if God would speak even a little, they would believe what he said and obey what they believed. It is not required that disciples begin with great knowledge—being able to gather together all the great themes of Scripture into a coherent whole, being able to articulate them well and teach them to others. As wonderful as that is, the central question is, will we obey what we know? Have we already decided that we will hear God when he speaks, embrace what he says, and act on it?

Once the Magi acted in faith, the Lord gave them more light. It's always true that when you act on the little bit of light that you have, the Lord gives you more. They followed a star with scraps of prophecy, and they found their way to Jerusalem. There Jewish scholars could open the scrolls of the Prophets and

say, “The Child will be born in Bethlehem.” They followed a star and were taught the Bible. Finally, the Lord himself spoke to them in a dream to warn them. Their obedience led to more information, more access to the heart and mind of God.

We have immeasurably more information about the ways of God than the Magi had. We have the Bible and aids available for study. We’re surrounded by people who can help us understand and give us direction. The hard question remains: is it our firm conviction that what God says, we will believe?

The book of Hebrews puts it succinctly: “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (11:6.) You don’t need to know much. You need to believe that God exists—a personal God, a sovereign God, a God by whose hand everything else exists, a God whose imprint is on everything he has made. And you need to believe that if you seek him earnestly, care about him, listen to him, and act accordingly, he will reward you. He will give you more of himself. He will invite you closer. He will strengthen and establish you. That exactly describes the Magi. They believed God would reward their seeking, and he abundantly did so.

The eastern visitors entered the home where Mary and the Baby were. I’m certain the home was only the most basic kind of shelter. These people were still very poor. So this new baby didn’t look like a King. There was no army protecting him, no royal palace for him to live in, no servants, no pampering, and no elegance. But the Magi recognized that he was the King of the Jews nonetheless, that God had sent them to him.

Then they did something extraordinary: they fell on the ground and worshiped him. In all the rest of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, thanks are offered to God the Father. When Mary met Elizabeth, she prayed, praising God for what he intended to do (Luke 1:46-55). When Zechariah was allowed to speak after being struck dumb, he thanked and praised God the Father for the birth of his Son who would come (Luke 1:67-79). When Simeon spoke in the temple, he voiced praise to God the Father for the occasion of the birth of his Son (Luke 2:25-32). But when the Magi came, they fell to the ground and worshiped the Baby himself. They had been granted by the God who loved them and led them, insight that this was not just the Son of David, not just a human savior, but God himself become human to save the world!

Herod and the scribes in Jerusalem, in their arrogance, knew all the texts and took no action. No one in Jerusalem went five miles to Bethlehem to discover what had taken place. The Magi traveled a thousand miles. They had so little, but they believed what they had, and were privileged to be the first to fall in worship before the Son of God.

Journeying in the ways of God

In the story of the Magi is the imagery of journeying in the ways of God. A great deal of the Bible is made up of journeys. The first thing God said to Abraham was, “Go to a place that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1.) Israel was formed as a nation by a journey from Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land (Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers; Deuteronomy; Joshua). Even the coming of Christ from heaven to earth is presented as an awesome, mysterious journey (John 1:1-2, 14; Philippians 2:5-7). The journey of the Magi is in the same vein.

Most of us want predictability. I want knowing God to be safe; I want to know the outcome before I start. But these travelers took an enormous risk. They didn’t know what they would find. And they have become sterling examples of the life of faith.

One of the simplest of Jesus' parables comes to mind: "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:45-46.) This is the way God invites us toward him, the way he shapes us and strengthens us. He offers us treasure that must be valued above everything else. The Magi could have stayed in their libraries and palaces and kept on observing the sky. But some of them decided that if God had sent a King for the Jews and for the world, then they would go. The kingdom of heaven is like that. Discovering what is worth having and letting go of everything else to have it is the wisest choice we can make.

(1) John H. Hopkins, *We Three Kings*.

(2) Isaac Watts, *Joy to the World!*

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