

*The King Comes According to God's Plan*  
**Responding to Jesus' Birth**  
 Matthew 2:1-12

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:*

*<sup>6</sup> "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."*

*<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*

- Matthew 2:1-12, ESV

### Background Info: Questions, Questions, Questions

I have always been someone who likes to ask a lot of questions. I enjoy investigating things, and I have wide-ranging interests, from theology, history and literature to sports, cars, and movies. I know myself well enough to know that the many intellectual curiosities I have often serve as a distraction for me from more important things. Of course, the Internet has not helped me with this. We need to be aware that sometimes our desire to know more details is not helpful.

The Bible intentionally only gives us minimal details of many events, including the events surrounding the first Christmas, the birth of Jesus. This has led to much speculation, and this is especially true when it comes to the visit of the magi, the wise men from East. We know so little, and what we do know leaves us with so many curious questions:

1. Who were these wise men?
2. How many of them were there?
3. Where did they come from?
4. What star did they see? How did they know it signaled the birth of the Messiah, the long-awaited King of the Jews?
5. When did they arrive in Jerusalem and Bethlehem? How old was Jesus when they visited Him?
6. Why did they bring gold, frankincense and myrrh?

I'm going to do my best to give you my best guesses at answers to these questions, quickly, before I explain why the Bible doesn't give us clear answers to these questions.

So, first of all – Who were these wise men? The Bible calls them magi, a word that comes from Iranian, from the area known in the ancient world as Medo-Persia. The simplest explanation seems to be that these men were Medo-Persian magi, astronomers, wise men, religious scholars. The magi of Medo-Persia were the best astronomers of the ancient world, and they were wealthy and powerful. They were mono-theistic, believing in only one God, who ruled heaven and earth, and they believed that this one God revealed His will through signs in the heavens, astronomical events that signaled key events in world affairs.

The tradition that the three wise men were actually kings named Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar and that they were from India, Egypt, and Greece is just pure speculative fancy.

Daniel the prophet was the lead court advisor in the days of Darius the Mede and he was likely put in charge of a group of early magi, hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Many Bible scholars believe that Daniel's influence is what led the Medo-Persian magi to adopt monotheism. It could also have been through Daniel's influence that the magi community became aware of Jewish prophecies of a coming Messiah. It is also possible that the magi were aware of the prophecies of Balaam, recorded in the Book of Numbers.

Balaam was a famous and wealthy prophet in the Ancient Near East, which is why Balak, King of Moab, sent for Balaam to have him curse the Israelites. In 1967, manuscripts uncovered in modern-day Jordan spoke of Balaam the Son of Beor, a famous and powerful soothsayer, or prophet – and so archaeologists were able to confirm that Balaam was well known outside of the Bible account of his visit to Balak. It was in Balaam's final oracle that he spoke of the coming ruler –

*“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,  
the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,  
the oracle of him who hears the words of God,  
and knows the knowledge of the Most High,  
who sees the vision of the Almighty,  
falling down with his eyes uncovered:  
I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not near:  
a star shall come out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”* – Numbers 24:15-17, ESV

So, whether it was through Daniel or Balaam or both, the magi knew to be looking and waiting for a great King to arise in Israel. But what was the star they saw? Several scholars have put forth several ideas based on astronomical events. I've read of 5 or 6 different theories. My own favorite is some kind of planetary conjunction. I'll give you two, probably the leading theories:

- I. In 7 BC, Jupiter and Saturn came very close to each other. Jupiter is a “wandering star” (planet) associated with kingship, while Saturn was associated with Israel. In February of 6 BC, Jupiter, Saturn and Mars all came close to each other, which some experts believe would have been interpreted as a sign of

the coming death of the king. So, the magi could have seen the first event, in 7 BC, as a sign of the birth of the promised Messiah, and then the second event in 6 BC as a sign of the coming death of the current king. That second event might have encouraged them to set out to seek the newborn king, who would have been a year and a half old or so by the time they arrived. This theory lines up with the death of Herod in 4 BC, which is when Josephus says he died, around the time of a lunar eclipse in the year we now call 4 BC.

2. Some people think Josephus was mistaken and that Herod actually died in 1 BC. If this is true, then an even closer convergence of Jupiter and Venus in 2 BC becomes the leading candidate for the magi's sign. Jupiter and Venus actually came so close to each other as to appear as one very bright star. It would have been taken as a new, bright star in the heavens – and so that fits the description even better. (Although, historians will say that the magi would have called a close conjunction of planets, a significant astronomical event, “a star.”)

One of these two events seems to be the most likely thing that would have meant the birth of the King of the Jews to these magi. The truth is that we don't know because the Bible doesn't give us enough specific details. Why not? Because the Bible is focusing our attention elsewhere.

As interesting as these questions are, they are not the most important issues for us to consider as we consider the birth of Jesus and its significance for the world. Much more important is this question: How have we responded to the birth of Jesus, to the coming of the Messiah into the world?

We see three very different responses to the birth of Jesus in this passage: Herod's response of hostility, the religious leaders' response of indifference, and the wise men's response of true worship.

### **A. Herod's Response: Hostility**

King Herod's response is the clearest and strongest response in this passage, other than the wise men, of course:

*When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him – v. 3*

Herod was troubled, agitated, stirred up, anxious, distressed. And the people around Herod in Jerusalem knew enough to know that, if Herod was distressed, they should be, too. Herod was nearing the end of his life and reign in Jerusalem, a reign marked by cunning and ruthlessness. He had risen to power in part because of his political skill of quickly aligning himself with whoever would give him a better position and more power. He had kept his position by staying in favor with his Roman overlords and by ruthlessly suppressing any suspected challenges to his rule, even killing his second wife, Mariamne, her two sons (his own sons, each of which he suspected of trying to seize his throne), her brother, her grandfather, and her mother.

Anyone willing to kill his wife and sons to protect his throne is not going to hesitate to kill a baby who is being acclaimed as the King of the Jews by wealthy foreign dignitaries. But Herod is also sly, and so he plots to use the wise men to help him find the newborn king and figure out how to get rid of him quietly. After he gets the chief priests together and finds out from them where the Christ is to be born, he sends the wise men to Bethlehem,

saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”

## **B. The Chief Priests’ Response: Indifference**

In a sense, Herod’s response to the birth of Jesus is understandable, given who he was. The response of the Chief Priests was something different altogether. Herod gathered to himself “*all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [and] he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.*”<sup>5</sup> They told him, “*In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:*

<sup>6</sup> “*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 chief priests were a group of people in charge of the Temple worship. Every few years, a new man was chosen to serve as high priest. This was not according to the Law of Moses, but according to the practical political realities imposed by Herod and the Romans, who wanted no challenge to their authority. Yet in the eyes of the people, once a man was elected to serve as High Priest, he remained a High Priest for life, and so the former High Priests, as well as that group of men from whom future High Priests would be selected, formed a kind of council, headed by Simon ben Boethus, whose daughter Mariamne, had been Herod’s wife. They were political operatives and religious leaders. The scribes were experts in the Law, trained in the writing and teaching of Scripture, most were likely Levites.

Together, this group, “the chief priests and the scribes” were the leaders in Temple worship and instruction in the Law, the spiritual heads of the people of God. They knew the Scriptures well enough to know right away that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, according to the prophet Micah. And yet they did not go to worship the baby, to welcome their long-awaited Messiah.

Why not? Part of the answer might have been prejudice. Among the Jews there was a saying, “Whoever learns anything from a magus is worthy of death.” So, it seems like they thought they couldn’t learn anything from magi or Samaritans or anyone else whom they considered “impure.”

Another part of the answer might have been political savvy. They knew Herod well enough to know he had no intention of going to “*worship him.*” If they went to worship him, they would be seen as siding with a potential rival to Herod’s throne, even if he is a baby and Herod is 70 years old. These men did not want to risk their lives by following the guidance of some foreigners.

The biggest reason why they didn’t go, though, might just be the simplest and saddest. They weren’t really looking forward to the coming of Messiah. They didn’t really believe God was going to send a Redeemer King to His people. I say this in part because the next generation of leadership whom these men trained up to take their place saw clear miracles Jesus did to authenticate His identity as the long-awaited Messiah, and they put Him to death because He was a threat to their power and status.

In the end, these men were religious leaders because it was profitable for them. It was a good gig. Why else would you let your daughter marry King Herod, unless you're deeply motivated by power and prestige?

### **C. The Magi's Response: Worship**

How different is the magi's response than the responses of Herod or the religious leaders in Jerusalem! These men show us the right way to respond to the coming of Jesus into the world.

#### **I. Watchfulness**

The first thing to note about these men was their watchfulness. It had been hundreds of years since Daniel had led the magi and even hundreds of years more than that since Balaam, Son of Beor, spoke his oracle about the star rising in Jacob. Yet these men were watching. No, they were not orthodox believers. They had a deeply flawed theology and some really mis-guided practices, but they were waiting and watching for the King of Israel to be born, which is more than we can say for most of the leadership in Israel.

#### **2. Responsiveness**

The second thing we see in these magi is a responsiveness to God. When they got the sign they had been waiting for, they responded in faith and obedience. They didn't even know exactly where to go, but they went to the most sensible place to find the King of the Jews, to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel. This is a long trip, and they come in a large enough caravan that it throws all of Jerusalem into an excited state, and they come bearing rather expensive gifts, too. This is all a responsiveness that shows the earnestness of their watchfulness.

#### **3. Determination**

The third thing we see is determination. They will not be put off by difficulties. They are willing to ask questions and to act by faith. If you read the passage carefully, they see the star sign and set out on their journey. But then they don't see the star sign again until they're leaving Jerusalem to go to Bethlehem, which is about 5-7 miles away. They travelled 1,000 miles or more and then persevered, even when they weren't sure exactly where they were going, until God supernaturally showed them the sign again.

I think the star sign they saw when they first headed out was probably an astronomical phenomenon, but the second appearance of the star sign in verse 9 was a supernatural revelation to the magi, perhaps even an angel, as angels are often associated with stars.

The contrast between their determination and the laziness, self-centeredness, self-protection, political calculation and indifference of the religious leaders is stark and powerful.

#### **4. Thoughtful, Insightful, Sacrificial Worship**

The magi then come to the house where Jesus is living with Mary and Joseph. This is not the stable/manger scene of Christmas. Based on what they told Herod and what Herod orders later in the chapter, it would seem that Jesus is probably a year to a year and a half old by this point. Joseph and Mary had apparently decided to

settle in Bethlehem. Maybe they had family they could stay with for a while until Joseph got his carpenter/stonemason business going well. I'm sure they were not super eager to go back to Nazareth and the small-town rumors.

We may not know exactly how old Jesus was, but we know from Luke 2 that Joseph and Mary visited the Temple with Jesus for His dedication when He was 40 days old, and this was before the wise men came.

So, the magi come to the house where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus live, and coming 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.”*

I think the lyrics of “We Three Kings” reflect well the best understanding of the significance of these gifts. Here’s how poet Timothy Dudley Smith described the significance of the gifts in his poem, “Visit of the Wise Men” –

Take, O Child,  
The gift that I bring,  
Rich and rare as befits a King:  
Gold that glints as the star looks down -  
Gold to gleam in a great king’s crown.  
When the kingdom comes, when the flags unfold,  
Remember me, and my gift of gold.

Take, O Child,  
The gift that I bring,  
Rich and rare as befits a King:  
I kneel as a king, to a King divine,  
Receive my praise, and this gift of mine  
Which is frankincense for the altar fire  
To burn in worship to the World’s Desire.

Take, O Child,  
The gift that I bring,  
Rich and rare as befits a King:  
Costliest myrrh from the East afar  
For the tomb foretold by the travelling star.  
When they bear you slow to your kingly grave  
You shall lie at last with the gift I gave.

\* \* \* \*

Strange are the gifts that the Wise Men bring  
To so small a Child, to so strange a King.  
Sovereign gold, but his brow was torn  
When they hailed him King, with a crown of thorn;  
Frankincense, that they might provide  
Perpetual praise to a God who died;

But none so strange as the myrrh they gave  
To anoint the clothes of a three-day grave.

And then the wise men show their wisdom and their responsiveness to God again when they are warned in a dream and return home by a different route.

### **The One Who Was Born**

This One who was born was King and God and Sacrifice, our Prophet, Priest, and King, the Only Hope for Salvation. How have you responded to His coming into the world? Do you see Him as a threat to your personal empire? He is. If He is the King, it means you are not. If He is the Savior, then you cannot save yourself. How have you responded? How will you respond? Will you pretend to believe and play at religion but remain indifferent, like the religious leaders in Jerusalem, or will you respond to God's word, persevere in seeking Him by faith, and worship Him with all you are and all you have?