

## Lessons from Wise Men

Matthew 1:24-2:18

Matthew certainly chooses some strange things to include in his Christmas story, doesn't he? And equally confusing is what he leaves out. Where's the long journey for Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Where's the stable and the manger? Where are the angels announcing the good news to the shepherds? Sure, we find all those details in Luke's gospel, but Matthew mentions none of them. He passes over all these events in verse 25, simply saying that Mary gave birth to a Son, and that Joseph gave Him the name Jesus.

No, instead of Away in a Manger, with the cattle lowing and the baby asleep on the hay, Matthew brings a different hymn to our minds: We Three Kings. But Matthew's version of the story is once again different from that which the hymn leads us to expect. For nowhere in Matthew's story does it say there were three visitors from the orient.

And Menotti's beautiful opera notwithstanding, nowhere does Matthew call them kings. No, the Bible calls them "wise men" or "magi," men versed in all sorts of learning, but especially in the movements of the stars and planets, and in what they thought those movements revealed about world events. Today, we would call them astrologers.

But why did Matthew include these foreign astrologers in his gospel? Why were they so important to him? After all, we know they were engaged in a false science. We know that what happens in the night sky doesn't affect human history.

Yes, of course the moon is important. Fishermen and hunters pay so much attention to the phases of the moon because their quarries do as well. And yes, the moon's gravity makes the seas slosh around, creating tidal forces.

But no one with any sense today believes that the movements of the planets really control or even reflect the events of human history. How could they? How could the position of the planets relative to the 4000 or so stars that can be seen with the naked eye from earth's surface – how could such movements have any earthly meaning at all?

But that's probably the sort of thing that the wise men saw. All our traditions and hymns and operas notwithstanding, there's nothing in Matthew's gospel that says the star the wise men followed was particularly bright or that it had a tail as big as a kite. In fact, Matthew doesn't say that anyone except the wise men even noticed it.

So, the star was probably a planet or series of planets, moving at different times and stopping at different times and in different places relative to the rest of the night sky. It was probably because of the astrological meaning the wise men and their pagan traditions had

ascribed to these planetary motions that they had somehow come to the conclusion that a baby had been born to the royal house of Judah.

That's why they went to Herod's palace. They wanted to pay their respects to the new baby, and of course to his father the king, who would no doubt be impressed with their ability to predict such a birth, and would perhaps be willing to consult them on other such important matters – for a reasonable fee, of course.

It's all rot. It's all rubbish. It's all a bunch of pagan superstition. So, why does Matthew bother to mention these guys? And why can't we get back to the baby in the manger and the angels and the shepherds?

Because after looking at the whole story, we find that these pagan stargazers do have something important to tell us. In the first place, their misplaced focus on the stars tells us that it is actually the Holy Scriptures that contain the real truth. It is the Word of God that really foretells the future. It is the Bible that best explains current human events.

Isn't that the same thing David was saying in Psalm 19 that we read responsively this morning? Sure, the heavens are telling the glory of God, but only in an imprecise way. It's one thing to get an impression of God's power in the majesty of the stars or in the heat of the sun's rays. But none of the great forces of nature speak in words.

No, to understand God more precisely, you have to read His Word. It's the law of the Lord that is perfect, reviving the soul. It is the commandment of the Lord that is pure, enlightening the eyes. It is the ordinances of the Lord that are true and righteous altogether.

For think about it. How did the Wise Men finally figure out where to go? They weren't just following yonder star – no, they had to go to Jerusalem and ask the people at Herod's court. And Herod had to ask the scribes, who in turn consulted the book of the Old Testament prophet Micah. Micah had written around 700 years before these events took place, clearly stating that the Messiah Who would rule over Israel would be born in Bethlehem of Judah.

And we see another Old Testament prophecy fulfilled at the end of today's passage, don't we? In verse 18, Matthew quotes from the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Jeremiah's prophecy, written some 600 years before Jesus was born. Jeremiah spoke of the lamentations of Rachel, weeping over the children who had been slain by the Assyrians who invaded and conquered Israel in 722 BC. But Matthew explains how these words were also fulfilled by the terrible actions Herod took after the birth of Jesus.

So, what is Matthew trying to tell us? Sure, our human wisdom may be great, and we may be tempted to put our faith in our own knowledge to help us understand the world around us. We

may even try to extrapolate current economic data or temperature trends into the future, to try to figure out what is going to happen with the stock market or with global warming. But it is only God Almighty Who knows the future, for it is only God Almighty Who controls all the events of history.

And so if we would really understand what is going on around us today, if we would get a glimpse of where all of our current confusing world events are headed, we need to consult a trustworthy source. It is God's reliable Word that will never lead us astray, for it is only God's Word that can guide us to Bethlehem, that can lead us to our own encounter with Jesus Christ, God with us.

But along with the prophecies of the Old Testament, the story of the wise men also has something to tell us about the true character of the king. King Herod, after all, doesn't come off very well in this story, does he?

For think about it. When these pagan astrologers show up, inquiring about the health of Herod's wife after what they had assumed was the birth of their new baby, Herod could have just laughed them out of his court. He could have spurned them as fools, using their obvious mistake to completely discredit them and their pseudo-science.

But he didn't. Instead of mocking their wacky notions about the stars, Herod was troubled. And why? Because of what he and the rest of God's people knew about God's Word. Because he knew that there was in fact a very real possibility that the true King of the Jews, the promised Messiah had in fact been born somewhere else, to someone else.

But why would the true King of the Jews not be born in the royal palace? Because of something Herod knew about himself: that he was not, in fact, a son of David. He was not from the royal line of Judah at all. No, if you look back at Matthew chapter 1, you will see the royal genealogy, the line of the rightful kings. And you will find Herod's name nowhere on that list.

Oh, to be sure, Herod had great power. He was a masterful politician, currying enough favor with the Roman Emperors to prop up his reign. He was a master architect and builder, constructing an elaborate complex around the Temple of God in Jerusalem, creating an immense man-made harbor in the Mediterranean Sea, and, of course, constructing suitable palaces for himself in strategic places throughout his kingdom. Yes, he was powerful enough and ruthless enough that when he was troubled, all Jerusalem trembled in fear.

But why would Herod be so troubled about the possibility that the promised Messiah had finally appeared? Wasn't Herod a Jew, and hadn't the Jews been longing for the coming of the Messiah for hundreds of years?

Well, Herod may have been a Jew, but first a foremost he was a man of the world, a man of power and wealth. He was also a man who had made many enemies among his own people, and thus he was a man who clung to power as a way of protecting himself. Moreover, his power rested solely on his allegiance to Rome – Herod had no interest at all in either real or counterfeit Messiahs who might stir up rebellions.

And so Herod did what comes naturally to tyrants. He moved swiftly to destroy anyone who might pose a threat to his power. After all, he had put his own wife Mariamne to death over 20 years earlier for the same reason. And he had also murdered his own two sons Alexander and Aristobulus because he thought they had been plotting against him. Why shouldn't he put what he doubtless considered to be a few peasant brats to the sword – just for safety's sake, just in case there might be something to all this pagan astrology stuff? Given Herod's legendary cruelty, the slaughter of the innocents is frankly one of the most believable if chilling passages in the entire Bible.

And if you think about it, in this story Herod serves as a symbol of all of the people of God, doesn't he? For when Jesus was all grown up, and when Jesus revealed Himself to His people in all His miraculous power, all they could think about was what was in it for them. They wanted Jesus to keep on feeding them with the loaves and the fish. Moreover, they wanted Jesus to drive out the Romans they hated so much, to lead them in the full-blown insurrection that Herod feared so greatly. But when Jesus refused to do this, when Jesus refused to be the kind of king they wanted who would give them the things they wanted, well, they managed to finish the job Herod had bungled, putting Jesus to death on a cross.

But how different is the character of this king, King Jesus. For while Herod's top priority was preserving his power, Jesus laid aside His power, becoming a baby born to poor parents. And while Herod tried to protect his life by the threat and the use of violence, Jesus would be willing to lay down His life for the same people who were so determined to kill Him.

In fact, Jesus was willing to die, not just for the Old Testament people of God, but for people from all over the world. This leads us to a third point we can learn from this story. For if the story of the wise men tells us of the absolute authority and truthfulness of the Scriptures, and if it draws a stark contrast between the character of King Herod and King Jesus, this story also shows us that people from all over the world are welcome in Jesus' kingdom.

Herod, after all, was a Jew, but that didn't make him do the right thing. Just so, the wise men weren't Jews, but that didn't matter. In spite of their pagan superstition, they were the ones who turned out to be in a right relationship to Jesus.

For it was the wise men who bowed down before Jesus, who may have been a toddler by the time they finally got to Bethlehem, and was certainly living in a house, not in the stable where he had been born. But the wise men were not put off by Joseph and Mary's obviously modest means – if the stars said the kid would be a king, then gifts worthy of a king he would receive. In spite of their pagan past, it was the wise men, not the Jews, who showed Jesus honor and who gave Him glory.

And the good news is that King Jesus continues to welcome all sorts of people today, from all over the world. What matters to King Jesus isn't your genealogy or your wealth. What matters is your willingness to trust Him.

So let us take our King at His Word, for His Word never fails and never changes. Let us rely on His character, as He clothes His power in humility, and as He reveals His glory in self sacrifice, dying so that a world of sinners might live. And let us do what all truly wise men do, bowing down before Him, confident of His welcome for all those who trust in Him.