

Lessons from Wise Men

Matthew 2:1-12

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 the last verse of chapter 1, 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 of them or that they were 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. Worse yet, at least for Matthew's Jewish readers, he mentions that they were from the east, probably from the area we now know as Iraq. In other words, they weren't Jews – they were polytheists who believed in a false source of truth, the ridiculous notion that what happens in the night sky affects human history.

Okay, so why did Matthew include these Gentile astrologers in his gospel? And what exactly did they see among the stars that prompted their trip from somewhere east of Israel? All our traditions and hymns 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 the astrological meaning the wise men and their traditions had ascribed to these planetary motions that convinced them 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, whom they hoped would 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 nonsensical 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 exotic astrologers 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 infinite expanse 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 written 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.

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 affirming the prophecies of the Old Testament, the story of the wise men also has something to tell us about the nature of good kings. King Herod, after all, doesn't come off very well in this story, does he?

For think about it. When the foreign astrologers showed 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 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 for them to prop up his reign with their invincible legions. 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 he was first and foremost 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 clung tightly to power as a way of protecting himself. Moreover, his power rested solely on his allegiance to Rome – Herod had absolutely no interest in either real or counterfeit Messiahs who might stir up rebellions.

And so Herod did what comes all too easily to the rich and powerful. In this passage, he lied to the wise men about his intentions. He said he wanted to join them in recognizing the new king. He attempted to draw them over to his side, using them to find out exactly who this new king was and where he might be found. But all the while, Herod was plotting to kill this potential rival, as Matthew explains in the next few verses.

Yes, Herod clearly represents all the wicked tyrants throughout the history of the world. But how different is the character of King Jesus! For while Herod's top priority was preserving his power, Jesus laid aside His power, choosing to be born as a baby into a carpenter's family. And while Herod tried to protect his life by deception and eventually the use of violence, Jesus would be willing to lay down His life for the same kind of people – those who were 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. And 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 that of 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 righteous. Just so, the wise men weren't Jews, but that didn't matter. In spite of their astrological superstitions, 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 at Herod's court, 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, or even the faith tradition in which you grew up. 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.