

December 31, 2023

“The Faith of the Wise Men”

Matthew 2:1-12

Lesson 5

Intro

There is a difference in today’s world between *astronomy* and *astrology*. Astronomy is the scientific study of the sun, moon, stars, and planets; of all the things that exist in the area we call “space”. Astrology takes that study and combines it with a belief that so-called gods control the position and movements of these items in space. This control then reveals information about the future, what some might call “omens”.

Scripture warns against astrology as a type of forbidden divination (Deut. 18:10-11; Jer. 10:2). But in Daniel, the men who practiced this astrology were called *magoi*, the word that gets us our word “magician”. But these ancient magoi, translated as “magi” in Matthew, weren’t magicians who entertained people. They were men of wisdom—they were astrologer-scholars. This is the type of people at the center of today’s passage.

Read Matthew 2:1-12

1. vs. 1: Three things are noted in this verse

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David

Herod was king at the time

He was called Herod the Great for his extensive building projects

The most notable was the rebuilding of the temple

He was put in place by the Romans

He died about 4 BC according to best records

This passages events therefore happened sometime before that

Magi came from the east

This means they lived in the east

They likely traveled several hundred, maybe even a thousand, miles

That distance would have taken at least 4 months to travel

Their number isn’t given by Matthew

There were at least two, as the word used is plural

Three gifts are given to Jesus, so the tradition is of three Magi

2. vs. 2: These men were obviously wealthy enough to travel this far distance

They likely had some if not all of the following

An appearance as “somebodies”—nice clothes, serious appearance, etc

Letters of introduction indicating their significance

Money to offer to get what they wanted or needed

Here they ask “Where is the one born King of the Jews?”

They likely talked to Herod, based on the factors just mentioned

They ask because they saw a star, which led them on this journey

This fits with their being magi, astrologer-scholars

The star’s appearance signals the birth of “the king of the Jews”

The magi say they have come to worship him!

3. vs. 3: The magi's words don't sit well with Herod
He has had sons and wives put to death as threats to his throne
An old saying is "When Momma's not happy, nobody's happy"
That applies here as well—If Herod's not happy, no one in Jerusalem will be either
4. vs. 4: Herod calls his own "experts" together
The chief priests ruled the temple
The teachers of the law were experts in Jewish Scriptures
Herod needed them because he was not an expert in prophecy and divination
But he obviously connected the belief in a coming Messiah to the magi's question
So he asks (demands?) info from these wise men about the birthplace of the Messiah
5. vs. 5-6: The religious leaders quote Micah 5:2, that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem
Bethlehem is a little village a few miles to the southwest of Jerusalem
Micah lived over 700 years before the events happening in today's text
This prophecy is a highlight in several ways
 It recognizes the insignificance of Bethlehem, still true in Herod's day
 It foretells the rise of a new ruler
 It says this ruler will be one who will "shepherd my people Israel"
 This is language indicating a Messiah, not just an earthly king
6. vs. 7: The word "secretly" here indicates that Herod met with the magi privately
He must have dismissed the religious leaders to do this
Ancient astrology was based on keeping precise records
 These magi would have known "the exact time the star had appeared"
Based on Matt. 2:16, Herod has asked this in order to know who to kill
7. vs. 8: Herod's request here shows more of his evil character and purposes
He sends the magi on their way to find the child indicated by the star
He says to send a message back so that he can also worship the child
We know based on vs. 16 that he has no intention of worshipping anyone but himself
The wise men do nothing wrong here in telling Herod the info he desires
He has been kind and polite to them, and they have no reason to suspect his request
8. vs. 9-10: The magi depart, with the star moving to guide them
It "went ahead of them" says our text
This reminds us of the pillar of fire that led the Hebrew people thru the wilderness
 (see Exodus 13:20-22)
They were "overjoyed" when they saw the star
 They had been following it for hundreds of miles
 Now it is still there guiding them the last few miles to Jesus
Our text suggests that the star appeared at night for them to head to Bethlehem
 This appearance at night is the reason for their joy, says our text
 However, they have traveled nearly 1000 miles so far
 Traveling at night at this time was seldom done
 It seems unlikely they would have had gone all this way at nighttime
 It also seems likely that they traveled during the day, seeing the star

The verse doesn't say it was day or night when they left to go to Bethlehem
It seems a stretch to say they left at night to follow the star

9. vs. 11: They came to a house here, not the manger of Luke's account (2:16)

It has been four months since the star appeared

Mary and Joseph would have left the manger for a house

The gifts they bring are noted in Isaiah 60:6 as kingly gifts

Though not said, it seems likely the gold was in the form of coins

These would have been very helpful for the coming flight to Egypt

(See Matt. 2:13-23)

Frankincense was prized for use in religious ceremonies

It was also considered a costly sacrificial offering

Myrrh was an aromatic resin, still used in making perfume

It was also used in preparing bodies for burial (see John 19:39)

It was helpful as an antiseptic for wounds and as a pain reliever

Both of these elements were extremely valuable

They provided a treasure easy to carry

10. vs. 12: This verse shows God in control of protecting both Jesus and those around Him

The magi were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod

The return to their country "by another route"

Joseph will also be warned in a dream to go to Egypt to escape Herod

Application: These magi serve as an important reminder to us. They were people in positions of power, yet they traveled hundreds of miles over many months to bring expensive gifts and to worship a new-born king. Most of us don't have the status or the kind of expensive gifts the magi did. But we can offer Him our sincere hearts in worship. That gift is more valuable to Him than anything of earthly value could be.

Prayer: Father God, help us to emulate the faith of the wise men. Like them, let nothing stop us from reaching Jesus, from offering Him worship that costs and that is sincere. In Jesus' name, Amen.