

# Pentwater Bible Church

*Christmas Message*  
*December 26, 2021*



The Adoration of the Magi By El Greco Cir 1568

Daniel E. Woodhead – Pastor Teacher

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**The Magi**  
**Daniel E. Woodhead**  
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As part of the birth of Jesus we read an account in Matthew's Gospel of Herod the king of Judea receiving some people from an eastern land who were alerted that the true "King of the Jews" had been born. As a result of their visit Herod and the general population of Jerusalem were threatened. Just who were these people and why was Herod threatened? God was bringing His long-awaited Messiah to the earth and the ungodly were going to try but would not be able to stop His plan.

Matthew 2:1–12

*<sup>1</sup>Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, Wise-men from the east came to Jerusalem,<sup>2</sup> saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we saw his star in the east, and are come to worship him. <sup>3</sup>And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup>And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ should be born. <sup>5</sup>And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written through the prophet,*

*(From Micah 5:2) "<sup>6</sup>And thou Bethlehem, land of Judah, Art in no wise least among the princes of Judah: For out of thee shall come forth a governor, Who shall be shepherd of my people Israel. "*

*<sup>7</sup>Then Herod privily called the Wise-men, and learned of them exactly what time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup>And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search out exactly concerning the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word, that I also may come and worship him. <sup>9</sup>And they, having heard the king, went their way; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. <sup>10</sup>And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. <sup>11</sup>And they came into the house and saw the young child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshipped him; and opening their treasures they offered unto him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way (ASV, 1901).*

THE STAR THAT APPEARED TO THE MAGI:

German astronomer, mathematician and writer, Johannes Kepler in 1607 believed he identified the Christmas star that guided the Magi or "Wise Men" to where Jesus was

born, and with precise event and date. To Kepler the "Star of Bethlehem" was a planetary conjunction of Jupiter, Mars and Saturn in the evening sky, described to mean a close approach of planets in the sky. Many others have struggled to find natural explanations for the star. The fact that God controls all things in all times and all places leads us to look to Him for an explanation.

Luke 2:8–9

*<sup>8</sup> And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid (KJV).*

The Magi from the east were led there by a visible star. That this was no ordinary star. The star did four unique movements:

1. The star appeared and disappeared on at least two occasions
2. The star led them from the east to the west
3. It led them from the north to the south
4. The star stood over the specific location where Jesus was

This was not an ordinary star. The Greek word for star simply means “radiance” or “brilliance.” Coming in the form of a light, this was the reappearance of the Shekinah Glory, announcing the birth of the Messiah to a group of Gentiles.

Therefore, it must be an appearance of the Shekinah Glory.

The Shekinah Glory is a visible manifestation of the presence of God in time and space. In the Old Testament most of these manifestations took the form of light, fire or a cloud including some combination of these.

He appears in the Old Testament in the following manners:

1. The Garden of Eden as fellowship with Adam and Eve
2. Meeting with Abraham as a smoking furnace.
3. To Moses as a burning bush.
4. During the Exodus as a pillar of fire and a cloud.
5. On Mount Sinai as a cloud, thunder and lightning as well as a trumpet.
6. A kind of visible manifestation to Moses said to be His back.
7. Dwelling within the Tabernacle and Temple and lighting the brazen altar in the Temple as fire coming down from Heaven.
8. Departing from the Temple.

In the New Testament He appeared:

1. To the shepherds and the Magi as the Christmas Star.
2. He also came as flesh (John 1: 1-14) in the body of Jesus.

3. At the Transfiguration as a white lit Jesus.
4. Tongues of fire to the apostles.
5. Bright light on the Damascus Road to Saul.
6. Smoke in the Tribulation Temple from Revelation 15:8.
7. At the Second Coming as Matthew 24:30.
8. In the Millennium as the Risen Jesus ruling the world (Ezekiel 43: 1-7a).
9. In the Eternal Order as seen in Revelation 21: 1-3; 10-11 and 23-24.

After the Shekinah Glory appeared to the shepherds announcing the birth of Jesus the Messiah it next appeared to the Magi. The star led them to Israel. It appeared to them on at least two occasions. It led them from the east to the west and from the north to the south. It finally stood over the very house where the child Jesus was; and was unique to Jesus and no other. Coming in the form of special light this was a physical manifestation of the Shekinah Glory announcing the birth of the Messiah to a group of Gentiles from Babylonia.

The vast majority of Jewish people, who should have been looking for their Messiah, were unaware of the birth of Christ, whereas these Gentiles, who were not God's people at that time, did seek to acknowledge this King. The same situation exists today as we anxiously anticipate His second arrival. Most could care less; but those of us who know Him look for Him to appear at any time (Matthew 24: 42-44; Mark 13: 33-37; I Thessalonians 4: 4-6; II Timothy 4:8; II Peter 3:12 etc.).

Not only was Christ a physical earthly King by virtue of His lineage from David, but also by virtue of the fact that those in the world who were official kingmakers recognized Him as such. The Magi were from Media-Persia and were Persian kingmakers. After the Babylonian Empire fell in 539 B.C. the Media-Persian Empire took control of that region of Mesopotamia. Following that empire Alexander's armies conquered it for the Greeks in 328 B.C. When Alexander died in 323 B.C. one of his generals, Seleucus Nicator, took control of the area and finally lost control of it to the Parthians in 139 B.C.

Magi is the Old Persian word *magav*, which refers to a certain very wise hereditary priestly tribe of people who came from the Medes. This term is also translated as "megistanes" from which we get our term magistrates. The Magi were so powerful that historians (Herodotus) tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king except under two conditions: he had to master the scientific and religious discipline of the Magi, and he had to be approved of and crowned by the Magi. In effect, they controlled who could be king within the Mesopotamian region. Having through the years risen to a place of great prominence in the kingdoms of Babylon, Media, and Persia, they served as advisors to the rulers, and so the term became synonymous in many ways with being a wise man. This is how our English translations render the word *magav*. Now, some time after the birth of Jesus, some God-fearing Magi arrived in Jerusalem asking for the King of the Jews.

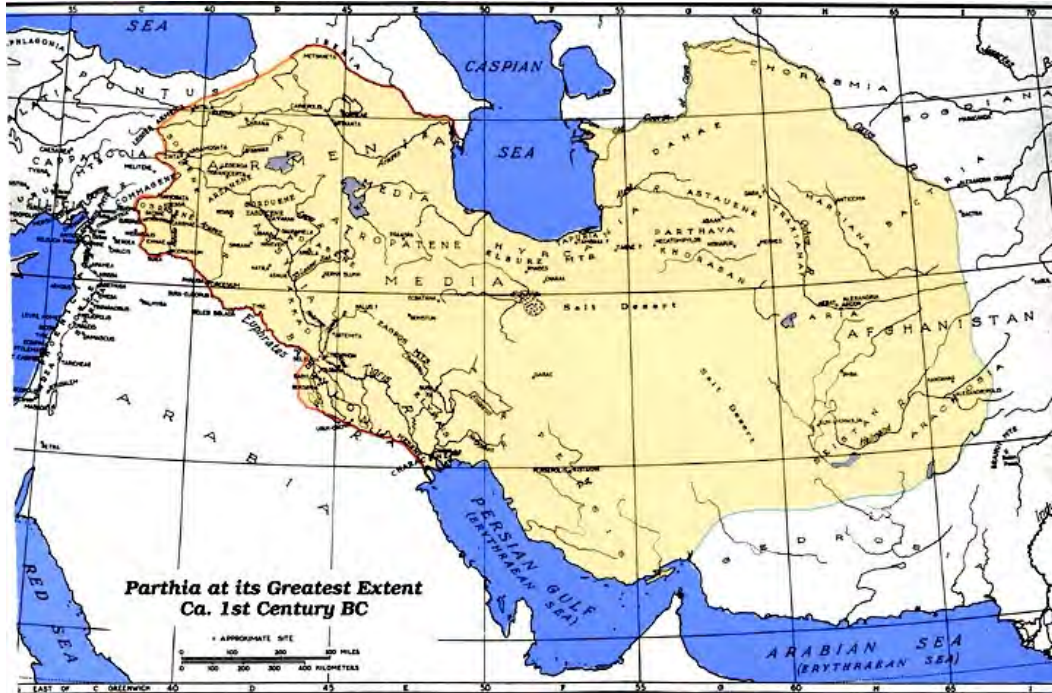
## Herod The Great

Herod was half Jew and half Idumaean, being a partial descendant of the Edomites who lived southeast of Israel in what is today Southern Jordan. He gained favor with the Romans, who controlled the land of Judea. As the son of Antipater, the procurator (governor) of Jerusalem and Judea, Herod had played up so much to the Romans that they appointed him as the tetrarch of Galilee in 47 B.C. It was a lesser position in significance, but nonetheless it was a position of honor among the Romans. Seven years later in 40 B.C. when the eastern Parthian Empire attacked the Romans at Israel, civil war broke out and Herod quickly fled to Rome. Convincing the Senate that he was pro-Roman, and from that part of the world, he knew how to handle regional political situations. The Romans made him the king of the Jews, gave him an army and charged him with the job of bringing Israel under control. After three years, Herod being successful, was finally able to gain the full authority that had been promised and truly became the king of the Jews, a title that he maintained until he died.

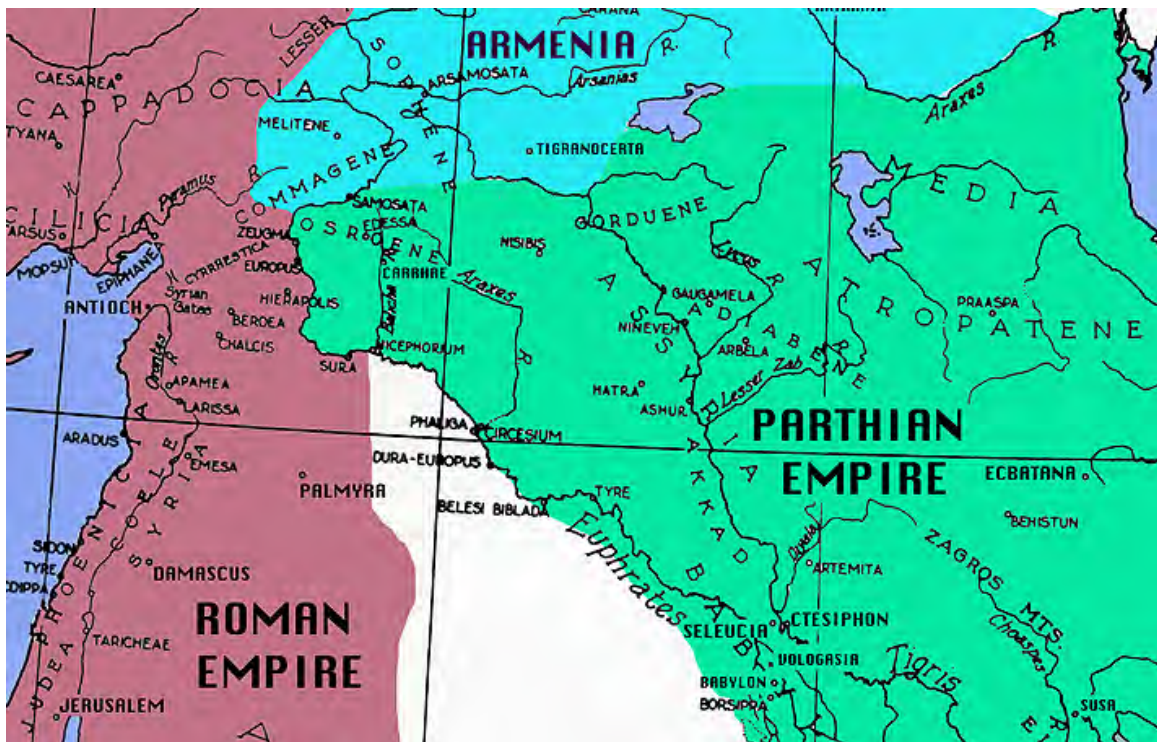
Politically speaking, Rome was strategically concerned with the eastern empire of Parthia, as the old Medo-Persian Empire became known. Rome had stretched its tentacles out to rule the world, but they never really felt secure about the Parthian Empire because they did not conquer them. Israel (situated between these two powers) became the battle ground between these violent enemies in 63, 55 and 40 B.C.



Roman Empire First Century A.D. by C.S. Hammond & Co. NY



Parthian Empire First Century B.C. from: <http://www.magyar-megmaradas.coldal.hu/cikkek/our-beliefs/the-scythian--part-3.html>



Roman Parthian Empires coincide in Syria just north of Israel from: <http://iranpoliticsclub.net/maps/maps04/>

Rome's anxiety over this eastern empire was accurately reflected in Herod's response to the arrival of the Magi in Matthew 2:3: "*When Herod, the king, had heard these things, he was troubled...*" When he heard that Magi, the oriental, Parthian kingmakers had arrived in Jerusalem, he became justifiably politically insecure. By the time of Christ, the Magi still had tremendous power in the east. Whereas some of them used their power, position, and skills with a great amount of human wisdom, others prostituted their craft. Both kinds of Magi were very common in the Mediterranean area when Christ was born (Acts 8 & 13 speak of corrupt ones). At the time of Christ in the eastern empire there was a ruling body called the Megistanes who would be similar in function to the United States Senate. It was totally composed of Magi who had the right of absolute choice for the selection of a king. They were kingmakers.

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem asking for the whereabouts of the new king that had been born, Herod panicked, knowing that those Persian kingmakers had come to find their king. They were no doubt traveling in full force with all their oriental pomp, riding Persian steeds (rather than camels). And accompanying them, historians estimate (from John MacArthur) there were a thousand mounted Persian cavalrymen. When they came into the city of Jerusalem and Herod saw them, he became very nervous. That's why the Bible says that Herod was "troubled." The Greek word conveys the idea that he was agitating like a washing machine--literally shaking. As the King of the Jews, the great dream of his life was to get that little buffer state in the middle of two huge contending empires, under his control. All of a sudden, this massive group of Persians arrived in the city and he panicked because the new king they were coming to find would be a threat to the realization of his dream.

At that time both Herod and Caesar Augustus were aged and close to death. Also, because the retirement of Tiberius, Augustus' future successor, the Roman army was left without a commander-in-chief. The Parthians', were aware that this would be the ideal time to bring about an eastern war against the west. Herod knew this too. The Bible says that they worshiped Christ. They saw more than just a king. They saw the Messiah they had heard about from the days of Daniel. The Magi who came to Jerusalem were God-fearing Gentiles who probably envisioned this Savior, the Anointed One (Messiah), as the king who would gather all the people of the East together against the oppression of Rome.

Knowing that the people of Israel were on their side rather than Rome's, the Magi came into town and started asking the people where this new King was. Most of the ruling Jews were blinded by their unbelief. Interestingly some of the first people in the world to recognize the arrival of the King were Gentiles. History reflects that irony of rejection in John 1:11 where it says, "*He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.*" But in spite of the general rejection of the King by the Jews, the Magi knew this Child could be the great Messiah that Daniel had prophesied. They could have hoped this would be the one who could unify the east and go against Rome with invincibility. Most Jews were looking for a Messiah that would resemble a strong military man capable of throwing off the suzerainty of the Romans and freeing them. And so, into Jerusalem rides the group of

Magi, kingmakers of the east on their fine Persian steeds, and escorted by a thousand mounted cavalymen.

They came into town asking, "*Where is He that is born King of the Jews?*", and Herod became afraid. A little of the shock of this whole scene is indicated in Matthew 2: 1. It was completely unexpected and shocking for Magi to come from the east, asking where the King of the Jews had been born.

Historians record for us that at that general time there was a strange expectation in the world for a coming king. The people in the east had it, which partly explains why the Magi came. People in many places were anticipating the arrival of a king, something even the Roman historians acknowledged:

- 1) Suetonius wrote in *The Twelve Caesars*, "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world." Writing during the second century A.D. about such things as Vespasian's conquering of Israel in A.D. 70, Suetonius looked back and said that the first century was a day when there was an expectation for men coming from Judea to rule the world. Consequently, people's eyes were focused upon that place.
- 2) Tacitus, the famous Roman historian, tells of the same belief in *The Annals* that "there was a firm persuasion...that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judaea were to acquire a universal empire."
- 3) Josephus, in *Wars of the Jews*, said that the Jews had a belief that "about that time one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth."

The Magi came to Jerusalem based upon information they had received from Daniel and other Jews (who were now living in their land since the captivity), upon their own sense of faith in the true God who would fulfill His Word, and upon what they saw in the sky. They repeatedly asked the Jews "*Saying, Where, is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him.*" (Matthew 2:2)

Herod must have known that Child was more than a human king. He apparently knew that this was the Messiah, the Anointed One, which the Magi were seeking. Herod knew that the true King of the Jews, and the Messiah of Israel, were one and the same. Like the Wise Men, he was aware that there was more than a humanly king coming to the earth. He knew that someday a God sent Messiah would arrive.

Herod's interrogation of the chief priests, about where the Christ was to be born, shows how subtly deceptive he really was. It is amazing how many people look to the Bible for information. But they will not accept Christ as their Savior and Lord. The chief priests and the scribes quoted Micah 5:2 to Herod, informing him that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. They knew that, and still paid absolutely no attention to the events in Bethlehem. It's amazing that these orthodox literalists had perfect head knowledge, but were never touched in their souls. No wonder the Bible says, "*...for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life*" (II Corinthians 3:6b.) It didn't take long before the indifference of



the chief priests and scribes issued in the hateful plotting of Christ's murder. From the indifference of Matthew chapter two to the plots and the murders at the end of the Messiah's life, they had full knowledge of all the prophecies being fulfilled by Jesus Christ, and yet they rejected them with full information. Jesus Himself even reminded them that all they had to do was to check the Scriptures which they were supposed to be so expert in: *"Search the scriptures; for...they are they which testify of Me"* (John. 5:39).

## **Bethlehem**

Bethlehem has an interesting history. In the book of Genesis, Jacob buried Rachel there, setting a marker by her grave (Genesis 35:19-20). Ruth married Boaz and she lived in the town of Bethlehem (Ruth 4:11), from where she could see her homeland, Moab, across the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. Bethlehem was the home and city of the great king of Israel David. It is called the city of David, as I Samuel indicates (16:1; 17:12; 20:6). It was there in that little village that the people of God had long expected their Messiah to be born, in accordance with the prophecy of Micah 5:2. They waited for David's greater Son, the Messiah, to come out of David's city. But when the time of His birth did arrive, few were even aware of it.

Herod was afraid that this little baby would interfere with his status in life. Jealous and fearful, he sought to eliminate Him. People felt the same way thirty-three years later, successfully completing Herod's original plot of killing Jesus. Some people feel that way today. Jesus is interference in their life. He bothers them, upsetting their plans, and if they had their choice, they too, would eliminate Him. Like the book of Hebrews says, those people know all about Christ and still reject Him, in effect, *"crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame"* (Hebrews 6: 6b). Jesus cautioned His disciples about the hatred and the hostility of the world toward Him and His servants: *"If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you"* (John. 15:18). *"...the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service"* (John. 16:2b). And, of course, we see the hatred and the hostility exemplified by Herod.

The chief priests and the scribes, who were engrossed in their political intrigues and their acquisition of power as well as making money in the Temple at the expense of the people, didn't care that their Messiah had been born. There are many who are indifferent like that today. They conduct church services for the sole purpose of making a living as if the work of Christ was a business. They will be the people the Bible speaks of as having no awareness of His coming for His Church (Matthew 24: 36-51).

The Magi came to worship Him knowing full well who he was and what He represented. This was all due to what they learned from Daniel the prophet. Daniel was chosen to become chief of the Magi when he demonstrated his superior ability in interpreting dreams (Daniel 5:11). By the "divine coincidence" of having a great Hebrew prophet to rule the Magi six hundred years before Jesus was born, God was, in effect, setting up the situation so that one day, when a baby was born in Bethlehem, some of those Magi would find their way to the house where the young child was so that He could be acknowledged as King by known Gentile kingmakers.

God controls human history; and we are seeing God at work. Long ago He picked out a man named Daniel and put him in a place to influence some men so that they could arrive in perfect timing. Interestingly, the people who should have known the great significance of the event missed it, and the people from way off who should have never guessed it could happen, showed up and worshipped the One who came to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16). Jesus came and said, "*I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Matthew 15:24). Israel turned her back on Christ, and so He called a people from those who were not formerly His (Romans 9:25). He reached out to the Gentiles, Romans says, and grafted us in (11:17). Even the unbelief of His own people could not prevent the Messiah from being honored as Jesus made clear in Luke 19:40 that if the people wouldn't praise Him, "*the stones would immediately cry out.*" Therefore, when the King arrived, and His own people wouldn't praise Him, then God made sure that there was somebody there to do it.

And you know in our world today, people celebrate Christmas by passing around Christmas cards and giving gifts. They look at the Wise Men, but few really understand the significance of their presence before that Child. There are some of us, however, who have followed the example of the Wise Men and bowed down to the "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Revelation 19:16b).

Next message: Isaiah THE PLACE OF REFUGE

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