

S e r m o n s o n  
Matthew

What Wise Men Do

*Matthew 2:1-12*

*With Study Questions*

*Pastor Paul Viggiano  
Branch of Hope Church  
2370 W. Carson Street, #100  
Torrance, CA 90501  
(310) 212-6999  
[pastorpaul@integrity.com](mailto:pastorpaul@integrity.com)  
[www.branchofhope.org](http://www.branchofhope.org)  
11/30/2003*

# What Wise Men Do

*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 have seen His star in the East 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 when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

<sup>5</sup> So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup>"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;  
For out of you shall come a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel!"

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.<sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."<sup>9</sup> When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

<sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.<sup>11</sup> And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.<sup>12</sup> Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

## **The Story**

Above is the first half of a story that goes something like this: wise men from the east come to worship the baby Jesus. Herod, who had been made king over the Jews by the Romans was not particularly excited about this event, nor were the people of Jerusalem. Herod begins to make inquiry of the wise men and his own priests and scribes regarding the time and place of the Christ's birth in order to destroy Him.

The wise men find the newly born King, worship Him and give Him gifts. They are warned in a dream of Herod's true motives and depart for their own country another way. Joseph is also warned in a dream to take Jesus to Egypt. Herod, in a fit of rage (something common for him), engages in the stomach-turning massacre of every male child, two years and under, in Bethlehem and all its districts.

Eventually Herod dies and Joseph, in another dream, is told to bring the baby back to Israel. But the new king, Herod's son, is still a danger so Joseph is warned that he should go to Nazareth.

## **Introduction**

The following are the points I will seek to highlight as we examine this story:

1) What is Matthew's main point in this portion of the text? 2) What is the significance of the wise men? 3) What was Israel's response to Christ and why? 4) Why was all the evidence useless to save? 5) Why did the wise men worship Christ?

## **I. Matthew's Point**

What is Matthew's point in conveying this story? What are we to learn? Before we make some specific observations in this story, let's look at the big picture.

The gospels are the good news—the good news that Christ has come to save that which was lost (Matthew 18:11). In Matthew it is emphatic that Christ is the promised King who will bless the world by the advancement of His kingdom. We've already seen

this brought forth in the His royal genealogy and by what the angels conveyed to Joseph regarding Jesus' mission to save His people (Matthew 1).

In chapter two of Matthew we will continue to be made aware of who Christ is. Matthew will make numerous allusions to Jesus as the promised Christ by virtue of fulfilled prophecy. For example: 1) He was born in Bethlehem (verse 6—Micah 5:2); 2) He would be called out of Egypt (verse 15—Hosea 11:1); 3) His birth would be accompanied by the tragic death of children (verse 18—Jeremiah 31:15); and, 4) He would be called a Nazarene (verse 23—Judges 13:5).

One can hardly miss Matthew's point; the hornet's nest which surrounds the birth of the King is according to God's holy design and confirms that He is indeed the Promised One. No master conspirator could possibly orchestrate the series of events necessary to fulfill these, and the numerous other prophecies concerning the Christ. It would never be a matter of whether or not this was the Christ but rather what man's response would be to this undeniable truth. Now let us make some observations regarding man's response to this King.

## II. The Significance of the Wise Men

What is the significance of the wise men? Why are they part of this story?

### **A Rare Anthem**

So how would God the Father introduce His Son into the world? God had promised that through the seed of Abraham—the Jewish nation—the world would be blessed and now the King has come. Would the blessed nation receive Him with trumpets and fanfare? Their long-awaited Messiah was here! The response of Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the announced birth of Christ should have been the national anthem of Israel when she sang,

<sup>50</sup> **And His mercy is on those who fear Him**  
**From generation to generation.**  
<sup>51</sup> **He has shown strength with His arm;**  
**He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.**  
<sup>52</sup> **He has put down the mighty from their thrones,**  
**And exalted the lowly.**  
<sup>53</sup> **He has filled the hungry with good things,**  
**And the rich He has sent away empty.**  
<sup>54</sup> **He has helped His servant Israel,**  
**In remembrance of His mercy,**  
<sup>55</sup> **As He spoke to our fathers,**  
**To Abraham and to his seed forever" (Luke 1:50-55).**

Mary certainly appreciated the gravity of the event! She was in the minority. The introduction of Christ into the human race was anything but regal. Let us examine Matthew's account.

### **An Ignored King**

**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 have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him" (Matthew 2:1, 2).**

But wait! Do we not here see a desire to worship Jesus? Yes, but by whom and under what conditions? Why the wise men? No doubt a substantial amount of time had passed since the birth of the child. He was no longer in the stable but in a house (verse 10). By the reckoning of Herod the child could have been up to two years old.

But even if it had only been months, why the difficulty in finding the King? Was not the glory of the Lord revealed to the shepherds (Luke 2)? Did not Anna and Simeon proclaim that this child was the Consolation of Israel (Luke 2)? How true was John's indictment, "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11)?

## **Extolled by Foreigners**

The regal splendor due the King would be rendered, not by His own people, but by gentiles, magi. There is endless speculation as to who these magi were and how many. There is no certain answer to those questions. We know they were not Israelites, and that they were from the East—perhaps Persia or Arabia.

One wonders if they were astonished at Israel's lack of faith. Their questions must have been fairly public (Herod knew of them). Where is the King? We have come to worship Him. Perhaps they thought there would be a procession. How long must they stand in line to offer their gifts? Their problem wasn't the length of the line; their problem was finding the King.

Aliens will often travel long and hard to the shores of America; arguably the freest nation ever. How vexing it must be to see Americans exercising their freedom by burning the flags which symbolize that very freedom. How vexing it must have been for these magi when they came to realize that the glory of the King was obscured by men's complacency.

Yet they were undaunted by the humble surroundings of the King. They did not wait to see what riches this King might provide, nor did they wait for the King to reach their own land. Impatient they were to become acquainted with Christ the King. Early we see the King's ministry would extend beyond the borders of Israel. We know little of the magi but Matthew Henry profoundly explains,

**Well, whatever sort of wise men they were before, now they began to be *wise men* indeed when they set themselves to enquire after Christ.<sup>1</sup>**

Not so with Herod and Jerusalem!

## **III. A Troubled King and People**

What was Israel's response to Christ and why?

**When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him (Matthew 2:3).**

### **A Wicked King—A Wicked Generation**

Why would Herod the king be troubled? Why would Jerusalem be troubled? Herod was an Edomite (descendant of Esau). According to the prophecy in Genesis 49:10 (the scepter departing from Judah) his office of king would usher in the Messiah. Although he held the office of a religious man, he didn't demonstrate an iota of genuine faith. Similarly the people of Israel had no genuine faith. Numerous times throughout this gospel Matthew will record Jesus' indictment against this wicked generation (Matthew 12:39-45; 16:4; 17:17).

### **Troubled by Nothing?**

But why would they be troubled if they had no faith? If I don't believe in lightning why would reports of lightning be bothersome to me? The answer is that Herod and the Israelites—and all men—have faith (Romans 1:18-23); just not saving faith. They know there is a God and there will be a day of reckoning.

The atheist argues that there is no God. But even in the shortest conversation with an atheist one can detect, not merely disinterest, but hostility toward God. I am neither mad at nor do I fear purple dragons. They simply get none of my attention. I am certainly not going to form an anti-purple dragon society. If there is no God, why do atheists hate Him so much?

Herod and the people of Jerusalem were troubled because they were living in open rebellion against a God who they knew existed. And they were aware of His Son/King who would perform those actions which Mary sung of earlier. He will scatter the proud and put down the mighty. He will fill the hungry with good things and exalt the lowly.

---

<sup>1</sup>Henry, M. (1996, c1991). Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: Complete and unabridged in one volume (Mt 2:1). Peabody: Hendrickson.

## **A Kingdom of Impact**

Unlike the impotent and emasculated forms of Christianity we see pervasive in our society—Christianity which is merely warmed over psychotherapy, religious self-help and monastic culture-retreat—Herod knew his very throne was at stake, the people of Jerusalem knew that rebellion against the King meant certain decimation. They were no doubt familiar with Psalm 2.

<sup>10</sup> **Now therefore, be wise, O kings;**

**Be instructed, you judges of the earth.**

<sup>11</sup> **Serve the Lord with fear,**

**And rejoice with trembling.**

<sup>12</sup> **Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,**

**And you perish in the way,**

**When His wrath is kindled but a little.**

**Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him (Psalm 2:10-12).**

But Herod would not kiss the Son. Instead he gathered priests and scribes and used what knowledge of God he had to seek to kill the Son.

## **IV. Evidence**

### **All the Evidence but no Verdict**

**And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:**

*<sup>6</sup> But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;  
For out of you shall come a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel!"*

<sup>7</sup> **Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also" (Matthew 2:4-8).**

How strongly does this argue against the value of evidences to convert men! Herod, the priests, the scribes, this whole generation saw the fulfillment of Scripture (Micah 5:2); they saw wondrous things. These magnificent evidences, instead of converting them, merely became a testimony against them. Christ's reprimand is seen later in Matthew.

**Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: <sup>21</sup> "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes (Matthew 11:20, 21).**

Truly faith comes from above. This is yet another testimony that it is God who "grant(s)... repentance, so that they may know the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25).

## **V. They Worshiped Him**

**When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. <sup>11</sup> And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> Then, being**

**divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way (Matthew 2:9-12).**

Not much explanation is given regarding the star so we won't go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6). That it stood over the house indicates that it probably wasn't what we commonly understand as a star. We do not know that there were three wise men; this is usually deduced from there being three gifts but it cannot be positively shown. Nor do we know the significance of the gifts. It is often postulated that the gold was for His royalty, the frankincense for His deity, and the myrrh for His death (but these are only guesses).

It is significant that the expression used to convey their presentation of gifts to Jesus is **"in the New Testament employed seven times, and always in a religious sense of offerings to God. Beyond doubt, therefore, we are to understand the presentation of these gifts by the Magi as a religious offering."**<sup>2</sup> If Jesus were not God, this behavior by the wise men would have been worthy of a rebuke. For as we will learn in this very gospel,

**Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Matthew 4:10).**

### **Worthy of Praise**

But it was God incarnate who these wise men worshiped; and wise men still worship Him. The faithlessness of Israel seemed to have no effect upon them. They did not say, "I will not worship Jesus because the church is full of hypocrites." The faithlessness of man has never been an indictment against God. We learn through the apostle,

**Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?**

**<sup>4</sup>Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar**

**(Romans 3:3, 4).**

These wise men worshiped Christ, not because of any program, or offer of self-esteem, or significance. The manger, or the house, where the baby lay had no witty strategies for church growth. There were no clever slogans or small groups where people could discuss their feelings.

The wise men worshiped Christ because He was worthy of worship. The wise men attended this worship service because they had been given a message that there was a glorious King who deserved their praise, faith, and allegiance. This is the message that attracts wise men—this is the message that makes men wise.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 2:11). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

## Questions for Study

1. What is Matthew's main point in conveying this story (page 2)?
2. Why do you suppose wise men are brought into the narrative (pages 2, 3)?
3. What should Israel's response to Christ have been (pages 4, 5)?
4. How did Israel's lack of faith affect the wise men (page 4)?
5. Why did the birth of Christ trouble Herod and Jerusalem (pages 4, 5)?
6. If they had no faith why would they seek to destroy Christ? What does this tell us about atheism (pages 4, 5)?
7. How would Christ the King be a threat to Herod the king (page 4)?
8. How could Herod and the Israelites ignore the clear evidence of the Christ (page 5)?
9. What does the fact that the wise men worshiped Jesus tell us about the nature of Jesus (pages 5, 6)?
10. What was the attraction of Jesus to the wise men (page 6)?