

# God Leads Us To Bethlehem

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**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>1</sup>.'" <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.

Who are these men from the east? We often refer to them as wisemen or as the three kings, but the truth is they were neither. They were gentiles. They were probably astrologers and practitioners of other occult superstitions. Most importantly they were people whom God in grace and through his word lead out of darkness to Bethlehem to know the Christ.

Despite the popular song, they were certainly not kings or any type of royalty. It is true that the term king was sometimes used for those of a lesser rank who helped rule in the king's name. This would have applied to people like governors or princes. The Magi were never referred to in this way. They were not in any sense rulers. They were not even a part of the administrative bureaucracy.

They were not wise men. This is a term that arose in the 18th century and probably not before. After the 18th century they are often portrayed as men who sought knowledge in the nature world, and recognized by their wisdom this star which would lead them to the Christ. This is not, however, what the ancient term Magi implies.

The Magi as a group were men, who sought to predict the future through occult lore, such as dreams and palm reading and star gazing. They were not a part of God's chosen people. The text makes it clear that they did not know the scriptures, or at least not well.

They were not rulers they were not wise in the learned sense. They were exactly what Paul describes in Ephesians 2:12 when he is talking about us.

**Ephesians 2:12** without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

These men were gentiles. They were ignorant. They were sinners. They had no business showing up in Jerusalem. Which is why Matthew introduces them with a word of astonishment: "behold." "**Behold**" God "**who is rich in mercy**" led them forth from their darkness and revealed himself to them in the person of Jesus Christ and used them for his own purposes and to fulfill his plan to redeem all people include you and I from sin.

The apostle Matthew makes it clear that the appearance of these Magi in Jerusalem is just as astonishing as the appearance of the angels in the fields near Bethlehem. It is part of the wonderful, good news of Jesus birth that these gentiles are called to faith. That God would by his grace and power call such men out of their pagan mysticism and reveal himself to them is indeed "**good tidings of great joy.**" For as Paul says in Eph 2:12 such people were we, for we who were far off like these men have been brought near through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the thing that we celebrate during Epiphany. Not that great kings brought rich gifts to Jesus. Not that wise men through their own wisdom found their way to Jesus. We celebrate that God shone forth the light of his word into the darkness of sinful hearts and revealed himself to pagan gentile sinners.

**1 Corinthians 1:21-25** 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

These men did not find Jesus through their wisdom or through occult practices. They were called by the power of God's word to faith and through that word they found Christ.

Although there is no indication that the term "wisemen" was used before the 18th century, I did not find anything that indicated why that term become popular. However, it does seem likely that many people would like to believe that these men were seekers after knowledge and that this seeking of natural knowledge lead them to Christ. That is an idea that would have been popular during the 18th century. It is an idea that would be very popular today, "let us seek good through our wisdom, through our knowledge." It is however an idea that is contrary to scripture.

When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus responded, "**flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.**" **Matthew 16:17**

**1 Corinthians 12:3** no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

How did they know that the star they saw was an indication of the birth of the "King of the Jews?" How did they even know about the prophecies of the coming Messiah? The simple answer is that we do not know. Scripture does not tell us. What we do know, and what is important, is that the star did not send

them to Bethlehem. It was God's word that sent them to Bethlehem. The star appeared again and led them only after they had learned from God's word that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.

It is possible that they knew something of the true God and of his promises. It is possible that some knowledge of this was passed down through the years from when the Jews were captives in Babylon. Or even that there was still a Jewish synagogue in the area they were from. It is even possible that until they left Jerusalem it was just an ordinary star.

Even if it was their wisdom that understood the star to be a sign of the Messiah. It was God's word that sent them to Bethlehem. These men didn't find their way to Christ through their cleverness or wisdom. Just like us they were called through the word.

We are often tempted to seek truth through our own wisdom, but that kind of truth leads us astray. That kind of wisdom is seen in our text in Herod, who wants to kill the child because he is afraid of his throne. The wisdom of man is seen in the priests and scribes who know where the Christ was to be born but can't be bothered to go and look. The wisdom of man is seen in the crowds who only care that Herod is troubled. That is where the wisdom of man gets you, but when the Magi follow the word of God, they find Bethlehem and God's promised redemption.

It is only God's word that will lead us to Christ.

July 20, 1969, was an incredible day. Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon. Some of you, I'm sure, remember it well. Mankind achieved something astonishing that day. The wise men of this world are able to do wonders, but it doesn't mean anything if we forget who created us and redeemed us from death.

God's word leads us somewhere that man's wisdom never can, it leads us to Bethlehem. There God's plan for our salvation is revealed. There we find the Christ who was born to redeem us from sin. Amen.