

The Wise Men From the East (Part 1)

Matthew 2:1-2

INTRODUCTION:

Matthew 2:1-2 (NASB95)

BODY:

I. Old Testament Prophecies Pointing to the Birth of Christ.

A. The Timing of the Messiah's Birth

Daniel 9:24a (NASB95)

Daniel 9:24b (NASB95)

B. From the Going Forth of the Commandment

Daniel 9:25-26a (NASB95)

C. *The Coming Prince* Timeline

Numbers 4:43 (NASB95)

1 Samuel 2:35 (NASB95)

D. The Place and the Sign

Micah 5:2 (NASB95)

Numbers 24:17 (NASB95)

II. The Arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem.

A. Who were the Wise Men Called Magi?

Matthew 2:1 (NASB95)

Matthew 2:2 (NASB95)

B. What was the star of Bethlehem?

CONCLUSION:

John 3:17 (NASB95)

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INTRODUCTION:

You can blame Neil for this week's and next week's sermon which will be presented in two parts, Lord willing.

He asked "How many wise men were at the manger?"

It is a common misconception that the wise men visited Jesus at the stable on the night of His birth. In fact, the wise men came days, months, or possibly even years later. That is why Matthew 2:11 says the wise men visited and worshiped Jesus in a **house**, not at the stable.

We assume that there were three wise men because of the three gifts that were given: gold, incense, and myrrh. However, the Bible does not say there were only three wise men. There could have been many more. Tradition says that there were three and that their names were Gaspar, Melchior (Mel' Cure), and Balthazar (Bow They' Zur), but since the Bible does not say, we have no way of knowing whether the tradition is accurate.

We know that the Magi were wise men from "the East," most likely Persia, or modern-day Iran. This means the wise men traveled 800 to 900 miles to see the Christ child. Most likely, the Magi knew of the writings of the prophet Daniel, who in time past had been the chief of the court seers in Persia. [Daniel 9:24-27](#) includes a prophecy which gives a timeline for the birth of the Messiah. Also, the Magi may have been aware of the prophecy of Balaam (who was from the town of Pethor on the Euphrates River near Persia) in [Numbers 24:17](#). Balaam's prophecy specifically mentions a "star coming out of Jacob."

We will look at these prophecies later in the message.

It is amazing that these wise men were able to pinpoint precisely when the Messiah had been born. They did a much better job than us.

We created a dating system that was to make the birth of Jesus Christ the dividing point of world history. It was B.C. and A.D. It is commonly thought that B.C. stands for "before Christ" and A.D. stands for "after death." This is only half correct. How could the year 1 B.C. have been "before Christ" and A.D. 1 been "after death"? B.C. does stand for "before Christ." but A.D. actually stands for the Latin phrase *anno domini*, which means "**in the year of our Lord.**"

The idea to count years from the birth of Jesus Christ was first proposed in the year 525 A.D. by Dionysius Exiguus (Die Oh Knee' See Us X Zig' You Us), a Christian monk several centuries after Jesus' death. However, when the B.C./A.D. system was being calculated, he actually made a mistake in pinpointing the year of Jesus' birth. Scholars later discovered that Jesus was actually born around 6—4 B.C. during the lifetime of Herod, not A.D. 1. Today, based on historical evidence relating to Herod most historians believe Christ was born a few years earlier.

We can make this assumption because of Herod's desire to kill the children two years old and under. Herod probably set the age of two years old in order to be sure he killed the one who was to be king, thinking that the wise men had been traveling for some time. But we know from historical records that Herod died in the spring of 4 B.C. We also know that Joseph was warned that Herod was seeking to kill Jesus and that they must flee to Egypt. So we know that Jesus was born during Herod's lifetime. So the sequence would be: Jesus was born somewhere around late 5 B.C. or early 4 B.C., the wise men showed up in early spring, and Herod the Great died shortly after having the children slaughtered.

It is clear enough to see that the story traces the quest of these Magi to find the one who was born king of the Jews. They arrive in the palace, they receive directions, they are "coached" by king Herod, they visit Bethlehem, and they do homage to the child.

Matthew underscores the truth that Jesus is the promised Messiah, which would be a source of joy to the nations and a real threat to Herod, the reigning evil king.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Matthew 2:1-2 (NASB95)

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ² "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

Prayer

BODY:

I. Old Testament Prophecies Pointing to the Birth of Christ.

Using the same approach as the author employs in Hebrews, I would like to start with the prophecies from the Old Testament concerning the birth of Christ and how the Wise Men would know when Jesus would arrive and how they could find Him. What exactly did they know? The Bible doesn't explicitly tell us, but we can find some clues in the Scriptures that provide some answers.

A. The Timing of the Messiah's Birth

Daniel records a clear prophecy of the Messiah who would present Himself to His people, would be hailed as the One who would come in the name of the Lord and then be killed.

This passage gives a timeline from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem, to the Messiah's triumphal entry into the city, and then to His being "cut off" (killed).

Daniel 9:24a (NASB95)

²⁴ "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city,

Israel understood "week" to mean seven. Just as we would say three dozen equals 36 (dozen meaning 12), or seven decades equals 70 years (decade meaning 10), so also the Jews understood "seventy weeks" to mean "seventy sevens," or 70 x 7, which equals 490. That 490 is the number of years until the Messiah would come and accomplish the following:

Daniel 9:24b (NASB95)

²⁴ “Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy *place*.”

B. From the Going Forth of the Commandment

The prophecy that was given, by the angel Gabriel to Daniel, then went on to announce when the beginning of these seventy weeks would occur. This set a clear time frame for future events.

Daniel 9:25-26a (NASB95)

²⁵ So you are to know and discern *that* from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince *there will be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. ²⁶ Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing,

The 70 sevens began with the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem that was issued by Artaxerxes Longimanus in 445 BC in **Nehemiah 2:5**. With that starting date, the “**seven weeks and sixty-two weeks**” equals 69 weeks, which the angel Gabriel prophesied about and which takes us to the date of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday.

C. The Coming Prince Timeline

Sir Robert Anderson in his book, *The Coming Prince*, laid out the timeline in precise detail to the exact day when the Messiah would be “cut off” (“cut off” is a Jewish term for killed). In order to keep this message within its allotted time we will accept that the date of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and His death on the cross can be determined precisely by the words of the angel Gabriel given to Daniel. With this knowledge, the Wise Men could have easily counted forward and determined the time when the Messiah would be killed. They could have also known from the Hebrew Scriptures that service as a priest started at the age of thirty.

Numbers 4:43 (NASB95)

⁴³ from thirty years and upward even to fifty years old, everyone who entered the service for work in the tent of meeting.

They also knew that God promised He would raise up a faithful priest.

1 Samuel 2:35 (NASB95)

³⁵ But I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in My heart and in My soul; and I will build him an enduring house, and he will walk before My anointed always.

Therefore, the Messiah would have been more than 30 years old and the Wise Men could have counted backward 30+ years from the date of the Messiah’s death and determine an approximate time of His birth.

D. The Place and the Sign

Knowing the approximate time of the Messiah's birth the Wise Men would have known to be watching for the birth of the Messiah.

Micah 5:2 (NASB95)

² "But as for you, **Bethlehem** Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity."

Numbers 24:17 (NASB95)

¹⁷ "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; **A star shall come forth from Jacob**, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth.

It is interesting that the star first led them to Jerusalem and when they arrived in Jerusalem they asked where they might find the "King of the Jews". Did they **not** know that Micah had placed His birth in Bethlehem? The answer, I believe, is that they had to go to Jerusalem first because it had been prophesied that Jesus would come out of Egypt. This may not have happened if Herod had not be involved and sought to kill all boys two years and under and thus have an angel tell Joseph to flee to Egypt while Herod was alive.

With these prophesies now fulfilled, it is easy for us to look back and understand the Scripture that revealed Jesus' time and place of birth. However, we know that hindsight is always clearer than foresight, so it causes us to wonder how the Wise Men could have understood the prophecies.

The Bible does not explicitly tell us, but it is clear that the wise men **did** understand them well enough to believe that this Child was the promised King of the Jews (the Promised Messiah) and they should follow "His star." Perhaps Daniel had opened the Scriptures to the Magi of his time. Perhaps through the Scriptures and Daniel's testimony, these men came to fear the Lord, for we know that "**the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge**" as found in **Prov. 1:7** and "**the beginning of wisdom**" as found in **Prov. 9:10**. This "fear" is a reverence, respect, and trust of the Lord and His revealed will.

It is no wonder the Bible calls them wise men. Their wisdom was likely born from a knowledge and fear of the Lord and was then handed down throughout the centuries.

II. The Arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem.

A. Who were the Wise Men Called Magi?

Matthew 2:1 (NASB95)

² Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem,

The Wise Men, or Magi, were educated and notable men who studied the stars and apparently knew the prophecies very well. It is thought to have been Daniel the Prophet who first introduced the Magi to the Holy Scriptures of the God of Israel. And, it is believed that throughout the centuries these wise men studied the Hebrew Scriptures; and therefore understood the timing of the Messiah's birth and the sign that would lead them to the place where He would be born.

They were men, possibly kings, from the East (most likely the area of Persia, or modern-day Iran). They were very interested in astronomy/astrology. When they observed the movements of stars and planets they carefully recorded everything they saw. Anything out of the ordinary was taken by them to be some kind of an omen. Now they had seen a star that could not be identified.

When they recognized “His star” they were diligent in setting out and following it to Jerusalem and eventually to the Christ Child. The Bible also tells us that their intention was grounded in knowing that this Child was born the King of the Jews and so they came to worship Him.

Matthew 2:2 (NASB95)

saying, ² “Where is **He who has been born King of the Jews?** For **we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.**”

Again, the Bible is correct in calling the Magi “wise men.” By the evidence of their watching for “His star,” traveling to Jerusalem to seek the “King of the Jews,” and desiring to worship Him, we can know that the Wise Men trusted in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and they believed His Word as written by the prophets.

These types of wise men were diligent to discover what signs and omens meant. And if they had recourse to the holy books of Israel, which they very well could have had in the east since Babylon remained a center of Jewish studies, they might have come across the prophecy of Balaam, an early prophet from the east who had predicted that a star would march forth in Israel as we just read from **Num. 24:17**. It may be that they saw the phenomenon, searched their collections of books, talked to various scribes of the different religions, and learned that Israel was the place. If they had inquired about it further, they might have discovered that this one who was to be born would be special, worthy of worship. Then, when the star led them to Jerusalem, where would they have gone looking for a king but to the palace?

Of course it is also possible that the Lord simply revealed these things to them when they saw the star, as He had with the shepherds, and then confirmed the revelation when the star appeared over the house where Jesus was.

B. What was the star of Bethlehem?

What exactly was the star of Bethlehem? The Magi in the East saw something in the heavens—the star of Bethlehem—that alerted them to the fact that the Jewish Messiah was born. The Magi do not call the star of Bethlehem by that name; they refer to it as being “His star,” since it was a sign to them that a king was born. The star prompted the Magi to follow the star to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel.

The Greek word translated “star” in the text is the word *aster*, which is the normal word for a star or celestial body. The word is used 24 times in the New Testament, and most of the time it refers to a celestial body. It can be used to denote angels, as in **Revelation 12:4**, where “aster” seems to refer to the fallen angels who followed Satan’s rebellion. Basic rules of biblical interpretation state that we should take the normal sense of a word unless there is compelling evidence to suggest otherwise. In that case, the star of Bethlehem should be considered an actual heavenly body. Something in the heavens provided a brighter-than-normal light in the sky.

However, there is evidence to suggest that the star of Bethlehem was not a **natural** stellar phenomenon, but something **unexplained** by science. First, the fact that the star of Bethlehem seemed to appear only to the Magi indicates that this was no ordinary star. Also, celestial bodies normally move from east to west due to the earth's rotation, yet the star of Bethlehem led the Magi from Jerusalem **south** to Bethlehem. Not only that, but it led them directly to the place where Joseph and Mary were staying and **stopped overhead**. There is no natural stellar phenomenon that can do that.

So, if the normal usage of the word *star* doesn't fit the context, what does? The star of Bethlehem in was likely an angel or a manifestation of the Shekinah (She kai' Nuh) Glory. The Shekinah, which literally means "dwelling of God," was the visible presence of the Lord. Prior to this, the most notable appearance of the Shekinah was the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites by day and the pillar of fire that led them by night in **Exodus 13:21**. The Shekinah can obviously lead people to specific locations. Either an angel or the Shekinah would fit the way in which the star moved. It should not surprise us that God would use a miraculous sign to signal the birth of His Son into the world. Those with "eyes to see" joyfully beheld His glory.

CONCLUSION:

The Magi were truly wise men!

There is more here than a visit to a child who would be king someday. These Magi worshiped him. That was the intent of their coming. And so the narrative also reminds us that this child Jesus was far more than a future king. Only if He is divine could He be worshiped.

The lesson we can learn from the Wise Men/Magi is that we, too, must trust in what God has said in His Word. He gives us wisdom, just as He gave it to the Magi. The Magi were Wise Men who believed God and His Word and acted accordingly. Christmas is a wonderful time to reflect on the greatest gift God gave to mankind when He sent His son into the world. It is a great time to examine our hearts and ask ourselves if we are wise men?

John 3:17 (NASB95)

¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

On this Christmas day I pray that you will be like those wise men—seeking Jesus with your whole heart, and then by faith committing your life to Him. He is the greatest gift you will ever receive.

Go Tell it on the Mountain