

# The Faith of the Wise Men

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 49:1-6

Background Scripture: Micah 5:2-4; Matthew 2:1-12

Today's Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

## I. The New King Is Born

### Matthew 2:1-2

**1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,**

**2 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.**

1a. Matthew gives fewer details about the actual birth of Jesus than does Luke. Instead, Matthew relates the nativity story with simplicity: *Jesus was born in Bethlehem*. A few details are added, tying his account to the geography and history of Palestine. *Bethlehem* (meaning “house of bread”) of *Judaea* was a village located a few miles south-southwest of Jerusalem.

1b. The phrase *the days of Herod the king* sets the context of a specific ruler in an identifiable time frame. This is the king known as Herod the Great, who ruled 37–4 BC as the first Roman puppet-king of Judea. The name *Herod* occurs in the New Testament about 40 times, often referring to different people—it’s a challenge not to get them confused! According to our best records, the Herod in view here died in 4 BC. Therefore, the events in today’s text take place shortly before that.

Herod is designated “the Great” be-

cause of his extensive building projects. The grandest of these was the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, a project he began about 20 BC and that was unfinished at the time of his death.

1c. Many legends have arisen in Christian tradition about these *wise men*. These include speculations regarding their occupations, their number, their names, and their place of origin. Matthew’s account doesn’t answer such questions.

2a. Verse 7 indicates that the wise men were granted an audience with Herod at some point. But we aren’t sure that was the case, as the wise men posed the question in the verse before us. An immediate audience would indicate that they were not a rag-tag group of nobodies! They either had diplomatic letters of introduction, could offer generous bribes, or presented such a regal appearance that Herod agreed to see them sooner rather than later.

2b. The reason for the wise men’s question is threefold. First, the fact that a particular *star* caught their attention points to their vocation as learned stargazers. These were astrologers who spent many hours attempting to interpret astral movements as omens from deities. While the Old Testament connects divination with pagan idolatry, we should not rule out God’s use of a specially prepared star to signal the birth of Jesus.

Second, the wise men's departure point *in the east* yields the possibility that they were Jews from the large Jewish community that remained in Babylon after the exile ended around 538 BC. But that possibility seems unlikely, given their astrological orientation.

Third, the wise men interpreted the new star as a sign that the newly arrived King of the Jews was important enough to be worthy of their *worship*. Although not specified by Matthew, this is often seen as a fulfillment of the "Star out of Jacob" prophecy of Numbers 24:17. Whether these men were Jews or not, this realization had touched them profoundly—so much so that they were willing to come to Jerusalem at enormous cost and considerable danger.

## II. The Old King Is Troubled Matthew 2:3-8

**3** When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

**4** And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

**5** And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

**6** And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

**7** Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

**8** And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

3. The wise men's inquiry did not sit

well with *Herod*. He was an old man who had sons and wives put to death when seen as threats to his throne. So Matthew, in grand understatement, says Herod *was troubled*. This was not mild irritation! In *Jerusalem*, when Herod wasn't happy, no one in Jerusalem was happy, fearing another murderous rampage. The people of the city would be willing to do about anything to placate the king.

4. *The chief priests* ruled Jerusalem's temple. They had an uneasy alliance with Herod that had enriched them greatly as the party of the Sadducees. The *scribes* were the experts in the Jewish Scriptures, often called upon to interpret fine points of the Law of Moses.

Herod was no expert on things such as prophecies concerning coming kings. Even so, he was apparently aware that the Jews believed a *Christ* was coming, the chosen Messiah of the Lord. Herod connected these prophecies with the inquiry of the wise men. Therefore, he *demand*ed the religious leaders to reveal the birthplace of the Messiah, believing it must be specified in the writings of the prophets.

5-6. In response, the religious leaders quoted Micah 5:2. On the precise designation *Bethlehem of Judaea* The prophet Micah worked in the eighth century BC. So this prophecy was already 700 years old at the time of Herod.

The Gospel of Matthew shows great interest in fulfilled prophecy, so this verse is a highlight. Micah's prophecy checks many boxes. It recognizes the relative insignificance of Bethlehem, still valid in Herod's day. It foretells the raising up of a new *Governor* or ruler from this city. And it indicates this person would not be a mere city ruler or district supervisor. Instead, the prophesied Messiah would *rule my people Israel*.

7. The word *privily* indicates that *Herod* had dismissed the religious leaders in

order to meet with *the wise men* alone. He set aside his rage in favor of putting on his happy face for this meeting. Ancient astrology was based on keeping precise records, so the wise men would have known the *time the star appeared*. The response of the wise men is not given. But we know the answer must have been at least four months prior to this meeting, since that's the time required for the wise men to have walked to Jerusalem. The wise men's response was important to Herod because it determined the time window of his murderous decision in Matthew 2:16.

8. Since we know Herod's real intent and how things turned out, the story becomes downright sinister at this point. His expressed desire to *worship him also* is a flat-out lie. But since Herod had been helpful to the wise men, they had no reason to suspect ulterior motives. So they took his words at face value.

### III. The Child Is Worshipped Matthew 2:9-12

**9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.**

**10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.**

**11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.**

**12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.**

9-10. The wise men would have exited Jerusalem from a gate near Herod's palace

on the city's western side. We don't know what time of day it was. But to travel near or after sunset in a pre-electricity era simply didn't happen. The *exceeding great joy* the men experienced is thus understandable if the reappearance of *the star, which they saw in the east* happened as (or if) darkness settles. The wise men could walk to Bethlehem in the dark, reaching *the young child* Jesus without waiting until sunrise.

11. The wise men were not empty-handed in their worship of *the young child*. They presented Jesus with costly gifts fit for a king. We easily understand the value of a gift of *gold*. While Matthew does not specify the form of this precious metal, it was likely coins. These were a vital resource for the family's subsequent flight to Egypt. *Frankincense* was considered the finest incense in the ancient world. Made from the resin of the Boswellia tree and imported from southern Arabia and Africa, it was prized for its use in religious ceremonies and as a costly sacrificial offering. *Myrrh* is an aromatic resin of the Commiphora tree. It was (and remains) valued as an ingredient in perfume; it was also used for anointing and in preparing a body for burial. It also had medicinal uses, both as a type of antiseptic for wounds and as a type of pain reduce.

12. The wise men, unsuspecting of Herod's treachery, needed to be *warned of God in a dream* not to report back to that tyrant. This warning served to protect not only the child Jesus but also Mary, Joseph, and the wise men. Herod's intent all along was to have this potential king killed, and the others could have very well ended up feeling the despot's wrath as well.

The wise men left Bethlehem by *another way*, a road that would not take them through Jerusalem. This further confirmed that God was orchestrating the birth and protection of the Messiah.

# Involvement Learning

## The Faith of the Wise Men

### Into the Lesson

Recall the most exciting baby announcement you ever received. What circumstances made this announcement particularly special?

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What hopes and dreams did you have for the coming child?

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As we study today's lesson, consider how the baby announcement and gifts reveal the child's importance to the gift-givers and gift-receivers.

### Into the Word

Read Matthew 2:1-4. Answer the following questions from the perspective of the given character(s).

How did you get the "baby announcement"?

King Herod \_\_\_\_\_

Wise Men \_\_\_\_\_

What was your response to the news?

King Herod \_\_\_\_\_

Wise Men \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you want to know the location of the child?

King Herod \_\_\_\_\_

Wise Men \_\_\_\_\_

Read Matthew 2:5-8. How does Isaiah 9:2-7 connect to the wise men?

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How does Micah 5:2-5 connect to King Herod?

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Read Matthew 2:9-12 and explain how the goals of King Herod and the wise men was either achieved or foiled.

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### Key Verse

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

### Into Life

The wise men lived in faith and showed obedience to God by following the star and believing his guidance. Think about a church ministry to which God is leading you to volunteer. How can you show faith and obedience this week in that ministry?

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### Thought to Remember

Wise men and women seek to worship King Jesus only and fully.