



Good morning I am Josh Burnham and I'm the lead pastor here at Bethel. For all our guests, those watching online, and all our covenant members, welcome! Why are days like today so important? Because we stand in the tradition of the Lord's community who have gathered regularly to worship for thousands of years. Today our gathering is an **expectant worship** gathering, because this is the advent season. Advent simply means "**it's finally here!**" We worship today with a He is finally here mentality!

For the next several weeks we will look at the Merry and Bright nature of the Christmas story. Specifically, we gaze today at the brightness of the impact of Messiah upon the wise men.

**"It's worth the Journey" (Matthew 2:1-12) pg # ???**

In the days of Herod, the king, wise men (magi) came from the east to Jerusalem. **Who were these men?** After countless hours of scholarly investigation, I am confident to report that these men did not ride up to Jerusalem singing "**we three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.**" By the small chance I am wrong in my estimation and they were singing the famous song by Anne Murray, they would have sung in Aramaic, Arabic or another Persian dialect.

The biblical evidence is scant and scholars have little to offer about the caravan. Most likely they were Zoroastrian influenced astrologers who studied the universe and movement of the planets. Possibly from Iran, they were nobles of the priestly caste who brought rich diplomatic gifts of significance for the new born king. **And this all takes place**, according to Matthew in two specific towns, Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

**Bethlehem** was a small village of 500 people. At the time of Jesus, this tiny city had little prestige and no significance. It's claim to fame was the grave of Rachel (Jacob), setting of Ruth, and the birthplace of the most famous shepherd in Israel's history, a man named David. By providence, David was also the most famous King in Israel's existence, but everyone knows that Kings live in Jerusalem.

**Jerusalem** was everything that Bethlehem wanted to be. A large urban center with a population of 600,000+. It was the location of the Temple. It was the center of religious pilgrimage. In fact, the sheep raised in Bethlehem supplied the temple cult. Jerusalem housed the political and religious elite – chief priests, Pharisees and scribes—steeped in religious education. It was Jerusalem who housed the King of the Jews, Herod, his expansive fortress and the ever-growing Herodian temple complex. Everyone knows that kings live in Jerusalem.

**Everyone is seeking a king (Matthew 2:1)** Immediately in the nativity narrative, we are confronted with a clash of worlds: the unexpected Bethlehem and the unaware Jerusalem. The true king born in Bethlehem exposes our **search**. The reality is that we are all seeking something.

Herod sought prestige, power, authority. He lived in Jerusalem because this is where kings live. Maybe, thought Herod, if I live in the correct neighborhood I will be accepted. **Are you seeking the approval of others based on status, or geography.** We are all building some kingdom. The reality is that **Herod would never be accepted**—as an Idumean (Edomite half-caste) in Jewish eyes, he was unfit to rule.

The chief priests and scribes tolerated the king Herod. They tolerated the false king because he was **useful**. Because of Herod, the Sadducees and religious order had power and authority. Everyone is seeking a King. Like the priests and scribes, **Are you tolerating something or something that you know is not good, but It is useful?** Sin? Sinful relationships? Are you basing your friendships on usefulness?

**Everyone knows that kings live in Jerusalem. But what if they don't?** When the wise men enter the scene and ask, “where is he born king of the Jews” they open a colossal can of worms. **In asking this simple question, they expose Herod’s heart.** If Herod were a true devotee of the Judaism of Scripture, he should have rejoiced greatly, but he does not. Instead, he views the new child as a mortal threat.

“Disturbed” is too weak a translation of his reaction; “in turmoil” or even “**terrified**” (cf. Weymouth, “greatly agitated”) would be more accurate. There is something **joyfully terrifying** about **Christmas. In acknowledging Jesus as king, we must admit that we are not. Will you admit today that true kings are born in Bethlehem?** **Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign in sabotage.” -CS Lewis**

Although the simple question revealed the heart of Herod(s); it also displayed the heart of authenticity. **Authentic hearts always find revealed truth.** These men had followed a star believing it would change their lives. They were simply truth-seekers. Psalm 24:3 reminds us this truth remains today, **“who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and pure heart.”** **The wise men had authentic hearts. Will you seek him in sincerity and truth?**

The magi found abundant life, not in their own Eastern religions. It wasn't in Jerusalem and it wasn't among the religious leaders who should have joined them in their quest. True wisdom is found, they realized, **at the feet of Jesus.** **Authentic hearts always find revealed truth, and to those whose hearts are open to God’s leading, you will find what the wise men found.** And now we turn our attention to the magi.

**It is worth the journey (2:1)** **“From the east”** **The east** (ἀνατολή). Literally, *the rising*. Some commentators prefer to render *at its rising*, or *when it rose*. The journey from Persia could have taken 3-6 months. Can you imagine the discussion in prepping for the journey, **“honey I saw a star today. I know I see stars every day but this star is different. I don’t know how far I must go, but I have to see where it leads.”** Very often, the call of Christ is like the journey of the wise men. To Abraham, Yahweh simply said, “Go from your country” (Gen. 12:1). To Peter and Andrew, Jesus said “follow me” (Matt. 4:18). What would the magi tell us about this lengthy journey? They would say that they followed the star without qualification. They would say we saw the star and we left. They would say the journey was lengthy, the way was rigorous, **but it was worth it.** We must follow Jesus without **qualification!** **It is worth the journey.**

Often, we see slogans that say “**life is about the journey, not the destination.**” That might be true in some cases, but the wise men made it clear that the **destination was the goal**. Three times the magi make it clear that the purpose of their journey is Jesus, and the result of their arrival is worship **He is worthy of your worship (2:2, 8, 11)**. Their posture of worship was appropriate toward gods or toward kings in the East. They understood worship, a word proskuneo in Greek from which we get our word prostrate or lying stretched out on the ground with one’s face downward. The wise men fundamentally understood that to worship Jesus was an attitude and posture of submission. He is worth or worship. **If the only way you could worship Jesus was in a prostrate, face down, position, would you still worship Jesus?** Do you worship in submission or out of convenience?

Apparently the **star** that caused their journey led them to Jerusalem, but the capital city was not their final destination. Now the star reappears and **behold** it guides them to Bethlehem. This is the first time the star is actually said to **move**. And when they see it they rejoice exceedingly with great (**mega**) joy. If ever there was an example to the modern church in how we should celebrate his revealed glory, this is it. **The child of God is, from necessity, a joyful man. His sins are forgiven, his soul is justified, his person is adopted, his trials are blessings, his conflicts are victories, his death is immortality, his future is a heaven of inconceivable, unthought-of, untold, and endless blessedness. With such a God, such a Savior, and such a hope, is he not, ought he not, to be a joyful man?**—Octavius Winslow Is it worth the journey? **He is worthy of your joy, because He is the source of all joy!**

Finding the boy King, they could not wait to bow in worship and show him their gifts and offerings. **He is worth your sacrifice (2:11)** The gifts used to honor the new king were typically associated with **royalty**. **Gold**, then as now, was a precious metal prized for its beauty and value, an appropriate regal gift. **Frankincense and myrrh** were fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship. These were not any gifts, they were costly sacrifices.

Often, we do not experience the provision of Yahweh in our lives because we withhold true sacrifice. Sacrifice/offering means letting go. Many are still enslaved because they hold onto the idol of wealth, status, security, greed and refuse to generously and sacrificially surrender to Jesus. David would be aghast to this type of sacrificial-less Christianity: 2Sam. 24:24 The king answered Araunah, “No, I insist on buying it from you for a price, for I will not offer to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.” David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for twenty ounces of silver. Are you a generous and sacrificial worshiper? He is worth your sacrifice!

**He is worth your return (2:12)** **Being warned** (χρηματισθέντες). The verb means **to give a response to one who asks or consults**: The word therefore implies that the wise men had sought and were continually seeking counsel of God; and so Wycliffe, “*And answer taken in sleep.*”

That the Magi had to be warned by a dream not to return to Herod thus suggests their naiveté, an innocence Jews rarely expected of Gentiles. **The main road they would need to take northward from Bethlehem** went directly through Jerusalem, then eastward through Syria. Given the probably large size of their entourage, the Magi could not approach Jerusalem without being noticed, as Herod knew very well. Indeed, no major route could take them homeward without passing through Jerusalem.

They probably ventured far south to Hebron, then followed the rugged road to Gaza on the coast, where another road could lead them northward. This route would then have carried them through **Nazareth**, then **Capernaum** and on to **Damascus**. **Why even return home?** Can you imagine the

debriefing session when they made it back to the east? **This is news worth sharing. How can you return to the Lord the greatest gift, eternal life?** By sharing it with others. How can we do this? Through the power and leading of the Holy Spirit.

**The Magi remind us that the birth of Jesus is Merry and Bright!**

**So what—Response? Hearing the Gospel is not enough, we must believe.**

*Perhaps this is a dreary winter day for you, when you are not feeling all the Christmas feels. Maybe you are lonely and discouraged. Perhaps you've been rejected. But know this: if you are in Christ, God leveraged the entire universe to shout to you His message of love and drew you to Himself. (Darling, Daniel. The Characters of Christmas)*

Through a star, the creator of the universe displayed His glory and demonstrated His grace to a people from a faraway land. **But seeing the star was not enough.** For us today, knowing the Christmas story and hearing the Gospel is not good enough. The gospel is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem—God in flesh—to bring life to a people who were dead in their sins. And he brought life by dying on a cross in Jerusalem. The birth of Jesus is a picture that we must be **born again**, and that for all who believe, will have abundant life.

*Now that you have heard this good news, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to him using words like this:*

*Jesus today I **recognize** it is because of my (sin) bad actions that I need you.*

*I **believe** Christ came to live, die and was raised from the death—to rescue me from my sin.*

***Forgive** me. I turn from me and put my trust in You.*

*Know that Jesus is Lord and King of all and I will **follow** Him.*

When the Magi returned months later, I can image they were asked: was it worth the journey? **He is!**

**Response: prayer, surrender to ministry, missions, give your life to Jesus, sing, silence?**



# Notes

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- Scholarly observations of Matthew's Birth narrative (an adult Christmas)
  - Matthew follows the typical OT birth announcements
  - Mathew's portrayal of Joseph resembles OT Joseph (Dreams, Egypt)
  - The escape of Jesus from Herod resembles Moses escaping from Pharaoh
- The story of the Magi and the star for Matthew becomes the anticipation of the fate of the good news for salvation, a fate he already knew in the aftermath of the resurrection (An adult Christmas)
- The birth narratives make clear to the reader that Jesus was God at his birth!

**Matt. 2:1** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him."

## Herod

### King of the Jews

- Why a King?
  - Herod had an authority issue. The Messiah was a ruler. There can only be one ruler! Herod was the only ruler in his life!
  - The Herod dominating the birth narratives is Herod the "Great."
    - He has been described as "**a madman who murdered** his own family and a great many rabbis",<sup>[9]</sup> "**the evil genius of the Judean nation**",<sup>[10]</sup> "**prepared to commit any crime in order to gratify his unbounded ambition**",<sup>[11]</sup> and "**the greatest builder in Jewish history**".<sup>[9]</sup> He is known for his colossal building projects throughout Judea, including his expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (Herod's Temple), the construction of the port at Caesarea Maritima, the fortress at Masada and Herodium.
    - His other title was Herod "King of the Jews"
- **Consider Herod** (Matthew 2) Is your reaction to King Jesus as Herod's who was deeply disturbed? The power of Christ is a threat to my control. This is why Herod was upset. He called himself the king of the Jews and now the rightful king has come.
  - Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign in sabotage." [CS Lewis]

**We are Herod.** Trying to control everything in our lives. *There are no control freaks in the kingdom* of God. And the child Jesus wages war against our Herods. How dare we tell the true king that we don't have time to rest (Sabbath) and pay tribute (worship) to him. How dare we not give our treasure in a way that honors the true King Jesus. All of these are cracks the façade of our Herodian behavior.

## Wise Men

- First, the Christological good news draws believers, and those believers are gentiles, the magi (An adult Christmas (12)
  - It was through nature that God revealed himself to the Gentiles
  - For the magi this natural revelation is an imperfect revelation: it tells them of the birth but does not tell them where they can find the King of the Jews (An Adult Christmas)
- Magi (Langenecker)
  - We are not exactly sure who they were
  - Did they ride camels? This idea comes from Psalm 72:10-11 and Isaiah 60
  - We do not know for certain who the Wise Men mentioned in the Nativity story were, and theories and explanations will continue. But if we put all the evidence together, it seems that the Wise Men were probably Zoroastrian influenced astrologers in the court of the Kingdoms of Nabataea and Sheba who brought rich gifts of diplomatic significance to the new- born King of the Jews
- Magi (Adam Hamilton)
  - We use the word “kings” but were called magi in Matthew. These magi were not “magicians” and were something between astronomers and astrologers.
    - Astronomy- study of universe
    - Astrology- study of movement of planets
  - Possibly from Persian (maybe Iran?)
    - Journey could have taken 3-6 months
  - No matter the sign they were truth-seekers who likely were not Jewish.
    - The sign was in a natural sign that they would have been looking for!
      - God gave a star to those who look at stars!
- In Daniel’s time the Magi were prominent in Babylon: “So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed” (Daniel 2:2). “Then the king commanded to call the magicians, and the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, for to show the king his dreams” (KJV). “The secret which the king hath demanded cannot the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, the soothsayers, show unto the king” (Daniel 2:27, KJV). Magicians, astrologers, sorcerers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers are mentioned in the second chapter of Daniel. Some writers think that five distinct classes of Magi are here referred to. It is difficult, however, to specify the difference between them.
- The Magians were a priestly caste, and the office was hereditary. They uttered prophecies, explained omens, interpreted dreams, and practiced *rhabdomancy* or divination by rods: “They consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood” (Hosea 4:12). Their notion of the peculiar sanctity of the elements led to a singular mode of disposing of the bodies of the dead: “They have given the dead bodies of your servants as food to the birds of the air, the flesh of your saints to the beasts of the earth” (Psalms 79:2).
- In Persia, they became a powerful body under the guide of Zoroaster, known in ancient Persia as Zarathustra, and were divided into three classes: *Herbeds*, or disciples; *Mobeds*, or masters; and *Destur-mobeds*, or perfect masters. Later, the term Magi became more extended in its

meaning. As the Magi were men of learning, devoting special attention to astronomy and the natural sciences, eventually all men celebrated for learning were called Magi, whether belonging to the priestly order or not. So as the Magi joined to the pursuits of science the arts of soothsayer, in process of time mere conjurers who had no scientific knowledge were called Magi. Simon Magus (Acts 8:9) and Bar-Jesus or Elymas (Acts 13:6, 8) were men of this sort. The Magi who came to visit the infant Savior were no doubt of the better class. The idea, however, that they were kings and three in number is mere imagination, and impossible to prove. They were evidently skilled in astronomical knowledge, and were earnest seekers after the newborn king. Where they came from is disputed. Various writers have suggested that they were Babylonians, Arabians, Persians, Bactrius, Parthians, or even Brahmins from India. Matthew says they were from “the east,” which is a geographical term of elastic meaning.

### **Astrology**

- Herod and his advisers believed in astrology. How, then, were they in the dark about an easily viewed conjunction of planets?
  - Also, why would the book of Matthew refer to astrology, a false and forbidden belief? The Old Testament contains many exhortations to the Jews to avoid astrology. Interpreting those words as astrological, therefore, would be inconsistent with biblical thought.

**2:3.** Many rulers feared astrological signs of their demise; the Emperor Nero later reportedly slaughtered many nobles in the hope that their deaths (rather than his own) would fulfill the prediction of a comet. Jerusalem was an important trade center; the Magi must have come with quite an entourage for the whole city to notice them. Then again, many people resented Herod’s rule and rumors could have circulated quickly. King Herod, who was aware of broad currents of thought in the Roman Empire and sponsored pagan temples among Gentile cities in his realm, might have been especially apt to consider the Magi’s mission significant.

### **East**

**The east** (ἀνατολή). Literally, *the rising*. Some commentators prefer to render *at its rising*, or *when it rose*. In Luke 1:78, the word is translated *dayspring*, or *dawn*. The kindred verb occurs in Matt. 4:16, “light *did spring up*” (ἀνέτειλεν).

### **Star**

- What was the star? (Michael Bakich)
  - The biblical account says the wise men spoke to Herod about the star. Neither Herod nor his scholars knew what they were talking about. No other Bible verse or secular writing mentions the star. What was it?
  - Some writers have suggested that the astronomical event called a star may have been a brilliant meteor, also known as a fireball. This explanation is the least likely because meteors -- even bright ones -- disappear in mere seconds. The star the wise men saw, on the other hand, remained in the sky for months.
  - Bright comets can be long-lived phenomena. (Anyone remember Hale-Bopp?) Since ancient

times, however, people have regarded comets as harbingers of doom. Around the time of Jesus' birth, scholars would have interpreted a comet as the finger of God (or of a god) pointing to Earth, warning of a disaster soon to befall.

- Magi--Such men thought the positions of the Sun, Moon, and planets against the background stars controlled the world's fate. They believed that correctly interpreting such "signs" would reveal the future.
- Planets?
  - The first of these events began in late May of 7 B.C., as Jupiter passed Saturn for the first of three times (called a triple conjunction), all in Pisces the Fishes.
  - The second planetary conjunction that may have inspired the magi was even more spectacular. In early August 3 B.C., Venus sat high in the eastern sky at sunrise. As the days passed, the magi would have observed Jupiter emerging from the dawn glow and approaching Venus.
  - Conclusion--The basis for an astrological explanation is on shaky ground. Herod and his advisers believed in astrology. How, then, were they in the dark about an easily viewed conjunction of planets?
    - Also, why would the book of Matthew refer to astrology, a false and forbidden belief? The Old Testament contains many exhortations to the Jews to avoid astrology. Interpreting those words as astrological, therefore, would be inconsistent with biblical thought.

**Matt. 2:3** When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Christ would be born.

### **Disturbed**

If Herod were a true devotee of the Judaism of Scripture, he should have rejoiced greatly, but he does not. Instead, he views the new child as a mortal threat. "Disturbed" is too weak a translation of his reaction; "in turmoil" or even "**terrified**" (cf. Weymouth, "greatly agitated") would be more accurate. "All Jerusalem" probably refers primarily to the religious leaders of Israel who dominated the city, many of whom were also personally installed by Herod.<sup>25</sup> The rejection of Jesus by Jerusalem foreshadows his similar fate at the end of his life.

### **Christ**

The newborn king is now equated with the Christ. "Messiah" and "King of the Jews" doubtless coalesced in the minds of many. Herod reveals his superficial knowledge of Scripture by having to ask the religious authorities where this Messiah is to be born. They supply the answer from Mic 5:2

### **Chief Priests/Scribes**

Verse 4 refers to the two key groups of religious leaders in Jerusalem. The "chief priests" headed the twenty-four main orders of priests who lived in and around the city. The scribes ("teachers of the law") had inherited the ancient profession of copying Scripture, but they had evolved into a class of teachers well trained in interpreting and applying the Old Testament as well.

**Matt. 2:5** "In Bethlehem of Judea," they told him, "because this is what was written by the prophet:

**Matt. 2:6** And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah: Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

### **Bethlehem**

Bethlehem was a small city approximately five miles south of Jerusalem.

Here is as close to a straightforward prediction-fulfillment scheme as is found anywhere in Matthew. The context of the passage in Micah seems clearly messianic and was regularly so taken by pre-Christian Jews. The remainder of the verse which Matthew leaves unquoted (“whose origins are from of old, from ancient times”) suggests more than a mere mortal is in view. Perhaps Micah even had in mind the child of Isa 7:14 and 9:6.

Certainly such a prophecy excludes many potential messianic aspirants and refutes the argument that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah simply by setting out to fulfill all of the Scriptures relevant to the office. He scarcely could have chosen his place of birth.

Matthew makes a key addition to Micah’s wording, by inserting the word translated “by no means,” to show that the fulfillment of this prophecy has transformed Bethlehem from a relatively insignificant town into a city of great honor. What seems at first glance to create a formal contradiction in fact involves an addition designed to make the text accurately reflect the altered situation. This combination of translation and commentary closely resembles that of the Jewish targums.

Discerning Jewish readers would have known the wording of the original text and would have recognized that Matthew’s addition was not a mistake in quoting the Scriptures but an interpretative explanation. Other changes to the text are minor and do not affect the overall meaning. Nevertheless, Matthew’s rendering of the Old Testament is more paraphrastic here than in 1:23 and probably reflects his independent translation of the Hebrew rather than dependence on the LXX. This in fact is Matthew’s consistent practice in citing Scripture when he is not following a previously written Gospel source.<sup>28</sup>

- The good news of Jesus was offensive to those who contradicted and glorious to those who believed
- Herod’s paranoia was well documented
  - Put mother to death, had favorite wife executed, brother in law killed, had all 3 of his sons killed,

### **Shepherd**

Matthew’s quotation not only answers Herod’s and the Magi’s question regarding the place of the Christ child’s birth while showing the city once despised as now honored, but it also adds another aspect to the work of the royal Messiah. He will not only rule but also “shepherd” the people of Israel. A shepherd as an image of a ruler of God’s people appeared commonly in the Old Testament (see Ezek 34). It implies guidance, pastoral care, and a sense of compassion (see Mark 6:34). The final phrase of Matthew’s quotation comes from 2 Sam 5:2, in which godly shepherding formed part of the role assigned to Israelite kings. What they often failed to carry out, the Messiah will now perform properly.

**Matt. 2:7** Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him.”

Comparing vv. 7 and 16 demonstrates Herod’s evil plans. The end of v. 8 is therefore a bold-faced lie; Herod has no intentions of worshiping the child. Instead he makes his plans “secretly” even as Joseph had “quietly,” i.e., in private (1:19). Both proposals were inappropriate. Joseph, however, was warned directly against his plan, while Herod receives no such warning. As a result, Herod is able to get his scheme underway.

**Matt. 2:9** After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.

The Magi do not recognize Herod’s purposes at first but are later warned in a dream just as Joseph had been (1:20–21). Like Joseph they obey God’s words (v. 12).

## Star

Meanwhile, the star guides them to Bethlehem. This is the first time the star is actually said to move. The text leaves open the question of whether or not it had so moved previously. If it had not, this could explain why the Magi had managed to get only as far as Jerusalem. They may have seen the star above Israel and assumed that its ruler would be born in the capital. But regardless of how much the star had traveled, its motion here seems to require a supernatural event. Various attempts to link the star with different astronomical phenomena, especially for purposes of dating (e.g., a comet or a conjunction of planets), prove interesting but are probably irrelevant.

## Worship

Their posture of worship was appropriate toward gods or toward kings in the East (but unlike most Mediterranean peoples, the Magi, though pagan, may not have been polytheists; they may have been Zoroastrian, but scholars debate the exact nature of Zoroastrianism in this period). Incense and myrrh were treasures characteristic of the East that the Mediterranean world typically imported from there (cf. 1 Kings 10:10; Ps 72:10–11, 15).

## Gifts

What the Magi recognize as divine guidance fills them, literally, with *exceedingly great joy* (v. 10). They find the mother and child and prostrate themselves before him in worship. The gifts used to honor the new king were typically *associated with royalty*. Because Matthew has not yet introduced the theme of Jesus’ death, it is not likely that he is implying it here, even though myrrh was a spice often used in embalming. Rather, *all three gifts honor the Christ child as King*. Gold, then as now, was a *precious metal prized for its beauty and value*, an appropriate regal gift. Frankincense and myrrh were *fragrant spices and perfumes equally appropriate for such adoration and worship*. Similar visits of Magi to royalty are described in other Greco-Roman literature of the time (Dio Cassius *Roman History* 63.7; Suetonius, *Nero* 13), but more

significant here is the Jewish background. The Magi appear as Balaam's successors to witness the fulfillment of Num 24:17.

Thus one born in obscurity is recognized by unlikely devotees as the future King of Israel. The child whose birth is shrouded in suspicions of illegitimacy (chap. 1) is in fact God's legitimate appointee. On the other hand, the legal rulers, both political and religious, by their clinging to positions of power and prestige, prove themselves to be illegitimate in God's eyes. Sadly, the church in many ages has perpetuated this pattern. Meanwhile, God often chooses to reveal himself to pagans, at times even in the midst of their religious practices, to lead them on to the full truth found only in Christ.

## Warned

**Being warned** (χρηματισθέντες). The verb means *to give a response to one who asks or consults*; hence, in the passive, as here, *to receive an answer*. The word therefore implies that the wise men had sought counsel of God; and so Wycliffe, "*And answer taken in sleep.*"

That the Magi had to be warned by a dream not to return to Herod thus suggests their naiveté, an innocence Jews rarely expected of Gentiles. Most peoples in the ancient world paid attention to special dreams (1:20); some even had rules on how to interpret them; and the Greeks thought that Magi were specially adept at dream interpretation.

## Another Route

The main road they would need to take northward from Bethlehem went directly through Jerusalem, then eastward through Syria. Given the probably large size of their entourage, the Magi could not approach Jerusalem without being noticed, as Herod knew very well. Indeed, no major route could take them homeward without passing through Jerusalem. They probably ventured far south to Hebron, then followed the rugged road to Gaza on the coast, where another road could lead them northward. This route would then have carried them through Nazareth, then Capernaum and on to Damascus.

# Illustrations

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It is as if you were standing before a dam 10,000 feet high filled with millions of gallons of water. And in

# Application

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