

We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain following yonder star. So goes the opening verse of the 1857 Christmas carol. From it we gain a lot about the story of the wise men. But did you notice 2 major assumptions the song writer makes that may not be accurate. They're found in the first phrase; we three kings.

We actually don't know if there were only three of them. The Bible's account talks about 3 gifts which have led some to assume that there were three of them. We also don't really know if they were kings. The account doesn't describe them as kings. And there is one other major assumption people make about the wise men every Christmas. In fact, some of you likely have this assumption displayed somewhere in your home. Those of you who have been around here for a while know what I'm talking about. What is it? It's most likely the wise men were not at the manger.

We may think we know the story of the wise men well. But upon closer examination, we may discover how much of the story we have assumed, revised or added in. So what will we do about this? Well to parents and grandparents who have deceived your children for many years into believing the wise men were at the manger, maybe you could go home and smash your nativity scene as an act of confession – or at least move the wise men out of the manger and show them on their way to Bethlehem. But it would be much more profitable to actually read or listen to the account in the Bible for what it does say. As we go through it, I'd like you to pay attention to how different people responded to the news of Jesus' birth.

Matthew 2:1-12 (ESV)

[1] 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, [2] saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." [3] When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; [4] and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. [5] They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

[6] "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

[7] Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. [8] And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." [9] After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. [10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. [11] And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and

frankincense and myrrh. [12] And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Matthew begins this section by mentioning the birthplace of Jesus. Remember he gave us Jesus' genealogy with special focus on Abraham and David? The Messiah had to come from David's line. What was David's birthplace? Bethlehem. The prophecy Matthew quotes predicted that the ruler would come out of Bethlehem. So Jesus' birth in Bethlehem fulfilled these prophecies.

Matthew also notes that the events he will describe took place during the days of Herod the king. So though we don't know if the wise men were kings, Matthew tells us Herod certainly was a king. Rome ruled Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine at this time. But they installed local figures to rule for them. This Herod is known as Herod the first or Herod the Great. He ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC over Judea and the Jews. He was even called King of the Jews. But he was not a Jew. He was an Idumean – someone from the region south of Israel. He was called “the great” because of his massive building projects. He restored the temple in Jerusalem and built the temple mount which still stands today. He built many theaters, cities, palaces and fortresses including his own palace at Jericho and the massive fortress at Masada. But all this was paid for by heavy taxation upon the people.

Later in his life he constantly felt threatened by rivals to his throne. So he had his own wife, several sons and other relatives murdered to protect his crown. He likely died in March of 4 BC and his body was secretly buried in one of his palaces for fear that his enemies would find it and desecrate it which they eventually did. Since Herod is still alive when the wise men arrive in Jerusalem as much as two years after Jesus was born, most scholars put Jesus birth somewhere between 6 and 4 BC. How could Jesus be born before year 0?

So Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the days of Herod the King. But who are the wise men? Our English versions use wise men to translate the term “Magos” or “Magi.” From this word, we get our word magician. Magi was originally a term for a Persian priestly group but later was applied widely to magicians and astrologers or star watchers. Members of the Persian group opposed Daniel and got him thrown in the lion's den because they saw him as a rival. They were usually leading figures in the religious court life of their country of origin. They employed a variety of astrology, wisdom and magical incantations to advise the king and the court.

We don't know for sure what part of the East they came from. But if Babylon, it was a 900 mile (1500 km) journey. This would take several months from the time they first saw the star until they arrived in Jerusalem. Why would they go to all this trouble to visit one born a king? There surely were plenty of kings out east?

Well if from Babylon, they were most likely familiar with the Old Testament prophecy through interaction with the large Jewish community in that city. They may have heard of Balaam's prophecy from Numbers 24:17 – "A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." On top of that on May 27, 7 BC, there was an unusual conjunction of planets. In ancient Babylonian astrology, Jupiter represented the primary deity. When Jupiter came close to Saturn (which represented the Jews) in the constellation Pisces (which represented Palestine) this may have moved the Magi to search out the supreme king. Saturn and Pisces showed them in which nation (the Jews) and where (Palestine) to look for him.

But it seems they did not know the prophecy about the town of his birth. So they assume he would be born in the capital city or at least someone in the capital would know where to look. So they ask around – "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east – or we saw it rise – and have come to worship him." Now just think about how that question is going to play out in the capital city of the Jews.

They already had a king in Herod. He was known for jealously guarding his throne to the point of murdering his own family. Herod will be alarmed. And all Jerusalem is alarmed perhaps because they fear his rage or maybe they fear something upsetting is about to happen in their nation.

Herod wastes no time but seeks out the Jewish religious leadership. He asks "where is the Christ to be born?" Not "where is the king to be born?" He knows about this messianic expectation. He also knows that if such a Christ were born in the line of David, this child would have a stronger claim to the throne than Herod would. They tell him "in Bethlehem of Judea" and quote the prophecy of Micah.

Now why didn't Herod just send a bunch of soldiers down to Bethlehem to find the baby? Maybe he thought he could use the wise men to accomplish his purposes without upsetting his subjects. After all, massacring children is not a good way to get votes. Maybe Bethlehem was a little bigger than village status. For whatever reason, he summons the wise men and asks carefully when the star rose. Then he instructs them to go and search diligently so he too can worship. But he just wants the location so he can wipe out the child.

The magi listen and make their way to Bethlehem, about 6 miles south of Jerusalem. They know the town but they don't know the place. So the star leads them but it doesn't act like any star. It goes before them and then stops over the place where the child was. Some have wondered if this star was in fact an angel who went ahead of them and stopped when they needed to stop – just like the pillar of cloud and fire in the desert.

When they saw the same star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. In Matthew 2:11 we get the info that they weren't at the manger. They go into a house. They see not a baby but a child and his mother. They fall down and worship the child. It is doubtful that they come to worship Jesus in recognition of his nature as God-man. More likely they are paying homage or respect to the king of a ruling country. Yet their worship is far more than even they intended.

Remember how Matthew started this Gospel? The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. God promised Abraham that through his descendants, all the families of the earth would be blessed. Now we have Gentile wise men coming from a far way nation to worship the little king. They present him with gifts of gold – a metal as valuable then as it is today; frankincense that was burned at the altar of God in the temple and myrrh, a spice used in incense and perfume. After paying their respects, they get up and go home via a different route. They have been warned in a dream to not give up their discovery to Herod. That's the account of the wise men.

Now I asked you to watch for people's reactions to birth of this king. I see 4 of them. Herod responded with a **clenched fist**. He was determined to crush the child and any threat to his power. The religious leaders respond with a **dismissive wave**. It seems the one promised by the Scriptures has arrived. But they don't even go along with the wise men to check it out. Then there are the **wringing hands of worry** by the citizens of Jerusalem. They wonder if this news will upset their current king or their current lives. Finally we see the **open hand of worship** of the wise men. They invest significant time, money and resources to worship the king. They freely give of themselves and their gifts to this king.

With those four responses in mind, which one most represents your current attitude towards Jesus the King? Maybe you have a clenched fist towards Jesus. You don't want to consider him or anything He has to say. You may feel threatened by Him or some other Christian hurt you. Maybe you've concluded that if that person represents Jesus, I want nothing to do with him. Or maybe you have experienced something this past year that has caused you to question God's love for you. Or maybe you wouldn't say you have a clenched fist towards Jesus because of something that's

happened or something emotional. Maybe your fist or your mind is clenched closed because you believe little or any of it.

If any of those describe you and you're sensing a need to look at Jesus again, please visit our resource table in the foyer after the service. Maybe you'd be interested in "Christmas: Historical fact or theological invention" or "is the story of Christ a copy of pagan myths?" Or maybe you've never read the story yourself. We have some Bibles on the back table and if you don't have one, please take one. Or maybe you have a family member with a clenched fist towards Jesus. Will you check out those resources and see if one or some of them might be added to their Christmas gifts this year?

Maybe your response to Jesus right now is a dismissive wave. You don't know Him. You think you don't need Him any better right now. Or you don't have time for Him. One way we can evaluate this in our lives is by the time we give to reading the Bible or listening to it being read. If God's word is not a regular part of your day it needs to be. I have included for you in the bulletin another copy of my own experience with God through His Word over the past 26 years of my life. There are some Bible reading plans available at the info center for you.

But some of you might immediately be dismissing this because you don't think you have time to read or you don't like reading the Bible. Or you think that's just for intellectuals and I just want to live my Christian life and not get caught up with all this Bible stuff. I listened to a podcast by John Piper this week entitled "For slow readers." He was asked what he would say to those who read slowly or don't like reading and therefore don't really read the Bible. Here is some of his response.

John Piper makes 6 very short obvious statements -for slow and unmotivated readers

1. The Bible is a book.
2. The Bible is inspired by God.
3. It is all true and profitable for our faith and salvation.
4. It lies dormant and useless unless it is read. Reading is the only key that unlocks writing.
5. Therefore, we must have this message either by our own reading or the reading of another.
6. So if we do not read and millions can't read – we must listen to others reading.

The Word of God going into our hearts and minds day and night is essential.

So if you can't bring yourself to read then listen.

- Have you seriously considered that God has appointed reading as the way to know the mystery of Christ? This is no fluke of history or hijacking by the scholastic crowd. Ephesians 3:4 – When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ.
- Have you considered there are millions of people around the world who would give almost anything for someone to teach them to read? Have you thought seriously of what a gift you have if you can read?
- Have you considered that the greatness of what you read can really turn reading into a pleasure?
 - Would you enjoy reading:
 - A letter that begins – Dear sir or madam – you have inherited a million dollars. Please read on.
 - A note from your doctor – the surgery was completely successful and the cancer was entirely removed.
 - A letter from your long alienated son – telling you that he has trusted in Christ and wants to come home.
 - An affidavit from your lawyer – the law suit against your business has been dropped.
- This is the Word of God to you. There are so many great things in this book to discover about God. It is so much more satisfying than a movie or a video game. It can bring you fresh water in the midst of sickness or a -35 day?
- Have you prayed – asked for illumination and motivation that you need?

So if your response is a dismissive wave to Jesus, will you stop that today? Instead, discover or rediscover the living God through His Word.

Maybe your response to Jesus is ringing hands of worry – because of something going on in your life right now. You wonder where Jesus is or you wonder what might happen to your life if you actually let Jesus in. If that's you, I'd invite you to meet me for prayer after the service or ask someone you know to pray with you about this.

If you have an open hand of worship and sacrifice – continue to imitate the wise men. Let's worship Jesus together now.