

Intro:

We began our Christmas series by considering the desperate plight of mankind: though created in light, mankind is lost to the light. This loss comes in consequence of man's own misdeeds – the fault is entirely his own.

We continued our Christmas series with a look at a unique prophecy, uttered by an unbelieving Gentile soothsayer, a 'spiritualist for hire', who though by way of prophetic vision saw a great light, yet remained in the darkness of soul which is the doom of most of mankind.

Now we come to the first arrival of the promised star Himself. We come to the very familiar passage of the star of Bethlehem and the coming of the 'wise men'.

Passages like this are a challenge to a preacher – most people are so familiar with them that it becomes difficult to say something fresh in a sermon. Even lost people are fairly familiar with passages like this (at least people in the USA and Canada ...).

- Everyone has heard this slogan: "Wise men still _____ [seek him]."
- Everyone knows there were how many wise men? [Don't say three!]
- Everyone knows they rode on what to get to Jerusalem? [Don't say camels!]
- Everyone knows that the gifts the wise men gave represent what? [Don't say 'his royalty, his deity, and his death'!]

As we go through the passage, there are a few more things we will find that you already know... some of them you will be right about!

Although we don't really know how many wise men there were, we will see in our passage three distinct attitudes towards the star and towards the Messiah the star represents.

It is those attitudes we will look at this morning.

Read Mt 2.1-12

I. The earnest faith of seeking men

The men we are most interested in are the wise men – obscure, mysterious, zealous, devoted ... and ... disappeared. Disappeared because this is the only place in the Bible where we encounter them.

- They arrive.
- They worship.
- They disappear, having accomplished the task God intended them to accomplish, they leave the Biblical scene, never to return again.

What can we know of them?

A. Their identity

1. The Greek word is ‘μάγοι’ — often transliterated ‘Magi’
 - a. The term is used three times in this chapter
 - b. Also used in Ac 13 (v. 6 and v. 8) referring to a man called ‘Elymas the sorcerer’ KJV; or ‘magician’ NAU

The question is: ‘Where these men sorcerers?’

- c. The history of the term
 - 1) A priestly tribe or caste among the Medes [obviously worshippers of false gods]
 - 2) Later found among the Medo-Persians
 - 3) Men who, in addition to ritualistic practices, were teachers of religion and science, especially of astronomy
 - 4) As everything ancient is wrapped up in superstition, their astronomy would be quickly connected to astrology
 - 5) From this, the term became connected with diviners and soothsayers, practitioners of dark arts and magic of all kinds in all nations
- d. These men seem of higher status than common spiritualists or diviners
 - 1) By their access to the court of Herod
 - 2) By their wealth
 - 3) Most of all, by their question

“The wise men who came from the East were members of a priestly class in the Persian Empire who were known for their study of astrology.”¹

¹ Stewart Custer, *The Gospel of the King*, p. 18.

2. Their quest is shaped by an understanding of Jewish scriptures
 - a. The prophecy of Balaam (Num 24.17)

Numbers 24:17 I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.

Stewart Custer, cautious connection: “They were plainly acquainted with the messianic teaching of the Jews. They may have been referring to Balaam’s prophecy...”²

D. A. Carson, more emphatic connection: “Matthew uses language almost certainly alluding to Numbers 24.17 ... This oracle, spoken by Balaam, who came ‘from the eastern mountains’ (Num 23.7), was widely regarded as messianic ...”³

- 1) Remember where Balaam was from? Pethor, a city near ‘the River’, *i.e.*, Euphrates
 - 2) We spoke last week of a settlement there called Mari, a place where men practiced similar arts to Balaam
 - 3) Could these men have somehow been connected?
- b. The presence of a large colony of Jews remained in Babylon – with their Scriptures

- 1) Look carefully at Isa 59.20ff.
 - a) Note: A Redeemer will come to Zion (59.20)
 - b) Note: the rising of the light (60.1-2)
 - c) Note: Gentiles will come to your light (60.3)

It is possible that the magi had texts like this available to them.

- 2) Notice this series of passages
 - a) Isa 11.9-10
 - b) Isa 42.1
 - c) Isa 49.6
 - d) Jer 16.19

(And there are many others.)

² Stewart Custer, *The Gospel of the King*, p. 18.

³ D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, p. 86.

- 3) Now look back to Isa 60.4-6 and note v. 6 “they shall bring gold and incense”

Why do you suppose these men arrived in Bethlehem with gold and incense?

3. Their identity:

- a. They are doubtless pagan priests and astronomers – maybe astrologers
- b. They are curious, thinking, seeking men – they have investigated the Scriptures and discerned something of what God is doing in the earth

B. Their activity

1. They saw the star

- a. Many attempts at offering a natural explanation
 - 1) A conjunction of the planets
 - 2) A supernova
 - 3) A comet
- b. None of them are adequate: consider v. 9
 - 1) The star reappeared
 - 2) The star appeared to move, leading them
 - 3) The star stood still at its destination

No natural phenomena can match this ... so what is it?

c. The glory of God?

So suggests the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*: “Could it be that ‘the star’ which the Magi saw and which led them to a specific house was the Shekinah glory of God? That same glory had led the children of Israel through the wilderness for 40 years as a pillar of fire and cloud. Perhaps this was what they saw in the East, and for want of a better term they called it a ‘star.’ All other efforts to explain this star are inadequate (such as a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars; a supernova; a comet; etc).”⁴

⁴ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 2:22 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985).

- 1) Did this glory accompany the angels over the fields and the shepherds in Lk 2?
 - 2) Did the light of this glory somehow shine as far as Babylon? And was that what these men saw?
 - d. Regardless, they saw the star and they connected it with the coming of the King of the Jews and ...
2. They traveled to Jerusalem
 - a. The journey covered many miles
 - b. The journey took at least several months
 - 1) Time for Joseph and Mary to find better accommodation
 - 2) Time for Herod to enter into his calculations
 - c. The significance of their journey is that they acted on what they saw: faith acts
 3. They worshipped the Lord
 - a. Some commentators, including some conservative ones, suggest that they were merely doing homage to someone they thought of as a king – certainly not worship!

A pox on that kind of scholarship!

- b. The verb used here is a regular one for worship in the NT, it means to prostrate one's self before the one you worship

“Among the Orientals, especially the Persians, *to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead* as an expression of profound reverence”⁵

It is inconceivable that these men, being who they were, motivated by what they had seen and heard, finding themselves before this baby in this humble home, led by that star, could be merely giving respect to someone they thought of as a ‘superior human being’ like a king!

Surely God has shown them Himself, and they worship Him.

This is the earnest faith of seeking men. But there are yet two more attitudes to consider (quickly)...

⁵ Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

II. The concealed enmity of a seething man

A. Herod is troubled by the magi's quest (3)

1. Herod was a brilliant but cruel king

- a. After the Maccabean kings fell into squabbling over their inheritance, the Romans moved in (about 63 BC)
- b. Herod's father gained prominence and eventually governorship of the region (Herod is an Edomite)
- c. Herod was a friend of Mark Antony and Octavian (Caesar Augustus) by whom he was appointed king of Judea (40 BC)
- d. Herod put down a revolt in Judea and with the help of the Romans consolidated his hold on power in 37 BC, reigning another 34 years (to 4 BC)
- e. Built many magnificent buildings including the Temple
- f. But always in constant power struggles to maintain his throne
 - 1) Though a friend of Mark Antony's, he had Cleopatra for an enemy (she wanted Judea for herself)
 - 2) Had his favorite wife, Mariamne, executed because he believed she was plotting against him
 - 3) Intended to divide kingdom between two of Mariamne's sons: Alexander and Aristobulus
 - a) Herod's sister wanted the advantage for her own son, so plotted against them
 - b) Another son, Antipater, poisoned his mind against them
 - c) Herod imprisoned Mariamne's sons
 - 4) Antipater then sought to poison him to get him out of the way quickly and take the throne
 - a) Herod's brother took the poison by mistake and died
 - b) Herod imprisoned Antipater and sought permission to have him executed
 - 5) At this point, two final things happened
 - a) Herod contracted an incurable disease
 - b) He drew up a will naming his youngest son, Antipas, as his heir (bypassing all others)

2. And then, some men came into Jerusalem from the East, asking, “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.”

Is it any wonder that Herod was troubled?

Is it any wonder that all Jerusalem was troubled with him?

B. Herod is determined to solve this problem also

1. Notice that he wants to know if the prophets have spoken concerning the birth of the Messiah (4)

Others may dismiss the wise men as cranks, Herod is taking no chances

2. Notice Herod’s private instructions (7)

a. He undoubtedly puts his best face forward in public (he has no desire to warn off any potential rival in Bethlehem)

b. He enquires *diligently* – “**1.** in secular writings, *to know accurately, to do exactly.*
2. *to investigate diligently*”⁶

“He treats the matter as highly important, and he is a man who never leave any stone unturned.”⁷

3. Notice Herod’s duplicity (8)

a. Go, find him

b. Send me word

c. I want to worship him also (same word as used of the wise men)

Of course, we know Herod’s real intent – he is a jealous, ambitious, suspicious, vengeful, seething man.

There are many men like this ... they may seem normal on the outside, but jar them a little with the claims of Christ and see what comes spilling out.

We have seen the earnest faith of seeking men and the concealed enmity of a seething man, and now...

⁶ Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

⁷ John A. Broadus, *Matthew*, p. 20.

III. The dead accuracy of indifferent men

A. Herod's council (4)

1. All the chief priests [a political appointment, several past chief priests at this time] — mostly Sadducees
2. All the scribes [teachers of the law, called 'lawyers' and 'doctors' in other passages] — many Pharisees, some Sadducees

B. Their answer (5-6)

1. Immediate, no head scratching
2. Passive, no seeking: they didn't walk down to Bethlehem with the wise men

It is only six miles.

They were indifferent men. Accurate, knowing the Scriptures, but indifferent.

How deadly!

Conclusion:

Earlier, I described the wise men this way:

- They are doubtless pagan priests and astronomers
- They are curious, thinking, seeking men

But most important, I am convinced that by the end of this story we can describe them this way:

- They are now believing men. No more idols for them. They have seen the living God.

What kind of heart attitude do you have to the Saviour?

Here's John Calvin:

"But if the sight of a star had so powerful an effect on the *Magi*, woe to our insensibility, who, now that Christ the King has been revealed to us, are so cold in our inquiries after him!"⁸

These men, for all their insight, only had a bare, incomplete picture of who it was they worshipped. You know better than they do.

Do you worship Him with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength?

⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Mt 2:1 (Galaxie Software, 2002; 2002).