

The worship of the wise men

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Today is the Day of the Kings here in Spain. I know that there is much beauty in these cultural events. The parades with live animals, joyful music, candy and presents are all fun. The thing that concerns me about Christian cultural events is that there is much confusion in the purpose and message of the holiday. The title of the sermon today is also confusing on purpose. I choose the title for it to have 2 meanings. First, is that if we focus all our attention on these men, it looks like we are worshipping the wise men and not Jesus. But if we let Matthew tell us the story, we see how these men came not to give presents but to worship Jesus. Then we can be encouraged to worship Jesus in this new year. It is important that we see and understand what the text means for many reasons. But today I am going to spend a while just explaining the story for two main reasons. First, I want to explain so that any person here who might not know who these wise men were can learn the true story, not the cultural one. Second, we live in an age where the bible is seen to be mythical and unscientific. This is a beautiful story, written within the lifetime of many who were present, and it was never contradicted by any early sources. Matthew is writing history and spiritual symbolism, or fairy tales for children to leave their shoes out? Let us look at our text in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, and see what we can learn together:

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."

The story begins by introducing two very important characters. First is Herod the King. Herod was born in 73 BC to Idumean (the region of Edom) parents who had converted to Judaism. He was allowed by the Romans to rule over Judea from 40 BC all the way until his death around 4 BC. Herod was a very sly and astute ruler. He defeated the Parthians during his first 3 years of being King, and established a stable government. He also managed to keep each Roman Emperor and governor pleased with his service, so that even though they were the big kings, he could remain the little king. He is most famous for

rebuilding the temple complex, and for losing his mind the last few years of his life. In his paranoid years, he killed his favorite wife, 2 of his sons, and also many of his lifelong friends. One Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, said it is better to be a pig in Herod's house than a son, because Jews don't kill pigs!

The second is not a character, but a group of characters. The English Standard Version, the translation of the Bible we use at IBC, utilizes the term "wise men", and some older English translations used to say "kings". But honestly, they are not really kings like European Monarchs, nor are they wise men like Oxford professors. What are they then? The first clue is that the word used is not of Greek origin. Though the New Testament was written in Greek, the word used here and translated as "wise men" is Persian in origin. "Magi" is a foreign word. This is the word used to describe the prophet Daniel and the men he worked with in Babylon. So at times they were rulers, like Daniel was a ruler, and at other times they were more like spiritual helpers, like Daniel was. They interpreted the stars, the king's dreams and at times interceded for the kings of their countries, all the while influencing the governing policies of the kings they served even governing. They were highly respected people. Though the bible does not say where they came from, Babylon or Persia would be the most likely place.

The more important thing to note is that these wise men must have had some kind of contact with the Jewish scriptures. That was not uncommon, because they would have studied all kinds of sacred texts like the Bible. How would they have gotten the bible? God allowed the King of Babylon to capture Israel and deport thousands of Jews to his kingdom. The Persians later conquered Babylon and again some of the Jews moved to the new capital of Persia. Without a doubt these Jewish populations spread the belief that one day a Messiah, Savior and Deliverer would rise up from within the Jewish people. These Magi would most likely have heard of all of these prophecies. And the one prophesy that they seem to follow comes from Numbers 24:17. It says, ***"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel."***

If it was Babylon, then it was a 1,300 km trip one way, by camel most likely. That was through deserts and places of robbers and thieves. This trip would take 40 days at 32 km per day. Since they were carrying gold and other gifts for a king, they would have surely had soldiers and many servants travelling with them. So there were definitely more than three travelers. It does not say they followed a star to Jerusalem. They saw a star rise and assumed that if a Jewish King would be born, it would be in a palace. So they went to the current King asking about the birth of the great Jewish king. These guys were not Jewish monotheists, but probably pagans who worshiped all kinds of gods. They were seekers. They tell the reason that they come. We come not to visit the shoes of the new king. We come to worship him. That leads to verses 3-8:

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.”

The coming of these foreign men and their cohort set the whole city of Jerusalem on edge. Surely some people were excited, and others were scared of the coming of the Messiah. Most importantly, there was another King that threatened King Herod's position. He called all the religious experts together to ask where the Christ, that is the Messiah King of the Jews, would be born. The religious leaders give him the correct answer. The Christ will be born in Bethlehem. Herod then calls a secret meeting with the wise men and tells them to go to Bethlehem and find the child for him so he can worship as well. He also manages to get one more detail out of the wise men. The wise men tell him the time that the star rose. Why would Herod want to know that? Because he wants to eliminate any rivals. The age of the child would give him the age of the boys to be killed. Herod, in verse 16, sends his soldiers to kill all the babies under 2 in Bethlehem. He does not want to worship, but to murder the rival King.

Lastly in verses 9-12 we get the end of the wise men's story:

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.

They leave obediently following the orders of current King Herod. As they leave, the star reappears and surprises the wise men. Where did this star come from? Why did it disappear and reappear? Many scientists and theologians have tried to explain this star. Some say it was a supernova that burned bright for a while. Others think it was the gathering of stars and planets to produce just the right light and appear as a new star. Just recently, Colin Nicholl, PhD, University of Cambridge, wrote a book on how it was a comet. The book is called: *The Great Christ Comet: Revealing the True Star of Bethlehem*. Nicholl makes a convincing case from an astronomical and biblical standpoint. He pushes forward three main reasons for thinking it was a comet:

- a) Matthew's description of the Star is uniquely and perfectly compatible with a large comet.
- b) An orbit can be developed for that comet that accommodates all of Matthew's claims.
- c) Other independent accounts of the celestial wonder attending Jesus's birth are astronomically consistent with such a cometary Star.

Honestly, the point of the story is not what the star was, but what it means. God is in control of the universe and he is communicating in a very colorful way that his son was born. Can you imagine the

reaction of the wise men? If you were searching for the star of a king and all of the sudden it rose above the house where Jesus was, you would be amazed just like they were. They were bursting with joy. As a matter of fact, Matthew, the gospel writer, makes one of the most repetitious statements written in all of the Bible. They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

There are four different words to describe their joy. Rejoiced. Exceedingly. Great. Joy. God had met them where they were. They were seeking him honestly and he helped them. It is with that kind of joy that they come into the house. Jesus was in a house. The wise men never made it to the manger where the shepherds were. I know that changes the nativity, but in the end the truth is more important than the tradition, right? They arrived at a house. Mary and Joseph must have built or rented a house. The wise men's visit probably happened when Jesus was between 1-2 years old. They came to a toddler in a house, not an infant in a manger. What do they do? They fall down and worship him. Notice that even though they found the boy and his mother they never worship her, only him. Then they bring gifts fit for a King: Gold, probably in coins, frankincense and myrrh, precious spices used for the aroma they gave. These were spices that no common family could afford. They were given out of the joy. No doubt that Joseph and Mary would pay for their travel and stay in Egypt with these riches. The wise men were so trusting of Herod that God even had to send a dream to warn them to avoid Herod. They returned without going through Jerusalem.

What can we learn for our lives today from this story? I want to share 4 lessons about worship from this story:

1. All humans are worshipers.
2. There will always be a battle for who or what will be worshipped.
3. God will be found by those who seek him with all their heart.
4. True worship must cost something.

1. All humans are worshipers.

If you are not careful, you can think that living in a country like Spain, because so many people are not religious, they are not worshipers. But everyone is a worshiper regardless of their religion or irreligion. One pastor and counselor says it this way:

“Human beings by their very nature are worshipers. Worship is not something we do; it defines who we are. You cannot divide human beings into those who worship and those who don't. Everybody worships; it's just a matter of what, or whom, we serve.”

Do you believe that? You see, not only are the wise men worshipping, so is Herod. He is worshipping power. It means everything to him. He loves his power as King and will sacrifice anything to be a king, even every boy under 2 years old in Bethlehem. All humans are worshipers. Everyone in Spain is a worshiper. What is the thing that if it were taken away from you, you would be hopeless or angry? If you lost your job, would you lose your value? If you lost your status, would you lose your friends? If you lost

your money, would you lose your dignity? If your family leaves you, would Christ be enough? What is the thing that gives you meaning? Look around you everywhere. People are worshiping and serving and sacrificing to “gods” that can give them no meaning, hope, or promise of security. They dedicate themselves to searching for so many things that cannot satisfy them. False worship is just loving, dedicating yourself to and serving what has been created, instead of the creator. The wise men came to worship, but the king Herod was also worshiping.

2. There will always be a battle for who will be worshiped.

In the story Herod tries to kill the toddler Jesus. Jesus is just a baby, and Herod is threatened by him. It is interesting that when the wise men came, they said they were coming to worship the King of the Jews. That phrase “King of the Jews” is the same words that were hung over Jesus head as he was crucified. The religious leaders liked their power and they did not want a King changing that. King Herod liked his power and he was not going to share with Jesus. We all understand this. We are like Herod at times. We don’t want to give Jesus Lordship of all parts of our lives. We say to him that he can have all this over here, but this dark spot I want to keep. We like some of our darkness. I pray that God would show you where you need to make him king. Either Jesus is Lord of all, or he is not Lord at all. When Christ comes into a life he claims the throne. Jesus was not born to share his Lordship with you and me. Either we will be servants of God in heaven, or Kings in hell. There is no other path. Open every part of your life to Jesus. When you learn to walk with him, you will find that when He is Lord his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Give him the throne of you heart in 2019.

3. God will be found by those who seek him with all their heart.

The wise men came from a far away land. They travelled not to give candy or do parades. They traveled to worship the King of the Jews, and they found him! They sought with all their hearts. They organized and paid a lot of money to travel and meet Jesus. They must have gotten tired, but they never gave up. What about you dear one? Do you seek with all your heart? God is ready to meet you, but will you give up before you get there? God’s word says in Jeremiah 29:12-13, ***“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.”***¹³ ***You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”***

4. True worship must cost us something.

The last lesson is about sacrifice. True worship costs us, or God will not accept it. God says that Cain sacrifice was not accepted. He did not give his best. God says that the Israelites must bring their best to him. No blind or lame sacrifices. The wise men traveled 1,300 km to worship Jesus. That was dangerous. It was costly. It was risky. He is not even from their country and they did it. They rejoiced with great joy. Their worship was accompanied by genuine emotion. They gave very valuable gifts to Jesus. Today, I want you to hear the challenge of God’s word. If we are going to worship, it must be a sacrifice. It must cost us of our time and talents and money. Where is God calling you to sacrifice in 2019? May God give us a 2019 filled with worship where we rejoice exceedingly and with great joy.

Discussion questions

1. Do you agree that all people are worshipers even if they don't worship religiously?
2. What things do people worship besides God?
3. How is worry and anxiety a form of being our own Lord? What would happen if we stopped trying to control everything and gave all our trouble to the real Lord?
4. Is there a difference between seeking God and seeking him with all our hearts?
5. Can you think of a time when you sought God and he responded?
6. God is pleased by our sacrifices for him. Romans 12:1-2 speak of being living sacrifices. What do you think that means?