

## LET'S TALK ABOUT THE WISE MEN

**TEXT:** Matthew 2:1-12

Well, we've almost finished the Christmas story. Here we are in the New Year, but we still have one chapter more. Matthew, and only Matthew, gives us this "addendum" to the greatest story ever told. The trouble is, he doesn't give us much in the way of details. If only Luke, the great historian, had written about the Wise Men, we would probably know a lot more about them and their strange journey. But over the centuries Biblical scholars have researched, and probably dreamed, to try to fill in the blanks. And they have come up with some pretty interesting things for us to think about today.

First of all, we call this day Epiphany. The dictionary tells us that an epiphany is an experience of a sudden and striking realization. Generally the term is used to describe a scientific breakthrough, religious or philosophical discoveries, but it can apply to any situation in which an enlightening realization allows a problem or situation to be understood from a new and deeper perspective.

For us, as Christians, Epiphany is the day of the year that we celebrate the Incarnation of God into the person of Jesus Christ. We have gone through the four weeks of Advent, weeks of repentance and darkness, and have come to the light of Epiphany.

And with Epiphany we celebrate the arrival of the Magi, or Wise Men, or Kings at the home of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. What we read in the reading from Matthew is all we know about this event. But it is surrounded with legend, speculation and tradition. Let's look at some of the things that we "know" about this tale.

First of all, a question: what should we call them? Magi? Wise Men? Kings? Matthew's account is vague and shrouded in mystery. The term *magi* is the precise Greek word used in Matthew's gospel. They were astrologers and interpreters of omens. You certainly could also call them *Wise men*; it is a perfectly acceptable translation. The

Old Testament frequently designated astrological advisors as wise men and they were valued for their wisdom concerning the affairs of the kingdom.

But why would they be *kings*? In Christmas pageants they always wear crowns, and we sing “We Three Kings”. We will never know whether the Magi were literal kings, but the idea of kings bringing treasures from Babylon is a compelling way to envision the story. So, if you prefer to call them *kings*, recognize that you are proclaiming the return of Jerusalem’s treasures from the exile in Babylon. As these men travel the road from Babylon in the East to Jerusalem, they bring back the gold, frankincense and myrrh stolen so many years before from the house of David.

No matter what you call them, Christians have been trying to nail down their identity for ages. Intrigue swirls around these festooned foreigners. Where did they come from? Personally, I think Matthew winked when he wrote “the East”. His description is so utterly unspecific that church traditions in dozens of countries claim to be their country of origin. An Armenian tradition identifies the “Magi of Bethlehem” as Balthasar of Arabia, Melchior of Persia, and Gaspar of India. Another wrinkle to the story: first-century naturalist Pliny the Elder wrote several chapters about these men wherein they sound more like something from a Harry Potter novel. He details their skill in magic arts, including pouring boiled earthworms in the ear to cure a toothache!

One of the primary questions about these travelers is: Just how many were there? Matthew does not tell us, other than referring to them in the plural. We tend to say “three kings” as the writer identifies three gifts that they bring, so we assume it’s one gift per giver. But it could well have been more, and most likely their entourage would have consisted of many servants, perhaps even family members so the travelers could well have been a band of folks, including pack animals carrying the gifts as well as food, other clothing and necessary items for a long trek. We’ve probably all been camping and have a sense of how much “stuff” we need to take along.

Another question arises: were these really “wise” men? I might call your attention to an alternate view which is printed on the back of today’s insert. By some Gentile folks, some magi would have been regarded as wise. But to others, especially Israelites, the magi were commonly seen as fools, as indicated by nearly every reference to them in surviving Israelite texts from the time. It is very likely that most recipients of Matthew’s gospel – most of whom were Israelite Christians – would not have held the magi in high regard. Rather, most early Christians would have heard this story not as a story about the wisest and most discerning among the Gentiles coming with great reverence to honor the Israelite King. They would have heard it as an almost comical, puzzling tale, about a bunch of silly, Eastern astrologers who are led by a star to see Jesus. “What was God up to?” many of the original recipients of Matthew’s gospel would have asked. “Why them?”

If we read this story *without* the assumption that the magi are three, discerning, wise men, then we can see how this story may have been understood differently by those who first told it or first heard it. Then we too might ask concerning the silly magi, along with the earliest tellers and hearers of this tale, why these folk? What was God up to?

Asking these questions can help us to recognize another important element of Matthew’s Gospel that is in view here already in its opening chapters. As the narrative unfolds, we see Jesus picking fishermen, sinners, rebels and tax collectors – basically a bunch of nobodies and no-goods to be his disciples. For this he is upbraided by the Pharisees, to whom he responds: “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”. He commends a Canaanite woman for her great faith. He tells his disciples, “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave”. He defines heroic deeds as concern for the least among us, and emulates this in his own miracles of healing. And, at one point, Jesus proclaims, “I praise you Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.”

In short, Matthew is concerned to tell us that those whom the world often finds silly, naïve, trashy, powerless, and childish are more likely to open their hearts and minds to Christ. The saving reign of God makes little headway among those who hoard their riches, who, like Herod, seek to preserve their privileged positions, who celebrate their status at the expense of others, who so trust in their own manner of wisdom that they are blind to the way of blessing God is making known in plain sight before them. The Kingdom of Heaven comes to those who set the lies of this world aside, and rest their hearts in the truth and love of God made known in Emmanuel.

There is a wonder and a magic about this story of wondering and wandering magi led to Jesus from the distant East by a star. It testifies to the far-reaching – indeed global and cosmic – implications of Jesus’ birth. Even more, it witnesses to God’s commitment to reach all the world with news of God’s redeeming love.

But perhaps it’s also simply that the presence of thee magi and their quest for God’s messiah announce that the world is changing, that God is approaching, and that nothing can remain the same in the presence of God’s messiah. The arrival of these wondering astrologers signal that the reach of God’s embrace is broadening considerably, and that there is no longer “insider” and “outsider”, but that all are included in God’s plan of salvation. This isn’t a new theme in Judaism, as from the very beginning of the story God promises to bless Abraham so that he may, in turn, be a blessing for the world. But now it is happening – all distinctions between people of different ethnicities and religions are dissolving. All are becoming one in Christ, and who knows what may change next.

So, call them Magi. Call them wise men. You can even call them kings if you’d like! When it comes to Matthew’s Christmas narrative, the more the merrier. Each label shines a light on a different facet of the story. Whatever you choose to call them this holiday season, these men were the first in the canonical New Testament to bow and worship the Lord Jesus. We would do well to follow their example. Amen.