

## “The Visit” - 2016

December 18, 2016

Matthew 2:1-12

### I. Introduction

For many of us, we have heard the Christmas story or even read these verses about the visit of the wise men or the Magi many, many times. Because of its familiarity, it's easy to look at this story as just a story. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Wisemen aren't quite real—they are more like figures from a crèche—like the figures on the table in front of me. But in reality they were real; they were flesh and blood people. They had financial issues, health issues, political issues, housing problems just like we do today.

To help get past the “same-o same o,” I'd like you to put yourself into Joseph's or Mary's place. Now go back, go back to the time when you are about to celebrate Jesus' 1<sup>st</sup> birthday; back to just before the Magi arrived. As you think back over the past year or so, what would you remember? Would you remember the angel telling you that Jehovah God had chosen you to raise His Son? You are both rather young and definitely inexperienced in raising children. How would you feel knowing that your Child was someone special? Perhaps *Happy and scared at the same time*? It's hard enough to raise a normal child, so how in the world could you do this; what could you possibly teach God's Son? After the angel's visits, Caesar ordered a census and you had to go to Bethlehem—90 long miles away. It was a long journey and when you got there, there wasn't any place to stay. How did you feel then? Would you wonder if God was really in control and if you were really going to be one of the parents of the Messiah? Finally, you found a stable where you could rest and give birth to the Son of God. What kind of beginning was this for any family but especially for one with the challenge of raising the Messiah of the world!?

Then there were the shepherds God had sent to worship Jesus there in the stable. How did this affect your faith and trust in God? *Didn't it remind you that God really did know what was happening; that He was in control?* After the low point of having to stay in a stable, wouldn't your emotions rebound to an all-time high? Then when people started to return home after the census and you moved into a house with your baby, things started looking up. But, since those shepherds had told others what they had seen, people were always coming to see your miracle Baby. In the first couple of weeks, you didn't seem to have any time to yourselves at all. But as time went on, even those visits died down and things began to settle down into a routine. Then there was the trip to the Temple in Jerusalem 40 days after Jesus' birth. [Turn to Luke 2:22-35](#). In case you had forgotten, Simeon and Anna reminded you of whom your

Baby is and the challenge God had given of you. This was real—it wasn't a dream or a nightmare—it was real! Now, *come back to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

As a righteous man, Joseph would know the Scriptures—especially the Psalms that were sung every Sabbath. I suspect that **Psalm 130:5** could be called Joseph's song. **"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope."** God hadn't said to leave Bethlehem, so the family had found a house and started to make a life there. After the first couple of months, life probably settled back into a fairly normal routine until Jesus was about 1 year old. Then the roller-coaster started all-over-again with the visit of the Magi. Not only did the neighbors wonder what was happening when the caravan arrived; according to Matthew, all of Jerusalem and parts of Judea were also in an uproar. In this familiar story, we see 3 different people or groups of people.

## **II. The 3 Characters**

**A. King Herod** The first character is King Herod. This King Herod is the first of several "King Herods" mentioned in the Bible. In 47 BC Julius Caesar had appointed Herod's father, a man called Antipater, to be governor of Judea under Roman occupation. Herod followed in his father's footsteps and in 37 BC was declared king of the Jews by Caesar Octavius and the Roman senate. After several years of fighting, and with Rome's support, Herod finally drove the Persians (the Iraqis and Iranians of today) out of Palestine and established his dynasty. Because of his victory, he was awarded the title: "Herod the Great."

Herod wasn't Jewish by birth, so to make himself acceptable in the eyes of his Jewish subjects, he married a Jewish woman. In his early years, he was a capable leader but soon after being named "Herod the Great," he became paranoid and jealous of his position. Early in his rule, he had his wife, 2 of his sons, his mother, and his brother-in-law, who was the high priest at the time, killed because he suspected them of plotting against him. By the time he died in 4 BC, Herod had gone through 9 wives and was married to his tenth. Five days before he died, he had a 3rd son killed. Shortly before his death, he arrested and imprisoned most of the distinguished citizens of Jerusalem. The moment he died, these prisoners were to be executed so that the people would mourn his death. Herod was paranoid and jealous. It was to this troubled man that the Magi came.

**B. The Magi** The 2<sup>nd</sup> characters are, "The Magi." Matthew tells us that these Magi or Wisemen came from the east. Contrary to the song, the Bible doesn't indicate how many of them there were. We don't know their names or how they traveled or where in particular they came from. Since they came from the East, it is assumed they came from Arabia or Persia. From other historical works, we know that Magi were generally found in Persia—especially in Babylon.

Persian magi were skilled in philosophy, medicine, and the natural sciences which for them included astrology. If, as many assume, these men did come from Babylon, then they had to travel around 900 miles to arrive in Jerusalem. Between planning and traveling, this trip would have taken several months. Such a lengthy trip would need to include soldiers and slaves as well as the Magi. Their caravan would have been a rather large affair.

These seekers—these Wisemen—came to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, to pay homage to the newborn king whose star they had seen in the east. Since, they as foreigners knew about this epic birth, they would have assumed that everyone in Jerusalem, and really all of Judea, would know about this special Baby. They must have been rather disappointed and somewhat disheartened that no one had a clue about a new King of the Jews. The only thing their questions seemed to do was to get everyone riled up.

Matthew didn't identify or explain the star they saw, but, not surprisingly, people through the ages have come up with a plethora of theories. If its identity were important the Bible would tell us what we need to know. What **is** important is that the Magi saw what they identified as a star and came to Jerusalem because of what it meant to them. Contrary to tradition, there is no evidence that they followed the star or that it continued to shine throughout their journey. It gave them just enough information to put them on the right road—the road to Jerusalem and Jesus Christ. The Wisemen didn't make their journey to just satisfy their curiosity, they came to worship the newborn King of the Jews. They had come 900 miles to fall down before Him and to give Him their gifts. God had spoken and, like the shepherds, they heard and responded. God had promised to all men in [Jeremiah 29:13](#), **“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”** The Wisemen may have been perplexed, but they didn't give up their search until they found the Child.

Not being typical men, they stopped to ask for directions—what better place to ask than at the palace. Long before they got to the palace, King Herod would have heard about them. This paranoid king would have been terrified and disturbed by the Wisemen and their questions. To some degree this was understandable; Herod was sitting on a powder keg. His country was surrounded by the Persians who were governed by Magi and wanted to win Palestine back; within Israel, the Jewish zealots were continually trying to cause an uprising to get rid of all non-Jewish leaders; and then there was his own personal paranoia and jealousy. Herod couldn't and wouldn't allow anyone to contest his power—including this new “King of the Jews.”

Herod was wise enough to connect the “*King of the Jews*” of the Magi with the long expected Messiah; the Messiah the people of that day were expecting at any minute. To learn more, Herod went to those who should know about the Messiah, our 3<sup>rd</sup> character: the chief priests and teachers of the law.

**C. The Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law** The chief priests and the teachers of the law, called scribes by some translations, were the religious leaders. They were the ones who knew the Jewish Scriptures. They were the experts. They were able to tell Herod where the Messiah—the Christ—was to be born. In [Micah 5:2](#) the prophet Micah had written, “**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.**” In addition, according to the numbers in [Daniel 9:20-27](#), the time prophesied for the coming of the Messiah was imminent. But although they could answer King Herod’s questions, these spiritual leaders were too busy to get involved. They were preoccupied—preoccupied with themselves. The chief priests and scribes may have been too busy to get involved, but after getting the information he wanted, Herod got busy and concocted a plan.

### III. Herod’s Plan

Herod had managed to keep his position of leadership for over 30 years through hard times and easy times and he wasn’t about to lose it now. So he talked to the Magi in secret. All he was interested in was the time of the star’s appearance—not its meaning or its significance. He had already devised a plan and he didn’t want anyone to figure him out. He wanted to know the age of this threat to his power—not, as he told the wise men, to worship Him but to kill Him—to kill the Messiah—the King of the Jews. [Turn to Matthew 2:13-16](#) to see Herod’s plan in action. Herod’s plan was to get rid of all competition.

### IV. God’s Plan

There was Herod’s plan and then there was God’s plan: the Wisemen had to find Jesus. When the Wisemen left the palace, they had a problem. They knew where to go—Bethlehem—but since no one seemed to know about this Baby, how were they going to find Him and worship Him and give Him their gifts? But God had a plan, He sent a star. As the Magi went on their way, they saw the star which stopped over the place where Jesus was--Bethlehem. Once again, we aren’t told what this star was, although it probably wasn’t a star up in the heavens. I suspect it was more like the pillar of light that lead the Children of Israel in the wilderness ([Exodus 40:34-38](#)) or maybe even an angel—like the one who brightened the night for the shepherds. Regardless of what it was, the Wisemen must have been thrilled and relieved to see it.

Contrary to some traditions, the Magi didn’t find Mary and Joseph and Jesus in the stable where He was born. [Matthew 2:11](#) tells us, they found them in a house. They didn’t worship Mary; they bowed

down and worshipped only Jesus. Only He was God. Only He was worthy of worship. They gave Him their presents. Their gifts were part of their worship. They weren't an after-thought—an “*oh, by the way, as long as we are here*” things—they had planned on doing this from the day they left home. They had come prepared and they had brought their best. They had brought gold, the most precious of metals, to honor the King of kings. They gave Him frankincense—a costly, beautiful-smelling incense that was used in the temple. It was used for special occasions—like the crowning a King or a High Priest. They gave Him myrrh a valuable perfume—Myrrh which was used in preparing bodies for burial.

After the Wisemen had worshipped this King of the Jews, they returned home a different way. Knowing Herod's heart, God sent these earnest seekers home safely and got Joseph, Mary, and Jesus out of danger.

## V. Conclusion—3 Attitudes

In this story about the visit of the Wisemen, we can see 3 different attitudes towards Jesus Christ. These are the same attitudes we see today.

**A. King Herod: “I can do it myself!”** The first attitude is that of King Herod: “I can do it myself!” He didn't need anyone else, he was his own god and he hated anyone and anything that opposed him.

Are you like King Herod? You go through all the motions—even coming to church on Sunday mornings and maybe even reading the Bible now and then. You pretend that you want to worship Jesus. But inside, you refuse to admit that you need anything or anyone else. You can make it on your own and you detest anyone who says otherwise. But the Bible says that there isn't any way to earn your way into heaven. As Peter told the Sanhedrin in [Acts 4:12](#), “**Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.**”

**B. The Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law: “Not now, I'm too busy.”** The second attitude is that of the chief priests and teachers of the law, “Not now, I'm too busy.” You know all the answers; you can quote Scripture verses with the best of them. But you're too busy to worry about God and heaven and hell. You have better things to do than to worry about all that religious stuff anyway. Just be warned, most of the indifferent priests and scribes came to hate Jesus just as much as Herod did. They crucified Him!

When the children of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, Joshua stood before them and gave them a choice. He said in [Joshua 24:15](#), “**Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.**” Everyone needs to make a choice. In [Luke 11:23](#) Jesus said, “**He who is not with me is against me.**” By not making a choice, you already have.

**C. The Magi: “We have come to worship the King of the Jews.”** The third attitude is that of the Magi, “We have come to worship the King of the Jews.” Are you like the Magi, do you bring Jesus your acceptance and your worship? Have you accepted His sacrifice on the cross for your life? Have you made Him king of your life? Is His will your will? As the Lord of your life, have you given Him your time, your talents, your treasures? What is your number one priority in life? If worshipping Him and serving Him come in as a distant 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>, then you aren’t like the Wisemen. They left everything to go and worship Jesus with the best they had. Turn to [Matthew 10:37-39](#). Jesus put it this way in [Luke 14:33](#), “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” If Jesus is really King of your life; if you are one of His children, then like the Wisemen, you will leave everything to worship and serve Him with your best.

So which attitude do you have? What are you going to do about it?