

“The Visit”
December 22, 2019
Matthew 2:1-12

I. Introduction

An old king sat uncomfortably on his throne waiting nervously for the mysterious travelers to approach. All Jerusalem was in an uproar with the rumors that these men were searching for a new “king of the Jews” who had just been born, yet neither the king nor any of his sons had just had a baby. This king had been praised earlier in his reign for his effective administration, his shrewd ability to navigate the tricky paths of Roman politics, so that multiple Caesars had favored him. During that time, he had undertaken some of the greatest building projects the ancient world had seen; this included rebuilding of the ancient temple in Jerusalem.

But the years had changed the king. He was still shrewd but had become cynical. He was still energetic, but now his ambition knew no end. He took even innocent glances, whispers, and rumors as hard threats to his reign, and he had no compassion for anyone who stood in his way. He had been married ten times, and he had put to death his most beloved wife and two oldest sons. All Jerusalem groaned under the weight of heavy taxes, levied before Rome got its share. He left instructions that on the moment of his death, hundreds of the nation’s greatest nobles were to be put to death as well. No one would threaten his reign, not family, not nobles, not even a helpless baby or a village of innocents. As these men approached, his eyes narrowed while his lips made a thin, cold smile. He would find out just who this supposed “King of the Jews” was and put an end to him as he had put an end to so many rivals before.

These mysterious Easterners are men who we’ve grown used to calling “kings” and “Magi”, and their moment in scripture is brief. Scholars debate about who exactly these men were, and how they knew the appearance of a star meant there was a new king born in Judea. The Greek word for them is “magoi,” a priestly class of Zoroastrians who worshiped one god and believed he was symbolized by the eternal flames they kept in their temples. Most seem to agree they came from Babylon or Persia, which still had a large Jewish community. As men who sought wisdom wherever they could find it, they likely had Jewish writings and maybe even the scriptures available to them, so there’s no doubt they were aware of the prophecies concerning the promised Messiah.

One of these prophecies was uttered by a man named Balaam, who prophesied for the king of Moab in [Numbers 22-24](#). The king of Moab had hired Balaam to put a curse on Israel, but the Holy Spirit came over Balaam and he uttered a blessing instead. But God did something even more amazing through

Balaam. He caused a Gentile and a hired enemy of Israel to be among the first prophets to tell of the coming Messiah, when in [Numbers 24:17](#), he said, “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.” These magi likely knew of Balaam’s words from the Jewish rabbis who were their neighbors. They may have even been especially intrigued since the prophecy came from a fellow Babylonian and maybe even a fellow magi.

And so, when a new star appeared in an area of the sky long associated with the Hebrews, they knew it must be a sign that the scepter had risen in Israel and in the depths of their hearts they were called to worship a God they didn’t know. So off to Jerusalem they went.

In this familiar story, we see 3 different people or groups of people—three characters.

II. The 3 Characters

A. King Herod The first character, the old king, 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, King 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 These are the 2nd characters: “The Magi.” Matthew tells us that these Magi or Wisemen came from the east. Contrary to the song and most creche’ scenes, 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.

Historically, 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 themselves. 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. When they appeared in Herod’s court, they didn’t find the chief priests and scribes expectantly awaiting the same event. Instead they found a conniving king and a nervous ruling class. None of the religious leaders of Israel, the very men entrusted with the prophetic word through the ages, expected the arrival of the Messiah for whom the Magi had come. Their only concern was to maintain their power at the expense of anything else, including their relationship with God. The Magi’s questions threatened their cherished status quo.

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 of significance 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 the Christ. The Magi didn’t make their journey to just satisfy their curiosity, they told King Herod that they had come 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, these wise men stopped to ask for directions—and 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 3rd 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. They were so preoccupied that they didn’t even follow the wisemen to Bethlehem.

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. After he got the information he needed, Herod got busy and came up with a plan. 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. Notice, too, they didn't worship Mary; **“they bowed down and worshipped him,”** i.e., 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 brought gifts fit for royalty. They had brought gold, the most precious of metals, to honor the King of kings. They gave Him incense—
frankincense—a costly, beautiful-smelling incense that was used in the temple. They gave Him myrrh a valuable perfume and used in preparing bodies for burial.

Matthew wrote that 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. You are as good, if not better, than anyone else 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. But 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.*” “*We have come to worship Jesus.*” Are you like the Magi, do you bring Jesus your love and your worship? Have you accepted His sacrifice on the cross for your life? Have you made Him king of your life? Putting it a different way: 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 2nd or 3rd, 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?