

Who Do You Say I Am?
The Magi
Lesson 6 Matthew 2.1-12
122224

Introduction

- 1 We are currently looking at the gospel of Matthew in a series entitled, Who Do You Say I Am? It is undoubtedly the most important question a person will ever answer ... a question that Jesus asks his disciples in Matthew 16 and a question Jesus is indirectly asking of the whole nation of Israel as he begins his last year of earthly ministry. And as we have seen not too many people are getting the right answer.
- 2 However, this morning we are going to look at a group of people that had the right answer from the get go. And the amazing thing is that they had the right answer without ever hearing or seeing Jesus. We find them much earlier in the gospel of Matthew, chapter two to be specific, and they are known as the Magi, traditionally, The Wisemen.

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not

to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route (Matthew 2:1–12).



Who Were the Magi (Not)? 4 Magi Myths

1 They were not kings.

- a The word Magi comes from the Greek word that means “great or powerful ones.” So they were men of high position and influence and that’s why so many people assumed that they were kings. But they were not... they were actually a society of king-advisors and king-makers. In fact no Persian was able to become king without being trained and approved by them.
- b The magi were “from the east” which indicates their Persian descent.
 - a Academically, they were renowned for their understanding of astronomy and all the sciences ... hence, the wise men.
 - b Spiritually they were monotheistic but also involved in various occult practices such as astrology.
 - c Practically they were some of the most powerful men in the ancient world.

2 There were not three.

- a This was a tradition developed in the Middle Ages based upon an assumption that there were three Magi because they gave three gifts to Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
- b And of course there is also that well-known Christmas carol, “We Three Kings.” For the record the Magi were very wealthy and therefore traveled in large caravans for safety’s sake.

3 They did not ride on camels.

Whenever you see movies from this time period, the actors are riding on camels. However, people from this area in that day typically rode horses and packed everything else on camels.

4 They were not present at the birth of Jesus. (several reasons)



- a According to verse 2 the Magi began their trip to Jerusalem not long after they saw what they called “his star,” the star that signaled Jesus’ birth. Then they made the long 750 mile journey to Jerusalem which took about four months. So by the time they get to Bethlehem Jesus is no longer a newborn. In fact he is probably older than four months and here’s why.
- b According to verse 7 when the Magi came to King Herod he asked them for *the exact time the star had appeared*, sent them off to Bethlehem and convinced them to report back to him so he too could worship newborn King of the Jews. Herod pretends he wants to worship but intends on murdering Jesus.
- c After worshipping Jesus the Magi were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod and subsequently returned home. Verse 16 says, *When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were **two years old and under**, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi (v16).*
- d That means that Jesus was probably somewhere between one and two years old and that conclusion is also validated by two more things.
 - The Greek word used to describe Jesus the “child” is not the word normally used for a newborn, “brephos.” It’s “paidion” which is the word used for young child.
 - Add to that when the Magi found Jesus verse 11 says he was in a house not in a manger, as Luke says he was at his birth (Lk 2:7).
- e All of this means that Jesus was a toddler when the Magi came to worship him. Therefore they were not there at his birth.



- 4 Now I know that’s going to mess up your nativity figurine set. But don’t get rid of the three Magi, just move off to the right a bit like they’ve just begun their journey from east to see Jesus! The important thing is not when they came to worship but the fact that they did come to worship Jesus ... which leads us to the question ...

How Did the Magi Come to Worship Jesus?

[1]Through the scripture.

- 1 For a period in ancient Israel's history they were ruled by kings, Saul being the first, David and Solomon being the most famous. After Solomon the kingdom split into the northern kingdom called Israel and southern kingdom called Judah.
 - a The kings and people of both kingdoms, for the most part were wicked. Eventually God judged the both the northern and southern kingdom by causing them to be overrun and enslaved to other nations.
 - b The Southern kingdom was taken captive by the Babylonians and among those exiles were many Jewish scholars, scribes and priests who brought the OT Scriptures with them.
 - c A few years later the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians among whom were the Magi. And the Magi would have been very interested in learning more about the God of the Jews and therefore probably aware of the OT the prophecies about the coming Jewish Messiah.
- 2 But how did they know about the star? "his star"
 - a Well because of their familiarity with the OT they probably knew about Balaam's prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah. In that prophecy the Holy Spirit said ... *a star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel (Num 24:17).*
 - b Basically, an ultimate king would arise out of Israel and the sign of it would be a unique star in the heavens.
- 3 So after the Magi arrived in Jerusalem verse 2 says they asked, *"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*
 - a Literally the Greek says the kept on asking because nobody could give them an answer. The Magi expected that such a great event would be common knowledge.... but it wasn't.
 - b Eventually the Magi's presence in Jerusalem caused enough unrest for Herod to hear about them and their question which was disturbing to him because the Magi were inquiring about a potential rival king.
 - Herod had manipulated his way to the throne and even killed some his own sons over this fear of losing it.
 - So when he heard about one "born" king he put his maniacal plan into acting by first assembling all the religious leaders to ask where the Messiah was to be born.

“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet (Micah 5:2) has written: ⁶ “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”
(Matthew 2:5–6)

- Herod subsequently conveys this to the Magi and once again they are guided to Jesus by the scripture.
- 4 And you would think that all the religious leaders would have followed along. A Messianic prophecy is about to be unveiled. But none of them go.
- a All of Jerusalem is so spiritually insensitive they don’t even know their Messiah is just five miles down the road.
 - b But the Magi were seeking him. Think about it... the people who had the least information, the greatest distance to travel, the greatest cost, the greatest hardships are the ones who are the most zealous about worshipping King Jesus.
 - c And when we consider that we can’t but think of my our spiritual journey.
 - Are we actively pursuing God like the Magi or have we become passive and dull like the people in Jerusalem?
 - Are we zealous for Jesus to the point where we go out of our way to worship him or are we content to stay at home?
 - d God informs them that a unique King is born and the first thing they do is to drop everything and find a way to worship Him. A caravan is formed, considerable resources are expended, a long journey is endured all because they were seeking Him.
- 5 When I consider this scene in Jerusalem, Herod, the religious leaders, the people and then the Magi my conclusion is that it is a miracle when anyone comes to Jesus. Salvation is a divine gift not a human achievement. It is not a natural consequence, it is a supernatural miracle.
- a Romans 3 tells us that in our natural sinful state no one truly seeks God. We may seek a substitute to replace the One True God but no one seeks him.
 - b That’s why Jesus says to his disciples, you did not chose me but I chose you.
 - We choose because we have been chosen.
 - We seek because we have been sought.

- We find him because we are found.
- And we love because he first loved us.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10).

- c And this is exactly what was happening to the Magi ... they are seeking because they have been sought out. God was at work in them and they were responding to his gracious call to believe in Jesus.
- 6 So the Magi came to worship Jesus as the ultimate King by revelation from scripture. But they also came through ...

[2] Through a supernatural manifestation

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him (Matthew 2:2b).

- 1 This star was no normal star because it seems that it only appeared to the Magi. We also know this star was no natural stellar phenomenon. It appears, then disappears sometime after they leave Persia and then it reappears to guide them to the very house where Jesus is living.
After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east [not led them to Jerusalem] went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was (v9).
 - a Now a star may be able to guide you on a long journey to a distant destination but not to an exact location like a house. So if it wasn't a star then what was it? Well, the word translated star is from the Greek word "aster" which also used to represent any great brilliance or radiance.
 - b I am strongly inclined to think that the same brilliance that guided the Magi was the glory of God
 - The same glory that shone around the shepherds when Jesus birth was announced to them by the angel (Luke 2:9)
 - The same glory that centuries earlier stood as a pillar of fire over the tabernacle and guided the Israelites through the wilderness.
 - The same glory that made Jesus face shine like the sun and his garments white as light on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17)
- 2 That star was a manifestation of the glory of God blazing as if it were an extremely bright star. The glory of God that had centuries earlier stood over the tabernacle now stood over Bethlehem visible only to the eyes for whom it was intended.

- 3 The Magi were led by the scripture to Bethlehem and then by the glory of God to the house. All for one moment of worship.

How did the Magi Worship?

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

- 1 It was normal, when you went to see a king or anyone greatly superior to you in rank, to bring gifts of great value and in the ancient world that was gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
 - a **Gold** was the metal of kings. When archeologist open up an ancient tomb and there is a lot of gold in it they know it was a King or someone of royalty.
 - b **Frankincense** in the ancient world was a very costly perfume that was used for the most special of occasions like a royal procession or royal wedding. It was also used in the worship of deity in many cultures.
 - c **Myrrh** was used as a perfume, anointing oil, medicinal tonic, and as a key ingredient in the mixture of spices used to prepare bodies for burial (John 19:39-40).
- 2 Matthew 2:11 tells us these gifts were great treasures, given as worship, but they may have even greater significance that was unknown to the Magi.
 - a Jesus is the Ultimate King (gold).
 - b Jesus is Eternal God and worthy of our highest worship (frankincense).
 - c Jesus is Eternal God who entered the human race as fully human in order to die for our sins (myrrh).
- 3 The Magi probably didn't realize all of that but nonetheless realized enough to worship him.
 - a Think about it. They saw no miracles to convince them. They heard no wise words out of his mouth. Everyone else who ever believed did so because they heard the great Sermon on the Mount or saw a great miracle or experience their own healing.
 - b But the Magi saw nothing like that. They saw nothing but a young toddler held in the arms of his mother ... and yet they worshiped him as the Ultimate King. As brilliant as they were, as learned as they were, as wise as they were there's no way they came to the conclusion that Jesus was the ultimate King on their own. Nobody does. It's all God's doing.

- 4 Up to this point Magi's lives could have been summarized by the famous Irish rock band U2's song, I Still Haven't Found what I'm Looking For.



- a That's from 1987 but I figured you've heard it since it was on one of the best selling albums of all time and streamed over a billion times. If the Magi could have a theme song from the 20th century that would be it. And they sang it their whole lives and all the way to Jerusalem.
 - b In reality that's the song every human beings quietly sings. We may not be as important as the Magi but were driven by the same thing. That's why people go from one created thing to another trying to find happiness and satisfaction not realizing that we can only find it in the Creator.
 - C.S. Lewis once said that if we find within ourselves a desire for which no earthly satisfaction can be found, perhaps this is evidence that we were made for another place altogether. This seems to be the running reflection of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For."
 - Or, to put it differently, in the famous words of Augustine centuries ago: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you."
 - c All their lives the Magi sought the wisdom of man. But it never left them satisfied. But once they entered that room they found it. They found him. They saw in person, the One whom Paul says in 1 Corinthians *has become for us the Wisdom of God*.
 - d He is the gold, frankincense and the myrrh. He is the King of all kings, Eternal God who is worthy of all our worship and the One who died for us so that we could live forever with him.
- 5 There was another use of myrrh in the ancient world... one that Jesus Christ refused when he was being crucified.
- a Sometime during his six hours on the cross the soldiers tried to give him myrrh mixed with wine because the myrrh was a crude anesthetic sometimes used to deaden pain. But Jesus refused it.
 - b Instead he chose to bear the full brunt of suffering the penalty of our sins for us. And through his suffering we have forgiveness of sins, right-standing with God and the gift of eternal life.
 - c That's why he came into the world. That is the meaning of Christmas.
 - We are loved by God. We can be forgiven our sins. We can be saved. We can be children of God.

- We can have peace in this life and guaranteed hope beyond this life. That's the meaning of Christmas and it calls us to believe in Jesus.

Conclusion

- 1 One last thing about the Magi. Their story is only told in Matthews gospel.
 - a While each of the 4 Gospels, Matt, Mark, Luke and John tell the same overall story, each one was written for a unique audience.
 - b Matthew's intended audience was the Jews, and his purpose was to show the Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah and King.
- 2 But, interestingly, *the first people* who come to worship Jesus in Matthew's gospel are Gentiles from the nation of Persia, the Magi. Likewise Matthew's *last words* in his gospel is the Great Commission: "Go make disciples of all the Gentile nations.
- 3 So Matthew begins and ends his Gospel with a focus on the nations. That's no accident.
 - a He begins his Gospel by showing the nations coming to see the Messiah. He ends it by telling us to go and tell them about the Messiah.
 - b That's because Jesus was not only a Jewish Savior or only an American Savior ... He is, as the Apostle John declares, "the Savior ***of the world***" (1 John 4:14), "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin ***of the world***" (John 1:29) and *the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of ***the whole world***. (1 John 2:2).*
- 4 This universal scope of salvation is the heart of the Christmas message. God's love extends to every nation, tribe, and tongue.
 - a Just as He providentially guided the Magi to worship Jesus, He is still at work today, drawing people from every corner of the globe to worship Jesus.
 - b And that includes the two people groups we are endeavoring to reach, the Mariners of SE Asia and Mountain People of Central Asia who ironically have Persian ancestry and trace some of their heritage back to the Magi.
- 5 Christmas is a time when we tend to turn in towards family and friends. And that's a good gift from God.. But it' also a time when we need to turn out towards those who have yet to believe, especially those who are so far removed from the message of the gospel.
- 6 That's why I would like to close this morning with a prayer for the Mountain People and the Mariners and for those working among them.

- a We need to pray for PK and Hope as they labor from this side of the pond through the national team working in the Mariner villages.
- b And we also need to pray for Tyler and Alyssia and Corey and Nathalie who this Christmas are both living and working in the mountains among the Mountain People.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. What surprised you most about the true story of the Magi? How does this differ from popular depictions?
2. The sermon mentions that "it is a miracle when anyone truly seeks after Jesus Christ." What does this mean to you? How have you experienced God's initiative in your own faith journey?
3. The Magi were guided by both Scripture and a supernatural sign. How have you experienced God's guidance through His Word and through circumstances in your life?
4. Discuss the significance of the gifts the Magi brought (gold, frankincense, and myrrh). How do these gifts point to Jesus' identity and mission?
5. The sermon draws a parallel between the Magi's search and the U2 song "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Before finding Christ, how did this sentiment resonate in your own life?
6. Matthew's gospel begins and ends with a focus on all nations. How does this shape our understanding of Jesus' mission and our role as His followers?