

A Story That Matters – Matthew 2:1-12

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The season of epiphany, which runs from today through this coming Saturday, means manifestation. This festival commemorates the visit of the magi from the east and symbolizes the manifestation of the baby Jesus to the world.

Popular impressions of this event likely come from Christmas cards, staged nativity scenes during Christmas pageants at church (we have our own beautiful nativity scene in the narthex where the magi have finally made it to the manger), and the lyrics of the carol “We Three Kings.” In a typical Christmas play, all the elements from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are squeezed into one performance—three kings, wearing crowns on their heads, each holding a gift, following a star to Bethlehem, arriving at a stable full of sheep and oxen, where shepherds have also come to see the baby Jesus lying in a manger.

A closer reading of Matthew 2, however, presents a rather different picture. Biblical professor Diane Chen of Palmer Theological Seminary reminds us of some realities of the wise men’s journey and arrival on the scene.

First, these men from the east were not kings but astrologers. The Greek word *magos* (*magi* in the plural) means astrologer or magician. These astrologers would study the movement of stars and planets and interpret it as a sign that some important event in the world had occurred.

Second, the text does not specify that there were three of them, nor their names and origin. Later traditions simply assumed there were three of them, given the mention of three gifts. They were then identified as Melchior of Persia/Babylonia, Gaspar of India, and Balthazar of Arabia/Syria. One would think they would be traveling together from the same country! In ancient times, it was customary to send a delegate to honor a new ruler in a neighboring regime. Could these stargazing astrologers be court officials too? In Persia, members of the priestly caste were called magi. So, maybe this could be their point of origin.

Third, the magi did not meet the baby soon after Mary had given birth. Unlike the shepherds who went to Bethlehem right after the angel had told them, “To you is born **this day** in the city of David a Savior” (Luke 2:11), the magi arrived later. From their initial sighting of the star to their arrival in Bethlehem after a stop in Jerusalem, considerable time would have elapsed. Verse 11 says, “On entering the **house**, they saw the child with Mary his mother.” By then, the holy family would have long since left the temporary shelter where the shepherds first visited for more appropriate lodging.

Fourth, the magi were not led by the star the entire way. The song “We Three Kings” has these words: “Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star. O star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.” In Matthew’s text, they saw the rising of the star, ascertained its significance, and departed for Jerusalem, the logical place to find a Jewish king. Had the star guided them all the way like our modern-day GPS, it would have taken them straight to Bethlehem. Yet it was only after Herod sent them to Bethlehem that they saw the star again, which then led them to Jesus’ exact location.

Despite the glaring discrepancies between the biblical text and the popular version in our minds, let us be reminded of the theological message that Matthew has for us.

Comparing Herod to the magi, the irony is stinging. Jesus, the true King of the Jews, Davidic Messiah, and Son of God was rejected by the sitting ruler of God’s own people. Being only half-Jewish, Herod was both feared and hated. The Jewish historian Josephus painted a picture of Herod as a suspicious and cruel client king, with a history of killing anyone whom he saw as a threat, not least his three sons and his wife. So even though Herod was reminded of Micah’s prophecy that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), his response was not to pay homage but to destroy the newborn king. With murderous intent, he tried to trick the magi into divulging Jesus’ location. Not only did Herod fail to get rid of Jesus, his paranoia ended the lives of many innocent Jewish boys (2:16-18). His death shortly thereafter was poetic justice indeed (2:15, 19)!

By contrast, the magi were the “wrong” people doing the right thing. By means of their astrological expertise, these pagans happened upon a sign. How did they know the star signified the birth of a **Jewish** king? Did they know of Balaam’s prophecy, that “a star shall come out of Jacob” (Numbers 24:17)? We do not know, for the text is silent on this. Nevertheless, the magi acted on their discovery. They embarked on a long journey, carrying expensive gifts worthy of a king, eager to pay homage. Their efforts led them to an encounter far beyond their expectations. The King of the Jews before whom they knelt was not just another human king, but the Son of the Most High God. The text says that “they were overwhelmed with joy” (2:10), which is an understatement. The wording in the Greek is emphatically redundant: “They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” Their homage was elevated into worship. The star and the dream that warned them not to return to Herod assured them that their pursuit had led them to the truth.

And here’s the biggest take away from this story, what really matters about it despite the inconsistencies with the traditional telling of it:

Since the magi were gentiles, the festival of Epiphany commemorates the manifestation of the Messiah not only to Israel but to the world. This resonates with the universal outlook of Matthew, whose narrative ends with the Great Commission, when Jesus instructed his disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (28:19).

Again, the magi were outsiders—gentiles, non-Jews. And here they were bringing gifts to this newly-born king of the Jews. God became incarnate for everyone, not just the insiders who had been expecting a Messiah. He came for the non-Jews, the magicians, the astrologers, and all others who would never have practiced a faith that Jesus himself was part of.

In our very pluralistic and skeptical world today, we should know that the gift of Jesus into the world is for the world. Not that we Jesus followers should lord it over those who question and doubt or those who practice other religions. Through our humble but bold proclaiming Jesus as Messiah, though, the world should know that Jesus came to rescue and

stand by all of us—no matter our degree of faith, or our brand of faith, or our having no faith at all.

For God so loved *the world*, that he gave his only begotten son. Like those astrologers did when they appeared at Jesus' feet, let's rejoice over that.