

## THE WHO, WHEN, AND WHAT OF THE WISE MEN

With the **holiday** of Thanksgiving behind us—and the calendar having turned to **December**—we are now officially in the Christmas “season”—and what many call the “most wonderful time of the year.” In one sense, we are **moving away** from our series on what it **means to be saved**, to be delivered from the future punishment of our sins because we have become members of God’s family. We are moving away from talking about God as our new **Father**—and our new **future**. And yet—technically speaking—we are really not moving away from it at all because **God would not be our Father**—and we would **not have a new future**—if God had not come to earth in the form of a man on that first Christmas!

This morning we are going to begin to look at what I believe is one of the **most misunderstood** parts of the Christmas “story”—the belief that **three wise men** came to worship the baby Jesus while He was **in the manger!** Isn’t that what happened? **No; it did not!**

How do we know? Because the Bible gives us a very different account! And when **tradition** contradicts the Book, we need to stick **with the Book!**

Turn Matthew 2:1-11. You probably noticed as I read, that the Bible does not give us the **number** of the wise men. Perhaps you also noticed that Jesus was called “**a young child**”—and that the wise men came to a **house** to present their gifts—not the manger. This morning we are going to look at “The Who, When, and What of the Wise Men.” Next week, Lord willing, we will look at “How and Why the Wise Men Sought Jesus.”

The sermon today is going to be in a slightly different format. Instead of having points...and subpoints from the text, I’m going to present—and hopefully answer—some questions people have about the wise men.

### 1. Who are the wise men?

In the NT, when we see the word “wise” or “wisdom,” it usually comes from the Greek word “*sophia*.”

“Wise” here, though, does not. Instead, it comes from the Greek word “*ma-go*”—sometimes pronounced “*magi*.” MacArthur states that we get our English words “magic” and “magician” from this word.

Many Bible commentators suggest that the history of the wise men is traced back to the astrologers and magicians of **Daniel’s** time. I don’t want to spend too much time on this, but I do want us to turn to the book of Daniel to get a better picture of what these men were like.

Dan 1:3. Wanted children of the royalty of Israel to be brought to Babylon

Not the only criteria, though. Notice vs 4. They were to be “skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king’s palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans.”

Wanted the educated and smart young people **from Israel** to bring their knowledge **with them**—and then be taught the language of the Chaldeans so they could be part of the king’s cabinet of counselors!

In Dan 1:19, Daniel and his 3 friends are brought before the king.

Notice mid of vs 20 “...he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.”

These magicians and astrologers—the magi—were the cream of the crop. They were also supposed to be able to interpret dreams. Look at chapter 2. In vs 1, Nebuchadnezzar dreams a dream.

Now Dan 2:2. The magicians and astrologers and sorcerers were to interpret his dream.

Now Dan 4:5. Nebuchadnezzar has another dream. **In vs 6**, he calls in **the wise men** to make known the interpretation. **In vs 7**, we see who comes in—magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers!

Now Dan 4:9. Nebuchadnezzar calls Daniel by the name they have given him: **Belteshazzar**. Notice what else King Nebuchadnezzar calls him—the **master of the magicians!** Needless to say, Daniel was highly respected! Many believe Daniel’s influence later prompted the wise men of Matthew 2 to seek Jesus.

This, then, is the picture you should have when you think of the “wise men” that came from the East to worship the young Christ-child.

## **2. Where did they come from?**

That’s easy—they came **from the east!** But from what **country?** We don’t know because we aren’t told!

Babylon is to the east—about 550 miles. In Ezra 7:9, we learn that it took Ezra 4 months to get from Babylon to Jerusalem.

A number of commentators suggest that they actually came from **Parthia**—a country that is another 650 miles to the east! It is noteworthy that the Parthians and Romans were enemies at the time of Jesus’ birth. In fact, they had major battles against one another in 55 B.C. and 40 B.C. and Rome feared Parthia. It is also interesting to learn that certain members of the Parthians priestly class were **called magi**—and that a council of magi was responsible for selecting the new king of their empire!

So...if it took roughly **4 months** to go the 550 miles from Babylon, it would have taken magi from the Parthian empire **8-10 months** to go the 1200 miles!

## **3. How many were there?**

Christmas cards...and songs...and tradition all suggest 3. Why? Because **three gifts** were given. Otherwise, there is nothing in the Bible that suggests there were only 3. I believe there were more—**a lot more**. Why?

--Suppose they came **from Babylon**—“only” a 4-month trip. Would it make sense for 3 men—who were probably not used to “roughing it”—travel that far **with treasures** fit for a king? I sure don’t think so!

--If they came from further away—like twice that far—it would make even **less** sense.

Let’s turn back to Mt 2. Look again at verses 2-3. Would a king—and an entire city—be “troubled” if 3 men from a foreign country came looking for a newborn King?

Probably not! But...if it was an **entourage** of wise men—**plus soldiers** to protect them—from a country that Rome had fought with 30-40 years earlier—that quite likely would cause some fear and trepidation!

## **4. When did the wise men visit Jesus?**

Maybe a better way to phrase the question would be: “**How old** was Jesus when the wise men worshipped Him?” We aren’t specifically told, but we do know this—it was **not the night** Jesus was born!

How do we know that?

--As already mentioned during the introduction, Jesus is referred to as a **young child** in vs 8, 9, and 11; as well as verses 14, 20, and 21.

--We also know from verse 11, that the wise men found Jesus at a **house** in Bethlehem, not in a stable with a manger.

Do we have any **other clues** in this chapter that might help us know **how old Jesus was?** I believe there are 3.

### A. The age of the children Herod had killed

In vs 7, we see Herod **asking the wise men** when the star appeared. Their answer? It doesn’t say! That sure would have **solved a lot of the difficulties**, wouldn’t it have? Jump ahead to **vs 16**: “Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, **from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.**”

--Did that mean Jesus was two years old at this time? No; Herod was an incredibly cruel and wicked man so he would have undoubtedly “padded” the number a little bit. If they had seen the star 10 months earlier, it would certainly not be out of the realm of possibility that Herod wanted boys two and under killed.

### B. The date of Herod’s death

--In vs 12, we see the wise men warned not to return to Herod

--In vs 13, an angel warns Joseph to flee to Egypt because “Herod will seek the young child to destroy Him.”

--In vs 14, we see Joseph, Jesus, and Mary fleeing to Egypt, *until*—vs 15—*the death of Herod*.

When did Herod die? The Bible doesn't give us a date—but historians do...sort of!

In fact, if you want to make your head hurt, "Google" the question: "When did Herod the Great die?" You will get answers like 4 BC...and 3 BC...and 2 BC...and 1 BC. The Jewish historian *Josephus* relates Herod's death to a lunar eclipse. The challenge, though, is which one! There was a lunar eclipse in 4 BC—but there were *two* lunar eclipses in 1 BC!

MacArthur really dug into the historical aspect of Jesus' birth and believes that Jesus was born 4-6 months *before* Herod died. If you enjoy doing historical research, this will probably pique your interest!

MacArthur made one other suggestion that I thought was pretty interesting and it was this:

C. Jesus was *at least* 41 days old when the wise men came

Why would MacArthur—or anyone else—make that suggestion? Notice on your outline...

**Lk 2:22** "And when the **days of her purification** according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought Him [the baby Jesus] to Jerusalem, to present Him to the Lord;"

What were "the days of her purification according to the law of Moses"?

For the sake of time, we aren't going to turn there, but feel free to check out Leviticus 12:1-8 on your own. In summary, it says this:

If you have a boy baby, he is named and circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. Thirty-three days after that—when he is 41 *days old*—the mother is to bring her son to the temple to dedicate him and to present an offering to the Lord. The offering is to be *a lamb*, but if the woman is *too poor*, she can offer *two turtle doves* or *two young pigeons*.

Do we know what Mary offered? She offered doves or pigeons! Why? We aren't told, but we can assume it was because she couldn't afford a lamb!

But...if she had received the *gift of gold* from the wise men *before* they took Jesus to Jerusalem, they would have been able to *buy a lamb*. Pretty good argument as to why Jesus had to be *at least* 41 days old when the wise men came to the house to worship Him!

We've seen the "who" and the "when" of the wise men and in a few minutes, we will look at the "what." Before we do, though, I want to consider a question that doesn't necessary pertain to the wise men, but one that certainly pertains to Mary and Joseph.

### **5. Why were Mary and Joseph still in Bethlehem?**

--We know from Luke 1:26, that Mary was from Nazareth.

--And we know from Luke 2:4 that Joseph was from Nazareth.

--We also know from Luke 2:22 and following, that they went to *Jerusalem* when Jesus was 41 days old, but then returned to *Bethlehem*. But why go *back to Bethlehem* and not return to Nazareth so their parents could meet their new grandson?

Again, *the Bible doesn't say* so any suggestions given should be taken as just that—*suggestions*. Here are a couple.

A. The distance to Nazareth

One reason they could have stayed in Bethlehem was because of how *far away* Nazareth was. The trip from Bethlehem *to Jerusalem* was only 6 miles. The trip from Bethlehem *to Nazareth*, though, was about 66 miles! Joseph may have felt it would be too hard on his young family to travel that far—at least while the child was young. Here's a second reason...

B. The closeness to Jerusalem

Why would they want to be close to Jerusalem—especially *after* they had dedicated Jesus at the temple? Not told but here is a thought. Notice part of the message that the angel gave to Mary: **Luke 1:32-33** "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him **the throne** of His father David: <sup>33</sup> And He shall **reign** over the house of Jacob for ever; and of **His kingdom** there shall be no end."

I don't believe Mary and Joseph knew **how...or when...or what kind** of king Jesus would be. I don't think they necessarily understood that when the angel said Jesus would be **given the throne** and that He would **reign over Israel forever**, that that required His death, burial, resurrection, ascension into heaven, and a waiting for His return.

So...if you are raising the One who is to be the King of the Jews, it would make more sense to **stay close** to the place **where kings ruled**—Jerusalem—than it would be to **move away** from it!

We've looked at the **who** of the wise men...and **where** they were from...and **how many**...and **when** they possibly visited the young Christ child. Next, we are going to begin to look at the "**what**"?

There are a number of "what" questions to be considered; here are a couple:

--**What** did the wise men **know** about Christ that caused them to seek Him?

--**What** did the wise men **do** when they found Him?

We might come back to these next week, but for now, we are going to consider this question:

### **6. What did the wise men discover before they found Christ?**

One very obvious thing they discovered was this—**God will guide you when you seek Him!** Hopefully we will look at that more closely next week, too!

There's another—but not-so-obvious—discovery they made, and it is this: **People who have the truth don't always value the truth!** Why do I say that?

Think about the picture here before us. These men **traveled a long distance**—at probably **great cost** and **difficulty**—and were excited to **finally** be getting close to seeing the King of the Jews! How do we know they were excited? Because we see in vs 10 that when they again **saw the star** that had gotten them this far, "they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

They weren't just excited, though—they were also **perplexed**. Why? Because no one seemed **to know**—or **care**—that the child was born! Notice again vs 2: "**Saying**, Where is He that is born the King of the Jews?" We know from the Greek that they didn't ask **just once**—they **kept on** asking! And no one seemed to know!

Finally, they were brought to Herod, and Herod (vs 4) "gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born."

Their response? "In Bethlehem of Judaea..." **How did** they know? Was it because they had **been there**? No; they hadn't been there; they knew because of what **God's Word said!**

Did they want to **go now**—with the wise men—to meet **their King**?

**No!** Like Herod, they chose to remain in Jerusalem. How fitting it was for God to have John write: "He came unto His own [people], and His own received Him not." (**John 1:11**)

--No room for Jesus in the inn at the time of His birth

--No room for Jesus in the hearts of His people after His birth

So, the ones who **knew the Word of God** did not care to **know the God of the Word**, it seems. They were content to know **about** Him—and for **others** to seek Him—but they didn't want to go meet Him for themselves! How could they pass up such a wonderful opportunity?

The same way countless others—and maybe even you—pass up the opportunity you have—**right now**—to seek and meet Christ!

--The journey is not long. In fact, you don't have to "travel" at all to meet Christ.

--But the journey is **costly and hard**. Why? Because you have to **try hard** and **work hard**? No; because you have to **humble yourself**...and admit you are a sinner...and admit that you can't save yourself...and agree with God that you deserve judgment, not heaven.

--And that is hard—**hard on our pride!** But until we recognize that we need God's forgiveness and mercy—and come to Him in faith—we are just like the scribes who knew about Him—but didn't go see Him!

So what would God have us do in light of His Word this morning?

1. If you are not saved, God wants you to come to Christ and receive Him as your Savior. “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.” **John 1:12** “But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.” Don’t just know **about** Him—receive Him!
2. If you are saved, we still need to seek Him, don’t we? We need to spend time with Him—and worship Him. Don’t get too busy with life that you don’t want to be “bothered” with “visiting” Him like the scribes of Herod’s time!