

# “Here Come the Magi”

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“Editor’s note: A revolutionary new look at an old story — a must read!”

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## **Matthew 2:1-12 NASB The Visit of the Magi**

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:*

*‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR FROM YOU WILL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” After hearing the king, they went on their way; and behold, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on ahead of them until it came to a stop over the place where the Child was to be found. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And after they came into the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary; and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And after being warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.*

In the second chapter of Matthew, after Jesus was born, we are suddenly introduced to the mysterious Magi from the East who have come to seek the newborn ‘King of the Jews’.

Who were they, these Magi? How did they know about Jesus? Why come to worship a King they weren’t affiliated with? What did they know that even the people of Israel didn’t know? *How* did they know it? Scripture doesn’t tell us a lot about them but there are historical records that can give us a clearer picture. Here’s what I found as I took a deeper look into who these Wise Men were and why they were there.

The word ‘Magi’ comes from the Greek ‘magos’ meaning one of a learned and priestly class — or wise men. The Persian word used to describe these men in their society was ‘magush’ meaning ‘magician’.

The Magi were a scared caste of Medes that provided priests for Persia. They were an elite, powerful, fabulously wealthy group of high-ranking priests who were devoted to interpreting dreams and studying the stars. Magi were *not* Kings, regardless of what songs say – though they possessed so much might and political clout that if they chose to do so, and

if they agreed as a group, they had the ability to depose a King and install a new King in his place. They were viewed as 'King Makers' in Eastern lands. Without their endorsement it would have been difficult for anyone to become or to remain a king. That's powerful.

In one book I looked at, it said the Magi in the ancient world were so powerful that we do not have an equivalent for them in the world today. This elite group held the reins of financial, religious, scientific, and political power. This is the reason why in verse 3 we read "*When Herod the King heard this (that the Magi had come to town) he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him*". I always wondered why they would be troubled at 3 men showing up looking for a small child! No wonder — that perception was all wrong.

These immensely rich and powerful men would have traveled with a huge caravan. Not 3 guys on 3 camels bearing 3 gifts — oh no, no, no! We know from historical texts that when they travelled it was in *ginormous* caravans. There would have been *hundreds more* travelling with them.

There would have been personal servants, cooks, cleaners, a workforce to assemble and disassemble the tents, those who would care for the animals as well as personal body guards and highly trained soldiers for protection and to ensure the safety of the vast treasures they were known to give as gifts. The presence of this immense mass of people and animals and military would have caused rulers and the population to be 'troubled' for sure.

But how did they even know about Jesus? And why would they travel hundreds of miles to bring gifts and worship him? The answer to these questions is found 500 years earlier.

When the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and took captive the people, they took with them a godly young man named Daniel. Due to his ability to hear God he was elevated and served as a high ranking official for many years to the Babylonians, Medes and Persian kings, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius and Cyrus the Great. Most scholars believe that he eventually became head of the Magi. As such, his prophecies and writings were not only well known, but also considered sacred by the Magi. He was highly proficient at interpreting dreams and visions and hearing from God. Due to his influence and what he had prophesied, the Magi held to the belief that a great world leader, the Messiah, would one day be born who would significantly alter human history.

Wow! The things you find out from a little digging.

So, all these years later the Magi were still watching and waiting. Then, it finally happened. In verse 2 of Matthew 2 it says 'We have seen his star in the East.' There are many modern-day theories as to what this 'star' was exactly. One of these theories is that there was an alignment of Jupiter, the moon, and Saturn in the constellation of Aries, which was recorded about that time and would have created quite a sight in the heavens.

Nothing however explains the words in Matthew 2:9 which says that "the star went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was." It seems ultimately that only a miraculous phenomenon could be the answer. This star led them to Jerusalem.

Here they met with King Herod. So Herod gathered the chief priests and scribes to find out where this Messiah, the new King, was to be born. He was fearing for his position. The scriptures were searched and it was reported that the birth would take place in Bethlehem of Judea. This is the location to which Herod directed the Magi with the request that when they were on their way home they would stop by and let him know if and where they found the child. So the caravan started on its way in the direction of Bethlehem. But soon the 'star' appeared again and it led them in a completely different direction. As it was almost two years after the birth of Jesus, the little family had long since returned to their home in Nazareth. The Magi, we're told, rejoiced when they saw the star, maybe because they knew it was more reliable than any human directions. (Much better even than google maps!)

The guiding star stopped right over the house where Mary and the young child were. The Magi entered the house and scripture says they 'fell down and worshipped the young child. Can you imagine a mother and child going about their daily routine and a group of strange, obviously rich men come into your home and fall down on your floor worshipping the child?

What!?! And then they start bringing in gifts. Oh my, how do you explain this to Joseph when he gets home from work? Curiouser and curiouser. Let's take a closer look at these gifts. Was there only a little box of gold, a little vial of frankincense and a small bottle of myrrh? There are documents and records that have survived from the ancient Middle East about the quantities and kinds of gifts that would have been given to a King.

Lower level Kings got less, higher level Kings received much more. The documents show that for a lower level King it was standard to give 20 talents of gold. That sounds like a small amount until you realize that it is approximately 1,336 pounds of gold! And that's for a lower level King: a

higher level King would receive exponentially more! What would a long awaited Messiah King who would change the world receive?

Some of the other things they would give were silver, ebony, ivory, lapis lazuli, garments spun with golden thread, exotic perfumes, items made of gold or inlaid with gold, including goblets, jewellery, perfume containers, knives, and figurines; items made from bronze, ivory, alabaster, and malachite. Clothing made of the finest fabric known at the time. These are just a small example of what was given. What would be presented by these extremely wealthy powerful men who had been waiting centuries for this birth that was announced by the stars in the heavens? It seems God was providing for our little family for their unexpected 3-year journey to happen not long after this.

The gifts that are mentioned in scripture are gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold is the gift of a King. Frankincense was used in temple worship, so it acknowledged Jesus as a Priest. Myrrh was a component in perfume that was used for embalming, and prophetically symbolized Christ's death. These three gifts of the Magi prophetically foretold that Jesus would eventually serve the role of King, High Priest, and Saviour of mankind through his death and resurrection.

Finally, when it was time to return to their home, our Wise Men are warned by God in a dream that they are not to report back to Herod but to take an alternate route, which they did.

And there you have it. Plans laid out by God centuries before or even from the beginning of time, being fulfilled by people who are watching and waiting for God's signs and listening for God's voice for direction. Then putting into action, actually doing, what is directed to be done.

The same still applies to us today. We are urged to know God through the written word and through relationship. As it says in Habakkuk 2 – "*to keep watch to see what He will speak to me.*"

Are you watching? Are you listening? As we move into this new year, let's determine in our hearts to take the time to make the time to establish a closer relationship with the God who sent his only son to make the way for us to have that relationship. The God who has a plan and a purpose for each of us. The God who gives us a future and a hope. The God who loves us unconditionally.

As it says on many Christmas cards "Wise Men or Women still seek Him."  
Will you? Amen