

Wise Men Bow Down Matthew 2

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It's dangerous to tag anything as "the most" because it's so subjective. But I'm going to do it anyway. Besides Jesus himself, the most misunderstood and mischaracterized individuals in the Bible are surely the three kings who came to worship Jesus when he was born. Nearly every nativity scene includes them. You are likely familiar with images that show them wearing draping garments, riding camels who are walking across seemingly endless dunes of sand. As they journey, there is a star twinkling brightly in the sky.

Where is the mischaracterization? There probably weren't three of them. They didn't follow a star across the desert. The camels are legend. They didn't go directly to Bethlehem. They didn't arrive with Jesus in a manger. And they weren't kings.

Other than that, everything's accurate, which is to say, almost nothing commonly understood about these guys is right! Almost everything we will see today in the text will disrupt years of what you have likely assumed to be true. Why they came is the key truth that changed them and just might change us.

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:1-2 ESV)

Matthew places the events of this visit as "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem." How long after we will see explained later. It is still "in the days of Herod the king."

Who was Herod? He is known as Herod the Great. He was "King" Herod in the sense that he was a provincial king under Rome. He was called Herod the Great because he was incredibly talented and accomplished. He was well educated. Extremely politically savvy. Martial arts expert. Renaissance man. He is most known for his building projects. He is biblically famous for his renovations of the temple in Jerusalem. By any measure, he was a marvel. He built many marvels including some still visible like Masada and Herodium.

He was also exceptionally ruthless and later in his life a paranoid schizophrenic. He was especially paranoid over any threat to his throne. This led him to kill his own mother and two sons lest they usurp him. As an example of Herod's ego and derangement, he made arrangements that at his death, one nobleman from each noble family would be killed to insure people were crying at his funeral.

One day an entourage walked into Jerusalem that immediately grabbed everyone's attention including Herod. Who were they? Sometimes called *magi*, the ESV translates it as "wise men." These were Babylonian astrologers. Astrology today is relegated to horoscopes and palm readers. But in the ancient world, the stars and their movements were carefully studied and recorded. Those who did so were of the educated class and served world leaders as advisors and general counsel.

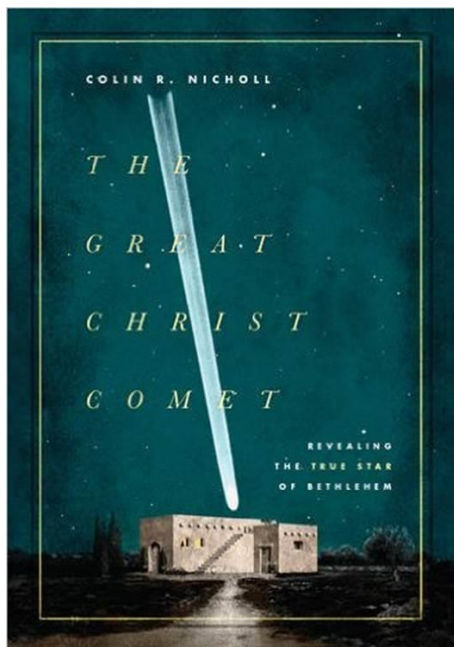
They came "from the east." Or modern day Iraq. It was a month's journey to Jerusalem.

In a city pulsating with messianic expectation, ruled by a paranoid schizophrenic whose trigger point was threats to his power, can you imagine anything more provocative and seditious than high-ranking foreign officials arriving and asking to see the new king of Israel?

How long did that take to get to the throne room of Herod? Maybe five seconds. *What? What new king? Who are these guys? Did you check their credentials? PhDs from the University of Baghdad? Fluent in Hebrew too? Impressive. What makes them think a new king was born here?*

"For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:2) That sentence is filled with intrigue. Let's begin with the star. *We have seen his star.* What star? The famous star. There is incredible conjecture about the star. Remember, the movement of stars was seen as a sign from the heavens. They meant something. We see a star and we think, *solar system far, far away.* Or when we see a shooting star, we don't attach historical meaning to it, we make a wish. But these are learned and sharp men. They are not fringe bloggers or conspiracists. They saw something that spurred them to travel a very long distance to meet a new king. What exactly did they see?

Last year a book came out that many people think answers that question. It's entitled *The Great Christ Comet* by biblical scholar Colin R. Nicholl.



I have not read it as it is very lengthy, but I watched a full interview by Eric Metaxas and read some reviews and summaries. Essentially, after careful biblical and astronomical study, what Nicholl proposes is that the only astronomical entity that does what the wise men describe is a comet (see below).



You are likely familiar with Halley's Comet or the Hale-Bopp Comet from 20 years ago. These comets can stay visible for months and move slowly across the sky. Professor Nicholl takes the biblical text as accurate and goes back into the cycle of the stars to show that around the time of Jesus birth, there was a constellation of stars visible known as Virgo (also means virgin). His proposal is that the comet appeared out of Virgo. Think of that. What would have been a star to them (because they didn't know or understand comets), comes forth from the constellation "Virgin." They see it and they connect it with Old Testament Scriptures that were brought to Babylon with the Jewish captivity under Nebuchadnezzar.

*"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."* (Numbers 24:17)

*"The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone."* (Isaiah 9:2)

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14)

These astrologers connect what they are seeing in the heavens with what they had studied in the Hebrew Scriptures and they concluded, *the prophesied king has been born in Jerusalem. Let's go see him.* So they pack up and head out. Where did they go? Not Bethlehem. Perhaps they didn't have the prophecy of Micah. Why did they go to Jerusalem? Where else would the king of the Jews be born or residing than in the capital city of Jerusalem?

"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

*" 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.'"* (Matthew 2:4-6)

Herod was no biblical scholar but any Jewish scholar who took Old Testament 101 knew that the Great King would be born in the city of David, Bethlehem. All his wise men say the same thing.

"Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." (Verses 7-8)

Herod assumes that the star's appearance marked Jesus' birth. *Soooo, how long ago did you see this star? Just mildly curious.* We see his murderous plot forming. He goes on and says, *I would love to worship this child-king myself. Would you find the child and then come back and let me know?* Herod has no interest in worshiping his usurper. He only wants him dead.

After listening to the king, the wise men went on their way. How did they know where to go? Bethlehem is only five miles from Jerusalem. It's essentially just down the hill. They knew because people told them, *Bethlehem? It's just over there....*

"And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." (Verses 9-10)

On their way, they look up and what do they see? If Professor Nicholls' theory is correct, they see the same comet only now it is not upward like a scepter, it is shaped downward. On the horizon it would appear to point. Like what? Here is a picture of a long-tailed comet in the downward position from New Zealand. Might this be close to what they saw?



The wise men rejoice "exceedingly." Another sign! It may have been a star miracle or it may have been a cosmological providence from God. Either way, they find the house where Jesus was living. Taking Herod's actions as an indication, Jesus was somewhere under two years old.

"And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way." (Matthew 2:11-12)

Tradition says there were three wise men because three gifts are listed. Nobody knows. What is noteworthy about the gifts is what these were used for.

"Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for one that was to die—these were the gifts of the wise men, and, even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true King, the perfect High priest, and in the end the end the supreme Savior of men."¹

You can read the rest later. God warns the wise men in a dream against telling Herod and they go back to Babylon by a different route. An angel warns Joseph to get out of there and they escape to Egypt, perhaps paying for the trip with the wise men's lavish gifts. Herod finds out he has been tricked and goes to Bethlehem and kills every child age two and under in the region.

So the section ends with the wise men on their month-long journey back; Joseph, Mary and Jesus in Egypt; families devastated in Bethlehem; and the king fuming that a star announced a child who might be the legitimate king of Israel.

Here is what I want each of us to ask ourselves today. Spiritually speaking, who in this story reminds you of you? Herod the Great? The scribes of Jerusalem? Or the wise men of Babylon?

Am I Like Herod?

The wise men were overjoyed at Jesus' birth. Not Herod. For Herod, Jesus represented a threat to his identity. He was, after all, Herod the Great. His whole self-identity was wrapped up in his own prestige. Herod was king of his world. He built what he wanted to build. He did what he wanted to do. He slept with who wanted to sleep with. He murdered who he wanted to murder. He was Herod the Great.

But he knew one thing about himself—the galaxies didn't announce his birth. No ancient Scriptures whispered his name. No foreign dignitaries arrived to honor his birth. In other words, he was Herod was Great but compared to a king that the heavens announced, he was *Herod-Not-That-Great*.

His response is very similar to why some people who hold Christianity in such contempt. Jesus always represents a threat to our vision of personal greatness. He is a threat to our moral freedom to live the way we want to live. A threat to the monuments we have built to our own self-importance. We are all a little paranoid schizophrenic about ourselves. We think we are So-and-So the Great until our little kingdoms encounter someone far greater and more glorious. Someone that ancient prophecies predicted. Someone for whom stars and angels announced his birth. If Jesus is God incarnate born supernaturally of a virgin, then I'm Steve Not-So-Great. I did a few things, but no star announced my coming. No frankincense was given to honor me.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2*, p. 38.

We see the Lordship of Jesus not only in his resurrection but also in his incarnation. He begins his life galactically glorious. His Lordship places a moral and spiritual ultimatum upon the pride of every human being. Unless we bow to him, we want him dead. Many people stumble on the gospel at this very point. Like Herod, their pride and self-importance cannot tolerate a rival much less a king. *Nobody can tell me what to do!* Really, even if the stars say he's more glorious than you are? Might you be like Herod?

Am I Like the Scribes?

It is a pretty shocking picture here. When asked where the Messiah would be born, the scribes rolled their eyes like, *Duh, everybody knows the prophet Micah. He'll be born in Bethlehem.* Even with the incredible news of stars aligning with prophecy and scholars arriving from a long way off, not one of them has enough personal interest to walk down the hill to Bethlehem. Just in case? Just out of curiosity? How about good old Jewish hospitality? These are the Bible people. These are the theologians. If anyone would walk down the hill to check it out, it would be them.

But they don't. Not one.

I couldn't be like the scribes, could I? Do you know the details of the story of Christmas? Can you name all the folks at the nativity? Are you a religious person? Maybe from childhood? Yet, in spite of head knowledge, at the heart level your personal investment in Jesus and his kingdom is basically absent. You know the answers but you won't walk down the hill. Spiritually interested but only to a point. Are you the scribe in the story?

Am I Like the Wise Men?

This is why Matthew includes this in his gospel. The wise men put to shame the Jewish Scribes and the King of Israel. How? They aren't supposed to be here in the first place. They are Gentiles. They are the people group that destroyed the temple and kidnapped the nation's leaders and wealth. They are pagan idol worshippers by birth, not good Jewish boys. They practice astrology, which is condemned in the Old Testament.

But who did Jesus come to save? Who flocks to him while the religious types resent him? It's the prostitutes and the tax collectors and the Gentiles, and yes, the astrologers. The Gentile astrologers bowing before Jesus were a microcosm of all that Jesus' story would unveil. From the beginning of Jesus' story, even as a kid, it was the marginalized and the unexpected who flocked to him. It's the very questionable types who have the insight to ask, *Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?... We...have come to worship him.*" (Matthew 2:2)

And God arranges the heavens and sends comets to make sure people like the magi have the incredible privilege to bow at Jesus' feet.

So what about us? God doesn't use stars to tell of Jesus' birth. Now he uses Scripture and Christians and churches and he has you reading this today. What's keeping you from bowing before Jesus as Savior and Lord? Pride, like Herod? Too invested in your own agenda and greatness? Any stars announce your birth? Any angels singing? Are you religious like the scribes but not interested enough to walk down the hill, to adjust your life around a Savior born?

In this story, we might be Herod, and we might be scribes, but by personal faith in Jesus, we can become the wise men and reenact their faith journey that brought them in worship

to the miraculous person of Jesus. They didn't know about his death on the cross or his resurrection. They simply knew him to be the one born king of the Jews. Wise men bow down.

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