

Epiphany 2025 (January 4, 2025)
Matthew 2:1-12 (Series A)
Wise or Guided Men?

Today we observed Epiphany, which recalls the visit of the magi or often as we say, “the wise men.” Sometimes, as we have in song, they are called kings, for which the Bible does really give support. The men may have represented one or more kings as emissaries, to pay respects, but we shouldn’t call them kings. Certain writings suggest there could have been as few as two men up to as many as twelve. What is known is that there were three particular gifts given, all of which were appropriate for giving to a king. The suggestion is made by scholars that the gift of gold was for Jesus’ role as a king, the frankincense was for his role as a priest, and the myrrh was for his anointing, but this is speculation.

But before the gifts are given we have the questions of how they knew what this star represented, where did it come from and what made them follow it. We might also ask if they were wise enough to figure this out on their own or were they guided.

It is important to remember that the Savior was promised to all the people of the world and that all were descended from Noah and his sons. We can trace the ancestral lines of all nations back to that time which means at some point in time all nations knew of the promise and may have had it written down in their historical or religious records. If we consider the Babylonian captivity and the fact that men like Daniel had important roles and even instructed the local magi and leaders, there may have been relatively fresh knowledge of what was promised to come from the line of King David.

So what do we make of this star that was seen and why would it mean something? All the way back in the book of Numbers (24:17) there is a prophecy from Balaam, who we pretty much ignore, that mentions a star coming out of Jacob, which would be Israel. Is that enough to supply the answer? What we don’t know at this time is were more details and other prophecies, which we don’t have, that were recorded and handed down in these other countries, since the promise of a savior was for them too.

While people have tried to determine if God used a natural occurrence like a comet as the star to guide them there is no object ever seen in the sky that could give traveling directions. We can use the arrangement of stars in the sky for navigational purposes such as figuring out where you are on earth, making it possible to travel the oceans and return, but not for guiding you to a place you have never been. So this “star” in the sky had to be miraculous and traveling at such a low height above them that it could actually be right above the place where Jesus was. Interestingly, there is no mention of anyone else seeing this star as Herod and others in Jerusalem are surprised to learn about this star.

The miraculous guiding of individuals continues as the magi tell of what has happened and ask where the baby is who has been born King of the Jews, the same words that Pontius Pilate will use at Jesus’ crucifixion. King Herod will then ask the priests and scribes where the Christ will be born. It seems none of them had really been looking for signs of the Savior but now they find the location to be Bethlehem.

If you think about it the appearance is that none of them are truly wise but in fact they are being guided to the correct conclusions. This same thing happened when Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter answers that he is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus tells him that he didn't figure that out by himself but that it was revealed to him by God. The sad part is that only the Magi were the ones to be wise enough to believe and follow in the way to the Lord and hopefully to follow the Lord after that. The others had the words to guide them but chose to deny all that the signs and words revealed.

If the star appeared the day Jesus was born, the first significant kingdom to the east would have been Babylon/Persia, a distance on foot of 1200 miles. Reasonable travel time of at least 40 days would have been required to get to Bethlehem, but they stopped for some period of time in Jerusalem to get directions. If they came from farther away we can see why King Herod chooses to kill all the boys under age two.

Interesting also is that is that after they leave Jerusalem the star shows up to lead them to where Jesus is. Bethlehem was small so it would seem they might only have had to ask the local people but they is likely a twist that we miss. More than forty days have passed, and Mary and Joseph have already taken Jesus to the Temple for dedication to the Lord and Luke tells us they returned home. There was no reason to still be at the stable and Matthew tells us the star stopped over the house where Jesus was. This may have been the house that Joseph was going to take the family back to after leaving Egypt but out of fear of the new Herod he decided to go to Nazareth.

Something for us to take away from this reading is that all people were always in God's plan and that He guides us in the way we should go, seeing as we are not wise enough to figure out all things on our own. There is no place so small as Bethlehem was and no place too far away as that country in the east from where the Magi came. Our problems come when we think we are so smart, have all the answers, and don't know what to do with them.

God showed himself over and over again and the people wanted to go their own way. The star led some to Jesus but not everyone wanted to follow with the same intent. Jesus came to live among us to show the love of God to save and yet so many won't follow yet. What we should determine is that faith comes from having the wisdom to trust where the Word, Jesus Christ and the Spirit guides. Salvation comes from following the Light, Christ Jesus. Amen.