

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Birth of Christ		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	3		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 2:1-12		
Date:	December 10, 2023 (a.m.)		

### THE WISE MEN AND THE WORD OF GOD

“The Word endears Christ to us,” declared Luther, “and Christ endears the Word to us.” The method of Matthew comes clearly into view in the first two chapters. Although he dwells on the genealogy, birth and early life of Jesus, he by no means approaches his subject as a secular biographer. “His purpose,” writes Stonehouse, “is to depict Jesus as the messianic King, the Son of David, whose history fulfills the revelation of the Old Testament.”<sup>1</sup> Notice how the Word meets with different responses. On the one hand, we see the *Word-seeking* magi, and on the other, we see the *Word-rejecting* Herod. We also note the attitude of the chief priests and teachers of the law – they know the Word but appear callously indifferent to its fulfillment.

I. **THE WISEMEN AND THE GENERAL REVELATION.** “The *wiseman* (KJV), *magi* (NIV) are translations of the Greek word *magoi*.<sup>2</sup> This probably refers to a priestly caste of Babylonian astrologers.<sup>3</sup> The word *astrology* as used here needs explanation. Originally, astrology was related to astronomy. For if astronomy is the study of the movements of the heavenly bodies, then astrology was the study of the effects of those movements. Owing to their inadequate techniques of astronomical observation, the early scientists had no conception of the infinite number of existing solar systems nor of the vast distances which separate the visible stars from each other. They were thus led to postulate a single system in which the seven moving stars or planets (sun, moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Mercury) shifted their position in relation to the earth and each other, against a fixed backcloth of the twelve signs of the zodiac.”<sup>4</sup> We should note that these men were, as Barclay observes, “skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science.”<sup>5</sup> They were seekers of truth and not quacks or charlatans. If they were Babylonian, then they were like those mentioned in Daniel 1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7. They saw a star “when it rose” (NIV fn.). What this star actually was remains uncertain. I am inclined to see this as a special star and not a planetary conjunction or comet like Halley’s.<sup>6</sup> It is the advent star that attracted them, and the question needs to be asked – how did they connect this with the one born King of the Jews? Ridderbos explains, “Among Babylonian astrologers in particular, it seems there had long been an expectation that a great King would arise in the West (some claim to find evidence of this in certain inscriptions). Quite possibly, the great influence that Daniel had on the Babylonian wise men and astrologers (Daniel 2:48; 5:11) was still at work here.”<sup>7</sup> “Attempts to identify the *star* as a regular astronomical phenomenon have generally focused on three possibilities: 1. A planetary conjunction (of Saturn and Jupiter) in 7 BC; 2. A comet, usually Halley’s, which unfortunately appeared too early, in 12/11 BC; 3. A nova (a star which, owing to an explosion, appears temporarily with extraordinary brightness). But no known astronomical phenomena account for the movement of the star as described in v. 9, and this indicates that what Matthew describes is guidance by a miraculous occurrence, even if the initial interest of the Magi was aroused by a nova (or a planetary conjunction – or both!)”<sup>8</sup>

II. **THE WISEMEN AND THE REVELATION OF SCRIPTURE.** “They came to Jerusalem,” notes Edersheim, “not because they imagined He must be born in the Jewish capital, but because they

would naturally expect there to obtain authentic information, *where* He might be found.”<sup>9</sup> Herod and *all* Jerusalem is disturbed by this inquiry. Why? Herod was overcome by a mixture of fear and anger. This can be seen in the sly, discreet course that he followed, and in the atrocious savagery of his eventual response (2:16). The newborn King posed a direct threat to him. The common folk hated him, and talk of a Messiah would only inflame their hopes. This Herod knew, *and* the ruling class in the Sanhedrin feared Herod’s response – so the inquiry by the magi alarmed them as well. Yet, note the irony – *they* possessed the Scriptures and knew where to look – Micah 5:2. “Notice,” says Ridderbos, “that the magi were able to find the newborn Jewish King only by the light of Israel’s Holy Scripture, not by the star that had enticed them.”<sup>10</sup> Only Scripture brings them directly to Christ. “This section of the story begs a number of questions. If the magi were east of Israel and they saw his star in the east, they should have gone to India! Obviously, they traveled west. The key to this verse is the fact that in Hebrew, the word for *East* also means *the rising*. The Greek text (with the NRSV) can be better translated, *We saw his star at its rising*. What then was the wisemen’s country of origin? Were they Gentiles? And were they from Arabia? The answer to the first question is that they were indeed Gentiles. The Shepherds were from the Bethlehem area and were most certainly Jews, yet the wisemen were Gentiles. The new *king of the Jews* was adored at his birth by both Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, the wisemen were quite likely from Arabia. When the text describes them as *wisemen from the East*, the question inevitably emerges: Where in the East? The answer to that question depends on where the writer lives. If an American is visiting friends in New Jersey and tells them that he or she came from *the West*, the hosts might infer that the guest is from Pittsburgh. If someone in the United States Navy is sent to serve in the *Western Pacific* he or she may be stationed in Pacific waters but a British ship one hundred yards away is in the *Eastern Pacific*. It is the same ocean, but the British look East to see it and the Americans look west. Any Christian living in Rome in the early centuries of the church would naturally think of *the East* as Persia, and indeed the word *Magi* in Greek literature does refer to people from Babylonia or Parthia. But for a Christian dwelling in the Holy Land, *the East* would refer to the other side of the Jordan River. Indeed, such a designation persists to this day. Living on the West Bank in Israel/Palestine I observed that visitors arriving from Jordan were always referred to as having come *from the East* which of course meant *the east side of the Jordan River*. It is only natural to assume that Jewish Christians, living in the Holy Land in the first century, thought and talked the same way. *The East* for them would naturally refer to the Jordanian deserts that connect with the deserts of Arabia.”<sup>11</sup>

III. ***THE WISEMEN WORSHIP THE WORD MADE FLESH.*** Finally, having thus been sovereignly drawn by God’s revelation in the heavens and directed by the prophetic Scriptures, the magi reach their journey’s end. They find the promised child, Immanu-el, “the with-us God.” Again, note the irony. The despised (pagan idolators) gentiles are led to Israel (who possesses the oracles of God [Romans 3:2]). Three reactions to the Word of God are seen: (1) *Herod* – hatred and hostility. He will do all that he can to destroy the word; (2) *The Priests and Scribes* – they are indifferent. They disregard the prophetic Scripture and the promised Messiah; (3) *The Wisemen* – they eagerly seek the Christ of Scripture and we see *adoring worship*.<sup>12</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** John Calvin commented: “Today all sorts of subjects are eagerly pursued; but the knowledge of God is neglected . . . Yet to know God is man’s chief end and justifies his existence.”<sup>13</sup> It is only in Christ that we can know God and only in Christ that we can have God as our God – and it is only in Scripture that you can find Christ. “You must stay,” declared Luther, “with the Person of Christ. When you have Him, you have all; but you have lost all when you have lost Him. In Christ you come to the Father, and the Father directs you to Christ.”<sup>14</sup> . . . And how does the Father direct you to Christ? By the Scripture. Stay with the Scriptures, for only in Scripture do we find Christ.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of the Synoptic Gospels to Christ I* (Baker, 1979), p. 127. Stonehouse elsewhere observes “Matthew’s appeal to the Old Testament . . . is displayed prominently in his record of the birth and infancy of Jesus (Mt. 1:22f.; 2:5f., 15, 17f., 23). As a matter of fact, there are nearly as many appeals to prophetic explanations perhaps from the fact that, when Jesus began his public ministry, his own deeds and words served to indicate the divine nature of his person and mission.” (p. 190).

<sup>2</sup>These are sometimes referred to as “Kings” (as in the song, “We Three Kings of Orient Are”) – a tradition that can be traced back as far as Tertullian and the late second century. It probably developed in light of the Old Testament passages that say Kings will come and worship the Messiah (cf. Psalm 68:29, 31; 72:10-11; Isaiah 49:7; 60:1-6). The common assumption that there were *three* of them is deduced from the *three* gifts. By the end of the sixth century they were given names: Melchior, Balthasar and Gasper.

<sup>3</sup>We do not know exactly where they were from – Persia or the Arabian Desert are possibilities, but Babylon is more likely. There was a sizable Jewish settlement there that could date from the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the more distant Babylon may be supported by the travel time required. cf. The commentary by D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin VIII (Zondervan, 1985), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup>cf. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), pp. 284-385 for extensive discussion.

<sup>5</sup>Wm. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew I* (Westminster Press, 1958), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup>Astrologers dating back to the medieval period have sought justification for their practice based upon this reference in Matthew’s Gospel. Cf. Keith Thomas, *op. cit.* p. 359. Note discussion by Carson, *op. cit.* p. 85.

<sup>7</sup>H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Student’s Commentary* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup>R. T. France, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 82.

<sup>9</sup>Alfred Edesheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Longman, Green & Co., 1899), p. 204. “Any Jew would have told them that the Messiah was not to be born in Jerusalem.” *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, 34.

<sup>11</sup>K. E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies In The Gospels* (IVP, 2008), p. 50.

<sup>12</sup>While they, in Persian style, adore Him as King, still reckoning Him such in early terms, and bring Him the fruits of the land, our duty is to worship Him in spirit. This is our proper and reasonable service which He demands, that we should consecrate to Him first ourselves, then our all.” Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries I* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 88.

<sup>13</sup>Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles I (Westminster Press, 1975).

<sup>14</sup>*What Luther Says: An Anthology*, compiled by E. M. Plass I (Concordia, 1959), p. 149.