

# “Epiphany: The Coming of Christ, Visit of the Wise Men, and You”

Matthew 2.1–12 Sermon

Mark Batluck

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## INTRODUCTION

It is ironic that the story of the wise men visiting baby Jesus is told and retold in churches, Sunday clubs, etc. yet few realize the significance of it. Everyone knows what happened: Jesus was born and (as nativity scenes depict it) no sooner had they cut the umbilical cord than the wise men came knocking on the door. So they with the shepherds, donkeys and all are seen kneeling at the foot of the manger. This whole scene is one of the most commonly painted stories in early Christian art as well. However, the visit of these men is shrouded in mystery. Who were these men? How did they to be worshippers of Jesus? I think you’ll be really surprised by how relevant this is for us today.

As we get started, we should discuss a couple terms that are commonly left undefined. First, in the title of this sermon, the term “**Epiphany**” may need some explanation. The Greek word, from which we get the English *Epiphany*, means “to appear or display” and the English word “epiphany” (with a lower case “e”) simply means, “an appearance of the divine.” In the holiday called “Epiphany” (with a capital “E”), Christians celebrate Jesus coming to Earth in human form, and we mark this celebration on the day the wise men were thought to have visited. So, whenever I say “Epiphany” from now on, think, “Our celebration of the coming of Christ and Jesus’ appearance to the Magi.”

Another term to consider is “**Magi**.” This word is rather difficult to define, but is often translated “magician” in the New Testament and other literature. We don’t know exactly what it means, but “wise man” or “magician” is a decent stab at it. The only place in the New Testament where it is used is in Acts 13, where we meet the “magician and false prophet” named Bar-Jesus. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint), we see it twice in Daniel 2, where Nebuchadnezzar calls upon his “magi and sorcerers” to both tell him his dream and also interpret it. The above passages are why I prefer the word “magician” to describe these men. The word “magician” does a better job of reminding us that these men were pagans. They were Gentiles and were likely coming, not from the Orient, but from the surrounding country, probably Arabia.

Now that we are all on the same page with these terms, let’s discuss the story Matthew tells us. It is recorded in Matthew 2.1–12. In this passage we see four things that are extremely significant for us in evangelism, our worship, our view of the Old Testament, and our picture of Christ throughout eternity.

## WALK THROUGH THE TEXT

1. **Christ appears to the unexpected (Mt 2.1–2).** Why is this a big deal that the Magi come to visit Jesus? We live in a multicultural world, right?—everyone is included. There are no favorites in our societies. In the Old Testament, though, among a human race steeped in wickedness and deserving nothing, God graciously looked down and said, “I’m going to pick a people and cultivate them as *my* people.” He even went as far as to say, “Out of all the nations of the Earth—you Jews will be the ones I bless.” And he did

just that—he picked the Jews and loved them and revealed himself to them in a special way.

You can imagine, then, the upheaval this causes for non-Jewish magicians to be the ones to visit Jesus! In fact, Matthew spends the first chapter first going through this long lineage about how Jesus is, in fact, the great-great-great-great grandson of David. This was for all of his Jewish listeners. Matthew wants to say, “Look—Jesus is the real deal! He is the promised Savior for the **Jews!**” And then he turns right back around and says, “Oh, by the way, non-Jewish magicians were really the first recognize Jesus as Lord.” These men were not God’s people, they didn’t come from a tribe of Israel, they weren’t sons of Abraham, and they weren’t privileged with the Law of Moses! This is outrageous—and yet they are privileged to become audience to the newborn Savior!

The next question is, who talked to them? Who told them to follow the star? Who told them to even care about this King of the Jews? The answer: who knows? And here they are, showing up and worshipping Jesus. This sounds an awful lot like John 3.8 to me, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it has come from or where it’s going. So it is with everyone born of the Holy Spirit.” In the above verse, John is saying that the Spirit works and acts in ways unbeknownst to us—he just works. As with the wind, which does it’s own thing all of the time here in Edinburgh, no one can say where or how the Spirit will perform his life-saving work.

In the same way, no one can explain what has happened to these men, yet we know 2 things: (1) They are not Jews—this story shows us that God is now revealing himself to people all over the world! (2) They probably converted. They worship Jesus and then bear the fruit of new life by obeying the dream they had telling them not to return to Herod.

This should give us tremendous confidence in the agenda of God for the world. First off, it’s great to know that God’s blessing is not reserved only for the Jews. I don’t think that there is even one Messianic Jew (or, a Jew that has become a Christian) in this church. The fact that we are all sitting here is a testimony to the power of this expansion in God’s plan to incorporate the Gentiles. Now, all over the world, there are millions more Gentiles than there are Jews. This is amazing! Have you ever wondered how hopeless, meaningless, trivial, or difficult life would be outside of Christ? When you do, think back to this passage and thank God for calling these men as a foreshadowing of how he would call *you*.

Secondly, this should give us tremendous confidence in the work of God in the world in that the success of his work doesn’t depend on your skill or obedience! The Spirit does what he does however he chooses to do it. Here are these magicians, living in a pagan culture. For all we know, they could have been enchanters or priests of their pagan religions! And yet they show up, somehow converted and worshippers of Jesus. This illustrates for us how God works, most often *through* us, but sometimes even *in spite of* us. This is my new favorite answer for those who ask me, “What happens to the natives in the jungle who never have a chance to hear about the gospel?” My answer will now be, “Have you read Matthew 2, how pagan magicians who had *NO* gospel witness came to worship Jesus as converted men?!” God is like the wind, he goes wherever he pleases and does whatever he wills. And we should praise him for that!

## **2. Christ's appearance causes some to worry and others to worship (Mt 2.3).**

Matthew 2.3 says that when Herod heard the news about one who was born “King of the Jews” that he and all of Jerusalem were troubled, distressed, worried, deeply concerned. Matthew uses this word for “fears” only one other time in the gospel (14.26), when the disciples thought Jesus was a ghost walking on the water. This isn’t the concern of faith, it was the worry of unbelief.

The wise men, on the other hand, when they were told about Jesus, set off on a journey...to worship him. This passage reminds us that Jesus is a wedge that drives some close to him and others away. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the Earth,” Jesus says in Matthew 10.34–35. “I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” Jesus is not saying here that he’s against good family relationships. He’s recognizing the simple fact that he is history’s most divisive figure, and that his person will be the sole cause of many major rifts among people that would otherwise be very close.

Paul says it slightly differently. “For we are the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one [those who are perishing] we are the smell of death; to the other [those who are saved] the fragrance of life...” (2 Cor 2.15–16). What Paul is saying is that when people smell Christ in our lives, to some it’ll smell sweet—like life. To others it’ll be the canker of death itself. Here in this passage, the magicians pick up the scent of the coming of Jesus and smell sweet life. Herod gets a whiff of the rot and is determined to snuff it out if he can.

This is something we have to recognize will be a reality in our lives and ministries. I have found in my own life that I’ll often gauge how well an interaction went with someone based on how they respond. If I share the gospel or ask them questions about spiritual things and they respond with hostility, I say to myself, “See, I did it wrong. If I were only more sensitive, or this, that and the other this wouldn’t have happened.” Likewise, if a person were to respond favorably to the gospel I would often think, “That went very well. I need to keep sharing the gospel like that.”

But this typical way of judging gospel-encounters isn’t right at all. Sure, we can all work on being more sensitive to those who don’t believe, but some people are just going to react with hostility no matter what you do. One of the most unpleasant gospel conversations I had with someone happened about 4 years back. I was sharing with a family member who would call himself a Christian and yet evidenced no fruit in his life of Christ. I didn’t judge him outright but just raised my concerns and he laughed at me. He just scoffed at what I was saying. It was a terrible conversation, but I’m glad I had it—it was right to raise those concerns and what happened was simply what Jesus said would happen—he would bring division in some families where Christ is concerned.

In another situation, I was doing beach evangelism, and there before me was the biggest, most intimidating American football player I’d ever seen. I said to myself, “Well, I better find someone else to share the gospel with because there’s no way that guy is interested.” But I caught myself, and decided to nervously walk up to him anyway. When I laid out the gospel for him, I could not believe it—he wanted to hear more! So we talked about the Lord for awhile, I prayed with him, and I left a tract with him. It was completely unexpected. The existence of Christ in the world brings about wrath in some and worship in others.

**3. Christ's coming was predicted hundreds of years beforehand (Mt 2.6).** Get the picture here: Herod hears from the wise men that a certain "King of the Jews" was to be born. If you do a little research on Herod you'll find that he was as politically devious of a person as you can be. At a point of political turmoil early in his career, he was temporarily unseated as the ruler Israel. And so he fled to Rome and asked for help and the Roman leadership crowned Herod the official *King of the Jews*. It was this Roman political backing that undergirded the rest of Herod's reign. Therefore, when the magicians show up saying another king of the Jews had been born, Herod's ears immediately perked up.

It seems that Herod knew that such a king had been predicted in the Old Testament. That's why he got the high priests and scribes together to ask them just what the prediction said. The Jewish leaders then found Micah 5.2, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah; from you shall come forth from me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old from ancient days." Micah predicted Jesus' birth in Bethlehem **700 years before** it actually happened, and said something even more incredible in the prophecy: Jesus' coming was "from of old from ancient days." This means that Jesus wasn't an afterthought or a change of plans. Jesus wasn't a plan B or just another way to "run history." Jesus' coming was part of God's plan from "ancient days."

This fact should give you an awesome confidence in the plans of God the Father throughout history. Think about it: if Jesus' coming to save the world was a plan in place from ancient days, then the world's needing saving must also have been a plan in place for the same amount of time. I would venture to say that nothing that has ever happened or will ever happen does so without first fitting perfectly into the divine plan.

The beauty of that confidence is that our faith in God's total control in all of life should go with us into every situation we face. If the biggest problem in all of history (the fact that world needs to be saved from sin) has been in the plan from the beginning and Jesus conquered sin decisively in his death and resurrection, how can we not face all of our lesser problems with the same degree of confidence? The fact that Jesus came in fulfillment of ancient predictions about his coming bring with it a whole storehouse of assurance for the believer that God is on a mission and is fulfilling his plans to complete what he set out to do.

**4. Gifts given to Christ foreshadowed him as the exalted Lamb of God (Mt 2.11).** There's a lot of mystery surrounding these gifts and what they symbolize. There are records outside of the Bible that tell of kings offering these three gifts to Greek gods. This causes some people to think, "That's what folks did for gods—they gave them gold, frankincense, and myrrh." However, there seems to be more to it than that. It appears as though these gifts each preach a certain thing about who Jesus was or what he would do.

Gold is the one gift no one disputes—it's a symbol of royalty. With gold leading the procession of gifts, there's no question that these men meant to honor Jesus as a King. Frankincense and myrrh are much more difficult, though. Frankincense was a harvested from trees and used at the altar in worship (Lev 2.1, 16; 6.15; 24.7; Ex 30.34). We can all hear the word "incense" in "frankincense" and know that this substance was often used in the Old Testament in times of prayer. Myrrh was an oiled perfume used for a number of

things, burial included. Mark 15.23 describes Jesus being offered a mixture of myrrh and wine as a sedative to ease his pain on the cross. John 19.39 says that Nicodemus brought myrrh and aloe to anoint Jesus' body with after the Lord died.

Given the precedent in Scripture for the use of these two spices that were harvested in southern Arabia, it is reasonable to assume that these men, probably Arabic, knew well the uses of these items and brought them to Jesus with this in mind. What we are seeing, then, is the foreshadowing of Jesus' role as the reigning Lamb of God. From the gold we have an allusion to his kingly reign, from the frankincense an allusion to his priestly role as the one who goes before God on behalf of the people, and in the myrrh we have an allusion to the precise *way* in which he would perform these priestly duties: by sacrificing himself.

This taps into something I realized for the first time just a few months ago—I was talking to a friend a couple months back and this person said, “Well, in heaven, we won't remember anything that happened here on Earth because we won't experience sadness or pain and it would be painful to remember things on Earth.” I said, “I'm not so sure about that. In heaven, Jesus will reign *forever* be worshipped as the ‘Lamb who was slain’ (Rev 5.6, 12; 13.8). What that means is that God's conquering sin and death in Jesus will be the centerpiece of all our worship for eternity! It's not that we won't remember any of it—on the contrary, we'll remember it all and yet will see Jesus as the center and ruler of everything!”

This savior of ours, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be worshipped for eternity for all that he did in coming to Earth as a baby, personally paying the penalty for the sin of the whole world, and then rising from the dead. And it is that legacy which is foreshadowed by the men who brought these three gifts to the baby in the manger.

#### TAKING MATTHEW 2.1–12 HOME...

Now, how will you worship the Jesus in 2010? I don't mean *where* will you worship him or even what activities in the church will you involve yourself with. Rather, I'm asking how your heart make Jesus, the risen Lamb of God, the treasure of your life? We talked earlier about there being two primary responses to Jesus: wrath and worship. But there is a third response that is very common among church folks: indifference. It's like the guy at the inn. Sure, he gave them a place to stay in his stable and he supplied them with a manger and all—but where was he when Jesus was born? Probably with his family doing what was most comfortable to him. Certainly not out in the stable adoring the newborn baby king.

Is that where you are? When you sit here through song after song and sermon after sermon, do you passively think, “Sure, okay, great...I agree with that”? If so, what is it that is sitting on the throne of your emotions today. What do you get really excited about, as compared to Jesus? Is it football? Family? Beer or food? Work or making money? If so, what do those things possess that Jesus does not?

Epiphany is a wonderful holiday to think these things through. These men traveled for miles, bringing a baby they had never seen very expensive gifts. This Wednesday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, spend some time thinking about how the Lord may be calling you to worship him in a new and fresh way this year. I do wonder if we as a church could take those areas of our hearts that reek of stagnation and change them to hearts that burn

brightly for him. Let's pray together that the Lord would keep our apathy from preventing our treasuring of Christ together.