

## January 8 Lesson

Today we read about the visit of the Magi and Herod's massacre of the babies in Bethlehem. Now, all of us are familiar with the wise men coming to worship baby Jesus as part of the Christmas story, but who are these Magi? The word in Greek is *magos*, and in the NT, it occurs here in Matthew 2 and in Acts 13, where Paul meets a "magician," a Jewish false prophet who was known as Bar-Jesus/Elymas (Acts 13:6, 8). The word was used of those who "practiced magic" (*mageuó*), as in the case of Simon of Samaria (Acts 8:9). In the OT, the word occurs in Daniel, where Nebuchadnezzar commanded "the magicians (*magos*), the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned" to explain his dream (Dan 2:2; also Dan 1:20; 2:10, 27; 4:7; 5:7, 11, 15).

From what we can tell from ancient sources, the Magi were a priestly caste of magicians and astronomers who were wise in interpreting the stars (astrology).<sup>1</sup> We know them as "wise men" today because of the KJV version of Matthew 2:1—"there came wise men from the east." Later legends claimed that there were three of them (three gifts) and that they were kings (Tertullian). By the end of the sixth century, they were even named: Melchior, Balthasar, and Gasper. None of these legends can be verified. That being said, it seems likely from the value of the gifts that they were wealthy, possibly court astrologers.<sup>2</sup>

What exactly is meant by "the east"? Where did they come from? Well, there are three main views: Arabia, Babylon, and Persia.

- Arabia: Gold and frankincense were associated with Arabia (cf. Isa 60:6; Ps 72:15). Arabia was also the earliest view (favored by Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Clement of Rome).
- Babylon: Babylon was closely associated with divination and astrology, and the word *magos* occurs frequently in Daniel's description of the Babylonian court (favored by Celsus, Jerome, and Augustine).
- Persia: In early Christian art, the Magi were shown as Persian. In fact, a church in Bethlehem built by Constantine was spared by the armies of the Persians in 614 because of a mosaic picturing the Magi as Persians (favored by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Chrysostom, and Cyril of Jerusalem; it became the dominant view among the Church Fathers).<sup>3</sup>

Now, the Magi came to Jerusalem (not knowing Micah 5:2, they naturally assumed a king would be born in the capital city), and they were asking, "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" (Matt 2:2).<sup>4</sup> So, what is this star that they saw? And how did they connect the star with the birth of a king of the Jews?

Well, as you might imagine, there have been many different theories about the star, including comets, novae, supernovae, meteors, planetary conjunctions, eclipses, bolides, and even ball lightning. But the earliest view was that the star was a miracle, a special creation of God that was used to mark the birth of his Son.<sup>5</sup> This view easily explains how the star was visible to the Magi in their homeland, and how it then "went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was" (Matt 2:9). Indeed, given the

<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, New Updated Edition. (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1993), 167.

<sup>2</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 86, note 7.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 168.

<sup>4</sup> "Worship" doesn't necessarily imply that the Magi recognized Jesus' divinity; it can also mean "do homage" (Broadus). However, Matthew doubtless expected his readers to realize that the Magi "worshipped" better than they knew (similar to how the prophets sometimes spoke things they themselves didn't fully understand; 1 Pet 1:10-11). Also, note that they didn't start by asking Herod; he summoned them later after they had been asking around.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Culley, "The Star Of Bethlehem," *Bible and Spade* 29.3 (2016): 79.

strong resistance to divination and astrology among early Christians, it's not surprising that almost all the Church Fathers considered the star to be a miracle.<sup>6</sup> That being said, God can use the natural, physical world to accomplish his purposes, and so in modern times, many have tried to explain the star in terms of real astronomical objects.

If we take this approach, we can rule out comets, for they were seen as omens of doom. Novas and supernovas have been recorded during this period (by the Chinese), but none occur near the time of Jesus' birth (it also seems unlikely that Herod would have had no knowledge of such an easily visible event). Meteors are momentary streaks across the sky, so they don't fit Matthew's description. The same goes for lightning. Really, the only likely candidate is a planet or a conjunction of planets (a conjunction is where planets and/or stars are very near each other in night sky). There is one possibility here, and I'll summarize from Gerald Culley's interesting article in Bible and Spade.<sup>7</sup>

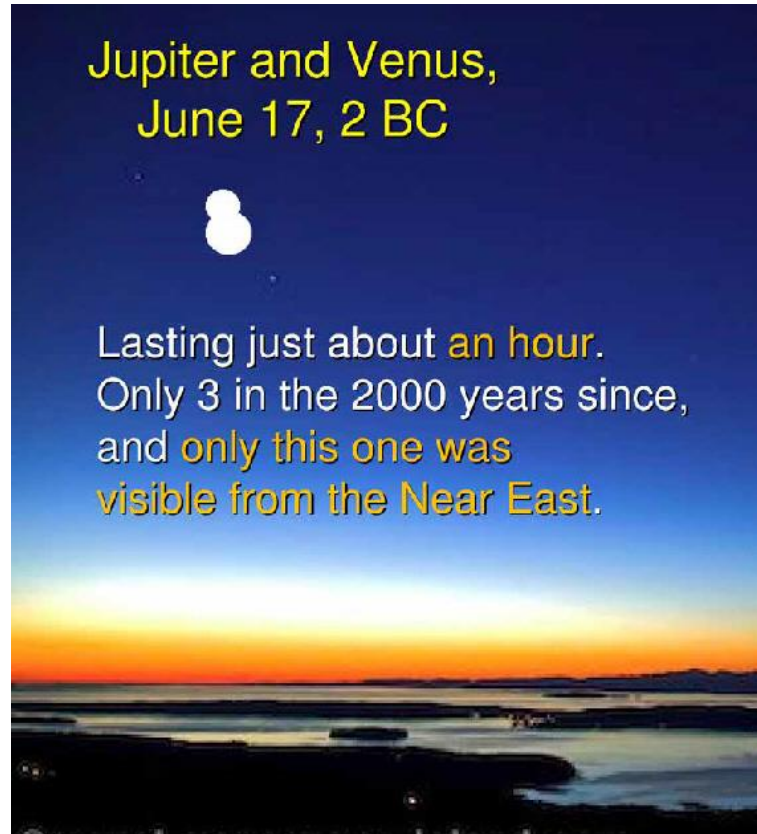
In September of 3 BC, the planet Jupiter began a 7-month triple conjunction with the star Regulus. Since Jupiter—largest of the planets and named by the Romans for the king of the gods—was circling over Regulus, which the ancients all regarded as the “king star,” the Magi would see this rare display as signaling something associated with kings. This event took place in the constellation of Leo (Regulus is part of the group of stars that makes up Leo). If the Magi were familiar with Jewish tradition (perhaps due to Daniel's influence), they would have recalled the symbol of the Jews' royal tribe, the Lion of Judah (Gen 49:9–10). Hence, a Jewish king. The magi may also have been aware of Balaam's prophecy from Numbers 24:17—“A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”



<sup>6</sup> Aaron Adair, “The Star of Christ in the Light of Astronomy,” *Zygon* 47.1 (2012): 8. Also, Dale C. Allison, “What Was the Star That Guided the Magi?” *Bible Review* 9.6: 20–24.

<sup>7</sup> Culley, “The Star Of Bethlehem,” p. 83. For a full, packaged presentation, see <https://bethlehemstar.com/> and <https://www.askelm.com/star/index.asp>.

Exactly nine months later, on June 17, 2 BC, the planet Venus came so close to Jupiter in the night sky that the naked eye couldn't tell them apart—they appeared as one very bright star.



A few months later, in December of 2 BC, Jupiter was in the southern sky at 68 degrees above the horizon. Then, perhaps explaining how the star “came to rest,” Jupiter entered retrograde (appearing to stop for about six days before “reversing” due to the earth’s faster orbital speed). The date was December 25, 2 BC. Jesus would have been about six months old at that point, and while this date did not mark his birth, it did mark the first celebration with gifts (the first Christmas if you will).

OK, so does all this explain the “star” that the Magi saw? Well, it’s possible, but we just don’t know for sure, and so there’s no point in being dogmatic. Regardless of whether the star was a miracle, or whether God used real stars and planets (or whether it was an angel as some people think), the point is that the good news of the birth of the Messiah was visible in the sky for those who had eyes to see. And how fascinating that it was magicians from the east—Gentile astrologers—who responded to that good news!

Now, it says that when Herod heard about the Magi’s question, he “was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matt 2:3). Why so? Well, if you remember from January 2, this is Herod the Great, the brilliant but brutal king of Judea. In his old age, he became paranoid and executed anyone he thought might be a threat, even his own sons. It was so bad that the emperor Augustus reportedly quipped, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than son” (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2:4, 11)—the joke being that, since Herod was religiously Jewish, he didn’t eat pork and his pig would be safe from slaughter. So you can imagine how upset he was when this group of Magi showed up and claimed that a rival king had been born (Herod had gained the throne through politics and warfare, not by birth). And when Herod the Great was upset, everyone else in the city was worried and upset!

Herod called “all the chief priests and scribes of the people,” and asked them where the Messiah (Christ) was to be born. So, who were the chief priests and scribes? Well, first of all, there was the high priest, after the order of Aaron the Levite. The high priest was supposed to be in office until he died, but by this time, high priests were appointed and removed at the whim of various rulers (you could even buy

the position if you had enough money). Because of this, there were often several living at one time. Those who had been removed from office lost their high priestly function, but they usually kept the title, as well as considerable power and prestige (Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas were both called high priest; cf. Luke 3:2; John 18:13, 24; Acts 4:6). Another of the chief priests was the captain of the Temple, who was appointed by and responsible to the high priest. He had the power to arrest and imprison, and so was allowed a contingent of soldiers who acted as Temple police. Throw in the heads of the priestly orders, the Temple treasurer and other Temple overseers and officials, and you had the priestly aristocracy referred to as the “chief priests.”<sup>8</sup> The “scribes” were the authorities on Jewish law, both written and traditional, and they were responsible for teaching the people (cf. Matt 23:2). They were often called lawyers because they were the legal experts of the day (many disputes concerned the Mosaic Law).<sup>9</sup>

Now, it’s interesting that Herod assumed the new king was the Messiah. Why so? Well, remember that Messiah (Christ) means “Anointed One.” David was anointed by Samuel to be king over Israel, and so “King of the Jews” was naturally understood as speaking of the Messiah (who else could it be in those days?). But then why didn’t any of the Jews go with the Magi to look for Jesus? Shouldn’t they have been excited about the birth of the Messiah? Well, I think this is our first clue as to the spiritual health of Israel’s religious and political leadership. They had aligned themselves with Herod, and if his power base was threatened, so was theirs. Indeed, from the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, the Jewish leaders are seen to be morally and spiritual bankrupt.<sup>10</sup>

Herod asked the Magi when the star first appeared (Matt 2:7), the point being that the star was likely seen at the birth of the Messiah (conception?), and it had taken some time for the Magi to travel to Jerusalem (note that the Magi weren’t there at the manger with the shepherds as our nativity scenes show). They likely arrived several months later, for Herod ordered that all babies “who were two years old or under” be killed (Matt 2:16). By this time, Mary and Joseph were living in a “house,” perhaps waiting until Jesus was older before they traveled back to Nazareth, or maybe Joseph had found work there in Bethlehem and they decided to stay.

The gifts given by the Magi were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Frankincense was a valuable spice that came from the gummy resin of a tree, and it produced a sweet odor when burned. It was used as a perfume in those days (cf. Song 3:6; 4:6), but it was also part of the recipe for the special sacred incense that was burned on the altar in the Temple (cf. Exod 30:34–38). Myrrh was also a sweet smelling spice that came from the sap of a small tree found in Arabia, Abyssinia, and India. Like frankincense, it was used as a perfume (Ps 45:8; Song 3:6), and it was part of the sacred anointing oil used by the priests (Exod 30:22–33). It was also used in burials to stifle the smell of a body as it decayed (cf. John 19:39).

Now, some think that there is symbolic significance in these gifts: gold represents Jesus’ kingship, frankincense his deity, and myrrh his sacrificial death and burial. But this likely reads too much into the Magi’s understanding of who Jesus is (although God may have prompted them to give gifts that implied more than they knew). Rather, these gifts show how much the Magi honor Jesus as King of the Jews, and their value was no doubt used to providentially support the family in their flight to and stay in Egypt.<sup>11</sup>

So, why did Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt? And where did they stay? Well, God told them to go to Egypt because it was a Roman province that was outside the jurisdiction of Herod the Great. Once there, they would be safe (Herod had no formal extradition treaty with the Roman authorities in Egypt). Although we can’t be sure where they lived, they could have stayed in the main Jewish community in Alexandria, a city that lay on the Mediterranean Sea at the western edge of the Nile Delta. About one million Jews lived in this large metropolis, and it would have been easy to blend into the populace there.

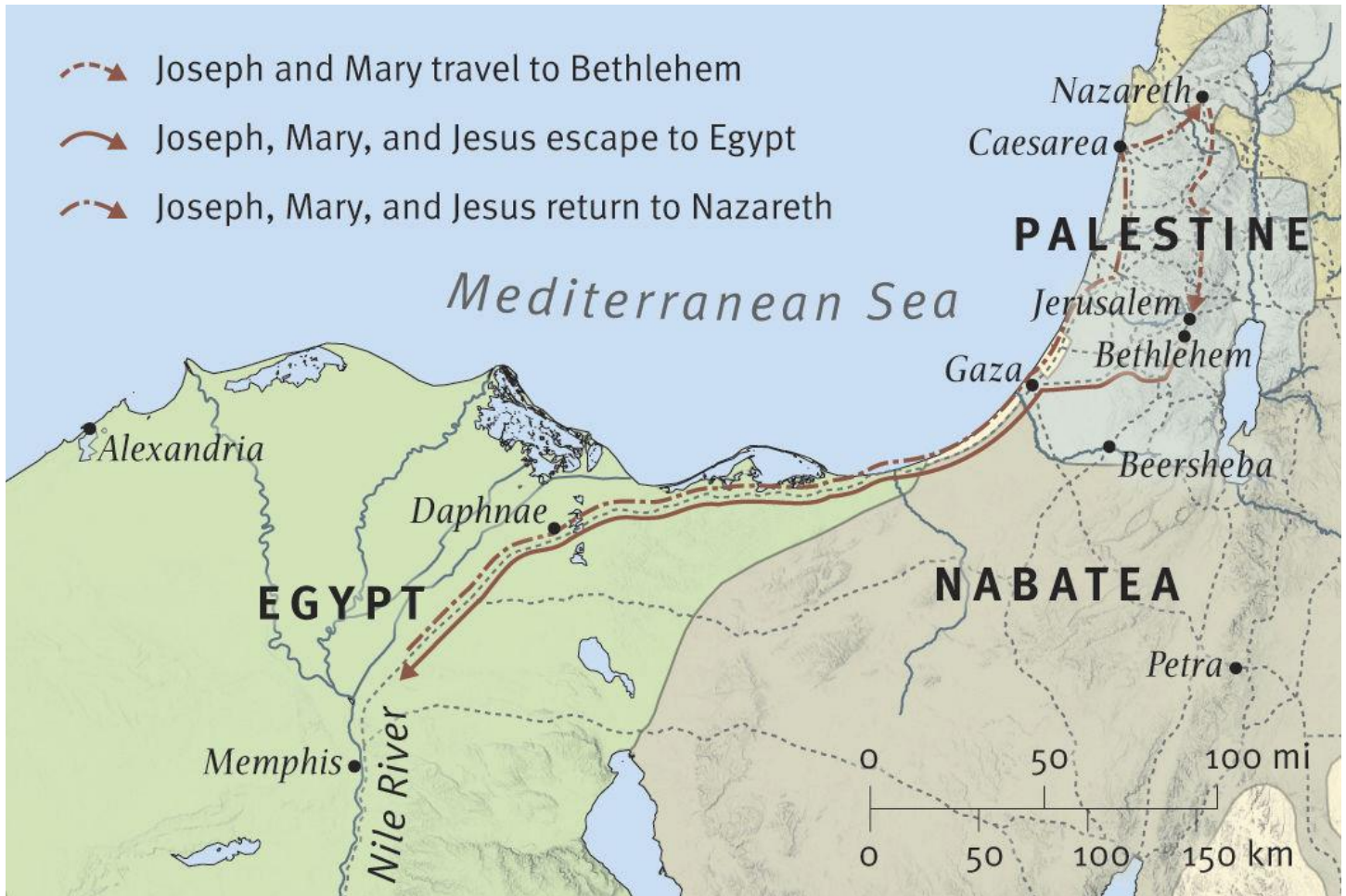
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<sup>8</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 88.

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 97–98.

<sup>11</sup> Wilkins, *Matthew*, 101.



When Herod realized the Magi had tricked him, he was furious, and ordered the slaughter of “all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under” (Matt 2:16). Bethlehem was a small city at that time (maybe 1,000 people), so we’re probably talking about 15 or 20 children being killed. So it was that the birth of the Messiah, a time that should have been one of rejoicing and celebration, was instead a time of fear and death and sorrow. Once again, Rachel wept at the loss of her sons, echoing the lamentation that occurred so many years ago when her children were led away to captivity in Babylon (Jer 31:15; Matt 2:18). The question comes to us today—how will we receive the Christ child?