

Christmas Lesson

Seekers of the King

MAIN IDEA

Wise men pursued and worshipped the newborn king of the Jews.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How do we pursue and worship Jesus?

STUDY AIM

To celebrate Jesus' birth and pursue a deeper love relationship with him

QUICK READ

A star announced the birth of King Jesus to men who studied the heavens. These men searched for the king, found the king, and worshipped the king by offering sacrificial gifts.



Introduction

My parents became followers of Jesus when I was young. They were the first among their families to follow Jesus. My family and I always went to Granny's house for Christmas. I had fun spending time with cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Before my parents met Christ, the focus of Christmas was family, food, and presents.

I still remember the Christmas when, about the time everyone was poised to open presents, my dad spoke up and asked if he could read the Christmas story from the Bible. It was an awkward moment, but everyone nodded in agreement. A new tradition began that night. Eventually, several of my extended family members gave their lives to Christ. I am positive God used my dad's boldness as a new believer to start my family thinking about the real meaning of Christmas.

Matthew 2:1–12

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem **2** and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. **5** "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Searching for Jesus (2:1–6)

Matthew recorded the genealogy of Jesus to establish him as the Messiah from the family line of David. Matthew recorded the story of an angel appearing to Mary and telling her she would be the mother of the Messiah. Mary and Joseph were engaged but not married at the time; therefore, a pregnant fiancée was considered a disgrace.

Joseph had a few options under the law as to how to handle this situation. He considered divorcing Mary quietly to avoid shaming her. Then an angel appeared to him to tell him Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She would give birth to a son, and they were to name him “Jesus.” He would be the Son of God. Joseph obeyed God and married Mary. The first chapter of Matthew closes with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem.

All this took place during the reign of King Herod the Great. He was a larger than life king who ruled from 37 to 4 B.C. Herod was a ruthless and cruel leader; however, one of his great feats was rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

Matthew 2 heralds the entrance of the Magi. Originally, Magi were priests among the Medes and Persians. Their primary function was dream interpretation. The Magi term later extended to include those with superior knowledge, such as astrologers and sages. The Magi in Matthew’s Gospel were astrologers from the East. Matthew’s general description as to where they lived has left much to speculation. However, Matthew’s point was to reveal that the announcement of Jesus’ birth was not solely for the Hebrews.

The primary role of the Magi in Matthew's Gospel was to direct cultic and ritual life, and to serve as advisors to the leaders. They gleaned much of their information by reading the stars. A common belief that the affairs of history could be seen in the movement of the stars led rulers and kings to use Magi to predict future events. The Magi in Matthew's Gospel studied the stars, and that is how they discovered a new star in the heavens, and their curiosity caused them to follow it. The identity of the star is not clear; whether it was a meteor or an actual star is not known. However, it was a new light in the sky and significant enough for the Magi to notice. Matthew gave no indication as to whether others could see the star, but the Magi followed it.

Another common belief held at the time was that a new star would appear to signify a significant birth, or the rise and fall of an empire. Numbers 24:17 declares a star will rise from Jacob and a scepter from Israel. These would be signs of the coming of the Messiah. It seems probable to suggest the Magi knew the stars and the Scriptures. This knowledge led

Herod's Legacy

Historians view Herod the Great with mixed feelings. Some herald him as a hero because of all he did for Judea; however, others declare him a tyrant because of the way he ruled. His reign introduced a new beginning in Judean history. The Roman Senate governed Herod; however, they gave him the name "King of Judea." His priority was to support the interests of Rome. However, Herod attempted to squelch negative feelings toward him from the Jews by building them massive buildings.

He rebuilt the Temple Mount, and a portion of it still stands today. He also built a harbor at Caesarea, using the latest technology of his day. These projects placed a heavy tax burden on the Jews, but they did provide employment for many people. Although Herod made small attempts to conform to Jewish traditions, by bringing in foreign entertainment and by erecting a golden eagle in front of the temple, he revealed a greater interest in pleasing Rome rather than the Jews. These acts and many others made the Pharisees and Sadducees enemies of Herod. Anger and dissatisfaction described the feelings of the Jews toward Herod at the end of his reign.

them to understand that the star had appeared to announce the birth of the king of the Jews.

The Romans had made Herod king. He was not a full Jew but had earned enough respect from the Romans to garner the leadership role. Herod was a suspicious man and felt threatened at the news of an emerging king. Herod murdered his wife, mother-in-law, and three of his sons because he was afraid they would overthrow him. He was determined to keep the role of king in his family, and he was willing to wipe out anything or anyone that jeopardized that goal. He heard the news of the Magi looking for a newborn king, so he called his leaders together to gain information regarding the birth.

Matthew wrote that all Jerusalem was disturbed by the king's state of mind. Apparently, others in Jerusalem had learned about the strangers from the East, and that Herod had called a meeting of his religious leaders. These actions indicated Herod was disturbed about something. The Jews knew how Herod responded to threats, so his agitation created an uneasiness in all of Jerusalem.

Teachers of the law and high priests, considered the religious aristocracy, served as Herod's religious leaders. These teachers were experts in the law, and the high priests, current and former, were experts in theology. They responded to Herod by quoting Micah 5:2. Herod spoke with the Magi secretly to find out the time frame of the birth, based on when the star appeared. He sent them on their way, requesting they send back the location of the baby once they discovered it.

The response of the religious leaders to the news of the newborn king speaks volumes about their attitude and beliefs about Messiah. They knew the biblical prophecies, and although it is not clear if they saw the star, they did not join the Magi in their quest to find Jesus.

Finding Jesus (2:7–10)

Herod met secretly with the Magi because he did not want the public to know their mission. It is possible he felt threatened by the news, and his plan was to eliminate the newborn before anyone else learned of his birth. Herod told the Magi he wanted to know the location of the baby king so he could

go and worship him as well. The truth was he wanted to eliminate the baby. Matthew gave evidence of Herod's intent in verse 16 when he explained the Magi's move to travel home by a different route to avoid Jerusalem and Herod. They realized the king was up to no good.

Herod was furious when he discovered the Magi had disobeyed him. He devised another plan to kill baby Jesus. He sent soldiers to Bethlehem and the surrounding areas, commanding them to kill every boy under the age of two. He chose the age of two and younger based on his calculation of when the star appeared to the Magi, and the time he learned they had gone home by another route.

The star led the Magi to Judea and then it disappeared. The disappearance of the star left the Magi with no particular direction to find the newborn king. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they began to inquire if anyone knew where the baby had been born. Certainly their failed search for the baby in Jerusalem left them frustrated.

When the Magi noticed the reappearance of the star, their hope renewed. Matthew described them as overjoyed at seeing the star again. After all, they studied the stars, looking for answers to the mysteries of life and the future. Encountering such a significant star only to lose it without discovering its meaning would have been heartbreaking.

The star led the Magi to Bethlehem, which was located approximately six miles from Jerusalem. The Magi, filled with confidence, followed the star directly to the location of Jesus. Matthew stated the Magi found Jesus in a house, not a stable. This revelation indicates that finding a place to live in Bethlehem was easier after the census had been taken (Luke 2:7).

Worshipping Jesus (2:10–12)

The Magi first responded to Jesus by bowing low before him in worship. Lowering oneself in worship was a sign of humility and submitting to another's authority.

Wisely, the Magi brought gifts to the newborn king. The Magi opened their treasure chest, and in their act of worship presented Jesus with gifts, sacrifices given to honor the king.

Roman culture dictated that a person always approach a king with a gift. Gold, considered the king of all metals, was the first gift the Magi presented. It was a fitting gift for a king.

Frankincense, the second gift of the Magi, was considered a luxury import and was made from the resin of trees from India, Somalia, or Arabia. Frankincense was a gift designed for a priest. A priest functioned as a bridge builder between God and his people. A priest would burn frankincense, a sweet-smelling perfume, during temple worship and temple sacrifices.

Myrrh, made from resin found in trees located in Arabia and Ethiopia, was a gift for someone who was going to die. It was used to embalm dead bodies.

All three gifts were valuable, which made them appropriate for a king. Each gift highlighted a particular aspect of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus was a king. He was also a priest, and he came to die for our sin.

Remember, one of the skills the Magi possessed was interpreting dreams. The Magi were warned though a dream (rather than angel or a star), not to return home through Jerusalem. Matthew used a Greek word for *warning* that indicated the message had a divine source. Matthew did not give

Preparing for Worship

In worship, our priority is to offer sacrificial gifts to Jesus. Here are steps to prepare for this type of worship.

1. Get plenty of rest the night before.
2. Arrive for worship in time to spend a few moments meditating on the goodness of Jesus before the service starts.
3. Participate in all aspects of the service. Singing, listening, reading, praying, are all gifts we can offer to Jesus.
4. Take notes during the message, and list action items you will complete based on what God says to you.
5. Give financially to support the work of the kingdom through your local church.
6. Greet others to make everyone feel welcome.

the details of the warning, but perhaps the dream exposed the evil deeds of Herod. The dream was clear, so the Magi obeyed it and avoided King Herod.

Matthew's inclusion of the dream demonstrates how God speaks to people in various ways. He chose to speak through a star and a dream to the Magi, who were familiar with both. How has God spoken to you?

Implications and Actions

Like the Magi, when you find Jesus, the encounter should result in worship and obedience. Someone once said, "We are all created with a God-shaped hole in our souls, and God is the only one who can fill that hole." When you give your life to God, he fills that hole, changing your identity and your destiny. Faithful obedience is how you demonstrate your love for God. Give him thanks for how he has changed your life.

The Bible gives us many titles to describe God. One of them is King of Kings. God is our friend, comforter, deliverer. At the same time, he is our king. Do you see God as your king? Do you treat him as your king? Obedience is key to allowing God to rule your life.

Questions

1. How can you honor God as king of your life?

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