

## **“King of the universe”**

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**Isaiah 60:1-6    Matthew 2:1-12**

The story of the wise men visiting the baby Jesus is one of the most celebrated events in history. Every old master worthy of that recognition has painted an “Adoration of the Magi” – Leonardo, Botticelli, Rubens, Rembrandt, Velasquez to name just a few. With its mystery and intrigue, its guiding star and the gifts fit for a king, the story of the wise men has always fed imagination and faith.

Mystery abounds with this story. How come only Matthew knows about it? – there’s no reference to this fascinating event anywhere else in the New Testament. What’s with the star? – is there any evidence from astronomy of such a unique occurrence, a star guiding people to the very spot like a modern GPS? How come Herod trusted the wise men to get back to him and didn’t send soldiers or spies to accompany them?

And most mysterious of all, who are these wise men, never heard of before and never heard of again? Are they kings? – well, no, that’s an identification stemming from the prophecy of Isaiah 60:3 “nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn”. How many of them were there? – traditionally three only, but that’s a number that stems from the fact of three gifts, we simply don’t know if there were two, three or more.

Where did they come from, who are they? You may have noticed the footnote in our Bibles, that the Greek word translated “wise men” is literally “magi” and may well mean “astrologers”. The magi or wise men tradition stems back into the Zoroastrian religion of Persia, where scholarly men of science, philosophy, astronomy and religion were called magi or wise men. In all likelihood the wise men of our story came from Persia, well to the east of Judea – they travelled a long time, months, maybe on camels, maybe on horseback, to find the child born to be king of the Jews, in Bethlehem.

But of course the most important question for us is what’s the meaning of this part of the Christmas story? What does it add to our understanding of the meaning of the birth of Christ?

The answer is quite a lot actually. With the visit of the wise men from afar, the world beats a path to Bethlehem to pay homage to Jesus. The birth of Christ is not just an event significant for the Jewish people, the arrival of the Messiah, the king of the Jews. It’s a world event, recognised by scholars from a vastly different part of the world. And they greet Jesus as a king, bringing him precious gifts fit for a king – gold, frankincense and myrrh. In this way the visit of the wise men fulfils the hopes and predictions of the old Jewish prophets, that one day God would act to bring all people, all nations, to see the reality of the one true God and to come and worship

him alongside the Jewish people who've been well ahead of the rest of us. The visit of the wise men fulfils prophecy and declares that Jesus is a gift for the whole world.

But it's more than that too. The story of the star tells us Jesus' birth has cosmic significance. Such stories were not uncommon in the ancient world. Special effects in the night sky were associated with the births of people like Abraham, Alexander the Great and Pliny. The wise men are worshipping the baby Jesus as more than just the new-born king of the Jews, they have travelled all this way to greet the king of the universe, one whose arrival has meaning for the whole of creation. So at Christmas we are already told that Jesus' birth is about not just the reconciliation of humanity with God, but the reconciliation of all creation, as later passages in the New Testament assert – “God so loved the **world**, that he sent his only Son...”

Let me conclude with one further thought. For Matthew the visit of the wise men is a further part in the new thing God is doing. In chapter 1 Matthew tells us of the miraculous pregnancy of Mary and the birth of Jesus – but before that he commences his gospel with the long genealogy of Joseph the husband of Mary, and in that genealogy he goes hugely against convention by including several women, not just the fathers but several mothers too. Christ is coming for everyone, both men and women. Then with the visit of the wise men we see that Christ is coming for everyone, both Jews and Gentiles, for the whole world, for the whole universe.

You cannot be any more inclusive than that. The love of God is for all. The action of God in Jesus is for all. Rejoice in the epiphany to the wise men, the appearance – manifestation – of God for everyone and for everything. A big thank you to Matthew for knowing the story of the wise men and recording it for every generation, for right there at the beginning of Jesus' life on earth Matthew celebrates the hugely inclusive love of God, the worldwide significance of Christ's coming and the joyful consequences for the whole universe that Christ is born.

To the glory of God, Amen.