

The Magi

There are some who contend that Christmas grew out of the pagan Roman festival of Saturnalia, and is actually a pagan celebration. Is that true?

The Saturnalia Festival in honor of Saturn was held on December 17 each year and continued for about a week. Everything became crazy with revelry during this time.

Christians did begin to celebrate Christmas during the Saturnalia holiday, but to say that Christmas is a pagan holiday is as sensible as saying that a Christian who goes to church on Sunday worships the Sun god!

In fact, the celebration of Christmas began as a gospel antidote to Saturnalia. It was a way for Christians to point to a true, good, and lasting reason for celebration – not a license to sin but salvation from it through Jesus who was born to ‘*save his people from their sins*’.¹

I celebrate Christmas because I want to emphasize that the real source of celebration is found only in Jesus Christ.

Our story in today’s Scripture takes us far far away to a group of people who made a great effort to honor Christ at His birth- to celebrate the true Christmas. Matthew records this account of the journey of the wise men,

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying

²“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, for out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.’

⁷Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.”

⁹After hearing the king, they went their way;

¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Child in the Manger*, (Edinburg: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), p. 169.

and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.

¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹²And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

Today we will look at the wise men who were on a special quest:
to find a new-born King.

C. S. Lewis wrote,

“Human history is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make them happy.”

What would it be like to live out all of our lives and then get to the end only to discover that we missed the most important things in life pursuing things of little importance. Jesus said,

“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

(Matt. 16:26).

We are all on the same quest to find truth and meaning in life.

We will not be at rest until we find Jesus Christ.

I. The Quest of the Magi.

This is a story of the Magi. They came from somewhere in the east.

We get our English words for magic and magician from this word [may-gee]

Of all the many aspects of the Christmas story the Magi have always been valued by artists, poets, musicians, play-writes. The song, *We Three Kings*, is a example,

*We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts, we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star...*

The three kings are derived from the three gifts they brought.

-The most ornate and expensive Christmas cards usually are of them bringing their gifts to Jesus, having traveled across the deserts beautifully dressed as for a coronation.

Their arrival is always after Jesus had been born, the star was nestling a few hundred feet above a barn-like stable, with a mean old inn keeper peaking through the window, at the sight of their camels and royal garb.

Of course there were talking animals, a little drummer boy, and lots of shepherds and a few sheep. Someone has suggested that this would be a difficult story to explain to space aliens passing through our system. Someone else has declared that when aliens pass by the earth they lock their doors.

What story tellers got right was that the wise men were following a star.

1. The Magi

They believed that cosmic forces affected or influenced our lives.

Psychologists have included SAD 'seasonal affective disorder', among the kinds of depressions directly caused by the Pacific Northwest's darker, wet weather. The Magi to a greater degree, included phenomenon such as the appearance of stars and planets, among the things that affected us.

They were among the intellectuals of their day; they were scientists, astronomers, and astrologers. They were on a quest to find a new-born King, since they had seen His star.

Numbers 24:17:

"A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel, and shall crush through the forehead of Moab, and tear down all the sons of Sheth."

Being astrologers they would have been keenly interested in that verse. History shows that the Magi here were the King-makers of their time.

When the Magi got to the region of Judea they lost sight of the star; so they brought their caravan into Jerusalem to the palace of the king. They naively thought that they weren't the only ones anticipating Messiah's arrival, for they said,

²"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

Their logic was simple: new king = royal palace

Thus, they went to the palace of the existing king – Herod.

So often people trust in their natural inclination, instead of trusting in the Lord...

2. Herod the king

³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled,
and all Jerusalem with him.

All Jerusalem knew what Herod was like,
and when Herod wasn't happy, nobody was happy.

Herod wasn't Jewish but was Idumean. His father was Antipater and had done some favors to Rome. As payment, the Herod family was given the right to rule Judea, which was under Roman occupation.

The old saying: Power Corrupts proves true with Herod.

Herod was a consummate politician;

he continued to do everything he could to gain favor with Rome.

In return the Roman senate gave him an army.

Herod was able to extend his empire from Judea to Jordan, to Syria, to Lebanon.

Herod was ruthless.

His chief appeal to Rome was the merciless efficiency with which he was able to extract taxes from the people. He had murdered all the Hasmoneans, the sons of the Maccabeans who had led a revolution against Greece's rule.

In order to make sure they didn't do it again, so he simply slaughtered them all.

He had ten wives and twelve children. One of his wives, Mariamne, had a brother, Aristobulus, who was the high priest. Herod was afraid of Aristobulus so he murdered him, then he killed her too."

Herod's paranoia was legendary.

He was afraid one of his two eldest sons might take his throne, so he murdered them both. His entire life was one of plotting and execution. Five days before his death he executed his eldest son for plotting against his throne. I read of one saying that it was *'safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons'*.

In one of the final acts of his evil life, he had the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem put in prison, and commanded that they be slaughtered the moment he died. "The people will not weep when I die," he said, "And I want them weeping, even if they weep over someone else." So even at his death, there was great slaughter.²

Herod was troubled by the appearance of the Magi.

Herod may have been troubled because the magi were from the east, but also because of their arrival with with a great deal of pomp and show.

² John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Miracle of Christmas*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), pp. 69-70.

Their typical costume would have included long, cone-shaped hats like those we associate with wizards. They would have been riding not on camels, but more likely on Persian steeds or Arabian horses. They might well have been traveling with a small army, since their journey took them into Roman territory. They must have been an impressive sight. Some estimate that their caravan included about 125 people, mostly soldiers.

Herod's army was busy.

What may have also troubled Herod was that his army was out of town, on duty with the census. This was no time for a band of king-makers inquiring about an infant they called the "King of the Jews." That was, after all, Herod's title, given to him by Caesar Augustus himself at Herod's coronation.

Troubled – "shaken" or "agitated", like the heavy duty cycle of a wash machine. He was in great turmoil.

Diplomacy was the approach taken.

⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him."

3. Chief Priests and Scribes:

⁴Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

In a sense the chief priests and scribes were the magi of king Herod. Herod summoned them to answer the magi's question of where the new King, or Messiah, was to be born.

⁵They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

⁶'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, for out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.'

Pattern: Getting lost and going their own way

Depending on Natural Inclination: Logic – 'Find a King at the Palace'

The Scripture pointing them to Bethlehem, puts them on the right track.

– Be led to a humble stable, for this Child will be a Shepherd-King!

II. The Quest fulfilled: the New Born King is found.

1. Finding Jesus

⁹After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.

The Scripture revealed the town, giving them direction.
Then the Star led them to the exact place.

2. The Joy of discovery

Great Joy and worship come to those who— find Jesus Christ

¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

¹¹After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him.

Then opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gifts: Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh

- Gold – symbol of royalty
- Frankincense – Old Testament worship
– sprinkled on offerings of the temple;
 - symbol of deity.
- Myrrh – used in embalming the dead
 - foreshadows Jesus' suffering and death.

The gifts to Jesus testify of His royalty, His deity, and His death for humanity.³

3. Final Warnings.

They listened to God and were led the to Christ and then back home again.

¹²And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

- **Herod's wrath.**

³ MacArthur, pp. 113.

Herod wasn't ignorant but seemed to be fearful of competition. He pretended to want to worship the child to the magi, but in reality wanted to murder him. When he realized that the Magi weren't returning to him to inform him of their finding the child born who would be "king of the Jews," he ordered all the children two and under in that region to be slain.

- Guidance by God for Joseph, Mary and Jesus. – 'Leave town now!'

Part of the miracle of Christ's birth isn't just that He was born of a virgin, in fulfillment of so many prophecies, but that he survived at all once He was born. Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said,

"Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt,
and remain there until I tell you;
for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him."

(Matt. 2:13)

III. A Final Quest.

Finding Christ must become our first priority: He is the way, truth, and Life – only through Him will someone have eternal life. Have you found Christ? If you are wise you will take the quest seriously. Are you alive? At death those who are alive in Christ move from life to Life.

The same is true for those who are dead in sin. After this life they will remain in their state of spiritual death, eternally separated from God. That will be in the eternal state called hell. Our final quest isn't Much different from the Magi. They trusted in the Scripture and followed a star.