

ODBC Handout to accompany message on the Wise Men December 31, 2023

OPEN DOOR BIBLE CHURCH, PO BOX 446, WEST OSSIPEE NH 03890

Pastor John Donovan, cell phone 508-380-0471

Pastor Terry Gerlarneau, cell phone 603-455-4399

Web site todbc.org email us at opendoorbiblechurch@todbc.org

December memory verse **Isaiah 9:6 (NKJV)** For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And
His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace.

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Commentary on Matthew Chapter 2 (the story of the Wise men) by Chuck Smith

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king ([Mat 2:1](#)),

This is Herod the Great, that little short monster. He was a little over four feet tall, and as really short little guys probably suffered a tremendous ego problem. And thus, significantly everything he did was big. I mean, he built great fortresses out of great rocks. I stood next to a rock that is along the Western Wall in Jerusalem that Herod had built as a retaining wall, to build up the temple mount to place the temple on top. Back underneath where tourists can't go, I stood by a rock that was forty-seven feet long, ten feet high, and ten feet wide. It is estimated to weigh one hundred and seventy tons. This little Herod had that rock put there.

He was a genius at building. He built, of course, the Herodian. He built Masada. He built another fortress similar to the Herodian that has not yet really been excavated, the Alexandrian. He built, of course, the great temple in Jerusalem. He built the temple mount area. He built Caesarea, and tremendous building projects by this little genius; built the pools over near Bethlehem, and the whole water system for Jerusalem. Today you can still look at many of the building projects of Herod and stand in absolute amazement at the building genius of this little fellow.

He also was horribly cruel and paranoid. He thought that his sons and his wife, Miriam, were plotting against him, so he had them all put to death. Then he began to miss Miriam, so he built a big monument to Miriam because he missed her after he had killed her. They used to say, "It's safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son," because he was always paranoid that his sons were trying to take over his throne. So, he was having

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them killed all the time and wiped out most of his sons because of his paranoia. He was a very insecure little fellow and that is why these big fortresses that he built, and would seek refuge in the fortresses.

Now in time, he realized that as the result of his own cruelty and meanness, no one would weep when he died. And he couldn't stand the thought of no one weeping when he died, so he gave orders that when he died all of his top officials were to be killed, executed, because he wanted people to mourn when he was dead. And he knew they wouldn't mourn for him, so in order that there would be mourning when he died, he ordered all these popular officials to be put to death when he died. Fortunately, when he died, they had enough sense to realize, well, why should we obey his order; he's dead? And the other officials were not executed and thus he went unmourned.

Now in those days when Herod was king, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, and they said, Where is he that is born the King of the Jews? ([Mat 2:1-2](#)).

Can't you imagine what that would do to this little insecure Herod? These guys are asking. I'm the King of the Jews. What do you mean, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" He was so threatened in his position that when these men came from the east to inquire of the birth of the King of the Jews, he really got shook.

They said, for we have seen his star in the east, and we are come to worship Him ([Mat 2:2](#)).

Now there is an awful lot that has been written about the star of Bethlehem. They have said it was a conjunction of planets, and they have come up with many different speculations as to what astronomically constituted the star of Bethlehem. In the Griffith Observatory in December, they oftentimes have as that monthly lecture, the star of Bethlehem. And of course, with that in the Planetarium there, they can adjust the lights in the ceiling to represent the skies in any period of history. They can take you back through the years to the time of the birth of Christ and show you the constellations, planet alignments, and so forth. They have a very interesting lecture on the star of Bethlehem.

But just exactly what did take place that constituted this special sign in the sky is a matter of many men's speculations. But that, at the present time, as valid as it is, it is just the speculation of man, and we do not know for sure. And God did not call me to speculate. So, we will just let that go.

we have seen his star in the East, and we have come to worship him ([Mat 2:2](#)).

If they were in the East and saw the star, then it evidently led them westward. So, it was some kind of perhaps special and supernatural sign, as I'll point out in a moment.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him ([Mat 2:3](#)).

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Because when Herod is troubled, everybody is troubled.

And when he had gathered all the chief priests and the scribes of the people together, he demanded [not he inquired] of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, [look these fellows know their Scriptures] in Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet [the prophet Micah], And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel ([Mat 2:4-6](#)).

They didn't finish the prophecy. But you go back to Micah and you read, "whose going forth is from everlasting" ([Micah 5:2](#)). And he speaks about His sitting upon the throne and reigning. So, Bethlehem's pinpointed as the birthplace.

So, when Herod had privately called the wise men, he inquired of them diligently when they first saw the star ([Mat 2:7](#)).

So, they told him when they first saw the star and began their journey. So

And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also ([Mat 2:8](#)).

Herod had a very perverted sense of worship.

When they had heard the king [that is king Herod], they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was ([Mat 2:9](#)).

It is hard to really explain then this star by some kind of a natural phenomenon, in that they saw it in the East. It led them west, but now it is leading them back east, because Bethlehem is actually south and east of Jerusalem.

"It stood", notice, "over where the young child was." **Notice it didn't stand over the manger. It didn't stand over where the baby was, but it stood over where the "young child was".** Here is where our Christmas cards and our Christmas pageants throw us off, because it makes such a glorious climax to the Christmas pageantry to have the wise men coming to the manger on their camels, and laying down their gifts before the baby in the manger, while the shepherds are peering on wild-eyed. It's something typical of Christmas cards, or of the Christmas pageantry, **but the wise men were latecomers. By the time that they had arrived, Joseph and Mary had moved out of the manger and had moved into a house in Bethlehem. The wise men, I am sorry, did not come to the manger, but actually arrived later on, perhaps a year or as much as two years later. When the wise men finally arrived and they found the young child, by this time Jesus was probably walking around and saying a few words.**

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And when they were come into the house, [not into the manger, but into the house] they saw the young child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold [befitting the king], and frankincense, and myrrh ([Mat 2:11](#)).

Myrrh was a spice for burial--quite significant that it would be given to "the young child."

Now being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way ([Mat 2:12](#)).

They didn't bother to go back to Jerusalem because God warned them not to.

And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph ([Mat 2:13](#)),

Now again, Joseph is really in contact with the Lord and the Spirit.

and the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word: for Herod is going to seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: And there he was until the death of Herod: [in order] that it might be fulfilled ([Mat 2:13-15](#)),

Notice how Matthew over and over is showing that these aspects of the life of Christ were in reality a fulfillment of prophecy,

which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my Son. Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked by the wise men, was exceedingly angry, he sent forth, and killed all of the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the area around, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men ([Mat 2:15-16](#)).

Remember, they said, "when did you first see the star?" So they told him when they first saw the star and that's why he killed the children two years old and under, because they had first seen the star some two years earlier, which again shows Christ was not a baby in a manger when the wise men arrived.

Then Herod when he killed all the children,

Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, of lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, as Rachel was weeping for her children ([Mat 2:17-18](#)),

Now of course, it's significant that Rachel actually died there just on the outskirts of Bethlehem and her tomb is there at Bethlehem. She died in childbirth at the birth of Benjamin. You remember she called his name Benoni, because of the grief. And so the

prophecy of Rachel who had died there in Bethlehem. The people, of course, around Bethlehem revere the place of her burial, her tomb there. "Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted because they are not," because they have been killed.

But when Herod was dead,[he died shortly thereafter], behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life. And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and they came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there: notwithstanding, he was warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the area of Galilee ([Mat 2:19-22](#)):

He went back up into the area where he originated from, actually in Galilee where Mary had first received the word from Gabriel that she was to become the mother of the Christ child.

And they came and they dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene ([Mat 2:23](#)).

All the way through, Matthew is showing you that Christ is the fulfillment of prophecy. Matthew is a prophecy buff.

Additional information from Doug Greenwold of Preserving Bible Times

About Those Wise Men

When it comes to the Wise Men, there is a good bit of lore and tradition that has built up around them. Supposedly there were three of them, but that is not supported by the text. All we know is that whatever their number (some Eastern traditions suggest there were twelve), they brought three gifts. We know they came from the East, but we don't know whether that means they traveled directly across the Arabian Desert or whether they came by the same circuitous 900-mile Fertile Crescent route that Abram did centuries before. We do know that a bright and prominent star was the cause for their journey and the GPS they needed to stay on course.

Traditionally, these Wise Men are labeled magicians, or possibly astrologers. Some use the term *Magi* to refer to a variety of men interested in dreams, magic and mysterious references to the future. It seems dubious that God would use these in His Great Invasion of Grace eternal plan. Others have suggested that the Wise Men were Nabateans, Persians, or perhaps Bedouins of the Arabian Desert. What can we appropriately deduce about these Wise Men that is consistent with the biblical

narrative?

Let's start with the star. In the First Century, one can easily argue that only Jewish people would have been aware of the importance of a star as the indicator of Messiah's coming. That's because the prophecy given in Numbers 24:17 was understood within a number of segments of Judaism to reference a deliverer. Thus, who but Jews would arrive at Herod the Great's palace asking, "*Where is 'the King of the Jews'?*" Only Jews!

There is another reason why Jews would have been scanning the heavens and studying stars with intent. Observant Judaism was a religious culture with a passion for doing things exactly as God has commanded. This preoccupation applies to the precise starting and ending dates of God's mandated festivals. With two calendars in view – solar and lunar – much "scientific" study of the stars was undertaken to aid in determining the precise dates for festivals. Thus, we can reasonably conclude that Jews in Babylon (due East of Israel on the map) would have had compelling reasons to study the stars for festival calendar planning purposes. That would make them **astronomers**, not forbidden astrologers with zodiac interests forbidden by God (Jeremiah 10:1-2). Therefore, those Wise Men would most likely be Jewish astronomers from Babylon who arrived in Bethlehem long after that birth night – some suggest 18 months later. This would explain why Herod wanted to kill all two-year old babies in Bethlehem after learning of the Wise Men's interest in this new born "*King.*"

Next: Those Wise Men's three gifts.

In the ancient Near East, it is customary to bring a gift when you visit. This is especially important when you visit someone "superior" to you. Typically, there is reciprocity of gift giving (this is fascinating as one might reason that Jesus' reciprocal gift would be given 33 years later in the form of Eternal Life). These Wise Men obviously knew they were going to visit a new born (Messianic) King. Therefore, much thought needed to be given to choosing appropriate gifts. That implicit context triggered a new avenue of pondering for me. Let's look at how God's Spirit prompted these Wise Men to choose their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; and in so doing, foreshadow the destiny of this babe – a King destined for a Cross.

Gold is a gift that symbolizes a King's wealth and throne - very appropriate. There was a practical benefit to this gift as well. It would cover the family's cost to spend time in Egypt.

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While we do not know which kind of frankincense was brought, we do know that the frankincense, *Levona*, is one of the four ingredients contained in the spice mix used in the daily Incense Offering in the Temple. Particularly noteworthy is that when *Levona* is burned it changes its color to white (signifying purity) as it rises to the heavens representing the ascending prayers of the people to God. Could there be something alluded to in the nature of this frankincense gift that speaks to the making of a pure (Passover) offering that will ascend to Heaven (in triumph)?

Myrrh is an aromatic resin of a family of small, thorny trees (think crown of thorns) which grow in dry, stony soil. Of particular interest is how myrrh is obtained. When a tree wound penetrates through the bark and into the sapwood, the tree starts to bleed a resin. During harvest, these small, thorny trees are repeatedly wounded to force them to bleed the myrrh gum resin. Wow! That evokes the blood that flowed from the repeated wounds of Jesus' back as He was systematically de-fleshed by the Romans scourging as well as the sword that pierced His side. Further re-enforcing this Cross motif, myrrh was used by the Egyptians as one of the ingredients for the embalming of mummies, a use for preparing the dead that continued into the first century.

Frankincense and myrrh suggest the birth of Jesus is pregnant with hints as to the motif of His death. These three gifts converge to create a portrait of a King being borne to be our Passover Lamb offered as a sacrifice for our sin. All those nativity scenes need a Cross! What a night! What a birth! What a Savior! What a God and what an Eternal Plan with Purpose!

What gift(s) will you bring to King Jesus in this year? Your devotion, worship, core competency, submission, making Him THE priority of your life? Those are gifts that will keep on giving in the Kingdom!