

“Wise Only By God’s Grace”

(Matthew 2:1-12)

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Introduction: Popular images that don’t quite represent Scripture.

Case and point: The Epiphany “Kings” or “Wise” Men Who Followed the Star:

- A. Calling them “kings” is something that did not occur until the 6th century; calling them “wise” did not occur until the 8th century! (Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 1:1-11:1*, 123-124)
- B. But our cultural images have built up these popular ideas about the magi who came to pay homage and adoration towards the baby Jesus (who was about two years old and was now being raised in the house of Joseph and Mary). This also corrects our typical “manger scenes”: the magi never made it to the manger, but traveled for many months to see the baby Jesus when much time passed after His birth. So the shepherds worshipped at the manger, but the magi bowed down before Christ in the humble home of Joseph and Mary many months after the birth of Christ.
- C. In the typical manger scene we have the poor shepherds and then the elaborate magi right there with them, but the biblical evidence states that the magi arrived long after the shepherds and furthermore Scripture will not let us be too terribly impressed with the magi.

- D. Magi were often servants of rulers who oppressed the people of Israel as we seemingly have depicted in the book of Daniel. They were most certainly *not* kings, but again, *servants*.
- E. Furthermore, any good Israelite would never admire their so-called “wisdom.” Ancient astronomy was often associated with the occult. From a Jewish perspective, this was a form of false and idolatrous knowledge and learning. For the people of God at the time, this would be something to be shunned.
- F. But even more fundamentally disturbing is that these magi were *Gentiles...they were outsiders in relation to the people of God...they did not belong in association with the Holy Messiah!*
- G. So who were the magi...they were not really kings, but servants; they were not really wise, but were known for occult science; and they were not even among God’s people, but Gentiles! How much should these men – in terms of their own persons and credentials – be admired? Not at all! And yet...these are the ones who came seeking Christ!

Part I: These Outsiders; these Occult Sinners; These Servants of Oppressors are the Ones Who Came Seeking Christ!

- A. St. Matthew is writing to Jews and he is undoubtedly putting them to shame because it was not the Israelites who sought to worship the Christ child, but Gentile sinners! But as this is recorded in Holy Scripture, we too are being

convicted for our sin which keeps us from seeking out the Christ to worship Him.

- B. There is, however, a great lesson to be learned. Luther writes about the situation here presented to us: “Him whom His own would not seek or acknowledge...[but] this strange, foreign people...That was truly a great disgrace for the entire Jewish land and people that Christ was born in the midst of them and they should first learn of it from strange, heathen, foreign people.” (Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, New Testament Volume I, 9)
- C. But understand that when you hear a commentary like this, teachers like Luther are in fact warning against the sinful nature that is each and every one of us regardless of our nationality and ethnicity.
- D. We see in Jerusalem our own sinful problem. “Jerusalem has had the Word for ages and, when it learns of Bethlehem through the magi, responds not at all. From Jerusalem comes only an attempt to murder the Messiah. (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 73)”
- E. We mirror Jerusalem and the Israelites at the time according to our sinful nature when Christ is in the very midst of us and yet we are unresponsive because we are too busy chasing the things of this world. Shame on them. Shame on us. We too are sinners as they were sinners.
- F. And yet from their perspective, the magi were greater sinners still. Again, remember that these served oppressors of God’s people, they were outside occult practitioners...what are *they* doing in Jerusalem?!
- G. They are in Jerusalem to show the ways of God:

- 1. Some 30 years after the magi, John the Baptist would preach: **“And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. (Mt 3:9)”**
 - 2. And after John the Baptist, Jesus Himself taught in the Parable of the Wedding Feast: **“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come...Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find. (Mt 22:2 & 9)”**
- H. That is, God does not need us. He wants us. He loves us. He calls us, but He does not need us. If we will not be faithful children of God, God can make faithful children from stones. If we will not respond to His great invitation to the wedding feast, He will go out to the main roads and find others. We are being warned in this Epiphany text that a great light has come into our midst, but the question is put before us, “How will we respond?” Will we seek Christ as the Magi did? Or will we drown out God’s great call to us through our i-phones, i-pads, earphones, and plasma, LCD, LED flat screens?
 - I. The point is that when you see the magi in Scripture or in those manger scenes which if they include the magi should still be set out in our homes esp. since only now has Epiphany arrived – but when you see these magi, we should be humbled: sinful, occult-practicing, outside of God’s-

people, servants of oppressors were called to seek Jesus!
Are we doing the same?

Part II: But Don't Despair, God Gave Those Magi A Lot of Help! He Gives You A Lot of Help As Well!

- A. The magi are also quite simply pictures of God's grace given to poor sinners.
- B. We simply do not know how much those magi knew about Jesus, but it should not surprise us if the word of the Old Testament prophets had somehow reached them (Chrysostom believed as much, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 1a, Matthew 1-13, 22). But what we know beyond a shadow of a doubt is that the Lord sent them an amazing miracle in the star of Bethlehem. Impressive studies have been conducted on the star of Bethlehem including stunning historical and astronomical research that gives at the end of the day a natural (albeit extremely rare) explanation for the phenomenon of the star that is here described. Many people find these explanations to testify to God's magnificent providence working in the cosmos and indeed what has been made reveals the invisible qualities of God (Romans 1:20), but there seems to be much more going on here.
- C. "The star" says Lenski "moved as a guide; the star arrived...the star stood...It is all perfectly plain, absolutely miraculous, unlike any star that ever existed. (ibid, 68)"
- D. Later, in warning the magi against Herod, God communicates to the magi in a dream (v 12).
- E. God had helped these poor magi! He very likely gave them His Word in advance, He led them by a miraculous star, and

He communicated to them in a dream...God's revelation made up for their inability; God's wisdom made up for their ignorance; God's power made up for their weakness; and God's grace in Christ covered their sin.

- F. And led by God they bowed down to worship the King! How much do they know about Jesus? We don't know with certainty, but I am personally drawn to Luther's description:

"Although they [the Magi] enter a poor house, find a poor young woman, with a poor child, and also there is an appearance so unlike a king that [the Magi's] servant is more honorable and reputable, yet they are not troubled, but in great, strong, full faith they put everything out of their eyes and mind which nature with its arrogance might adduce and bring into play; they simply know the verse of the prophet and the testimony of the star and believe Him to be King, fall down, worship Him, and give presents to Him. (Kretzmann, 10)"

- G. I find the discussions about how much they knew to wax cold. They were being led by a miraculous star...they must have known that *this* child was *the* King of Kings and that caused them to prostrate themselves.
- H. The gifts they gave were also quite simply amazing. It is easy for the scholar to say that they were simply gifts given to royalty, to a king period. But the ancient opinions in the church seem to appreciate that again much more is going on, so it is unwise for us to ignore such a great tradition:
 - 1. Gold was given to say yes indeed Jesus was King!
 - 2. (frankincense and myrrh were costly aromatic gums distilled from trees and much used in religious ceremonies) Now this frankincense was given Jesus

because He was being confessed as God. As the frankincense rises up, so do our prayers and so does our worship rise up to God.

3. Myrrh was given Jesus because He was destined to die when He would die on the cross for His blood to cover the sin of the magi and to cover your sin as well! Myrrh was used to prepare the dead for burial and Christ would be buried three days before His conquering death for the magi and for you.
- I. No amount of human “wisdom” could ever realize these things, but God was leading these magi. God’s revelation was overcoming what they could never know by themselves. By grace, they knew.

Part III and Conclusion: And by Grace, You Know!

- A. Your star of Bethlehem or your star of “House of Bread” (the meaning of “Bethlehem”) is the star of Christ’s house (the Church) where the Bread of Life – Jesus Himself – is here given and shines forth through His Word given to you; where the “star” of Christ’s Word and Sacrament is set before you.
- B. You too poor sinner are being led by God to worship Jesus born to save you from sin and every evil. And to borrow from Gregory the Great: “And so do we offer gold to the newborn king if we shine in his light with the brightness of the wisdom from on high. We too offer him incense if we enkindle on the altar of our hearts the thoughts of our human minds by our holy pursuits of prayer, so as to give forth a sweet smell to God by our heavenly desire. And we offer him myrrh if we mortify the vices of our bodies by our

self-denial. (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Ia, Matthew 1-13, 28*)”

- C. But none of this happens without God coming to you. And He has and has led you to Christ and by His grace you worship Jesus. He is King to lead you into His Kingdom; He is God with the authority and power to forgive and grant eternal life; He died to cover your sins and then rose so that death would lose its power over you. The gifts do indeed fit Him perfectly and as we consider the poor magi with all of their faults, we realize that since God had no problem embracing them, that we too are embraced and held by the King of Kings as though we were *His* gifts. It is true because He died for you and He does indeed cherish you as His very own so that now you too are wise only by God’s grace!