

Epiphany #1 – The Visit of the Magi

Matthew 2 v 1 – 12

Context:

The early weeks of January every year are known in the church calendar as the season of Epiphany. The word 'Epiphany' means 'appearing', 'revelation' or 'manifestation' and the season focuses on the way in which the New Testament reveals Jesus as the unique Son of God, sent by the Father to fulfil his great and precious promises made through the prophets in the Old Testament. In today's passage we see that this revelation of the true identity of Jesus wasn't restricted to Israelite Jews, but even reached to the Gentiles (non-Jews), in keeping with God's prophetic promise centuries earlier. So, let's meet our intrepid stargazers from the East.

Observation:

1. Where was Jesus born and when according to v 1a?
2. Who came to Jerusalem in v 1b?
3. What question did they ask in v 2?
4. What was the reaction to their question according to v 3?
5. Who did Herod summon and what did he ask them in v 4?
6. What was their answer in v 5 and how did they know this according to v 6?
7. What did Herod then do in v 7?
8. Where did he send them and why in v 8?
9. What did they see as they left Herod in Jerusalem (v 9) and how did they feel when they saw it (v 10)?
10. Where did they arrive and who did they see according to v 11a?
11. What did they do according to v 11b?
12. Why did they take a different route home (v 12)?

Meaning:

NOTE #1 : Herod the Great was born in Idumea (OT Edom) and ruled Judea from around 37-4BC as a client-king of Rome. He was known for two things in particular: his cruelty and his creativity. He regarded human life as cheap and expendable, even killing members of his own family who he suspected of plotting against him. Yet, he was a fantastic builder, undertaking huge and ambitious projects, including expanding the Jerusalem Temple.

NOTE #2: Magi were wise men who served as spiritual and political advisors to kings in the eastern realms of Babylon (modern Iraq) and Persia (modern Iran). They would often use 'magic' to discern what advice they should give to their masters and were experts in astrology.

1. If the Magi were Gentiles (non-Jews), why would *they* be expecting the birth of a King of the Jews and what was the significance of the star (v 2)? – see Numbers 24 v 17, Isaiah 9 v 2.
2. Why do you think King Herod and the population of Jerusalem were so disturbed (v 3)?

3. Why do you think Herod didn't know something as important as where the Messiah would be born (v 4)?
4. Why do you think the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem – what was the significance of this little town in the Old Testament (v 5-6)?
5. The religious leaders quoted the prophet Micah in their reply to Herod. Read Micah 5 v 2-4 and see what else he prophesied about the Messiah in addition to his birthplace.
6. Why do you think Herod wanted to know the exact time the star had appeared (v 7)?
7. What was so hypocritical about Herod's words in v 8?
8. How can we explain what happened in v 9? – see Joshua 10 v 12-14, 2 Kings 20 v 8-11 for examples of God interacting with the heavens to accomplish his will.
9. Why were they so happy to see the star again (v 10)?
10. Christmas cards often depict the wise men as *kings* visiting the *newborn* Jesus *in the stable*. We already know from NOTE #2 above that they were *advisors* to kings rather than kings, but how does v 11 also undermine the traditional nativity scene (see also v 16)?
11. What does their action in v 11a tell us about the Magi's understanding of who Jesus was?
12. What do you think might have been the significance of the 3 types of gift in v 11b?
13. Why do you think God warned them not to go back to Herod (v 12)?

Application:

1. Do you find it surprising that God would reveal Jesus to pagan stargazers? What might this tell us about the way God works in our world today?
2. The Magi went on a *physical* journey and a *spiritual* journey. Can you describe these two journeys and the transformation experienced by the Magi?
3. How would you describe your own spiritual journey?
4. Herod was deeply insecure and cruelly suspicious of any potential rivals to his power. Where do we find our security and how can we avoid the trap Herod fell into?
5. We can't really understand this biblical event, the visit of the Magi, without accepting the possibility that miracles can and do take place in the universe - the star that appeared in the East, the accuracy of Micah's prophecy spoken hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, the dream which warned the Magi to take a different route home – all miracles! Do you believe miracles happen today and can you give any examples from your own life or someone else's?
6. The Magi gave Jesus gifts. What gift might you give Jesus at the beginning of 2025?

Pray:

- Thank God for the birth of Jesus.
- Pray that you might be open to the miraculous in your life.
- Pray for God's grace to be secure in Him, unlike Herod!