

# *The Light and the Magi*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

1<sup>st</sup> Weekend of Christmas

December 30, 2012

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*Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen  
upon you.

<sup>2</sup>For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.

<sup>3</sup>Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your  
dawn.

<sup>4</sup>Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to  
you;  
your sons shall come from far away,

and your daughters shall be carried on  
their nurses' arms.

<sup>5</sup>Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall  
be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to  
you.

<sup>6</sup>A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and  
Ephah;

all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the  
LORD.

*Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)*

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup>"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." <sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

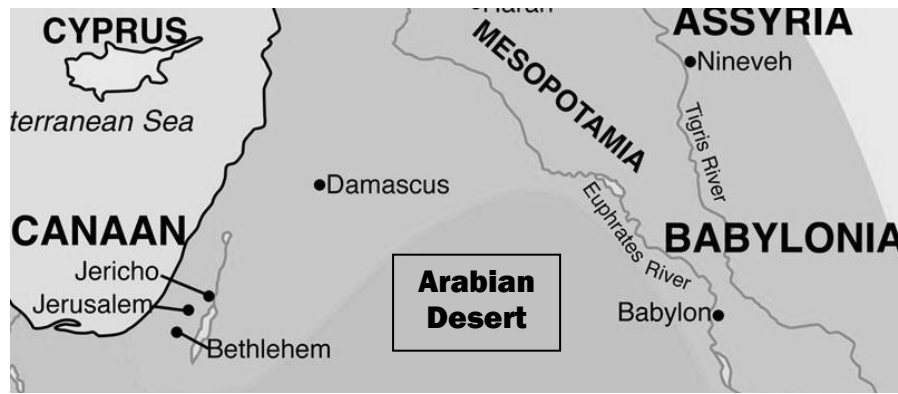
<sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

*It is now time for the whole world to behold their Savior.*

*The magi from the east, gentile not Jewish, arrive on all our behalf.*

*The long journey to the light*

We get the timing of this story all wrong. Our Christmas pageants and nativity sets have shepherds, animals, angels, Mary, Joseph, and three kings with camels -- all gathered around the baby Jesus. But this can't be right. Even if the star had appeared over Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' conception rather than his birth, and the wise men had begun their journey that very day, they still might not have arrived in time for the birth.



Israel lies on the western side of the Jordan River which sits in a great rift valley. On the eastern side of the river sits the Arabian desert. Thus, as is evident from the map above getting from Babylonia to Bethlehem necessitated going north along the Tigris and Euphrates and then southwestward through Syria into Galilee and then south to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was more than a thousand miles. At times the magi and their retinue would have traveled through areas plagued with bandits. At other times, they would have passed through sparsely populated lands that offered little to eat or to drink. It would have been so much easier

#### Who were these “wise men?”

“Wise men” in v.1 translates the Greek word, *magoi*, which literally means magicians. It is why they are sometimes referred to as the “magi.” But these *magoi* were neither doers of tricks nor kings. Matthew never even says there were three. Because they came from the east, probably Persia or Babylonia, they were most likely astronomers and astrologers, readers of stars. Though they worked without telescopes, Persian and Babylonian astronomers were quite sophisticated in their understanding of the stars and planetary movement. Further, they believed that certain astronomical phenomena were signs of new kings, falling emperors, and other important events.

Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the star of Bethlehem – was it some sort of super-nova? An unusually bright star or planet? A conjunction of planets? Of course, in Matthew, it is just a star – not even a “bright” one.

Whatever the star actually was, these magi saw in the “star” a sign that something incredibly important was happening – a king had been born – and they traveled westward in search of the answer.

for them simply to stay home and wait for someone else to bring them whatever good news there might be. After all, they were men of great learning, prestige, and power. But despite the difficulties and uncertainties of the long journey, they chose not to stay, but to go.

The star was there for all the world to see, but only these wise men went.

#### *An uncertain destination<sup>1</sup>*

Not only did the magi know that the journey would be long and difficult, they only had a vague idea where they were headed. Indeed, chances are that Bethlehem was a most unexpected destination.

In Jesus’ day, large communities of Jews still lived along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what was once the center of the vast Babylonian empire. These Jews were the descendants of those who had chosen not to return to Jerusalem after the end of the exile in 538BC. The Book of Esther is set in just such a post-exilic Jewish community in Persia (the successors to the Babylonians). Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that these three learned men were familiar with the great Hebrew Scroll of Isaiah.

<sup>1</sup>An essay by Walter Brueggemann, “Off by Nine Miles,” helped me to see the connections to Isaiah 60. It was published by *Christian Century* magazine and can be found on-line at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org).

Isaiah 60 speaks of a time when Jerusalem would be restored to greatness and wealth, when kings would come in procession, when other peoples would bring gifts of gold and silver, frankincense and myrrh. As 60:1 has it, there would be a light shining so brightly that all the world would see it.

Not surprisingly then, the magi head for Jerusalem. And where do they go? To King Herod's grand palace. Where better to find a new king than at the palace, the seat of power and wealth. Imagine the magi's surprise when a few of Herod's biblical scholars dug up the reference to Bethlehem as the place to find this new king. In terms of wealth

### Who was King Herod?

The Herod family plays a prominent role in the New Testament. Herod the Great tries to murder Jesus and one of his sons participates in the crucifixion. However, the New Testament Herods can be confusing because there are two of them by name and a third called Philip. (see Luke 3:1)

The Herod at the time of Jesus' birth (about 6BC) was Herod the Great, the founder of the family dynasty. In the struggle for control of Judea nearly forty years before Jesus' birth, Herod had backed the right horse – the Romans, who had first been invited into Judea more than twenty years earlier. As a reward for his support, the Romans gave Herod the title of King, even though Rome's power was usually wielded through a governor (e.g. Pilate, decades later).

So far as the Jews were concerned, Herod the Great was a pretender to the throne. He set about to win the people's devotion by launching a massive rebuilding of the temple. His architects and builders removed a portion of the mountaintop and built a structure into which we could have fit twenty-five football fields. In Jesus' day, the project was still underway. It was finished just in time for the Romans to destroy it in 70AD in the great war.

Despite his rebuilding program, Herod the Great was never able to earn the affection of the Jews. They still awaited a true king, anointed by God and from the House of David.

When Herod the Great died in 4BC or so, soon after ordering the murder of the infants in Bethlehem, his sons assumed control of various portions of Herod's "kingdom." One of these sons, Herod Antipas, "governed" Galilee and is the Herod who executed John the Baptist and played a key role in Jesus' trial.

and power, Bethlehem was dusty and inconsequential, worlds away from Herod and Jerusalem, though it only about five miles down the road to the southeast. Surely, the magi never expected to find the child in such a place. Yet, their surprise did not diminish their joy. Perhaps it even heightened their sense of awe and wonder. It was a world turned upside-down by the unexpected power of God.

### *Our journey*

The Christian journey is long and often difficult. Making one's way on this journey requires an adequate vision of the destination. We need to see the world as God sees it as we make our way forward. And it is Christ who is our light, much as the star over Bethlehem was a light for the Magi to follow.

It is a long journey in that we are "now" people and don't appreciate that our retraining in the ways of Christ takes time. We often fail to grasp that the retraining moves forward, not out of our successes but out of our sufferings, large and small. Though our destination is certain, for Christ is certain, we often see it only dimly and, sometimes, not at all.

But we do not journey alone, for not only is God with us each step, we are accompanied by countless Christians. The Magi represent the revealing of the Christ child to the whole world, Jew and Gentile alike. The twelfth day of Christmas is January 6, the day on the church calendar called Epiphany, which comes from the Greek word meaning "manifestation," Epiphany celebrates the revealing of Jesus, the Son of God, to the world. Surely, there can be no better light to follow.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The main point of Matthew's story is to show the world's response to Jesus' birth. The people who should have seen the truth, the priests and scribes, did not. They recognized none of the signs that Matthew is so careful to point out. What do you think Jesus' second coming will be like? How likely are we to be mistaken about the features of Jesus' second coming? What can we do to prepare for his coming?
2. Jesus and Herod had very different ideas about the nature and use of power. Make a Top Ten List of the contrasts in these two men. What does this list reveal about how we might be contrasted with Jesus? Discuss this quote from D.A. Hare's commentary on Matthew: "For us, the contrast can serve to symbolize the internal contrast between that part of the inner self which willingly and joyfully accepts the Lordship of Christ our King and that darker side of the self which firmly and persistently rejects his right to rule. Scoff not at Herod until you have acknowledged the Herod in yourself!"
3. There is nothing spectacular in the magi's worship of the infant Jesus. With great joy, they simply fall on their knees and present their gifts. Re-read verses 11-12. What can the magi's worship of Jesus teach us about our own worship?

### Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

#### Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

#### Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

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### Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning January 6

Scott Engle will lead an eye-opening series on the seven deadly sins:

#### *Glittering Vices*

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Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org). Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

## Sermon Notes

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