

Following the Star

Matthew 2:1—12

Introduction

Carol and I were talking about this the other day. The Bible is so full of wonderful prophecies and promises we see fulfilled in Jesus. Yet, look at how many people read or hear these things and do not believe them. To us, it's simple. We read the prophecy in *Isaiah* about the virgin having a son and then read about the virgin Mary giving birth to Jesus and we see the connection. Jesus is the Messiah. Depending on how one interprets them, there are no fewer than 300 prophecies in the Old Testament that are fulfilled in Jesus. How can people not see it? Maybe we can learn a lesson from the Magi.

Who Were the Magi?

The Bible merely identifies these men as *wise men from the east* (**Matthew 2:1**). We sing the song *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. But who were they? Christian tradition has labeled them Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. Exactly who they were is of no importance. But here is what we know about them. They were men from Babylon, belonging to a class of people known as “Magi.”

Learned Men

The Magi were called “wise men” because they were learned men. They read extensively on many and diverse subjects. Because of this, they were held in high esteem by both society and the nobility.

Students of the Arts

They were also students of the Arts: alchemy and astrology. Alchemy is the transmutation of metals with the goal of the great “human goods”: wealth, longevity, and immortality. Astrology is the study of the night sky with the goal of discerning meaning, interpreting “signs” in the heavens.

Theologians

Their wide array of reading included scriptures from different religions and cultures, making them global theologians. Since the Babylonian Captivity, they would have had access to the Hebrew Scriptures.

Revelation

Through their studies, they had opened themselves up to God. God reveals Himself in two ways: general revelation in nature and special revelation in His Word.

Nature

First, God revealed Himself to them in nature, in the star. They knew that new stars marked the birth of great kings. This mysterious star appeared to move in the sky, while all other stars appeared stationary to the human eye. An anonymous church father tells us what they would have understood from this star. *By the sign of the star appearing to them at that time, they understood that the birth of the King was revealed to them by divine authority. Through the mystery of the star they understood that the dignity of the King who was born exceeded the measure of all earthly kings. For it was inevitable that*

they considered this King more glorious than the star, which devoutly paid homage to Him. What else could these men do but submit to Him when even the stars in the sky saw they were subject to Him?

Scripture

Combining their knowledge of stars with the Hebrew Scriptures, they knew to head toward Jerusalem because they were looking for the *King of the Jews*. The passage the scribes and priests shared with Herod is part of **Micah 5:2** (Read **Micah 5:2** in *KJV*). With the help of Niels Hemmingsen (1513—1600), 16th century Danish Lutheran theologian, we can see what this verse tells us about Jesus. 1) The place of His birth—Bethlehem. 2) His office—ruler of Israel. 3) His incarnation, which was promised “from of old”. 4) His divinity—from “ancient days”, or everlasting. 5) His two natures — “His goings forth.” 6) His unity of person—the use of the 1st person singular noun. That’s a nearly complete picture of Jesus Christ in one verse.

Not a Secret Knowledge

But our original question remains unanswered: “Why do most people not believe these truths?” After all, the star the Magi saw wasn’t just visible to them. There were other astrologers who would have seen it and would have known it meant the birth of a King. The scribes and priests studied the Scriptures. When asked the question about the birth of the King of the Jews, they knew right where to turn. In fact, they could quote it. Yet, they were unphased by this knowledge. When it was made known to Herod, instead of giving glory to God for fulfilling His promise, he tried to have the Boy killed.

God Gave Them Faith

The difference is faith. Reason and knowledge cannot bring us to God. Only faith can do that. Faith is a gift that only God can give. That God gave these particular Magi faith is evident in what they did when they found Jesus and His mother Mary. They worshiped Him and gave him expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold to crown Him King; frankincense, which was used in worship, to show He is priest; and myrrh, an embalming spice, to point to His sacrificial death. They recognize Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

God Gives Us Faith

God gives faith today through Word and Sacrament. It is freely available to all people, for God is not willing that any should perish. But many don’t believe in Him because they resist His grace. They refuse to believe. Let us, like the Magi, follow the light of His Word to worship Jesus as our Savior and Lord.

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
