



Rev Alan Johnston

I don't know if you can relate to this, but there are quite a few stories in my family that have been so exaggerated over time that it's hard to know what actually happened. This morning we're going to look at a group of people who are an important part of the Christmas story. The only problem is that the stories and myths surrounding these people have grown, so it's very difficult to understand a lot about them. They're called the Wise Men or, as I'm going to call them, the magi.

If you grew up in a church, you've automatically got this picture of three kings from the Orient bearing gifts, walking a little stooped over with three camels, following this star which eventually stops over a manger on Christmas morning, and they go in and find baby Jesus lying in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. The problem is, almost none of that is accurate.

There are few stories in the Bible that are clouded with as much myth and tradition as this one. I think it's safe to say that there are more opinions about this passage than almost any other passage in the Bible. And there are not only opinions, but there are songs like We Three Kings, and nativity scenes and Christmas cards that have shaped our opinions. This morning, I want to help peel back some of the confusion and try to figure out what really happened, and what it means for our lives today.

We have read the story since we were children and we read it again this morning, so now let me give you a little quiz to see how you do.

1. How many wisemen or magi were there?
2. What did these scholars or magi do for a living?
3. What did they follow to find Jesus?
4. When did they arrive to worship Jesus?

Okay, let's see how you did.

FIRST: How many scholars or magi were there?

The answer : we just don't know. The Bible tells us there were more than one. It says "some wise men." But it doesn't tell us how many. Some people think that there were three because they presented three gifts. Other traditions say that there were two, four, even twelve magi. Some traditions have even given them names Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar, and one church claims to have their skulls. But we just don't know how many magi there were.

SECOND: What did these magi do for a living?

The first recorded reference to these men as kings took place two hundred years after the event actually took place.

Why would anybody guess that they were kings? Two reasons. First, they were rich enough to afford very expensive gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the second reason is that the Bible prophesied that kings would come and worship Jesus.

But there's no indication in this passage that they were kings. They're identified as being magi, a word that we could probably translate as astrologer. They were probably Persian priest-astrologers.

Daniel, when taken into captivity into Babylon, was trained as a “Wise Man” – Daniel 1:17-20:

¹⁷To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. ¹⁸At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

Astrology was a widely respected science in those times in the Roman world. Studies show that the astrologers of that day had an astonishing knowledge of astronomy. Magi at that time were physician-astrologers who healed the sick, interpreted dreams, and cast horoscopes. Even though the Jewish faith was against astrology, many people of that day, including some Jews, put stock in astrological predictions. That's why, when these magi communicated news of a king's birth to Herod, it was taken seriously. Constellations and comets and alignments all meant something. They signified the birth of a great Caesar, what type of life that Caesar would live, potential disasters that were about to take place, and so on. These magi had a very scientific knowledge of astronomy, and they applied that into the field of astrology. We're going to see why this is important in a few minutes.

QUESTION THREE: What did they follow to find Jesus?

The verse I read called it a star. There are a lot of theories that people have developed to explain what it is. So the answer to this question is that we don't know. But Numbers 24:17 reads: "A star will rise from Jacob; a sceptre will emerge from Israel."

We don't know if the magi knew this verse, but we do know that Matthew knew this verse. No matter what the star was, it's presented as a supernatural act of God to reveal the birth of his Son. You could say, no matter what theory you hold, that the appearance of this star was a miracle.

QUESTION FOUR: When did they arrive to worship Jesus?

Matthew 2:8,11:

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2:11 says that they entered a **house** where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus lived. By this time, Mary and Joseph were married, living in a house, and intending to stay in Bethlehem for a while. Jesus was probably one or two years old by the time the magi

found him. He may have been walking by then. That explains why Herod killed all the boys up to the age of two. Jesus was much older than a newborn baby by this time...

Well, how did you do on this quiz? How many people have to go home and fix their nativity scenes now? It's a challenge to see past all the legends to see what actually took place two thousand years ago.

So what lessons can we learn?

So you have two groups of people. On one hand, you've got all the religious leaders of the day. Matthew 2:7 says the "leading priests and teachers of religious law" got together to study where the Messiah was born. This group included the current and past high priests - a position that would rotate every year. These people knew the Bible inside out. They were even able to discover with precision where the Messiah was to be born. These were the "good guys".

Then you've got this group of foreign astrologers. Their practices are condemned in Scriptures. They're probably not even from the Jewish race, and their entire profession is a dishonourable one. You've got these two groups of people - the religious leaders who are just five miles away from where Jesus was born, and the magi who are from hundreds of miles away. And which group does God choose to come and worship his Son? He picked the astrologers. He bypassed the religious leaders of the day and went for the astrologers. There are a lot of messages in this passage for us. We could focus on the worship that is due to Jesus as king. We could focus on the reactions of the different groups. But this passage was written to a Jewish audience.

It was written to a group of people who would have a very hard time believing that God would speak to astrologers. They would have a very hard time believing that God would choose that kind of person to come and worship his Son. But what type of person is God looking for to worship him? The picture that many of us carry is the type of person who belongs in church. You know the kind. But let's be honest, there are some people that just don't look like "God's type". Do you know who I mean? I've got a mental list of people who just don't look like they'd be of much use to God. If you're honest, you've probably got a list too. I want to spend just a few moments talking to two groups of people, to see if we can really take this home.

Darryl Dash refers to them as two sorts of people:

I WANT TO TALK FIRST TO THOSE OF US WHO LOOK LIKE WE BELONG IN CHURCH. You know who you are. You don't have too many tattoos, the only parts of your body that are pierced are our ears, and then only if you're female; you probably brought a Bible with you, you can quote John 3:16, and you admit you're a sinner because one time you didn't come to a complete stop at a stop sign. This story is written for us to help us think outside the box - to help us realize that God's plan might include more people than us. It's written to help us understand that maybe God is planning to love and to reach people who don't look like us, who don't feel like they belong, who don't really fit the picture of a person who would follow Jesus. I'm a little bit scared by the fact that it's the religious people who seemed to have missed most of what Jesus had to offer.

But there was another group of people that Jesus loved. Jesus loved to hang around people that the religious crowd had written off. Is it possible that God isn't as impressed with how we appear churchy and religious, as much as we think?

Is it possible that we're actually in danger of missing out on real worship? Of not joining in with what he's doing, because he uses different people than we would pick?

The magi offered their worship to Jesus. And Jesus has offered to us his reciprocated gift: the chance to be accepted by him, even though we don't belong. So look at other people differently. Don't write them off. Don't look down on them. See them the way Jesus would, even if they do things differently from what we think God likes.

I want to speak for a second to the other group, **THE GROUP THAT FEELS LIKE WE DON'T BELONG**. You really don't feel like you belong in church. You may even be here because your spouse drags you here, or because you have a friend here. You may be the most reluctant person who came through the doors this morning. The message of the story for you, is this: **YOU BELONG MORE THAN YOU THINK**. When God decided to throw a welcoming party for his Son, he chose only a few people to attend. He chose an unmarried couple in their teens to attend as the parents. He chose some shepherds - probably teenagers working a job as glamorous as working at McDonalds. And he chose some astrologers. He bypassed the people we would have chosen, and invited the people that, at least by our standards, didn't really belong. ***So you belong***. God loves you more than you could ever imagine.

Ephesians 2:1 says, "Once you were dead, doomed forever because of your many sins."

You may relate to that verse. A lot of us are or were at the very end of ourselves. We did things. We made mistakes. We realized that we had not only damaged ourselves and the people around us, but we had actually died spiritually. And the Bible says that we were separated from God and doomed forever.

"But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so very much, that even while we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead" (Ephesians 2:4).

Even if you feel you don't belong, God is rich in mercy. He loves you very much. He wants you to have new life and forgiveness, not because of anything you've done, but because that's why Jesus came.

Jesus came for people who don't belong.

He came for people who weren't good enough.

He came for people who wanted to be forgiven.

He came to take their punishment, to die for them, to give them a fresh start and complete forgiveness. And you can receive this gift by responding in repentance - turning away from your sins; and in faith - believing that Jesus came to live, die, and rise again for you.

You belong.

You're the reason that Jesus came.

And you can come to worship him today.

LET US PRAY