

Jesus' Visitors: The Worshipping Wise Men

Matthew 2:1-12

The Christmas Pageant

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

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When others were getting up in the morning and leaving for work, the wise men were just going to bed. And when others had washed the dinner dishes, trimmed the oil lamps, and donned their night clothes, the wise men were wide awake, gazing at the stars. Stars were their obsession because they believed that we humans are in the grip of astral forces, that our destinies are written in the stars from the instant of our birth to the moment of our death. Their beliefs are still with us in the daily horoscope on page C13 in the Washington Post, and in musty rooms on Wisconsin Avenue where psychics shuffle their Tarot cards. I am amazed by the number of people who believe that they have been dealt this or that personality and are locked into an inescapable fate just because they were born under a particular sign of the zodiac.

But stop and think: the starlight that will strike our eyes later tonight is already several years old by the time it gets here. The star Arcturus, for example, may not even exist anymore. It may long since have collapsed, and we would not know it for perhaps thirty-seven years because it takes that long for its light to arrive here on earth. Listen to Stephen Hawking: "When we look at the universe, we are seeing it as it was in the past." And that means that the stars we thought we were born under weren't even there at that moment, weren't actually in those precise locations, when we were born. So what possible power can they have over our destinies?

In Matthew's Gospel, the star has no influence whatsoever on Jesus' birth. The star is only a beacon, a marker indicating where he was born. Like a road sign, the star merely points the way for the wise men. And just as road signs are to be read and then forgotten as we move toward our destination, the star came and went, never to appear again. The star vanished, leaving behind the child and the man he would become, and that man, Jesus, is the one who reveals our destiny. Jesus is the prototype of humanity. Jesus, in his purity of character and his unity of personality, is what we were intended to be. Jesus, in his love for God and his compassion for others, is what we should all be like. Jesus is the perfect man, the complete human being.

And he is more than human. When the wise men saw the child they were compelled to do more than greet a human monarch. Matthew says, "They knelt down and paid him homage." The older version of the Bible is closer to the truth: "They fell down and worshiped him." But isn't that a bit much, to worship another human being, and a baby at that? If and when Prince Charles ascends the throne of Great Britain, heads of state will fly in from afar to witness his coronation, but you can be very sure no one will fall down and worship him! In fact, it will be Charles who kneels before the Archbishop of Canterbury, God's representative, and not the other way around. Yet the wise men fell down before a mere child and worshiped him. Why?

Because somewhere on the six mile trek from Jerusalem to Bethlehem they perceived the real identity of this child. Sometime on that dark night made brighter by the Bethlehem star the truth got hold of them that this was more than a Judean prince. Somehow, penetrating and overpowering their prior beliefs about stars and planets, they were seized by the belief that this was no mere human ruler; this was the King of kings and Lord of lords. And in the face of that revelation, they could do no other than fall down and worship him. By the way, you will find the exact same phrase in Revelation 19:4, where "the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne." That's what Matthew wants us to understand: the wise men saw the reflection of God in the face of Mary's baby, so they fell down and worshiped him.

And that's not all: "Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." This, of course, is the time-honored protocol when visiting a head of state: you take them gifts. Last month Carol and I took friends to Gettysburg, and while there we toured the Eisenhower farm. As we

stepped into their living room we saw scores of figurines and pieces of fine china, all of them gifts from foreign dignitaries while the Eisenhowers were in the White House. And that's what the wise men did. They gave precious gifts to the newborn king.

You, on the other hand, may have no precious gifts to give to Jesus. You're retired and living on a fixed income, and that income seems to dwindle month after month. Or you're just starting out in life, with more prospects than prosperity. You have no trust funds, no accumulated assets, no offshore bank accounts. So this talk about wise men dipping into their treasure chests goes right past you. You cannot relate to it, let alone replicate it.

Evidently a scribe in the second century felt the same way, because there is a translation of this text that changes the words "treasure chests" to "knapsacks." "They opened their knapsacks and offered him gifts." I can identify with that. I don't have a jewel-studded chest full of gold, gems, and rare spices. I have no accounts in the Bahamas or Switzerland. But I do have a knapsack containing a few raw talents, a bit of compassion, and a spare dollar or two. I have some time to give to a person confined to home, I own a car in which I can transport someone with a disability, there is a telephone at home on which I can call a lonely friend. I have a knapsack full of simple gifts, and so do you.

The point is, Jesus wants nothing more than you yourself. He wants you, not someone who is more wealthy or better educated than you. He wants you just as you are, not as you think you should be. Your knapsack, whatever its contents, is more than acceptable to Jesus. Your box of talents, however plain, will do just fine. Christina Rossetti said it well:

What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; If I were a wise man, I would do my part; Yet what I can, I give him: Give my heart.

Before you open your gifts this Christmas, open your knapsack, and give Christ your heart.