

Matthew 2:7-12

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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." 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The traditional Christmas scene has the magi at the stable. However, they arrived some time after the birth of Jesus. Between the two Gospels, Jesus goes from the stable to a house. Luke has the story of the shepherds going to the manger and Matthew is after the birth of Jesus when the magi present gifts at a house. When the magi do visit Jesus, he is still a baby in Bethlehem. It took time for the magi to travel from the east. We do not know exactly where they came from. They were not kings. We do not know how many magi there were. Tradition is that there were three wise men because they presented three gifts. They went to Jerusalem first because they knew that the king had arrived but they did not know exactly where. So, they went to Jerusalem to worship him. The title of Magi comes from the Greek word for magic. Traditionally they are known as wise men. They would have been skilled in philosophy, medicine, science, and astrology. People believed in astrology. They believed you could tell the future from the stars and your destiny was determined by the star under which you were born.

Jerusalem is the capital so it just makes sense that the king would be there. It is important to recognize that the action of Gentiles verifies the authenticity of Old Testament prophecy. The foreigners knew about the promised Messiah and they came to worship him as soon as possible. There are historical documents that reveal that people, other than the Jews, knew about the expected king. In the Orient, it was known that men coming from Judaea to rule the world (Suetonius Life of Vespasian 4:5). There was a belief that rulers were coming from Judaea to acquire a universal empire (Tacitus Histories, 5:13). The Jews believed one from their country would become governor of the earth (Josephus: Wars of the Jews, 6:5,4). So, when Christ came, the world was eager and full of expectation waiting for God. The magi were among the first to respond. They took the initiative to look for him when others did not.

The magi were following a star. They called it his star – not a star. This was no ordinary star and there are many theories about planets, comets, and stars lining up. Regardless, the star was a guiding light of the Holy Spirit. Their profession was to watch the heavens. It was heavenly brilliance that got their attention. They set out from the East. The star got them going in the right direction. They may not have had sight of the star the whole time which would explain how they ended up in Jerusalem and needed directions to go to Bethlehem. They learned the details of the prophecy when they were in Jerusalem as King Herod sent them to Bethlehem. Then at the right time the star appeared again like a compass it showed them right direction. The Scripture tells us that they worshiped him. Emphasis is not placed on the Virgin Mary who is with child of the Holy Spirit; emphasis is placed on the divine status of the child.

King Herod was disturbed. Men from the East were searching for the new born king. This was a threat to his throne. He was paranoid of anyone that would be a rival to his power. It is known that he even murdered three sons, his wife, and her mother, and ordered people to die upon his death so that there would be mourning. Herod does not know the scriptures so he calls in the experts. The chief priests and teachers of law are in the know. They are professionally trained to know the law and prophecy. They know the answer is that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Micah 5:2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Matthew makes sure we know that through Jesus prophecy is fulfilled. He is born in Bethlehem. The prophecy of Micah occurred several centuries before Christ arrived. Matthew makes an effort to confirm that Jesus is the Messiah. He is a descendant of Abraham, he is of the house of David, born in the city of David, and Mary is with child of Holy Spirit. People knew the Old Testament prophecy would come true because it always does as it is verified by events of history. King Herod confirms the prophecy by his action. The prophecy is that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. So he sends the magi to find him in Bethlehem. The reaction of King Herod is one of murder and deception. He lies to the wise men. His desire is murder the child to prevent him from becoming the new king.

There are different reactions to Jesus. Herod's reaction was hatred and hostility due to his paranoia of losing his power and influence. The religious leaders had a similar reaction some 30 years later. Neither party bothered to look for him. The shepherds went to see and marvel at the news and the magi showed their respect through their actions. What Matthew shows us is that it is the Gentiles that search for him, find him, and verify his divine status through their action. People from various places of the world verify, by their actions, Jesus is the promised Messiah. While a multitude of people were waiting and anticipating the arrival of the Messiah, the magi took action. People today need to do the same. While the world is complacent it is the wise that seek the Lord and adore him.