

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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Sermon Title: Why Do We Call the Wise Men “Wise”? Matthew 2:1-12

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INTRODUCTION: Many people think of the wise men in the manger scene, there along with the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and baby Jesus in the manger. The truth is: The wise men were not there on the night of Jesus’ birth. The shepherds came for a visit, and they were the only ones we know of. The scene itself was probably drab—a dark barn with barnyard animals, a manger full of hay. It was probably not the way you think of it. I’d say many of you here today grew up on farms, and you are familiar with the earthiness of barns, the smell of the animals and their excrement, the smell of hay, wood, and earth. There was no room in the inn, so the hotel manager gave them a barn with no running water and no electricity.

I am sorry to completely ruin your idea of the scene you’ve envisioned around the birth of Christ. I hope no one goes home today all depressed. But, it wasn’t the appearance of the scene which mattered. It was the person who appeared on the scene who mattered.

Jesus came as a poor child, born to simple parents who feared God. God chose Mary and Joseph because he knew they had what was needed to provide for the Messiah until the time in which he would be ready to be on his own.

So, the Bible talks about these wise men, also called magi. We’ve seen so many manger scenes and children’s plays, and we take for granted the real story of the wise men. Why do we call these mystery men wise men? This morning I’d like for us to look at the scripture as if we are detectives looking for answers to that question: **Why do we call them wise men?** Here are twelve clues:

Clue 1: They were called magi.

Clue 2: They were from the East.

Clue 3: They knew his title as King of the Jews.

Clue 4: They studied the stars.

Clue 5: They came to worship him.

Clue 6: They must have been completely convinced the prophecies were true.

Clue 7: Their search attracted the attention of King Herod.

Clue 8: Their presence caused King Herod to seek out the truth.

Clue 9: They felt joy when they saw the star again.

Clue 10: They went to a house.

Clue 11: They brought gifts when they worshiped him.

Clue 12: They were sensitive to God's direction.

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:1-12 ¹*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

³*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:*

⁶ *"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"*

⁷*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."*

⁹*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On 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, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

CLUE 1: THEY WERE CALLED MAGI.

There is a lot of writing here and there about the magi. The magi were an educated class of people within different cultures of the day. *Magi* is where we get the word “magic.” As I understand it, there were different types of magi: those who were real bona fide magi and those who were fake magi. Today, we have people with genuine doctorate degrees and those with non-accredited, fake doctorates. For every genuine article, there is a cheap imitation, isn't there?

Anyway, we believe these magi were men from this educated class who must have been very knowledgeable as we'll see in a few minutes.

CLUE 2: THEY WERE FROM THE EAST.

If you look at a map of the Middle East during the time of Christ, you'll find there is nothing to the immediate east except desert and wilderness. In fact, there is no civilization for at least a thousand miles. There are cities a thousand miles to the east, and some of them are mentioned in the Bible. Because none of these cities are mentioned, many believe they were from very, very distant lands.

For them to have made such a trip, they would have planned far in advance. The trip from the East would have been treacherous. It would have required them to travel with a caravan of servants and enough supplies to travel such a long distance through the desert.

If they were from China, their trip would have been 5,000 miles at a minimum. I've read camel caravans can move about 20 miles per day. At a minimum, travel from China would have taken 250 days of non-stop travel. And, this calculation only works if they began their pilgrimage in the eastern part of China. We really don't know where they are from. We do not know their names. We don't know how many there were or how they traveled. All we know is they were from the East, and the nearest Eastern cities were about 1,000 miles away.

This was not a vacation for them. This was a pilgrimage.

CLUE 3: THEY KNEW HIS TITLE AS KING OF THE JEWS.

This indicates they knew their scripture. Some believe perhaps they were Jews themselves because of the scripture in Esther, which tells how Jews were dispersed everywhere. Regardless, it's interesting they knew his title, the title which would be used on his cross.

CLUE 4: THEY STUDIED THE STARS.

They must have known the prophecy from Numbers 24: *A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.* But, this alone would have been enough for them to know Jesus was King of the Jews. Interestingly enough, there were many copies of the scrolls Daniel and Isaiah had during this time—scriptures which talked of the coming Messiah, so it is likely the magi had access to them.

CLUE 5: THEY CAME TO WORSHIP HIM.

Why did they come to worship a baby? There are so many mysteries in the Bible, aren't there? But, then again, it would be a rather boring book if every question had a direct answer. Again, we have to look for clues. Magi were known for their study of the paranormal. These magi would have been no different. I have this idea: Perhaps in their studies and with all their knowledge, they, like many of us here today, came to a point in their lives where they realized they had not found the answer. They realized sorcery and studies in the paranormal really had no value, and in their search for truth, they landed upon the Holy Scriptures, specifically Isaiah 7, which says a virgin, would conceive. The fact they came to worship him indicates they knew of the salvific quality of his unique baby.

CLUE 6: THEY MUST HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY CONVINCED THE PROPHECIES WERE TRUE.

How many of you would start a long trip unsure as to whether what you looking for would even be there? You might do it if you were traveling to flea markets, looking for a specific item, in your air-conditioned car on a summer day. But, how many of you would walk a thousand miles, or ride a camel and hire a caravan of people, buy supplies and take a year or more of your life at great personal expense to go on a journey of uncertainty. The answer is no one. None of you would do it, unless you fully believe what you were looking for was going to be there. Now, try to find one

or more people to believe this with you and get them to join in the planning of the trip. Really, the fact that more than one person believed the prophecies and made the trip is quite remarkable.

CLUE 7: THEIR SEARCH ATTRACTED THE ATTENTION OF KING HEROD.

Herod was not known for going out of his way to be friendly to locals, much less to passersby. The mere fact they got his attention indicates they were important men. Perhaps they were distant kings, or lesser kings, or maybe just king-like, or maybe they just had an alarming message. The fact they traveled so far and went around asking for directions to the location of the child, King of the Jews, was enough to get Herod's attention.

CLUE 8: THEIR PRESENCE CAUSED KING HEROD TO SEEK OUT THE TRUTH

Being alarmed, Herod got the Jewish religious folks together and asked what this was about. They told him where Christ was supposed to be born. They quoted Micah Chapter 5...stating Bethlehem, but these particular Jews did not believe their Messiah had been born.

Now this is very interesting...the Jewish leaders knew the Book of Micah told where the Jesus was to be born, and apparently the magi did not. This indicates the magi did not have the book of Micah.

***So, here we see something very interesting:

The magi believed Jesus had been born, but they did not know his location. The teachers of the Jewish law did not believe Jesus had been born, but they knew the prophesied location! And, Herod was threatened by it all!

You may not know King Herod was not a Jewish king. He was a Roman king who occupied Jerusalem. The idea of a Jewish king was a threat to Herod. He sought out the truth, but he did so for his own political gain.

CLUE 9: THEY FELT JOY WHEN THEY SAW THE STAR AGAIN.

They knew God was leading them. God provided the star to take them where they wanted to go. No wonder they were overjoyed! They saw the star a long time ago, and now here it was again. I like the emotion of joy, which I believe is the normal, default emotion of the believer. We learn from the Book of Acts, the word “joy” is used many times to describe how believers felt.

CLUE 10: THEY WENT TO A HOUSE.

This is not really a clue as to why we call the wise men “wise,” but it is a clue as to the length of time they traveled. They saw the star and began their journey. They didn’t give up. That’s why they were wise. It does not say they went to a manger. It does not say they went to a barn. They went to a house. Again, I am sorry to mess up your idea of the manger scene on the night Jesus was born. ☺

CLUE 11: THEY BROUGHT GIFTS WHEN THEY WORSHIPPED HIM.

Since three gifts are mentioned, this is where we get this idea there were three magi. Christians in the East believe there were twelve. There could have been more. Really, we do not know.

But, look at their gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold was a gift for a king, frankincense, a symbol of deity, and myrrh, something used to embalm the dead. Jesus is a king, God in the flesh, who came to earth to die for the sins of the world.

I do not believe the gifts were coincidental. I believe they knew exactly what they were doing.

CLUE 12: THEY WERE SENSITIVE TO GOD’S DIRECTION.

Now, after having worshipped Jesus, they were warned by a dream not to go back to Herod.

Twelve clues give us insight into these men. Little wonder why they are called *WISE MEN*.

CALL TO ACTION: Please listen and take this home with you today: Today, wise people who seek truth will find it in the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. With Jesus, it's not a hide and seek game.

This Jesus is just as available to you today as he was to the wise men of yesterday. He is real! He's no longer a baby but the one and only risen Lord!

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I use the NIV translation of scripture because of its conversational nature. Feel free to go to Bible Gateway and copy and paste whichever translation you want to use. This transcript has been edited to an outline format that improves readability and therefore may not exactly follow the video edition.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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