

Follow the Star Like the Wise Men

Matthew 2:1-12 (Epiphany of our Lord)

Whether this is the first time you have heard this account or the hundredth time, there always seems to be more questions that come to your mind than answers provided. When exactly did this take place? Who are these wise men or Magi? Where in the “east” was their home? How many of them were there? How did they know about God’s promise of a Savior? How did they know this particular star they saw in the sky would lead them to the Savior, the King of their hearts? What was that special star?

Some of those questions we can answer with a little more certainty than others. When the wise men showed up in Jerusalem, it definitely wasn’t Christmas night as the Bible tells us that Mary and Joseph were in a house not in that stable. It may have been a few months after his birth, possibly even up to two years based on the orders Herod gave after the wise men left. These wise men probably were not kings as the carol tells us. However based on what they gave to Jesus, they must have been blessed with great earthly wealth. We do know that they were scholars who studied the wisdom of the ancients and especially the stars. They were not Jews. They were of the “nations”. They were Gentiles whose homeland many think was Babylon, in what is today Iraq.

Even though we do not know exactly where these men came or when exactly they came, it’s clear they believed the promise of a Savior. Perhaps they knew of that promise because they had copies of the books of Moses or Isaiah which spoke about that Savior. As scholars they may have studied those books. Yet perhaps the greatest question relates to this star. What was this star that just appeared in the night sky? How did they connect this special star in the sky to be the star to follow to find that promised Savior?

Maybe it was something like what we saw last month. The planets Jupiter and Saturn came into alignment so that it looked like they were merging in the night sky to form one giant star. If you saw it or saw pictures of it, it was quite an amazing and bright sight in the early night sky. The Christmas Star, as it was called, shone brightly in the sky for a couple nights for the first time since the 1200s. Was that what the wise men saw? We don’t know for sure, but even if it was, how did they know it would lead them to the Savior? Stars don’t tell us anything in particular. They just shine as lights in the sky. Numbers 24:17 speaks of a star in reference to the promised Savior. **“I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise up out of Israel.”** Yet even if they understood this to speak about a star in the sky, how did they know this star that just appeared was that one. So how did they know to follow it?

That’s a lot of questions with some answers, but ultimately it doesn’t matter. We can get wrapped up in the questions and details that we miss the point. These wise men saw this star in the sky. They knew to follow it. Following it is what they did with eagerness and commitment to finding the one and worshipping the one born “King of the Jews”. Today as we begin the season of Epiphany, a season of revealing, that star reveals Jesus and his glory. So today, let’s eagerly follow the star like the wise men and with the same eagerness seek to worship him.

If they did come from Babylon, they were on a long journey of more than 500 miles following this unique star in the sky. However it appears the star disappeared for a time when they got to the land of Judah. So they made a reasonable assumption. They went to the most logical place to find a king they could think of - the capital city of Jerusalem. Where else would you expect to find a king? It was there they approached King Herod and in his presence they asked a reasonable question and why they wanted to know. “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

This inquiry did not sit well with Herod, who himself was just a “puppet king” of the Roman Empire. Even though Herod didn’t have the authority of a real king, he deemed any threat to his “power” as one he must get rid of. No wonder Herod was “disturbed” to hear the question of the wise men. He had demonstrated that when he killed three of his own sons who seemed to be plotting against him. Because he was a power-hungry, bloodthirsty, and ruthless leader who didn’t tolerate even the perception of challenge to his power, when he was disturbed all of Jerusalem was disturbed too. The wise men didn’t know this when they asked, but Herod was only helpful in seeking out those who could help.

The star had taken the wise men this far. Instead of a light in the sky, the directions would have to come from a light shining from the scrolls of the prophets which spoke of the Savior’s coming. Consulting those scrolls of God’s inspired word, the chief priest and experts in the law were able to tell Herod where to look. The answer to their question wasn’t in a place where the wise men much less Herod would have maybe thought to look. It was in humble Bethlehem where the humble King of the Jews, the Savior of the world, would be born.

This news should have given Herod joy at what had been revealed to him and what he was about to tell the wise men. It should have moved him to step off his throne to go with them to Bethlehem, but it didn’t. The revealing of the Savior did nothing to move his heart concerned only with his own kingship. Herod thought his kingdom was at stake. His fear robbed him of a precious opportunity to take care of a far more urgent need - his soul. Herod had no desire to worship this baby king, but to kill him, a presumed rival to the throne. Yet the wise men received what the scrolls revealed and it lit their way to continue their journey to worship the King of their hearts.

With the star of the Word shining them in the right direction, that star which had guided them for so long appeared seemingly just as it had before to finish pointing the way. They rejoiced with overwhelming joy when they saw it once again. Following the light of the Word and the light of this star, they were led to the doorstep of the house where he was staying. Imagine the joy they felt as they opened that door. They had reached the goal of their long journey. Without hesitation, they did what they had set out to do when they first saw the star and what told Herod they wanted to do. Standing was out of the question. On their knees in reverence reserved for high-ranking people like kings or divine beings, they did what they had come so many, many miles to do, what is rightfully done only for God himself. They “worshipped him”. They prayed to him. They praised the one who had been revealed to them guided by the star and directed by his Word, but now seen with their eyes.

Yet their worship wasn’t just with open mouths and moving lips. It was also worship that opened their hands and presented gifts freely and generously to him. They were very valuable gifts that were precious to the one giving it. The value of gold doesn’t need to be reiterated. Incense offers a nice aroma when burned as its smoke rises to the sky. Myrrh was a very expensive aromatic resin used in perfume and in the embalming process. Much has been made of these gifts. Perhaps there is some symbolism in those gifts, but maybe they just wanted to give their Savior the best they had to offer.

Like the wise men, we eagerly followed the star today as it reveals the Savior born not just for a small number, but all people, all nations, for you, and for me. He is the King born to rule in our hearts and the King born to die for our sins. Standing before the glory of his grace revealed to us, like the wise men, we fall, maybe not on bending knee, but with bended hearts to eagerly worship him through our prayers and praises. We raise our hands in thankful worship joyfully offering him our treasures. What about after today?

The Christmas star created excitement as people’s eyes were focused on the sky trying to see the spectacular sight. The planets’ orbits have begun to move out of that alignment and the light of the “Christmas Star” is no longer

there to see anymore. Now people who don't normally look up into the night sky and watch the stars are no longer taking the time to look up there in the sky as much, because there appears to be nothing special to see up there anymore.

The Christmas Star is not shining. The star that the wise men followed isn't shining anymore. The time approaches for that star we place on top of our Christmas trees to be put away for the year, the star which reminds us of that star we followed today. What about after today? Does our desire to eagerly worship with open mouths get put away like that star on your tree until its light returns again? Are we always so eager to open our hands and keep worshipping with our treasures - our time, talents, and wealth? Don't we still have a star to follow? We may not be able to follow a star in the sky, but there is a star to keep following with the same eagerness and gladness as it fills our hearts with the same joy because of whose glory it reveals to us.

Consider the wise men. They had seen Jesus. They had seen his glory as their Savior when Herod didn't even want to try and see it. They had done what they had so eagerly and diligently set out to do - worship the King of the Jews. The star the wise men saw in the sky and followed no longer shone as they made the long journey home. Like the wise men, that time of worship in his presence they had long waited for came to an end. Would that joy and eagerness to worship fade into the monotony of life like the light of that star? Would their desire to worship him as they did become like something checked off their bucket list?

So on their journey home going a different way and probably more miles than before, what continued to fill them with the same joy and eagerness to worship? It was the light of the forgotten star in this account, the star which spoke of his promised coming and revealed to them where they would find Jesus in Bethlehem. Following the star of God's Word, Jesus kept being revealed to them and the glory of his saving grace continued to shine brightly in their hearts. There still was a star to follow. How could they not eagerly follow its light and then joyfully worship the one born King of the Jews with their prayers, their praises, and even their treasures as they had once done?

There still is a star for us to follow. As the star of God's Word continues to shine and points us to Jesus, so it continues to reveal the glory of his grace to us. Wouldn't we want to keep following its light with the same eagerness? Wouldn't we want to worship him with the same joy opening our lips to pray and praise all while opening our hands to giving him gifts of our time to live for him, our talents to serve him, and our treasures used to share him?

Martin Luther once said this of the wise men. "They simply follow the verse of the prophet and the testimony of the star and believe him to be King, fall down, worship, and give presents to him." Isn't that you and I not necessarily following the star in the sky we saw today shining for a time and then fading away, but the star of his Word which shines brightly every day? Keep following the light of the "star". Believe Jesus to be King. Eagerly worship him with your prayers, your praises, and your presents.



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