

THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD



Study Notes for the Christian Layperson

by: Rev. Sean Willman

Matthew 2:1-12 ESV

Author and Date:

The Holy Spirit caused St. Matthew the Apostle and Evangelist to write this Gospel around AD 50.

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,

- Matthew makes clear the historical nature of Jesus' birth by naming both the ruler of Judea and the town in which Jesus is born. These details place the miraculous virgin birth into space and time and remind us that the gospels are records of actual events, namely the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
- The wise men, literally *magi*, are unnamed, unnumbered, and essentially unidentified in any way. Although often referred to as "three kings," we do not know where they came from, how they knew the Word of God, what their title was, or even how many of them there were. Magi is vague term that refers to those who were the most learned. Wherever in the east they come from, these magi were likely the local experts in the fields of medicine, science, the stars, interpretation of dreams, etc.

² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

- The magi make an assertion: Jesus, the Babe born in Bethlehem, is King of the Jews. The star that rose was His, put there to lead them to Jerusalem.

These Gentiles are not in Jerusalem to find facts; they know these things are true, and they have come to worship this Child.

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

- Herod had risen to power by use of force. He was, by all accounts, a ruthless and unmerciful ruler. As such, he had to always be on guard against any who would seek to unseat him by the same means he had gained superiority. That there might be a challenger to his reign caused him consternation. What is more, the Child born was supposedly King of the Jews. Herod, the foreigner, was aware that the Jews were constantly praying for a Messiah who was to come and rule His people. He feared that this One just born would quickly gain popularity, thereby robbing him of power.
- While those in Jerusalem longed to be out from under Herod's thumb, they feared that a king coming to challenge Herod would result in endless deaths and bloodshed. By this fear these Jews make their unbelief clear. While praying for a Messiah, they did not recognize Him when He came. Instead of rejoicing that the promised one had finally come, they cower in the fear of unbelief.

⁴ And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means

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least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

- Of course Herod did not believe the Holy Scriptures, but here makes use of them, and those called to proclaim them in order to gather information about Jesus. The chief priests and scribes know the prophecies concerning the Christ who was to come and quickly answer Herod’s theological question by quoting Micah 5:2. Sadly, they later show that they have no faith in these prophecies when they reject their fulfillment, Jesus.
- Bethlehem was not a large city by any means, but from this city of David would come another king who was to rule over Israel. Unlike Herod, or even David, the Messiah would not be a warrior king, but rather a shepherd. Jesus would come to guide His people into the way of truth and guard them from any who would seek to harm them. He would ultimately give His own life for theirs.

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

- Herod is careful not to make the leaders of the church suspicious by asking too many questions, so he speaks to the magi in private. He assumed that they first saw the star when the Child was born. By having this information, he would know exactly how old the Child was and could more easily find this tiny threat to the throne.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”

- As friendly and inquisitive as Herod appeared, his intentions with the Child were evil. Not unlike those who only search the Holy Scriptures for promises of wealth and long-life, Herod was the consummate hypocrite and rank unbeliever. He desired to know the Scriptures, not to have life in Christ, but that his own life and evil desires might be fulfilled. The same can be said of anyone who sees the Holy Scriptures as a means to the end of personal gain rather than the only source of truth and life.

9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

- The star that the magi had seen before appears again, this time to lead them directly to Jesus. These men are filled with joy, awe, and reverence for the Child Jesus, the King of the Jews. Epiphany means manifestation, or appearance. When Jesus appears the response of these Gentiles stands in stark contrast with that of Herod and the Jews. Indeed, this is one of the chief themes of Epiphany: when the Messiah appears His people are those who receive Him in faith.
- Many have speculated that the gifts of the magi each have a specific meaning, however, the point is not the individual gifts, but rather that they came and worshipped this Child as the King. They believed the Holy Scriptures, they followed the star, and they gave honor to Jesus with their worship and gifts.

12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

- God the Father protects His Son in the same way He protects us. “From this we learn how paternally God the Father dealt, and cared for His own, not letting them come into the hands of their enemies except at the hour provided by God; for even the hairs on our head are numbered, yes, before we endure trouble, God has sent His angel from heaven as our escort and protector.” (Spangenberg, *The Year of Christian Grace*, 54)



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