

## **Week of January 4<sup>th</sup> - Matthew 2.1-12**

- Read each daily Devotional Reading using the SOAP method and Daily Devotional to help you reflect.
- Read the article below prior to group
- Think through the small group and accountability questions after the article

### ***Devotional Readings***

Sunday	Isaiah 60
Monday	Psalm 72
Tuesday	Ephesians 3
Wednesday	Matthew 2
Thursday	Genesis 41
Friday	Exodus 7
Saturday	Daniel 2

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### ***Article: The Magi Visit Jesus - Matthew 2.1-12***

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*by N.T. Wright from Matthew for everyone, Part 1( England: London : SPCK, 2002.), 08-12.*

I was convinced it was a helicopter. It was a dark night, and a bright light was shining just above the nearby town. Surely, I thought, the police must be out looking for a criminal; or perhaps there had been an accident. We had just come from the city, and our eyes weren't yet adjusted for the dark night-time out in the country. But there, plain for all to see, was a light in the sky: a bright, almost dazzling light that could only have come, I was convinced, from a man-made searchlight attached to an airplane or helicopter.

But I was wrong, as our taxi-driver took delight in pointing out to me. It was the planet Venus. It was at one of its closest points to our planet, Earth; it was hanging in the evening sky, brighter than I would ever have imagined. My eyes were too used to the city streetlights. I had forgotten just how bright, and how beautiful and evocative, the night sky can be. The ancient world, innocent of streetlights, never forgot the night sky. Many people, particularly in the countries to the east of Palestine, had developed the study of the stars and the planets to a fine art, giving each one very particular meanings. They believed, after all, that the whole world was of a piece; everything was interconnected, and when something important was happening on earth you could expect to see it reflected in the heavens. Alternatively, a remarkable event among the stars and planets must mean, they thought, a remarkable event on earth.

Scholars have labored to discover what Matthew's 'star' might have been. Halley's Comet appeared in 12—11 BC, but that would be very early for this story. Or it could have been some kind of supernova. More likely is the fact that the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other three times in 7 BC. Since Jupiter was the 'royal' or kingly planet, and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was obvious: a new king of the Jews was about to be born. We cannot be certain if this was why the 'wise and learned men' came from the East. But, even if it wasn't, nothing is more likely than that thoughtful astronomers or astrologers (the two went together in the ancient world), noticing strange events in the heavens, would search out their earthly counterparts. If, as it appears, they were also wealthy, they would have no major difficulty in making the journey.

Matthew is not telling us all this simply to satisfy astronomical curiosity. Nor is he offering us the kind of cozy, picture-book story we have created for ourselves out of it, with strange but gentle oriental kings bringing gifts to a child in a stable. (Matthew says nothing about a stable; as far as we know from his gospel, Mary and Joseph were simply living in Bethlehem at the time, only moving to Nazareth later (2.23). Nor does he say the visitors were themselves royal.) The overtones of his story are quite different.

What he tells us is political dynamite. Jesus, Matthew is saying, is the true king of the Jews, and old Herod is the false one, a usurper, an impostor. As we shall see, this Herod died soon after Jesus' birth; but his sons ruled on, and one of them, Herod Antipas, plays a significant role in the developing story of Jesus himself. The house of Herod did not take kindly to the idea of anyone else claiming to be 'king of the Jews'.

The arrival of the 'Magi' (that's the word Matthew uses for them; it can refer to 'magicians or 'astrologers or experts in interpreting dreams, portents and other strange happenings) introduces us to something which Matthew wants us to be clear about from the start. If Jesus is in some

sense, king of the Jews, that doesn't mean that his rule is limited to the Jewish people. At the heart of many prophecies about the coming king, the Messiah, there were predictions that his rule would bring God's justice and peace to the whole world (e.g. Psalm 72; Isaiah 11.1—10). Matthew will end his gospel with Jesus commissioning his followers to go out and make disciples from every nation; this, it seems, is the way that the prophecies of the Messiah's worldwide rule are going to come true. There are hints of the same thing at various points in the gospel (e.g. 8.11), though Jesus himself did not deliberately seek out Gentiles during his ministry (see 10.5—6). But here, even when Jesus is an apparently unknown baby, there is a sign of what is to come. The gifts that the Magi brought were the sort of things that people in the ancient world would think of as appropriate presents to bring to kings, or even gods.

There is another way as well in which this story points ahead to the climax of the gospel. Jesus will finally come face to face with the representative of the world's greatest king — Pilate, Caesar's subordinate. Pilate will have rather different gifts to give him, though he, too, is warned by a dream not to do anything to him (27.19). His soldiers are the first Gentiles since the Magi to call Jesus 'king of the Jews' (27.29), but the crown they give him is made of thorns, and his throne is a cross. At that moment, instead of a bright star, there will be an unearthly darkness (27.45), out of which we shall hear a single Gentile voice: yes, he really was God's son (27.54).

Listen to the whole story, Matthew is saying. Think about what it meant for Jesus to be the true king of the Jews. And then — come to him, by whatever route you can, and with the best gifts you can find.

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**About the author:** N.T. Wright is Bishop of Durham (Church of England) and was formerly Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. A graduate of Oxford University, he previously taught at Cambridge, McGill, and Oxford Universities. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), and *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (2003) are the first three volumes of his projected six-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (SPCK/ Fortress Press). Among his many other published works are *The Original Jesus* (1996), *What Saint Paul Really Said* (1997), and *The Climax of the Covenant* (1992). He is the author of the For Everyone commentary series.

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## **Small Group Questions**

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### **Accountability**

Divine Living - Are you building an interactive relationship with God? In your private prayer and devotional time, what are you learning or experiencing? How are you Knowing Christ in worship? Are you reaching your group and individual goals in this area?

### **Open / Scripture**

1. Share what you know of the story of the three wise men who visited Christ. Does anything stand out to you as surprising?

### **Observation**

1. When are we told that the wise men from the East came to see the Christ? (Mat 2:1)
2. Once they arrived in the land, what was their question and what was their intention? (Mat 2:2)
3. What was the response of King Herod, and all of Jerusalem? Why would you think they would have this reaction?
4. What does Herod do next? (Mat 2:4-5) What might asking this question indicate about Herod's life of faith? Was he longing for the Jewish aspirations for the coming Messiah?
5. What was the answer that the Priests and Scribes give Herod? Read Micah 5:2-4 in light of their answer to Herod.
6. What does Herod do next and what information does he get from them. (Mat 2:7) Read ahead to Mat 2:16. What did the Wise men tell Herod as to when they first saw the star? From this, how old might have Jesus been?

7. After leaving Herod, the Wise men see the star again. Does the behavior of this star seem ordinary to you? In light of Deacon Chris' sermon on the Olivet Discourse, What might a star symbolize and what significance would it have by it resting above Jesus?
8. What type of place were Mary and Joseph living in when the wise men arrived? (Mat 2:11) What did the wise men do when they saw Jesus? Contrast this with Revelation 4:6-11; and 5:6-10. What similarities are there between the actions of the wise men and the 24 elders?
9. What do the wise men do after throwing themselves in front of the Child and worshiping them? What do they open? (Mat 2:11) What do they give the Child? Would you give these items to your children? What might they symbolize?
10. Who warns the wise men to not return to Herod? Who is the main character in this story?

### **Apply**

1. Imagine yourself as the original audience of Matthew's gospel, which was written to a primarily Jewish audience. Would it seem strange to you that gentiles from the east would come to worship the Christ, yet the "religiously" Jewish king would completely miss it and be threatened by the child? Why wasn't Herod ready to celebrate the birth of the King? What might be degrading our ability to recognize the presence of the King as Herod did? This week, let us pray that God would enable us to see our blinders as we can see Herod's.
2. The Wise men brought gifts for this most important King. Imagine yourself in their shoes. What would you bring from what you have for this King? Would you bring something of great value? What would it mean for you today to bring the King your best as a gift?
3. What relation might our vision and comprehension of Christ have to our ability and passion to offer our very best to him in worship? What gift can you give to Jesus that would demonstrate love and worship? Read and mediate on John 14:15-17 and John 15:9-13. This week let us pray that the Holy Spirit would present us with opportunities to demonstrate "cross shaped" love to those around us. Not as a means neither of making us feel "good," nor for the reason alone of making someone else feel loved or blessed, but primarily for purpose of bringing Jesus a gift!