

“Star Trek”

Introduction: Before we pack up our manger scene and begin putting away our Christmas decorations, we want to consider those who arrived relatively late to the party, those known as the kings, magi, or wise men. We certainly always picture these fellows arriving while Jesus was still in the manger and the shepherds were still in town. But in reality, as Matthew begins to tell their story, nearly two years had passed since the birth of Jesus and the holy family had moved out of the barn or cave where Jesus had been born and were living in more permanent housing (v. 11). Further, these fellows weren’t kings, as our well-loved carol declares them to be, but astrologers and astronomers (which is what the word Magi designates) who studied the stars and the planets. Finally, just because there were three gifts doesn’t mean that there were three men; often these fellows traveled in caravans of twelve.

Nevertheless, the arrival of the magi, whenever they came and however many there were, was significant. Their arrival, celebrated by the church on 1/6, launches the season in the church year known as Epiphany, a time when the uniqueness of Jesus, the light of the world, begins to be revealed. It is also an arrival which set off religious and political explosions. Who really is the king of the Jews? Who actually are his people? Jesus, the arrival of the magi begins to emphasize, is a gift for all, but, sadly, one that is not embraced by all. The varying responses of the magi, king Herod, and the religious leaders, are helpful to ponder. Listen for each as we hear the text together.

I. Searching and Worshipping

A. So what were the wise men searching for as they gazed at the night sky? Given the lack of devices with screens and streets with lights, the ancient world had developed the study of the stars and planets to a fine art. They believed that the whole world was of one, interrelated piece, so that when something important was happening on earth, you could see it reflected in the sky. Conversely, a remarkable event among the planets and stars must mean, they thought, that a remarkable event had taken place on earth. Also, because after the exile to Babylon some communities of Jews did not return to the Promised Land, these Gentile men would have been exposed to the Jewish scriptures which actually discussed a star as a part of their Messianic expectations: “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17). Putting this together with a remarkable event witnessed in the night sky—possibly a supernova, the coming together of Jupiter and Saturn, or even an angelic presence—could easily have led these scholars to conclude that something big was taking place in Judea, that a new age was beginning. As Jerusalem was its capital, it’s natural they would have headed there first. Once there, they were redirected to Bethlehem.

B. Now, it’s difficult to know what was going on in the hearts of these Magi. Were they just curious, or was there more? On the one hand, from our perspective, we can look back at OT passages which highlight leaders of Gentile nations presenting gifts to the king of Israel (e.g., Ps. 72:10-11; Isa. 60:5-6, 11), and we can try to link the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the roles that Jesus took on as king, priest, and sacrifice, but that’s probably far more than these fellows understood at that moment. On the other hand, as the trip would have been around 900 miles, and they did it by camel, it would seem that they were driven by more than mere curiosity! That’s the distance from here to NC, and I don’t even like doing it in a car! Perhaps, at the very least, the Magi were no longer satisfied with worshipping the stars; they were searching for the one who had created them.

C. What's significant is that they were willing to explore, ask questions, have their worldview challenged, and bow before the truth when they found it, as imperfect as it might have been. Ultimately, their worship began to fulfil the promise that although Jesus would be known as the king of the Jews (he had come to assume the throne of David, forever), his kingdom would not be limited to Jews. Isaiah sums up nicely the universal reach and mission of this new king: "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isa. 60:3). The Magi represented this coming.

II. Searching and Destroying

A. As opposed to searching and worshipping, Herod was intent on searching and destroying. When the religious leaders redirected the magi to Bethlehem, Herod tried to make like he wanted to find and worship this new king, too. Of course, those were not his intentions. He was a brutal bully, appointed to rule in Judea by the Roman Empire. While his reign began with some helpful building projects and the offering of relief in a time of famine, toward the end of his life he became overwhelmed by jealousy and insecurity. Such resulted in his elimination of any suspected rival to his throne, putting to death three of his sons, his mother-in-law, and his wife. He then had 70 distinguished citizens arrested, leaving orders that they be killed upon his death so that at least some tears would be shed at his funeral. And Matthew 2 goes on to reveal, when Herod realized that the Magi were not going to report back to him, he had every boy child under the age of two put to death.

B. Sadly, Herod was surrounded by the best Scripture teachers there were, but he was not willing to have anything they taught inform his life. He refused to ask questions with an open mind. His lust for power, and willingness to do anything to hold on to it, overwhelmed his better qualities. The scriptures challenged his way of life. Better, he reasoned, to put this child to death than have to live under his authority.

III. Searching and Ignoring

A. In between the Magi and King Herod we find a third group, the religious leaders of the day. These fellows we could say were neither searching and worshipping, nor searching and destroying but searching and ignoring. They knew their Bibles. Drawing on their understanding of the prophets, they had no problem answering Herod's question as to where this long-anticipated king was expected to be born. But did they make any effort to go to Bethlehem to greet and celebrate him? They didn't lift a sandal! They knew it all but did nothing.

B. Why not? Most likely it's because they had so aligned themselves with Herod that if his power base was threatened, so would theirs have been. The consequences of crossing Herod were just too great; they risked losing their favored status. So, they refused to stand against the bully that was Herod and stand up for what was right. They chose to ignore the king who had come to reveal a different kind of self-sacrificing, other-oriented way of exercising power. It deepened and hardened as time went on.

What child is this, who, on Mary's lap is sleeping, but is sleeping no more? Who is the little one the Magi came to worship, but is a toddler no more? Let's make sure we don't simply box him up, along with the rest of our Christmas decorations, and forget about him until next year, but continue searching and growing in our understanding of him as the season of Epiphany unfolds: What has he come to give you? What might you want to give him?