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# LIFE BIBLE STUDY

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## SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 2:1-23

To learn how God speaks to the most unlikely people to accomplish His purposes.

### A Few Wise Guys

I remember in seminary, a professor had us read the poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (more commonly known as *The Night Before Christmas*). It wasn't the first time I had read it, in fact, far from it. It was an unusual exercise in a seminary classroom, but we had entered the month of December, and I reasoned that perhaps



there was some underlying Christmas related reason to it, and so I went along. We read the whole thing and afterwards he asked us one question: "What does Santa Clause look like?" Again, a strange question, but one we all took to and after a few minutes we began the discussion. What we found, from the poem, was that our idea of what Santa Clause looked like was, in fact, very different from how the poem described him. He is described as, "a little old driver so lively and quick," and, "He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot, And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot." He is even described as, "a right jolly old elf." He is tiny! No red suit! This is why he flies on a, "miniature sleigh and eight tiny rein-deer." My whole world was rocked! How had I missed it? I've read it so many times, and yet, I never noticed.

"I've read it so many times, and yet, I never noticed. The Bible can be that way for us too."

The Bible can be that way for us too, which is why slow, word by word study is such a beneficial practice for Christians. The story of the, “Three Kings,” is one that is often portrayed much differently than what the text actually indicates. Let’s jump in, and discover what those differences are.

## A Brief Summary of the Story

You will, of course, read this passage. But, so you have an overview of what you are looking forward to, this is how Matthew 2 unfolds. Jesus has just been born, and suddenly three men from the East come to Bethlehem, having followed a star that had mysteriously and suddenly risen into the night sky, and inquire with King Herod as to where the king of the Jews had been born. This strikes Herod rather badly, and he consults with all of the Jewish religious teachers and leaders regarding what these men could be talking about. Out of fear, he deceitfully asks the men to find the baby Jesus in order that he, “might come and worship him too” (2:8). In reality, this is a plot to destroy Him. The three men do as they are asked and find the boy, present gifts to Him, worship, and are filled with great joy (2:10-11). They are warned of Herod’s plan in a dream and travel a different way home. Meanwhile, Joseph is instructed by an angel of the Lord to take his wife Mary and son Jesus to Egypt, which shows a connection of Jesus to Moses (who also flees Egypt because of a crazed leader who disliked Jewish people), and thus fulfills the prophesy in Hosea 11:1 (2:13-15). Herod is furious, and he sends men to kill every male child under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas, but soon after, he dies. Joseph resolves to come home, but then he discovers Herod’s son is now in charge, and so rather than going back, he chooses to relocate his family to the district of Galilee in a city called Nazareth, fulfilling yet another OT prophesy from Psalm 22:6-13, Isaiah 53:2-3, Jeremiah 23:5, and Zechariah 3:8 (2:19-23).

## We Three Kings of Orient Aren’t

You’ve likely heard the song, and perhaps even sung it in church. “We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar...” It’s a classic Christmas carol written by John Henry Hopkins in 1857, chronicling the journey of the wise men in Matthew chapter 2. But, were they really kings? This is often posited by the presents they brought to Jesus, but this is by no means a convincing answer.

The term used in the Gospel account is the term, “magi,” (Gk. μάγοι), and it’s either a title, “the magi,” or means something like, “wise men.” They are, “from the east,” and likely Persian, although Arabia, Egypt, and Babylon are also possibilities. It is however most likely that they were Persian. Persia historically had a line of men that were astrologers and/or magicians (*magician* is actually a derivative of the word, “magi”). Studying the stars, they were consulted often on matters of politics and religion, and likely had significant prominence in their land. This makes a lot of sense given Matthew’s narrative, that they had seen a star that represented the Jewish Messiah. Judaism had clusters of popularity in all four of the aforementioned places, so it is not unreasonable that they would have had knowledge of the Jewish scriptures and messianic prophecies.

## Some Top Notch Presents

Grant Osborne frames this well in the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, “Down through the centuries all kinds of imaginative metaphorical meanings have been read into the gifts (e.g., gold for his royalty, frankincense for his divinity, myrrh for his suffering and death), but that is unlikely. First, they are the type of expensive gifts given to a future king — gold was as highly prized then as today; frankincense and myrrh (both resinous gums taken from trees in Arabia) were fragrant spices used in the best perfumes.

Second, they reflect OT precedent; in fact, there is a fulfillment sense in these passages (see Ps 72:10–11, 15, in which “all kings” fall down in homage and give gifts [gold] to the king; Isa 60:3–6, where the nations rejoice and bring their riches [gold and frankincense]; and 1 Kgs 10:2, 10, where the Gentile Queen of Sheba gave gold, spices, and precious stones to Solomon, the son of David).”

Beyond this, similar visits of the Magi to royalty are found recorded in other Greco-Roman literature. This was not an uncommon practice amongst the Persian Magi. What makes this visit so unique is not those who are visiting, nor the way in which they visit, but *who* is being visited. The visit also seems to be a fulfillment of Numbers 24:17, which further heightens its significance.

## How Many Were There?

It is not likely that these men were actual kings as the Christmas carol portrays them, and even more shockingly, the text never indicates that there were actually *three* of them. Historically, the number ascribed to them dates back to the early Apostolic Father Origen (AD 185-254), and he did so because of the number of gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh). However, Matthew simply employs the plural form of, “magi,” but no other details are given.

## So What’s Their Significance?

The magi play a pretty enormous role, actually. In already the bulk of the first chapter, Matthew has set Jesus up to be a large representative of Israel (the Son of David, the Son of Abraham), and he has proven this by tracing His lineage to show He is in fact, a rightful heir to David’s throne. Matthew shows both typological fulfillment and theological depth to the virgin birth. Throughout Matthew’s Gospel we will see the Anointed King of Israel be rejected by Israel and eventually be put death. And yet, some foreign astronomers steeped in magic are the ones that rightly read and interpret the Jewish prophecies regarding His birth, and they respond by bringing gifts and worshipping Him. Matthew is setting the stage here for the readers that Jesus will be not only the King of the Jews, but the King of Kings.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Matthew 2:1-6. Write down all of the characters in this passage, and circle the ones that are not familiar to you. Do a quick a search online and write down what you find.
2. Read Matthew 2:6, and then read 2 Samuel 5:2, 1 Chronicles 11:2, and Ezekiel 34:11-16. What is the significance of Jesus’ birthplace?

### Day Two

1. Read Matthew 2:7-12. Summarize this passage in your own words. What parts of this stand out to you the most? Why?
2. How does verse 12 relate to verses 7 and 8? What does verse 12 indicate about Herod’s instruction to them?

### Day Three

1. Read Matthew 2:13-15. Now read Exodus 2:11-15. What are the similarities between Moses and Jesus? What are some of the differences?

2. Read Hosea 11:1. What is the context of this passage in Hosea? Write down, “Egypt,” “Israel/Son,” and, “I/God.” Now, do a side by side comparison of who these represent in Hosea and then in Matthew. What are the differences? Which are the same?

### Day Four

1. Read Matthew 2:16-23. Summarize this passage in your own words and write down anything that stood out to you as interesting or unique.
2. What is significant about Nazareth (hint: nothing)? Why is it important that Jesus came from a small, no-name town? Read 1 Corinthians 1:27-28. How does this passage tie to Jesus being called, “a Nazarene?”

## Week 4 Discussion: The Three Wise Men

There is so much to learn from the short and yet rich story of the magi from the East who came with gifts to worship Jesus when He was born. Their story is important for the testimony of the Gospel, which means it is important for us in the church today as well.

1. Another honest icebreaker: Did you ever notice that the text never says that the wise men were kings, nor does it indicate that there were three of them? Did this surprise you? Share with the group.
2. Matthew’s Gospel is very Jewish in that it connects itself to so many Old Testament passages, and yet, the ones who recognize Jesus for who He really is are Gentiles, and they do so because of their knowledge of the Old Testament. What does this say about our need today to know and understand God’s Word, but specifically the Old Testament? How well would you recognize Jewish prophecy based on your understanding of the Old Testament?
3. Read Matthew 2:13 and 19. There are two times in this passage where Joseph is communicated to by the angel of the Lord through a dream. Sometimes God impresses upon us actions we need to take while we are in the Word. Share with the group if this has happened, and how it turned out. Was there fruit from your obedience or consequences from your lack of obedience in following what God was saying?
4. What was the reason for God speaking in such a unique way to Joseph? What was at stake? What if Joseph had not been obedient to his dream?
5. Jesus ends up in a small, no-name town and yet, He is the King of Kings. As you read this week, “God uses the lowly to confound the wise” (1 Cor 1:28). How has God used you to do something you never dreamed you could do? Share with the group your experience.

## Takeaways:

1. The magi were not kings, nor were there definitely three of them (although there may have been, it just doesn’t say). They were likely Persian astronomers that had a good knowledge of the Old Testament and were seen as wise in the eyes of their contemporaries.
2. The magi’s response to Jesus foreshadows that Jesus is not merely a Jewish King, but the King of, “every tribe, every nation, and every tongue” (Rev 7:9).

### *PRAYER REQUESTS:*