

**“Where Do You Look for the King?”**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**  
**Epiphany of our Lord**  
**January 6, 2008**

*O star of wonder, star of light,  
star of royal beauty bright,  
westward leading, still proceeding,  
guide us to thy perfect light.*

Wise men from the East, students of the night sky, lovers of truth and beauty, pack their bags, leave their homes, and set out in search of a king. They follow a star, or perhaps it could be a comet. Whatever it may be, they wonder where will its light lead them? When their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh are finally offered in reverent tribute, in what part of the world will they find themselves? Descending from the Zagros Mountains and beginning their long journey through the Tigris Valley, the three discuss their destination.

“Surely it must be Rome,” mused one of the magi. “It is the heart of the mightiest empire of them all. Is there an emperor more powerful than Octavian? With his victories over Brutus and Antony he has no real rival. His legions are the strongest the world has ever known. And his capitol is surely the finest. I have heard stories of its splendor. The Baths of Agrippa, the Forum, the Palatine Palace, the Temples of Mars and Apollo—all such wonders! Why it is said that the Circus Maximus itself can hold as many as 250,000 for an afternoon at the chariot races. It is not just a cliché, my brothers; all roads really do lead to Rome. Where else would a king of this importance be born? Surely this is where this wondrous star is leading us.”

“Ah, my friend and trusted companion,” another magi replied, “power and wealth are not everything. Given certain geo-political realities, I suppose Rome does seem like the logical choice, but it seems to me that our destination must be that of Athens. For to rule in today’s world, one must be wise. And where else do you find wisdom than in the home of Socrates? Think of all the greatness that has come out of that city. Plato and

Aristotle were the veritable fathers of philosophy. Homer was perhaps the greatest author who ever lived. We ourselves use the mathematical theorems of Pythagoras. Euripides may prove to be one of the greatest playwrights of all time. And what of the ideas that have flowed from Athens? Democracy had its birth there. Alexander spread its culture far and wide. Why, even Rome uses its language for commerce. No, with all due respect, you cannot get around the fact that Athens is at the heart of all wisdom and knowledge. I have no doubts that it is where the star is leading.”

It was now the final magi’s turn to speak. “You both make some excellent points. As always I am astounded by your logic. You are, however, forgetting the sign. According to our nightly observations, this amazing astronomical event had its rising in the constellation Pisces, which is also known as the house of the Hebrews. He that will be born will be one that house calls ‘Messiah,’ the one who will come and lead Abraham’s children. And where else would you look for the leader of Abraham’s children than in the home of Abraham? True, Jerusalem is not as powerful as Rome or as wise as Athens, but the Hebrews are a very devout people and that city is the centerpiece of their ritual and piety. The Pharisees and Sadducees, their clerics, all pay homage to it. It is home to their chief priest and, most importantly, it is where Solomon and now Herod have built their temples. It is the hub of the Hebrew universe and the pious say that the creator of heaven and earth itself dwells in its Holy of Holies. That is why, on feast days, the population of Jerusalem swells. I have heard that during their Passover observance, on that day that is different from all the other days, some two million people will fill the city streets. No, if we are going to find the one who is to be born the King of the Jews, then the capitol of the Jews is where we must look. I have no doubt in my mind, my esteemed colleagues, that this is the place to which the star is leading.”

Rome. Athens. Jerusalem. Where else would one look for a king? These were the logical choices of the day, and they were perfectly reasonable selections given the dictates of conventional wisdom. Anyone with any knowledge at all would have made similar educated guesses. Power and wealth, wisdom and knowledge, ritual and tradition—these have always been essential qualities for leadership. Each is an attribute

that any king, queen, president, or general would do well to possess. So why not look to the centers of those attributes for help? Why not start the search of a lifetime there? Would any star or comet worth its celestial salt lead any place else? Where does one search for a king? Oh well, back to the story.

The third magi turned to his companions with a rather smug smile as they rode through the Damascus Gate and into the city of Jerusalem. So far the star had led them exactly to where he thought it would. That smile quickly faded, however, upon entering the throne room of Herod's palace. The reputation of the ruler of Judea had preceded him. While skilled in the game of international politics, his handling of domestic issues left much to be desired. A paranoid, jealous despot, he had murdered his wife, his son, and his two brothers-in-law the moment he felt they were even the slightest threat to his throne. Octavian's wisecrack about it being safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son was well founded, and one that would bring a smile to any of the traveler's lips at any other time. But not at this time. As they stood before the one who pompously called himself "the Great," they could tell that their rather innocent question about the whereabouts of the child born to be a king had sent the old man into an internal rage. Was this yet another plot? Was his throne threatened once more?

It was with a forced smile that Herod invited the three to be seated. After exchanging the required social pleasantries, they began to discuss their journey and the heavenly light they were following. Herod then called the scribes into the room, the students of the Hebrew scripture, and commanded them to search the sacred writings for an answer to the magi's question. At their reply, which came almost instantly, the mood of the king changed considerably. Bethlehem! The scribes stated that the prophet Micah had said that from Bethlehem would come one who is to rule in Israel, one whose origin is from old, one who would stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord. Yes, Herod knew of its historical connection to David, the shepherd boy turned king, but he also knew that in recent times it had become nothing more than an outpost for shepherds, an off-the-beaten-path, nothing-of-great-import, backwash of a wide-spot-in-the-road to which the urban sprawl of the more sophisticated Jerusalem had yet to reach. And yes,

Herod also knew that throughout the world there was a general feeling of expectation that the time was never riper for the coming of that one great king that would set everything right. Yet Herod had handled pretenders before. A sharp sword could make quick work of almost any promise, no matter how long or how tightly it had been held. A slight, but noticeable grin turned the corner of Herod's lips. The king sent the magi on with his thanks and their promise to return to him and report everything they had found. Something about the way the old king made that request made the magi uneasy, but they set out on the short six-mile journey to the village anyway. Would this finally be the end to their searching? The star went before them.

Before we go on, perhaps we should pause and give some consideration to what we have heard up to this point. There are some who wonder if the story of the magi ever really happened. There are those who say that this story falls outside the criteria for historicity that is so crucial for serious scholarship. Specifically, it does not meet the criterion of multiple attestation—the idea that a story can be found in more than one contemporary literary form or genre in order for it to be considered historically verifiable. And according to that dictate that conclusion is probably true, since the gospel of Matthew is the only place we find this story. There are no other primary sources that tell of this incident. Songs in the hymnal don't count!

But even if it may not have actually happened in this way or was not recorded in more than one source; stories don't always have to be historically accurate in order for them to be true. This story, just like all gospel stories, was never written to simply give us an objective account of what occurred at a specific time and place in history. Since the magi fall into the category of people the Bible calls "gentiles," the same category into which we fall, then their story is probably what Jewish scholars call a "midrash," a story about others that is really a story about us. It is a story about the search for a king that Jew and Gentile alike must make. And like most searches, the nature of the journey is often just as important as its destination. As a matter of fact, some will argue that how one begins the journey is just as important as where one ends it. What presuppositions does one already have set in place when that first step is ready to be taken? What

assumptions has one already made as one sets out down the road? If one believes, for instance, that true power must only be sought in the halls of government, then more often than not the true power one seeks will usually be discovered in the halls of government. If one believes that it is in the corporate boardrooms of the world where true leaders are formed, then more than likely one's true leader will be found in the corporate boardrooms of the world. The same can be said if it is believed that one's search must begin in the classrooms of academia, the parade grounds of the military, or the laboratories of modern science. The presumptions one makes as the journey is undertaken, you see, usually have a huge influence on that place at which the journey will end.

Yet whether it is historically accurate or not, the story of the magi show us a very different way to travel. While they all had their ideas as to where the star may lead them, they did not let those ideas set their course of their journey. Rather, they let the light of the star do the leading. And the gospel of Matthew makes it very clear that when everything was said and done, everyone was very surprised where this particular king was finally found. This king, as you know, was not found in those places that most expected him to be. The same is true today. If you set out on a journey to search for the same king for whom the magi sought, and you allow the light from above to lead you, your journey will not direct you to the centers of power or might. Your journey will not take you to the halls of government, the laboratories of science, or the battlefields of war. Your journey will not end in the markets of commerce or the centers of industry. Rather, if you search for this king, you will be led through soup kitchens and community centers of the inner city, into refugee camps and field hospitals on the edges of great conflict, to prisons, hospitals, ghettos, nursing homes and all of those other places where justice, mercy, and peace are in very short supply. To find this king you will have to leave the powerful city of Rome, the knowledgeable city of Athens, and even the most holy city of Jerusalem. For just as the light of the star led the magi elsewhere, so it will lead us. And it is to their story that we now return.

When the star had finally stopped over insignificant village of Bethlehem, the magi entered the simple house and were amazed at the sheer ordinariness of it all.

Nothing fancy. No false pretense. Not a thing that would make one suspect that they were about to enter the presence of a king. It was in a simple chair of a village carpenter that the travelers first saw the child resting comfortably in his young mother's lap. He seemed to be so like every other child they had ever seen, and yet somehow he was so very different from every other child they had seen. As they drew near to him, they began to notice that something was happening to them, something that seemed to be occurring deep down inside. They came closer. Never had they known so much joy. Never had they felt such so much hope. Never had they experienced so much peace. A peaceful warmth began to build from within. It was almost as if the ice of a hundred winters was melting from their heart. The magi took out their gifts and laid their gold, frankincense and myrrh at the feet of this young child. Then those wise men fell upon their knees and began to worship the king. Their king. In that little town of Bethlehem.