

We Three Kings

When Christmas starts to draw near it's common for people to erect Nativity scenes. These can be seen everywhere – in churches, in people's yards, in malls and stores, and on Christmas cards. A common feature of a Nativity scene is the presence of three Oriental kings that are standing next to a manger, accompanied by a host of shepherds and animals. However, how much of that picture is actually real? Were there really three wise men and did they really visit the manger on the night Christ was born?

One interesting fact is that only Matthew mentions the wise men. The books of Mark and John do not mention the birth of Christ at all. Luke has a detailed account of Christ's birth but he does not mention anything about a visit by wise men. Luke mentions the angelic announcement and the visit by shepherds, but no wise men were said to have made an appearance that night.

The only account of the wise men in the entire Bible is found in Matthew chapter 2. Since this is a fairly lengthy passage I'll break up the chapter with occasional bits of explanation.

Matthew 2:1: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,
2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.”

Here we see that the wise men came “from the east” (verse 1). However, these wise men didn't go to Bethlehem but to Jerusalem. Right away we can see that it's highly unlikely that they made it to the manger on the night Jesus was born. In order for that to have happened they would have had to travel from “the east” to Jerusalem, met with Herod, got directions, and then traveled to Bethlehem – all in the space of a few hours and without the benefit of modern transportation! That doesn't seem very likely (and it will become even more unlikely when we read the rest of the chapter).

A few other important points: note that the chapter doesn't mention how many wise men there were. There could have been two, or three, or even nine; we're just not told. Also notice that the passage does not give their names or their origin. All we know is that they were “from the east” and were motivated by the appearance of a star. The star told them that the King of the Jews had been born, and the wise men had come to worship him.

The story continues:

Matthew 2:3: “When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.”

This is actually a surprising passage: even though the Messiah had been born, the news of this momentous event had not reached Herod or the religious leaders of the day! Apparently they did not hear the announcement that had been made by the angels – or if they did they ignored it. The Messiah had been born and the chief priests missed it completely. They had to be brought up-to-date by *Gentiles* from a distant country!

Another amazing thing is that Herod knew exactly what question to ask. He knew that the wise men were seeking the Messiah and he wanted to know where the Messiah was supposed to be born. The priests told him about Micah 5:2, which prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. What happens next is astonishing:

Matthew 2:7: “Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently **what time** the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.”

Herod wanted to know when the wise men had first seen the star – which implies that quite a bit of time had elapsed since then. (Later on we'll be given a hint as to just how much time had passed.) After finding out this key bit of knowledge he sent the wise men to Bethlehem and told them to find the Messiah and then let him know where he was.

What surprises me about this is what *didn't* happen. Notice that the chief priests and scribes did not say “The Messiah has been born! This is amazing news! We must go find him at once!” The wise men went to Bethlehem *alone* – no priests or scribes went with them. As far as I can tell the religious leaders of Israel were completely *uninterested* that the Messiah had been born. We know that the whole city knew what was going on because verse 3 tells us that *all of Jerusalem* was “troubled” by the news. Even that is quite astonishing: the people were not happy, or excited, or in awe: no, they were “troubled.” The news that the long-awaited Messiah had been born *troubled* them.

The Messiah had been born, and not only did the priests miss it, but after finding out that they had missed it they had no interest in tracking Him down.

The story continues:

Matthew 2:9: “When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshiped him; and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.”

After the wise men left Herod they once again saw the famous star, which they followed straight to Jesus. They then worshiped Him, gave their gifts, and departed. However, God warned them in a dream to not go back to Herod, so they slipped out of the country and returned home. (As a side-note, notice that the passage does *not* say that the wise men found the child in Bethlehem. We're actually not told where Jesus was living when He was visited by the wise men.)

Some would argue that since three gifts were given there must have been three wise men. However, the passage doesn't actually say this. It's entirely possible that an unknown number of wise men pooled their resources, obtain gifts, and presented them jointly. For all we know *all* of the wise men could have given gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The passage just does not say.

What amazes me is the striking contrast between the wise men and the religious leaders. The wise men – who were clearly foreigners from a distant country – not only recognized the birth of Christ but traveled from a distant land so they could worship Him and bring Him gifts. By contrast, the chief

priests not only missed the birth of Christ but they couldn't even be bothered to go see Him! On top of that, the gifts brought by the wise men showed tremendous insight into the person and work of Christ: they brought gold, which is a gift for a king; frankincense, which is an offering for a God; and myrrh, which quite possibly looked toward the Messiah's crucifixion and death. The wise men were looking for the Messiah, they loved Him, they worshiped Him as King, and they seemed to know why He came.

Herod had a very different action: he wanted to kill the Messiah.

Matthew 2:16: “Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.”

Since the wise men didn't tell Herod where Jesus was, Herod decided to simply kill everyone in the area who was two years old or younger. Since this was “according to the time” that the wise men had told him, that implies that the star had first appeared about two years earlier. If it took the wise men two years to get to Israel then they were clearly not present the night of Christ's birth!

Now it's true that the chief priests aren't mentioned in verse 16. Herod apparently acted alone in attempting to kill the Messiah. However, we *also* don't see the chief priests intervening to attempt to save the Messiah's life – and, ultimately, the chief priests did succeed in having Him crucified. There is no indication that they were upset at Herod's attempt to murder their long-awaited Messiah.

In summary, we can see from these verses that the Bible simply does not say how many wise men there were, or where they were from, or what their names were. We can also see that the wise men were *not* present the night of Christ's birth but instead came by several years later. Finally – and most importantly – we can see that the wise men noticed the birth of the Messiah and came to worship Him, while the religious leaders of the day missed it entirely.