

§10: THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN

Matt. 2:1–12

Wise Men Arrive in Jerusalem

2:1–2

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,
2 saying: Where is the One born King of the Jews?
For we saw His star in the east, and we have come to worship Him.

Herod's Inquiry

2:3–4

3 And when Herod the king heard, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.
4 And when he had gathered together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he was inquiring of them where the Christ was to be born.

The Christ to be Born in Bethlehem

2:5–6

5 And they said to him: In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written through the prophet:
6 And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;
for out of you shall come forth a leader,
who will shepherd my people Israel.

Herod Sends the Wise Men to Bethlehem

2:7–8

7 Then Herod secretly called the wise men, and ascertained exactly from them the time of the appearing star,
8 and he sent them to Bethlehem, and said:
Go and inquire carefully about the Child;
and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.

The Wise Men Find Jesus

2:9–11

9 And having heard the king, they went; and behold, the star which they had seen in the east was going on before them until it came and stood over where the Child was.
10 And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.
11 And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshipped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh.

The Wise Men Return Home Without Reporting to Herod

2:12

12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way.

Notes

1. **Wise men (Mt. 2:1ff.).** Often translated directly from the Greek as “magi” (pronounced may-jye, singular: magus, compare our word “magic”). These were perhaps astrologers. They came from the “east” which could mean Arabia, Mesopotamia, or somewhere else in that general area. According to later traditions there were three of them (corresponding to the three gifts), they were kings (as one interpreted Isa. 60:3), and their names were Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.
2. **His star (Mt. 2:2,7,9,10).** It is not known if there is a natural astronomical explanation for this star, and if so, what it is. The idea of a “star” is connected with Messianic prophecy in Num. 24:17.
3. On the chronology of the events in §§8–10, note that when the shepherds come to see the newborn Jesus, they find Him “in a manger.” (Lk. 2:16). The wise men come “into the house” (Mt. 2:11). The visit of the wise men took place most likely after the visit of the shepherds and after Joseph and Mary returned to Bethlehem from the presentation and purification in Jerusalem. All of the things said about the infant Jesus in the temple would surely have alarmed King Herod who was waiting for some report about Jesus. It would not make sense for the wise men to have to return home secretly, but for the parents of Jesus to show up quite openly in Jerusalem. Thus, the traditional “Christmas scene” of the shepherds and wise men together around Jesus’ manger is based on tradition, not on the history as presented in our Gospels. The relative chronology of these events is given as follows:

Day 1: Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (in a stable, Bethlehem)
Day 1: Visit of the Shepherds (Bethlehem)
Day 8: Circumcision and Naming of Jesus (Bethlehem)
Day 41: Presentation and Purification in the Temple (Jerusalem)
Later: Joseph and Mary Return to Bethlehem (to a “house”)
Later: Visit of the Wise Men (Bethlehem)