

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Matthew 2:1-12

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Years A, B, and C - Epiphany, Text: Matthew 2:1-12
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Only Matthew records the visit of the wise men from the east (2:1–12). They come to Jerusalem looking for a child born king of the Jews and spoke of having observed a star at its rising; note Numbers 25:15–19, and the reference to “star” and “scepter” in v. 17. They consult with Herod the Great. He, in turn, consults the city’s chief priests and scribes who tell him that the expected Jewish Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, quoting Micah 5:2.

Bethlehem is about five miles south of Jerusalem. David was born there (1 Samuel 17:12) and his great-grandmother Ruth lived there (Ruth 1:19; 4:11). Micah prophesied that the fortunes of Judah would be renewed through a ruler born in Bethlehem of the house of David (Micah 5:2). In Jesus’ day, it possibly had a population of about 150 to 200 people.

When the wise men resume their journey after meeting with King Herod, the star that they had seen at its rising reappeared and led them to Bethlehem, and hovering over the house where Jesus was staying. The Wise Men entered the house and presented Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

As the 10th century monk, Aelfric, wrote:

Gold befits a king; frankincense belongs to the service of God; with myrrh they treat the bodies of dead men so that their bodies decay less rapidly. The gold signified that He is a true king, the frankincense that He is true God, the myrrh that He was then mortal; but now He remains immortal in eternity.

Eventually the wise men leave for their own country. Although Herod had asked them to inform him of the child’s whereabouts, they do not do this — having been warned by an angel in a dream not to honor Herod’s request. Even the Gentile foreigners received a visitation by God’s messenger.

Assumptions of Tradition

As with the story of Jesus birth in Luke, the story of the Wise Men’s visit in Matthew has been embellished over the years with details not mentioned in Scripture.

- *Tradition* says that the wise men were three in number; after all, there were three gifts.
- *Tradition* assigned them names: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.
- *Tradition* says that they rode camels.
- *Tradition* often calls them “kings.”

But these notions remain, at best, folk traditions, added to visualize the story in the popular imagination. There might have been four or more wise men, and they might have traveled by donkey, camel, or on foot.

Regarding the Magi:

The Greek word from which the term *magi* is derived (usually translated as “wise men”) refers to a wide variety of people, including fortune-tellers, priestly augurs, astrologers, and magicians. Some suggest that the wise men came from Babylonia, or Persia, where the word *magus* originated. A strong tradition suggests they came from present-day Jordan and that they were astrologers.

There is good reason to believe that the *magi* were Gentiles, for if they had been Jews, they would have known better than to ask King Herod about the birth of a national ruler who might challenge his dynasty. Matthew does not tell us why they wanted to pay homage to a Jewish king or what they learned about Him from their observations of “his star” (Matthew 2:2).

Some astonishing things are beginning to emerge. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the first to visit Him were those viewed as outcasts by the nation’s religious leaders. The next to visit Him were Gentiles.

This is all the more remarkable when it is remembered

that at that time, there were those in Israel who despised the Gentiles and referred to them as “spittle” (2 Esdras 6:55–56, an Apocryphal writing). There were those in Israel who detested the Edomites and Philistines, and referred to the Samaritans as “foolish people” (Sirach 50:25–2, Apocrypha). There were those in Israel who longed for God to pour out His vengeance on the Gentiles (Isaiah 61:2). There were also those who hoped that one day the treasures of the Gentiles would be brought into their land to become theirs (Isaiah 61:6).

In the midst of all this, Matthew tells us that some of the wise among the Gentiles willingly brought their treasures to the Christ Child. It would seem that God was fulfilling His people’s dreams in *a radical way* — *in His way!*