

There's nothing that keeps you on the edge of your seat like a good mystery--learning the characters, investigating the details, cracking the case. The mystery genre of literature and film has captivated generations of readers and viewers with classic series like *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* all the way to the recent resurgence of mysteries found in the many "True Crime" podcasts. Now everyone can be a detective trying to get to the bottom of a mystery. If you fancy yourself a mystery buff, I think you'll see the intrigue of text we have before us today, because as I studied, I couldn't help feeling like I was investigating and unraveling a mystery.

You see, the story of the Magi from the East has so many mysteries both great and small, like "who were these Magi?" and "what did the star look like?". We'll spend a bit of time considering those questions as we go, yet in all those curious questions and mysteries we must not let ourselves wonder too far from the one wondrous mysterious at the center of it all. As our new hymn invited us, *Come, Behold the Wondrous Mystery!* But wait, we can't get too far ahead of ourselves. Let's take the story as it comes.

The gospel writer Matthew records, "**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod...**" (Matthew 2:1). If we pause right there, we find our first mystery. History has given this particular king the title Herod the Great because of his great building projects. He rebuilt the glorious temple in Jerusalem. He built an amazing palace on Masada and a harbor at Caesarea that is still an engineering wonder.

But how he retains the title "Great" when you remember the other things he did is a true mystery. He murdered or executed most of his own family, even his sons, suspecting that they were plotting against his throne. He ordered the slaughter of all the innocent children two and under in Bethlehem after he heard about the birth of Jesus. When he was about to die, he also ordered the execution of prominent officials so that there wouldn't be any rejoicing in Jerusalem at his death. Though remembered as the Great, he was the epitome of sin and greed and power left unchecked.

It was during his tyrannical reign that "**Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.**" (2:1) Here we encounter another mystery. Just who were these men, the Magi from the east or the wisemen as they are often called? Many of the things we think we know about them come not from Matthew's account but from traditions or songs like "We Three Kings of Orient Are." This famous Christmas Carol speculates that there were **three** wisemen, one for each gift. The title also suggests that they were kings, and some tradition has even given them names, *Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar*. Cool names, but none of that comes from Matthew's Gospel.

What we do know about the Magi is that they were part of a group of foreign religious men fascinated with astronomy and astrology and interpreting omens. They were likely the remnants of the Magi or magicians from either Babylon or the Medes and Persians that were mentioned already back at the time of Daniel, the one who got thrown in the lions' den. Way back then, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and "summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed," but they couldn't do it.

Now another mystery in this is the question of how and why these mysterious Magi were watching for the star and knew that it meant the king of the Jews had been born. After all, these men were Gentiles not Jews. They were foreigners to the covenants and promises and laws and prophecies of God. On top of it, they were part of a group devoted to astrology, trying to find hidden meanings and omens in the stars, the kind of thing that God's Old Testament laws had forbidden.

How they were able to ascertain that the star meant the king of the Jews was born and that they should go worship him is a mystery we can't necessarily solve. But we might make two

Biblical inferences, educated guesses. Daniel had been put in charge of all the magi and wisemen of Babylon back in his time. We know what a faithful believer he was, even willing to be thrown into the lions' den for his faith. It may have been the faith and testimony he left behind that taught these men to expect the coming Savior.

Another clue we get comes from way back in the history of Israel when King Balak tried to bribe the false prophet Balaam into putting a curse on the people of Israel. That's a story you may have never heard, or you may have to really dig it out of the Sunday School archives in your brain. As it turned out, God wouldn't let Balaam curse Israel, instead he made him bless Israel. God ended up making Balaam the false prophet into a real prophet for a day because this is what he said, **"A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."** (Numbers 24:17). It sure seems like this could be the reason the Magi, who were of the same kind of superstitious religious background as Balaam, were waiting for the star and for a king to come out of Israel. That's the reason they pack up their camels and gifts and travel far and wide to Jerusalem, the capital city to ask, **"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."**

That brings us to our next curious mystery. What on earth kind of star was this? This is the object of all kinds of speculation about planets aligning in some unique fashion to look like a new star. I don't know about all that, but the Magi were astronomers and they called it a star. Now you have to remember that stars themselves usually don't rise, in the same way that the Sun doesn't rise. Instead, the earth is turning so that it looks like the sun and stars are rising or setting. But who knows, maybe this star did rise up into the sky in some unnatural way. In any case, it seems to appear at God's command out of thin air to mark this sacred time in history, to fulfill Balaam's prophecy and to be a beacon to lead the Magi to Christ.

It's kind of ironic, isn't it? The gentile Magi are the ones who come to Jerusalem and announce the king has been born. The Gentiles are the ones in the loop. They come to ask to the Jews, God's chosen people, the people who had been waiting for centuries for the Shoot from the Root of Jesse, for the ruler whose origins are from of old, from ancient times, for the king to sit on David's throne, if they've seen him yet. When the Magi ask their mysterious question, "Hey did you guys see the king of the Jews yet? We saw by the star that he was born," the Jews were first oblivious and then they were afraid. **"When King Herod (not actually a Jew by the way, but was king of the Jews at the time) heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."** (Matthew 2:3)

Now Herod we already said was completely evil, so no big surprise there, but all of Jerusalem with him? Disturbed by the birth of the Messiah!?!? Disturbed by good news of great joy that will be for all the people? What happened to these people? How could they be disturbed by the coming of the Messiah, their long-awaited king? So Herod calls together the chief priests and teachers of the law to answer the Magi's question, "Where would he be born?". They even still knew what the prophet Micah foretold about him, that he would be born in Bethlehem, and he would be the ruler to shepherd the people of Israel. But beyond their initial fear, it didn't seem to mean anything to them. None of them went with the Magi to worship! What a response to the birth of the Savior: fear and then apathy!

So we see how true the Apostle John's words are, **"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood it...He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."**

How they got to that point is but a simple mystery to crack, a mystery explained by what sin does to the heart. Sin at its essence is unbelief, a darkness intent on choking out the light of life and truth and grace. It's a darkness that now lives within our very nature, though not created that way originally. This darkness is an intruder bent on destruction, and we see it's terrible effects in the world. I just listened to a true crime podcast about two grandmothers named Helen and Olga who were taking out life insurance policies on homeless men and then running them over with their cars so they could collect! Almost sounds as bad as Herod. It's easy to shine the spotlight out there, but what about when we shine it in here? What do we find? Apathy, sheer boredom, and carelessness about what the Word says to us? Or a relentless appetite for power and approval and to retain control above all else. It's a sad reality that we have far more in common with Herod the abominable and with the ignorant and apathetic chief priests than we do with the innocent babe of Bethlehem. All of mankind is united in this darkness of sin and unbelief.

And this is the darkness into which the light of life enters for all. This is the wondrous mystery of mysteries we simply must behold. Enough with our silly curiosity about stars and wisemen. *"Come, Behold the Wondrous Mystery,"* says our hymn writer, *"in the dawning of the King, he the theme of heaven's praises, robed in frail humanity. In our longing, in our darkness, now the light of life has come. Look to Christ who condescended, took on flesh to ransom us."* (CW 21: 535 *Come, Behold the Wondrous Mystery.* Matt Boswell, Matt Papa, and Michael Bleeker).

God must send light to call us out of darkness and he does not hold back. He unleashes it. He sends **"the true light that gives light to everyone"** (John 1:9) into the world, not just for the Jews, but the Gentiles as well, for all people. And on this special occasion called Epiphany, the Greek word which means "to appear or to reveal" God once again makes the special light in the sky appear to guide those gentile Magi out of darkness to the Light of the world. **"The star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, (the text literally says) they rejoiced greatly a great joy."** (Matthew 2:9,10) So the angel's words on Christmas Eve were true, **"good news of great joy for all the people"**.

"On coming to the house (not stable) they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh." (Matthew 2:11). These were gifts fit for a king, the best they could offer in thanks for the king they had received, the light that gives the light of life in a world of darkness. So the Apostle John's words also ring true, **"His own did not receive him, yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."**

Come, behold the wondrous mystery uncovered for the Magi that day. Behold the sight they would have seen with their eyes: the King of Kings born in tiny Bethlehem to poor parents no less; a vulnerable baby who could well be slaughtered by Herod's bloodthirsty scheme; the light of the world wrapped in frail humanity. They beheld with their eyes and however unbelievable it may have been, they believed in their hearts, and they bowed down and worshiped their tiny king. The light **"called them out of darkness into his wonderful light"** (1 Peter 2:9) and these foreign astrologers became children of God.

The True Light has done the same for Gentile sinners just like you and me. The Apostle Paul explains for us the glorious unraveling of this mystery. **"This mystery is that through the**

gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 3:6). That's the mystery of Epiphany uncovered: Jesus, the light for all people. May the true light guide us ever to himself, to bow in humble worship all our days. May it drive out the darkness of our sin. And finally, may we reflect his light so that others may share our joy in him. Amen.

Now wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. (Ephesians 5:14)