

Do You See What I See?
By Rev. Vernon Schindler

(Study Guide)

One of the problems that confront us in the account of Jesus' birth, and in this study, is that it is so familiar we do not carefully read Matthew (and Luke's) account, but merely skim over them. Many of our cherished associations with the visit of the Wise Men are only conjecture. The opening exercise involves the group in separating Biblical fact from cherished tradition. Allow the group individually to mark either "yes" or "no" to each statement, based on Matthew's account. Then allow the group to share why they answered as they did. It is interesting that none of the statements can be answered with a "yes" on the basis of Matthew's account in the Bible.

This doesn't mean that we have to do away with our traditional Christmas pageants and the well-known carols. It does remind us, however, to guard against the common practice of thinking the Scriptures say something that they really do not say. Let's look at Matthew 2:1-12 and see what is said.

Below are each of the statements in the study and some additional notes.

1. There were three wise men.

Tradition suggests there were three wise men since they brought three gifts. They were almost certainly not kings. Isaiah 60:3 (you may wish to have the group read this verse) may have given rise in song to calling them kings.

The "magi," as Matthew calls them (using the same word from which we get "magic"), were probably what would now be termed as astrologers. It should be noted, too, that Matthew does not give them names.

2. The wise men were rich.

They may have been wealthy, as the gifts they brought would have been costly; but Matthew does not describe them as being rich.

A word about the gifts: They have been made to symbolize all sorts of things. What is certain is that they were worthy of a king, each very precious. The holy family may have used them to finance their exile into Egypt. Frankincense and myrrh were used extensively in religious rites, one as an incense, the other as a salve or ointment. Their worship cost the wise men a great deal in time and funds.

3. They came on camels.

Camels commonly were used in caravans to transport goods in Jesus' time. Their inclusion with crèches seems to draw on the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecy (60:1-6) has historically been one of the readings on the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6th). (You may wish to have the group read these

verses.) In describing the manifestation of God's redeeming glory in Christ, Isaiah foretold (verse 6): "Herds of camels will cover your land ... bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord."

4. and 5. They traveled by day/by night.

Matthew reports "and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was" (verse 9). This implies that it had disappeared during their journey; but it does not answer with certainty that they traveled either by day or by night.

6. Herod wanted to worship the Messiah.

Herod "found out from [the wise men] the exact time the star had appeared" (verse 7). This would be important to enable him to estimate the age of the newborn king." Very piously he stated "so that I too may go and worship him" (verse 8). Murder, however, was in his heart as demonstrated by his actions in ordering the murder of all boys, two and under, in Bethlehem and its vicinity (verse 16).

7. The wise men wanted to see the king of the Jews, who was just born.

Since they were looking for the "king of the Jews," the wise men naturally headed for Jerusalem, the Jewish capital. Since travel was not as fast nor as convenient as it is for us today, it would have taken them some time to prepare for and then make the journey to Jerusalem. Assuming that Herod would allow himself a large margin of error, when he inquired as to the exact time the star first appeared, Jesus was not "newly born" when the Magi arrived.

8. The wise men came immediately after the shepherds left.

The visit of the wise men did not coincide with the shepherd's visit. They came some months later, for Jesus was no longer in a "stable" but in a "house" (verse 11).

9. The wise men found Jesus in the stable.

Matthew specifically says, "on coming into the house, they saw the child" (verse 11).

10. Joseph was with the child and his mother Mary.

The focus is on Jesus. He is mentioned first (which is always the case when he is named with his mother, Mary); and while he may have been present, Joseph is not mentioned.

11. and 12. The star was a planet/a comet.

What was the "star" (the word can mean any heavenly phenomenon) that started the wise men on their journey (verse 2) and which may not have been seen again until they were on their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (verse 9)? It was almost certainly not some spectacular object, such as a comet or super nova,

because Herod had to ask the Magi when it had first appeared (verse 7). This suggests that the phenomenon was one that astrologers would have noticed because of their constant study of the regular movements of the heavenly bodies but which ordinary people probably would not have noticed.

This star, thus, may have been a special star and not an ordinary star, planet, or comet, although some scientists and biblical scholars have suggested it may be identified with the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.

Since Herod had told the wise men where to find the one “born king of the Jews,” they no longer needed the star. Yet Matthew specifically informs us it went “ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was” (verse 9). To the wise men it may have been an omen of success.

In any case, the precise nature of this “star” is not Matthew’s main point. What he wants to make clear is that the coming of the Christ is significant for all people, not just for Israel. We do not know what led these men to associate the Savior’s birth with the “star;” but we do know God awakened in them the desire to go and see the Savior with their own eyes.

These are the details of Matthew’s account. Now consider what “we see” in his narrative.

The wise men came “to worship” Jesus. Herod was “disturbed.” The chief priests and teachers of the law could point to Micah 5:2 (you may wish to have the group read the verse); but Matthew does not report that they too went to the small town of Bethlehem to find the Christ.

We by God’s grace also see in the “Babe of Bethlehem,” Christ as Savior and Lord. We too “worship him” and offer him our gifts. But in light of the teachings of Scripture and of Jesus’ work on the cross, we know in reality we bring nothing to Christ. It is he who does everything for us — forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are all gifts that God himself grants us when he works faith in us. When the wise men again saw the star and found Christ, “they were overjoyed” (verse 10). Christ still, 2,000 years later, brings such joy to those who come to him.

Close by praying together the prayer at the end of the study.

Helpful notes may be found in the following resources available from Concordia Publishing House:

1. The NIV® Concordia Self-Study Bible
2. The People’s Bible Commentary -- Matthew

