
The Magi

DAVE BAST

Each year at Christmas, hundreds of millions of people all over the world celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. In huge churches and tiny chapels alike, the very same story is retold; a story about a stable and a baby in a manger, and angels appearing to shepherds, and wise men journeying from afar to worship the newborn king; but the season in the Christian year that comes *after* Christmas is far less popular. It is called *Epiphany*, the season of light, when we are reminded that Jesus came as the light of the whole world, and that our mission as Christians is to share his light with the nations. We will begin exploring this idea today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, today we want to begin a new series. It is also a seasonal series. We have done many series for Advent and for Lent over the years on *Groundwork*, but today we want to start out a series for Epiphany, a very important but less well-known, less popular season of the Christian year.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It comes after Christmas, on January 6th, which is, if you think about the twelve days of Christmas, January 6th is the twelfth day, or the twelfth night after Christmas on December 25th. That is where Epiphany begins, and then we think about the ministry and the implications of Jesus during the season of Epiphany, right up until Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. So, this is going to be a six-part series, Dave, that we are going to be exploring principally from the book of Acts; but today, for this first program we are not going to go to Acts just yet, we are going to see some prologue/prelude stuff from Matthew.

DAVE BAST

Right; and also a link back to the familiar Christmas story, as we look at a little bit of Matthew 1, and then mostly focusing on Matthew 2. The word *epiphany*, incidentally, means manifestation or revelation or...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Appearance.

DAVE BAST

Right; the *appearance* of Jesus in the world; and as you mentioned briefly, a lot of times the focus will be on Jesus' ministry, his words and his acts and his doings, but also the idea that Jesus brings new life into the world, and that this life is light for all the nations; that the Church's mission is to share the life and work and salvation of Jesus with the whole world...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So we want to think about how Matthew connects this in his particular story that he relates about the birth of Jesus and shortly thereafter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, Matthew—first book of the New Testament in the order of things, and so you turn from Malachi at the end of the Old Testament to Matthew, and the first thing you see is Jesus' family tree in Matthew 1; and Matthew includes that not only to demonstrate that Jesus is indeed a true descendent of Abraham and of David, establishing that he is in the line of David, but Matthew does that to begin revealing to us...you know, we said epiphany means a revelation...Matthew is going to reveal to us through the family tree of Jesus that Jesus has come for not just Israel—not just those covenant people, but for the whole world, and Matthew does that very cleverly by including some women who are usually not in family trees, but he includes a number of women, all of whom are not from Israel: There is Tamar, who is a Canaanite; there is Rahab, who was from Jericho; there is Ruth, who was from Moab; there is a Hittite person named Bathsheba. These are all people who come from outside of Israel, and yet, they are in Jesus' family tree, and it is Matthew's way of sort of jostling the reader in the ribs and saying: See, stay tuned. This Jesus is not just for Israel.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; and interestingly, it has often been pointed out by scholars that Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is intended primarily for a Jewish Christian audience. Some even think that maybe Matthew originally wrote in Aramaic, not in Greek, and that it was translated; but even though he is trying to convey right from the start that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah—no question about it. Nobody quotes more in these early chapters from the Old Testament than Matthew does, as we will see in just a bit, but he wants to drop in these little hints, too, that it is more than that. That Jesus is not just the Messiah for the Jewish people—the hope of Israel considered ethnically—but he is the savior of the world; and in fact, that is where Matthew goes next. After the genealogy comes this wonderful little story of how Mary conceived of Jesus without the aid of Joseph, her betrothed, and Joseph was going to put her away kind of privately. He did not want to bring shame to her, but he also did not want to marry her in this compromised condition; and then the angel reveals to Joseph: No, do not worry, Joseph, this is from God and you will call his name Jesus, which means savior.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that he will be Immanuel: God with us. Right, so Joseph never speaks in scripture. He is only described as a righteous man; and of course, righteousness is so important for God's people and for God's covenant people. So Joseph is a righteous man who is going to do the righteous thing. When your fiancée has stepped out on you, as he believes Mary had, or else how could she be with child; but the angel comes to him and says: I am going to revise your definition of righteousness. The righteous thing here is to stay with her because what is in her is of God; and so, she gives birth. It is very brief in Matthew. We do not get the big Luke account of his birth; it is very brief; and then we immediately, in Matthew 2, get this story about the first people who seem to catch a clue that something cosmic had happened in Bethlehem.

DAVE BAST

And it is the familiar story from Matthew Chapter 2:1-11. So, let's listen to it: After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea... So now, just to set the stage for the story, we are some time after the birth now. The angels have all gone away; the shepherds are back with their sheep. It may even be a year or two later, and Joseph and Mary have settled in Bethlehem for a period of time. Now we pick it up with this: ¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, ²and

asked, “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.”³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together all the people, chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a Ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem, and said, “Go, and search carefully for the child, and as soon as you find him report to me so that I too may go and worship him.”⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed,¹¹ and on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him; and then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

DAVE BAST

So, that is a story probably familiar to almost every Bible reader, but the question is, what is the point, exactly? Who are these mysterious magi, these visitors from the East? We think of them more normally as the wise men—the three wise men; and what is their visit all about? Well, let’s ask those questions and think more about them in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we just now read, Dave, a...for many people anyway...a familiar story from Matthew 2, the visit of the Magi, or as you mentioned earlier, sometimes we have called them the wise men. In the original Greek of Matthew, they are *magoi*. They are a familiar part of the Christmas story, although as you point out, this visit may have come well *after* Jesus’ actual birth. We are not quite sure, but it could be a year or more; but we know about these figures, and we sing of them sometimes. There is a popular hymn: We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts, we travel afar; and so, the first line of that song has kind of reinforced the idea that there were three of them, and that maybe they were kings; but the truth is, the text does not tell us that.

DAVE BAST

In fact, that did not stop, though, Christian tradition from elaborating on the identity of these three people. Three...we are not told how many there were, but because there were three *gifts* that are mentioned in the story...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

Gold, frankincense and myrrh; it became normal to associate one gift with each of the three...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And the Orient reference. Orient means the place... In Latin it is...*Oriens* is the Latin word for the place where the sun rises; so, it means the East, but as our version that we read just now translates it: We have seen his star when it rose. So, it is possible that they were not even east of Jerusalem, although it is likely that they were. Most scholars think they came from Persia.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; probably modern-day Iraq, perhaps, or maybe Iran. And the idea that they are kings...there is no knowing that for sure; and we really do not know much about them except that we know a little bit about what the *magoi* were, and they appeared to be sort of quasi scientists. We might even call it kind of a quack science today, and since they were interested in the stars, they might be what today we would call astrologers. They tried to figure out the meaning of life from the movements of the stars and the heavenly bodies. So, for all we know, these are the people who wrote the horoscope column for the Baghdad Gazette back then or something, but we do know that about them; and we also know that the Bible warns against these people, that they are practicing superstitious arts. In fact, there was a rabbi in the intertestamental period between the Old Testament and the New Testament who said: He who learns from magi is worthy of death; and so, there was a great wariness of these types of people.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. Actually, our word *magician* and *magic*...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Come from that word *magi*, so there are some unsavory overtones. On the other hand, some of them came maybe closer to actual scientists, as we would think of it. Not so much astrologers, but astronomers. They sort of blended the two...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They knew an incredible amount about the movement of the planets especially. In fact, that word *planet* comes from the Greek word *planá?*, which means *to wander*; so by their careful observation of the night sky...you can imagine, no light pollution out there in the desert, and they may be on top of a ziggurat, one of these great towers, they knew that some heavenly bodies seemed to move sort of erratically. Those they called the planets, and others were fixed stars, plus the sun and the moon, of course; so, as you said, Scott, they tried to interpret these movements as somehow impacting human behavior, even human destiny.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and probably, as with those who try to do that today, they mostly were not right; but on this occasion, God got through to them, and nobody knows exactly what this star is, and it talks about moving...stars do not really move, but some think it was a star that had gone supernova. It was an extra-bright star. But the point being, something caught their attention and God used it. It does not validate the rest of their work, but on this occasion they got something right. Something interesting had happened; something perhaps cosmic had happened in Judea.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and there have been all kinds of sort of Christian scientific attempts to explain what the star of Bethlehem was, was it a comet? As you say, Scott, was it a supernova? Was it some conjunction of the planets that they would have paid attention to? Did it have something to do with pointing to Judah or to a lion—Leo—the constellation Leo? Be that as it may, and nobody knows for sure; there has been lots of ink spilled...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

The key point, as you said, is that God used this to communicate with them; this wonderful sense that God wants to talk to us. God wants to reach us. God wants to reveal himself to us. In this case, these were intellectuals who did not have the Bible, and did not have God's revelation, so he spoke to them in a way they could get the message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and for Matthew, and for the message Matthew wanted to send to his readers...and as you said earlier, Dave, Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. We think he was writing for a Jewish audience who either had become Christian or who Matthew wanted to become Christians and recognize Jesus as the Messiah. For Matthew and for his Jewish readers, the main thing is not *how* did the Magi get there, the main thing is that they got there at all because these were gentiles; these were foreigners. Just like the four women in the genealogy, the family tree in Matthew 1 that we mentioned in the first part of this program. These were unlikely characters to come worship the Messiah. In fact, for a lot of the Jews in Matthew's day, they were *unwanted* characters. How could the Messiah get close to these greasy, superstitious foreigners who are not even part of the covenant people of God? And yet, they are the first ones that Matthew brings to the cradle; and again, the message is the same. Matthew is previewing for us the Jesus who will end this gospel by saying: Go and make disciples of *all* nations; and the Magi are the firstfruits of that.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; we mentioned that Epiphany is January 6th, and in the Eastern Church—the Orthodox Christian tradition—January 6th is celebrated as Christmas, but in the Western Church it is celebrated as Epiphany, and the visit of the Magi—the visit of the wise men—takes place on January 6th, so that is why it sort of wraps up the end of the Christmas season; but there is a wonderful appropriateness about this because they are led to Jesus by the light of a star, whatever that may have been; they represent the gentiles who will be drawn to the light of Christ—kings to the brightness of his rising, as Isaiah foretold about the Messiah; and they represent also the fact that God wants people to see his light and to be drawn to it, to come to him. All of this in this wonderful story; but there are some other stories coming up also in Matthew, too, that we do not want to ignore, even though they present a much darker picture of what happened in connection with the Magi, and we will look at those stories before we wrap up the program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this program, the first of a six-part series here on *Groundwork*, for the season of Epiphany; that time between, in the Christian year...the Advent and Christmas season, and then the Lenten season, when we think about Jesus and his ministry. In this series in particular we are thinking about the reach of Jesus to all the nations, and we have seen that in Matthew 1 and 2. Matthew has already signaled that Jesus is going to be for more than just the Jewish people—just Israel—and we have seen that most particularly through these magi—these strangers from the East who were not Israel, but who were the first to worship Jesus as a king.

DAVE BAST

So, back to the story and its aftermath in Matthew 2. The wise men somehow are clued into the fact that a special person has been born and he is connected with Judea and he is somehow of the royal family or the royal house of Judah. He is going to be a king. God has given them this message in his condescension by revealing to them through astronomy perhaps, and then they are led by the star, and very naturally...they do not have the details of exactly where this king is...so very naturally, they go to Jerusalem and they knock on the door of Herod's palace, and they say: Excuse me. We have come to see the Child; making the natural assumption that it must be a child of Herod's, right, because Herod is the king; and Herod says...he sort of covers his surprise: this is news to me, hmmm.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and the Magi may have known many things, but what they did not know was that Herod was the last man on earth to go and say: Hey, there is a new king in the neighborhood. Do you know where he is? Because Herod was a complete paranoid. He was ruthless. He had already murdered one or two of his own sons. Caesar once said you would be better off being one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons, because he was so paranoid somebody was going to try to steal the throne from him. So, this is the wrong man...this is putting a match to a powder keg. The Magi do not know it, but they have set up a bad chain of events, and Herod is going to try to use them to get to this child so he can kill him himself, but they are warned to go home by another way. Herod finds out about that, and what follows is a very grim story.

DAVE BAST

It is called the slaughter of the innocents, often. Herod sends out squads of his stormtroopers, and they have orders to kill every male child in and around Bethlehem, 2 years old and younger. So, this horrible story... I often have reflected on the fact that at Christmastime, during the Christmas season, Scott, the news media will sometimes play up some terrible thing that happens and say how awful this is at this time of year, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

At Christmas; but the original Christmas story had awful things in it, too—atrocities and genocide. And so Joseph and Mary and the child flee. They escape because Joseph, too, has been warned in a dream—God speaks a lot in dreams here—to get out of town because Herod is coming after the child; and so they go to Egypt. Ironically enough, Egypt, which is the house of bondage—the house of slavery for Israel—from which Israel had to be delivered—and in fact, Israel's deliverer will come up out of Egypt in a few years time. Egypt becomes for the Messiah a place of refuge and a place of safekeeping.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so ironically, the holy family become refugees; they become immigrants in a strange land in Egypt, but they do find safe harbor there; they are protected there. But for Matthew's original readers, this would have rung all sorts of bells because what you are beginning to see here is that this Jesus, who Matthew has identified as Immanuel—God with us—the savior, he is repeating the history of Israel. You know, starting with Abraham, and then with Jacob and his sons, they leave Israel—the Promised Land—and go to Egypt and end up getting stuck there for four hundred years; but Jesus is repeating it; and so Jesus goes to Egypt, Jesus will return from Egypt, and then eventually Jesus will go to the wilderness and be tempted by the devil, and in Matthew he will be quoting Deuteronomy every time he refutes the devil, which shows that Jesus is now repeating Israel's wilderness years. This is the new Israel; this is the new Israel; and what is significant about that is that if Jesus is the new Israel, and if Jesus' family tree contains all these non Israelites, and if Jesus as Messiah first attracted people from Baghdad in Iraq and Persia, clearly the new Israel is going to be an expanded Israel. This is not going to be for Israel only anymore. Jesus is here as a witness to all nations, which is what we are thinking about, actually, in this series.

DAVE BAST

And he is also a living application of the truths of scripture, beginning in the Old Testament. So Matthew quotes from Micah in the story of the Magi visiting Jerusalem. Herod does not know...where is the Messiah supposed to be born? We think the Messiah has arrived, where is that going to happen? So, he calls in the priests and the scribes and the experts in scripture, the professors, and they say: Well, it is right here in Micah Chapter 5: Bethlehem; and off they go to Bethlehem. Then a little bit later, Matthew will quote from Jeremiah: Rachel weeping for her children when the children of Bethlehem...because Rachel was buried in Bethlehem or very nearby. Jeremiah later quoted that about the sorrows of the exile. So, we see this whole story of Israel in the Old Testament being recapitulated in the Person of Jesus, right from his birth onwards, and eventually he will come up out of Egypt—Matthew quotes from Hosea—^{11:1}Out of Egypt I have called my son; and he will settle in Galilee, another Old Testament prophecy, and it is all about Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and Matthew is just masterful at this. He is taking all of these threads from the Old Testament and weaving together a brand new garment. I mean, we have Genesis material, we have Exodus material, we have exile material, we have the Prophets, all weaving together to say: Jesus is the Messiah; he is the true King of Kings, and he is not just for Israel, he is for all people. One of the things...and we are going to think about this in particular in the next program in this series...one of the challenges that has for us in the Church today is to say are we also still pushing out those borders? Do we see Jesus as for *all people*, or just for people like us? That is a perpetual challenge for the Church.

DAVE BAST

And here is another one. Right from the start, Jesus provokes violent opposition against him, as well as drawing strangers to him. So, on the one hand you have Herod, who wants to kill him; on the other hand, the Magi, who worship him and offer him their treasures; and the question for me is, which one am I?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; are we for him or are we against him, and that is the perpetual question that the Church faces, and that the world faces, because it all comes down to that child of Bethlehem.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time when we go to Acts Chapter 8 to see how the early persecution of the Church actually helped spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole world. Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, and let us know scripture passages and topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-magi>

Printed on February 22, 2025