

# Whose Birthday Is It?

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We have heard Luke's account of the birth of Jesus involving the shepherds and the angels, Mary and Joseph and the animals. I want to us read Matthew's account which includes the story of the wise men.

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup> "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 be the shepherd of my people Israel." <sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, 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 and of incense and of myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2:1-12

We have all heard the Christmas carol about "We Three Kings." No where in this passage does it say that they were kings nor that there were three of them. Where did those ideas come from? Isaiah prophesied that when the Messiah arrived the kings of the earth would come to him bearing gifts. Some assumed that when the magi came with their gifts, it was a fulfillment of this prophecy. Therefore they must be kings. We don't know how many of them there were. Since three gifts are mentioned (gold, frankincense and myrrh-an oil used in anointing rituals) an assumption was made that there were three magi. The Greek Orthodox tradition says there were twelve magi. We don't know.

Matthew calls them magi not kings. The term Magi is the root word for our word magic. They practiced magical arts. Magi were philosophers, astronomers and priests from Persia—modern day Iran. In their search for truth, they studied the stars and the religions of the world. When the nation of Israel was conquered by its enemies, many of the Jewish people were taken captive and exiled to foreign lands. At the time of Jesus' birth, there were many Jewish persons living in Persia. In their quest for knowledge about other religions, the Magi would have talked to some of these Jewish persons about their beliefs. They would have heard about the prophecies of a Messiah-King that was to be born in Israel. As they studied the stars at night they witnessed the appearance of an unusual star. Modern astronomers tell us that there was a convergence of two planets, Jupiter and Saturn, that occurred about the time of Jesus' birth. They would have appeared as a single bright star in the sky. This convergence happens about once every twenty years. The magi believed that when this star appeared it was a sign that a king was born. They concluded that this star was the sign that the prophesied King of Jews was born.

So they set out to follow the star. Traveling from Persia to Bethlehem would have been a distance of 1,000 miles—about the distance from Lubbock to Los Angeles. The journey would take them a minimum of 50 days. There is no mention of camels in the text, but it was a typical mode of transportation in Persia.

Why would they make such a long and difficult journey to see a baby? We find a clue in what was happening in the territory of Persia. They were living under a cruel tyrant king. He killed his own father to seize the throne. Then he killed his 30 brothers to ensure that none of them would challenge his right to the throne. He even feared his own sons would revolt against him and deported them to Rome. He was a ruthless and oppressive

leader—much like Gaddafi in Libya or al-Assad in Syria. When the Magi saw the star representing the birth of the Messiah-King, their hearts filled with hope. This was a King who would be a Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He would bring righteousness and justice to the whole world—peace on earth, good will to all people. They hoped this King would make the world a better place. This king could change the world.

This is why we celebrate Christmas. Even though we do not live under a tyrannical regime, we have a deep longing for hope. We long to know there is a King of Kings who can bring justice and righteousness not only to the world, but to us. We long for a King who will complete and make right all those things in this world that seem unfinished and unfair. Many families in our church have experienced immense pain in the past few months. Some of you have experienced the death of parents, siblings and even children. Some of you have lost your jobs. Some of you have received divorce papers. Some of you have had family struggles.

We live in a world that suffers from much injustice: 22,000 children will die today on Christmas Eve of preventable causes. Other children will be kidnapped or sold into the sex industry. Christians will suffer imprisonment and torture tonight. We live in a world that desperately needs the hope of Christmas.

If Christmas is only about getting the latest iPad, or HD TV, or jewelry or latest designer clothes, then it really does not have much to offer. Christmas is so much more than stuff. The Magi came to the manger from their darkness looking for light and hope. When I stand with a family next to the fresh grave of someone they love, I don't take out my iPad and say, "Here, I think this will help your grief." Instead I offer them the Christ of Christmas and Easter. "For unto you is born this day a savior. He is the resurrection and

the life. Those who believe in him will never die. You will see your loved one again.” I can offer them the Messiah-King who is the hope of the world. You will not walk through the valley of the shadow of death alone. Jesus will walk with you. Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. Jesus Christ is the one will return one day to establish the Kingdom of God in its fullness and wipe away every tear from their eyes. In his Kingdom death will be no more.

When the Magi saw the baby, their hearts were filled with joy. They bowed down and worshipped a baby. They expressed their gratitude for the hope they saw in this child by presenting their gifts to him. Notice that the Bible does not say that they gave gifts to each other. At the manger the Magi did not turn to each other and say: “Hey, it’s the first Christmas—what do you want for Christmas?” They only gave gifts to Jesus. How did we get into this habit of giving each other gifts at Christmas? How did it become a big party for us? It is not my birthday! It is not your birthday!

Now, I’m no Scrooge suggesting that we quit giving gifts to each other at Christmas. It is OK to exchange gifts and have Santa and all that. I think Jesus enjoys seeing us celebrate his birth by giving gifts to each other. But if we just give gifts to each other and don’t give a gift to Jesus, then we have forgotten whose birthday it is!

How do we give a gift to Jesus? How do we express our gratitude for the hope he alone gives? How do we express our gratitude that he alone can forgive all our sins and give us a new beginning? How do we express our gratitude when he gives us peace and strength to deal with illness, and crises and death?

Jesus told us. “When you do it to one of the least of these, you have done it unto me.” Our Christmas Eve Offering is an opportunity to give a gift to Jesus. Not just a token

gift. But a significant gift expressing our gratitude. Where would we be without the Jesus of Christmas?

Tonight the first \$40,000 of our offering goes to support the clinic and nutrition center at the Methodist Mission station that Paul Rider and I visited last summer. The day we went to the nutrition center the parents of 50 children were given food for their children for a week. One of the children who came to the clinic that day was so severely malnourished she was admitted to the infirmary. Two days later the missionary told us this little girl had died. We hear the statistic 22,000 children will die today from preventable causes. It is just a statistic. But when you see and touch one of them who has died—she becomes a real person. Her name was Muteba (moo-tay-baa).

I want you to get a glimpse of this basic nutrition center and clinic. Listen to what they do. Every day hundreds of Mutebas (moo-tay-baas) are saved.

**VIDEO: Nutrition Center and Clinic Congo**

Your gift to Jesus tonight can save hundreds of more Mutebas (moo-tay-baa). . Each one has a name. If you are not prepared for the offering tonight—you can do it later. You can give it tomorrow at our combined Christmas morning service. You can mail it next week. You can donate on our web site or use your bill pay.

Christmas is not your birthday! What will you give to Jesus to express your gratitude for the hope, forgiveness, love and grace he gives to you every day of the year?