

# Worship

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First Sunday of Advent

Character Emphasis: Magi

Scripture Text: Matthew 2:1-12

**Lesson Synopsis:** In their search for and worship of Jesus, the Magi offer an example worthy of emulation. Taking a close look at the characters in this story, this lesson will push students to ask how they will react to this same Christ. Will they worship him like the Magi, ignore him like the chief priests and teachers of the law, or become hostile like Herod? A concluding question will focus on how to worship Christ amid the busyness and distractions of the Christmas season.

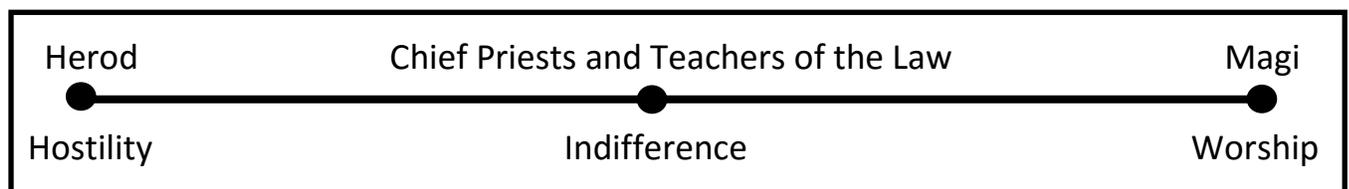
## Digging In

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The presence of the Magi is no surprise as we consider the characters surrounding Jesus' birth. Indeed, their bowed bodies and extravagant gifts have long graced the stables in our living room nativity scenes. While their presence may be routine in the Christmas season, however, the *challenge* of the Magi is anything but! Here we see the powerful, the knowledgeable, and the respected bowing in worship before the newborn king. We see them offering him costly gifts befitting his station. We see them seeking his presence before other things. We see the Magi in these various ways, and we hear their challenge echoing off the page: Will we do the same?

Sharpening this challenge are the examples of other characters in the story who react quite differently to the same newborn king. These include Herod and the chief priests and teachers of the law, and, taken together with the Magi, these characters offer a spectrum of responses to Jesus that ranges from hostility to indifference to worship. To better understand the response of each character or group of characters, we will look at each in turn.

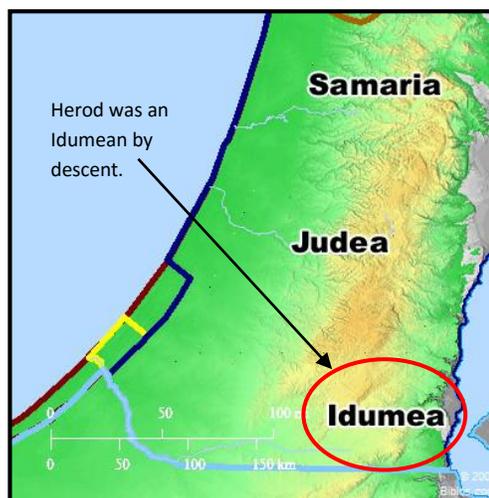
### A Spectrum of Responses to Jesus



## Herod

Herod the Great was an Idumean by descent who ascended the Judean throne through political savvy and war. A harsh ruler who taxed his people heavily to fund building projects and bribes and a foreigner backed by the Romans, Herod was not well-liked by his subjects. Perhaps fueled by this social discontent and the precariousness of his position, Herod was also a paranoid ruler who was jealous for his throne.<sup>i</sup>

Imagine, then, the spike in Herod's paranoia when a caravan of Magi come to Jerusalem asking about a child "who has been born king of the Jews" (2:2)! Remember that Herod was *not* born king of the Jews – he took the throne through politics and war. More than this, he was an Idumean by descent and lacked the hereditary credentials of a "born" king of the Jewish people. Now a group of Magi are speaking of a child with a more legitimate claim to the throne than his own, and they are speaking in the language of signs. In the Roman world, heavenly signs carried great weight, especially in regard to political leadership. As Craig Keener explains in his commentary on this passage, "Comets ... and analogous celestial signs usually signaled the death of one ruler and the consequent rise of another..."<sup>iii</sup> A star portending a royal birth is not good news for the present king, and word is spreading throughout Jerusalem!



Map used courtesy of Biblos.com

### A Note on the Disturbance in Jerusalem

Along with Herod being disturbed by the Magi's news of a newborn king, the text tells us that "all Jerusalem" was disturbed with him (2:3). While Herod's disturbance is understandable, the disturbance of the people is less so. Why should a dissatisfied people be troubled at news of a new king? David Garland offers one solution to this problem in stating, "Perhaps it is the case that when this psychopathic king is troubled, it is time for everyone else to be troubled as well."<sup>ii</sup>

With all of this background in our minds, it is no surprise to find that Herod is "disturbed" (2:3) when he receives word of the Magi. His rule is under threat! Acting deceitfully, he summons the Magi to find the exact time when the star appeared and asks that they report back to him when they discover the child's whereabouts. The reason Herod gives for wanting this information is a desire to worship the newborn king, but the rest of the story reveals a more sinister intent. When Herod discovers that the Magi have left the country without returning to him (they were warned off in a dream), we are told that he "was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance

with the time he had learned from the Magi” (2:16).

This disturbing account doesn’t often make it into our cheery renditions of the nativity. It is clear, though, that the acceptance and worship of the Magi was not the only response to the newborn Jesus. He was also greeted with fear and disturbance and murderous rage. For Herod, Jesus was a threat to be neutralized, and Herod pursued this end with a brutal decree, caring nothing for the innocents who were killed in the fray. Were it not for divine promptings and human obedience (2:13-15), Jesus might well have succumbed to Herod’s hostility.

### **Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law**

Less prominent and less dramatic in the narrative are the chief priests and teachers of the law. Upon hearing of a newborn king, Herod summons these experts in the scriptures to ask where the Messiah is to be born. They name Bethlehem knowledgably and accurately, quoting a passage from Micah. Then they vanish from the scene.

That the chief priests and teachers of the law fail to play a more central role in the narrative is strange in light of their station in society. These are the leaders of the people and the expounders of scripture. They have just heard of the advent of the Messiah and have pointed the way to his birth place. Yet they stop here after catching wind of this momentous news. Why do these religious leaders not accompany the Magi in their search for this king whom they themselves have identified as the Messiah?

A possible answer to this question is that these religious leaders had been appointed by Herod to support his rule.<sup>iv</sup> As such, they may have been acting as Herod’s lackeys, offering the needed information but going no further. In this light, these leaders are much like the seed among thorns in the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1-23). As Jesus explains in Matthew 13:22, “The seed falling among thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.” Their exalted positions being tied to

#### **King or Messiah?**

When the Magi come to Jerusalem, they come asking about a king (2:2). Herod and the chief priests and teachers of the law, on the other hand, speak of the Messiah (2:4). Why the difference?

Having been conquered by surrounding nations and now being ruled by the Romans, the Jews looked forward to a time when God would raise up for them a king like David who would recapture Israel’s former glory. This hoped-for king was known as the Messiah, and it was expected that he would be God’s anointed agent in delivering Israel from her enemies. When Herod and the chief priests and teachers hear of “one who has been born king of the Jews,” they think automatically of the Messianic king.

Herod, the religious leaders hear the good news of a newborn king but fail to act on this news due to worries about their own positions. Of course, this is only speculation. A kinder reading would assign to the religious leaders a fear of Herod's reaction to news of a rival claimant to the throne. Ultimately, no definitive reason is given for this lack of interest. More important to the story than the uncertain motivations of the chief priests and teachers is their concrete lack of response. In these characters we are given a picture of what one commentator has called "spiritual complacency."<sup>v</sup> Whatever the reason for their lack of movement, whether worries, busyness, fear, or simply lack of care, these leaders who should welcome the newborn king respond with a surprising indifference.

## The Magi

The Magi stand as strange exemplars in the gospel of Matthew. While the leaders of the Jewish people react with hostility and indifference to the newborn Jesus, these foreigners of a different religion approach him with reverence and veneration! Assigning a precise identity to the Magi is difficult, as the term "Magi" was used in a variety of ways. Because they have come to Jerusalem having seen a star, it seems best to interpret these seekers of the newborn king as astronomers who have rightly interpreted a sign of God in the heavens.<sup>vii</sup> Naming the Magi in this way may make us nervous because of their association with foreign religious practices. Matthew, though, is only praising in his description of them. Raymond Brown summarizes the Magi well in saying, "They represent the best of pagan lore and religious perceptivity which has come to seek Jesus through revelation in nature."<sup>viii</sup> In the Magi, we see God speaking to unexpected people in an unexpected way, and they alone in this story act appropriately.

Having interpreted the star correctly, the Magi have come to Jerusalem seeking Jesus. After all, the palace in the capital city seems the right place to find a newborn king! In Jerusalem, they are pointed to Bethlehem by Herod, and

### The Gifts of the Magi<sup>vi</sup>

The Magi offer the newborn Jesus gifts fit for a king. While gold obviously fits this criterion, frankincense and myrrh are more enigmatic for the contemporary reader. In the ancient world, both frankincense and myrrh were prized commodities that had both religious and medical significance. In offering Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the Magi offer him three valuable gifts of great worth in their time.

Later tradition assigned allegorical application to the gifts: gold for kingship, frankincense for divinity (because it was used in worship), and myrrh for death (because it was used for embalming). While these meanings are foreign to Matthew's telling, they do help us consider the identity and vocation of Jesus.

they follow the star to this small town until it stops over the child's resting place. Then follows their exemplary response to Jesus: "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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, frankincense and myrrh." (2:10-11) The Magi meet Jesus with joy and worship. They offer gifts of great cost that are fit for a king. These outsiders and foreigners, these Magi, seek the presence of the king, and having found him, they bow in worship.

## Application

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As we have seen, three different character groups offer three very different responses to the newborn Jesus. Herod responds with hostility, the chief priests and teachers of the law respond with indifference, and the Magi respond with worship. In these examples, we as believers are challenged to gauge our own responses to Christ, and, while we may be tempted to rush to identify ourselves with the worship of the Magi, it is important to note that hostility and indifference are also real possibilities in the life of faith.

To speak of hostility to Jesus seems strange when considering a people who have accepted him as Lord and Savior. Yet we don't have to look far in the scriptures to find that Jesus is not afraid to unsettle us in his quest for lordship in our lives. Think, for instance, of his stringent demand for discipleship: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." (Matt 16:24-25) These are hard words indeed, and there are times in our walks of faith when these same words leap off the pages of scripture onto the pages of our experience. We hear Jesus calling us to die to sinful habits. We hear him calling us to sacrifice for his sake. We hear him calling us to difficult paths that we would not have chosen for ourselves. These are moments when Christ disturbs us just as he disturbed Herod. Jesus threatens us as he demands lordship in our lives. During these moments of unsettling, we must consider our response. Will we respond with hostility like Herod, combatting the demands of Christ, or will we bow in submission like the Magi?

Indifference is also a real possibility in the Christian life. Many of us can testify to periods of lethargy in our walks of faith. We allow the demands of life to drown out the demands of the gospel, and we convince ourselves that sitting in front of the TV is more compelling than sitting at Jesus' feet. Whatever the reasons for our spiritual complacency, it is possible for us to move through life without giving Jesus much thought. We are not hostile, but neither are we worshipful. We take Christ for granted and fail to seek him as the Magi did. We know we have become indifferent when we

realize that we haven't considered Christ for days, and we must name a response to these moments of indifference. Will we guard against them by choosing the way of the Magi? Will we shake ourselves loose of them in order to worship the king?

And then there is the worship exemplified by the Magi. Note that this worship is costly. The Magi have left home on a journey to Judea, thereby paying a price in time and effort. They offer costly gifts fit for a king. With this extravagance in mind, we can ask ourselves about our own worship, which should also be costly. In Romans 12:1, Paul encourages his listeners to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." Worship in this light is a matter for all of life and not just Sundays. This does not mean that we should forget the importance of corporate worship. Instead, we should consider both the corporate and the personal dimensions of worship, holding them together. These two aspects of worship intermingle, informing and perfecting one another in the life of faith. As we consider the Magi, we can ask ourselves about our commitments to corporate worship and offering ourselves as living sacrifices to the God who saves.

Moving to a specifically Christmas-oriented application, the Magi are once again instructive. There can be no doubt that many voices vie for our attention during the Christmas season. Some of these are good voices like the calls to family and recreation. Others voices call in less fruitful directions. We can think here of the calls to consumerism, anxiety, and stress. In the midst of all this noise of Christmas, the Magi challenge us to remember a child who was laid in a manger. This child does not force himself into our consciousness; at least not all the time. He waits for those who will seek him. This Christmas, may we seek the Christ child amidst so much noise, and may we bow in worship like the Magi.

## Teaching Helps

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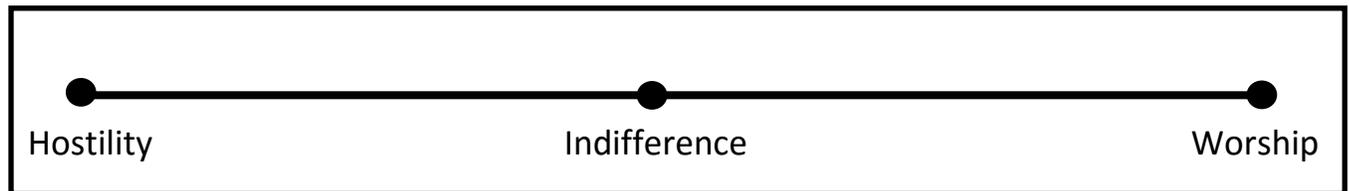
**Icebreaker:** To get people talking, begin with the following question, "What is your favorite Christmas memory?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

**Introduction:** Introduce the lesson by explaining the advent series (see p. 1). Then let the class know that today's lesson will focus on the Advent theme of Worship by focusing on the characters of the Magi.

**Question:** Ask participants what they remember about the Magi or Wise Men from the Christmas story. Offer clarifications from the Magi section above if needed.

**A Spectrum of Responses:** Once class members have related their memories of the Magi, draw the following spectrum on the board, explaining that the Magi are found in a story in which various characters exhibit different responses to Jesus. Some are hostile, some are indifferent, while others worship.

### A Spectrum of Responses to Jesus



With the spectrum drawn on the board, read the scripture passages associated with each character in the story and ask the class where they fall on the spectrum.

#### Herod:

- **Scripture Passage(s):** Have two class members read the following scripture passages about Herod.
  - 2:3-8 (Preface this passage by explaining that the Magi have arrived in Jerusalem searching for the one born king of the Jews).
  - 2:16-18 (Preface this passage by explaining that the Magi have left Jerusalem without returning to Herod to tell him where to find the child.)
- **Question:** Ask where Herod fits on the spectrum, and write his name over "hostility" after the class answers.
- **Question:** Point out that Herod was "disturbed" when he heard that the Magi were in town. Ask why this was the case. (Refer to the Herod section for answers to this question.)
- **Question:** Ask if anyone would feel comfortable sharing a time when they felt disturbed by Jesus. It may be good here to offer your own story of feeling challenged/disturbed by Jesus. (See the Application section for more on this concept.)
- **Application Point:** There are times in our Christian walks when Jesus unsettles us in the demands that he makes on our lives. At these moments we must decide whether to be hostile or submissive to his call.

#### The Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law

- **Scripture Passage(s):** Have one class member read the following scripture about the chief priests and teachers of the law.
  - 2:4-6
- **Question:** Ask where the chief priests and teachers of the law fit on the spectrum, and write their titles over "indifference" after the class answers.

- **Question:** Explain that the chief priests and teachers of the law were the leaders of the people and interpreters of scripture. Ask why they may have failed to seek the Messiah after they heard of his birth. (See Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law section for answers to this question.)
- **Question:** Ask how we today can be indifferent to Jesus in our own lives.
- **Question:** Ask which is worse, hostility or indifference to Jesus.
- **Application Point:** Indifference to Jesus is a real threat in the walk of faith. We can guard against indifference or shake ourselves out of it by purposefully choosing to seek Christ regularly.

### The Magi

- **Scripture Passage(s):** Have two class members read the following scripture passages about the Magi.
  - 2:1-2
  - 2:9-12
- **Question:** Ask where the Magi fit on the spectrum, and write their title over “worship” after the class answers.
- **Question:** Ask how the Magi worshiped Jesus. (They bowed before him and gave him gifts.) Note that the worship of the Magi was costly in time, effort, and expense.
- **Question:** Ask what it means for Christians to offer Jesus costly worship today. (See the Application section for more on this concept). Be ready to reference Romans 12:1 in seeking a definition of Christian worship.
- **Application Point:** We are called to worship Jesus both corporately and personally. Both of these aspects of worship are important to the life of faith.

**Turning to Christmas:** Having talked about responses to Jesus in regular life, now turn to applying this concept to the Christmas season.

- **Question:** Ask participants where we are most likely to find ourselves on the spectrum during the Christmas season. Note that the season is filled with many things besides Jesus that call for our attention and that these distractions can lead to indifference.
- **Question:** Remind participants that the heart of Advent is waiting for Christ. This waiting is not passive, though. Like the Magi, we are called to actively seek the Savior and worship in those moments when he finds us. Ask for ways that we can remember to seek and worship Jesus like the Magi in the midst of the busyness of the season. Be ready with a few suggestions of your own. Ideas: Using an advent calendar to remember Jesus daily, choosing to help the poor in Jesus’ name, reading the Christmas story and having a time of thanksgiving on

Christmas Eve or morning, using a Christmas devotional throughout the Christmas season.

- **Application Point:** This Christmas, we have the opportunity to put Christ in the center of our celebrations. We should purposefully seek him in the midst of the busyness of the Christmas season.

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<sup>i</sup> For a fuller treatment of Herod, see: Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas : The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad,, 1989), 40–49.

<sup>ii</sup> David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1999), 26.

<sup>iii</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.,, 1999), 101.

<sup>iv</sup> Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas*.

<sup>v</sup> Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 103.

<sup>vi</sup> Eugene M. Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” vol. 8, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 143.

<sup>vii</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah : A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, Image Book ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1979).

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.