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Thomas Shepherd

Andrews University, trs@andrews.edu

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GRACE FOR OUTSIDERS



How God brings outsiders in

THOMAS R. SHEPHERD

Outside. Rejected or neglected. Their viewpoint undervalued; their involvement in power structures of society minimal to nonexistent.

Ever been there? Meet two of the groups who hailed the birth of the Messiah—the Wise Men and the shepherds. Though we will see that these two groups are different in background, status, and outlook, yet they have something crucial in common.

WISE MEN

The story of the Wise Men appears in Matthew 2. Who were these visitors from the East? The Greek term Matthew uses is *magos*. It means a wise man or magician, which suggests either a positive or negative connotation. The term could refer to a wide range of groups from astronomers and astrologers to magicians, fortunetellers, or priestly diviners.¹ The term is used six times in the New Testament, four of the uses here in Matthew 2, the other two uses in Acts 13. In Acts 13:8 the *magos* Elymas is called a false prophet. He clearly is on the wrong side of the gospel, opposing the work of Barnabas and Paul as they seek to bring the gospel message

to the proconsul of Cyprus. Paul calls this man a son of the devil, an enemy of righteousness and full of deceit and villainy (verse 10)—hardly a positive character!

But the Wise Men of Matthew 2 are not referred to with any of these negative characteristics. They have come to bring gifts to the one born “King of the Jews.” How and why would they do this? They are associated with the appearance of a star in the East that they follow to find the newborn King (Matt. 2:2, 9, 10).² They studied the heavens. Their belief that the heavens contained omens for what would happen on earth would likely garner for them the name of astrologers in our modern world. But this negative evaluation is based on a modern secular view that the heavens present no signs that predict or affect events on earth. This is clearly not the view of the Scriptures (cf. Matt. 24:29).

Astronomers today sometimes associate the Bethlehem star with a conjunction of planets, a comet, or a supernova.³ But this astronomical event had the unusual characteristic of going before the Wise Men and actually standing over the house where they found the Christ child (Matt. 2:9). This detail indicates that the “star” was some-

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thing unusual indeed. Ellen White notes that it was a band of distant angels.⁴ The text of Matthew notes how the Wise Men rejoiced greatly at seeing the star (verse 10). Upon entering the house where Joseph, Mary, and Jesus resided, the Wise Men worshipped the child and offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These visitors from the East were considered heathen by the religious leaders in Jerusalem.⁵ Herod saw their query “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” as a threat to his dynasty and laid a cunning plot to do away with the newborn King. What is especially striking is that the Wise Men came such a great distance to worship the new King, while Herod and the religious leaders were a mere 6.8 miles (11 kilometers) from the birthplace of Jesus, and they did not venture to travel that short way to find the Son of God. The Wise Men at great expense and time sought and found the Saviour of the world, while His own people did not treasure His birth (John 1:11). But foreigners, outsiders, received the revelation, saw the light and beheld its glory, and received “the right to become children of God” (verse 12).

SHEPHERDS

Shepherds in Jesus’ day were considered dishonest and people who could not be trusted as witnesses in court because they grazed their flocks on the lands of others.⁶ Thus, they too were outsiders like the Wise Men, but in most cases much poorer, even though within the Jewish community.

But like the Wise Men, they too received heavenly revelation of the birth of Jesus. The story is told in Luke 2. In their case the angelic revelation is much more direct and frightening.⁷ An angel of God appears to them (Luke 2:9) and informs them of the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem. He indicates that the child will be found wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.⁸ Assuaging their fear, the angel proclaims the great joy of the birth of the Saviour of the world (verses 10, 11). Heaven cannot keep silent at this greatest event of salvation, and multitudes of angels burst forth in songs of joy.

The shepherds’ response to the revelation is not unlike that of the Wise Men: “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us” (verse 15). When they find the Christ child, they tell about

These visitors from the East were considered heathen by the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

the angel’s message. Everyone who hears it wonders, but Mary treasures up the revelation. The shepherds, meanwhile, return to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen (verse 20).

THE TAKEAWAYS

Several important lessons derive from these two somewhat disparate stories. First, God is no respecter of persons—He will give His message to those with an open ear to listen. Keep your ears attuned to His voice. Second, welcome outsiders; they may have a message from God that you need to hear. Third, when you receive the revelation, rejoice in the grace that God provides.

The Christmas story is beautiful in its simplicity, profound in its implications, but especially wonderful in its revelation of salvation. Rejoice! The Christ child was born for you. 🎄

¹ See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 167.

² The Magi came “from the East” to Jerusalem (Matt. 2:1). They were likely from Babylon, Persia, or Arabia. See Brown; Robert K. McIver, “Matthew” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel M. Rodríguez et al. (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2022), pp. 1224, 1225. Why would they travel west to find the newborn King if the star appeared in the East? The answer is that Matthew 2:2 refers to *where they were when they saw the star*. The star actually appeared in the western sky.

³ See Brown, pp. 170–173.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898, 1940), p. 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 420, and b. Sanhedrin 25b.

⁷ The story of the shepherds in Luke 2 is typical of an epiphany (appearance of a heavenly visitant) in Scripture with five characteristics: (1) glory; (2) human fear; (3) “do not fear”; (4) divine revelation; and (5) human response. The fourfold human response includes the shepherds’ report, everyone wonders, Mary treasures the revelation, and the shepherds return praising God.

⁸ The strips of cloth, “swaddling cloths,” were meant to keep the baby’s limbs straight. See I. Howard Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 106.

Thomas R. Shepherd, Ph.D., is a senior research professor of New Testament studies at Andrews University.