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Matthew 2:1-18
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Fear Does Not Stop Us

A recent study by the Pew Research Center and Forbes magazine showed that roughly 30% of U.S. adults consult astrology or horoscopes at least yearly. While this is often noted for fun, very few (around 1%) rely on them for major decisions. Among those who do, Gen Z/Millennial young adults and most particularly young women look to the stars for self-understanding and life guidance in uncertain times.¹

Searching the stars for signs and life's answers is not new.

Around the 3rd century BCE, astrology began in ancient Mesopotamia with Babylonian celestial observations and the development of the 12 sign Zodiac. Around the 1st century BCE, astrology was linked to Greek mythology when people looked to the stars and planetary gods for personal fate and birth charts. This marriage flourished for centuries, but declined in the Enlightenment before a 20th-century revival with newspaper sun-sign horoscopes and psychological interpretations.

So this idea of looking to the stars to identify significant events was around the time of Jesus' birth.

Please join me as we read from Matthew 2:1-18 and we see how the stars indeed influenced scientists from Babylon who had come looking for the one born king of the Jews.

Matthew 2:1-18

“Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. This happened while Herod was king of Judea. After Jesus' birth, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. **2** They asked, “Where is the child who has been born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose. Now we have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard about it, he was very upset. Everyone in Jerusalem was troubled too. **4** So Herod called together all the chief priests of the people. He also called the teachers of the law. He asked them where the Messiah was going to be born. **5** “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied. “This is what the prophet has written. He said,

¹ May 21, 2025, “30% of Americans Consult Astrology, Tarot Cards or Fortune Tellers” <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/05/21/3-in-10-americans-consult-astrology-tarot-cards-or-fortune-tellers/>

6 “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are certainly not the least important among the towns of Judah.
A ruler will come out of you.

He will rule my people Israel like a shepherd.’” (Micah 5:2)

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men. He found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem. He said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report it to me. Then I can go and worship him too.”

9 After the wise men had listened to the king, they went on their way. The star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them. It finally stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. 11 The wise men went to the house. There they saw the child with his mother Mary. They bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures. They gave him gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 But God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. So they returned to their country on a different road.

13 When the wise men had left, Joseph had a dream. In the dream an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph. “Get up!” the angel said. “Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you to come back. Herod is going to search for the child. He wants to kill him.”

14 So Joseph got up. During the night, he left for Egypt with the child and his mother Mary. 15 They stayed there until King Herod died. So the words the Lord had spoken through the prophet came true. He had said, “I brought my son out of Egypt.” (Hosea 11:1)

16 Herod realized that the wise men had tricked him. So he became very angry. He gave orders about Bethlehem and the area around it. He ordered all the boys two years old and under to be killed. This agreed with the time when the wise men had seen the star. 17 In this way, the words Jeremiah the prophet spoke came true. He had said,

18 “A voice is heard in Ramah.
It’s the sound of crying and deep sadness.
Rachel is crying over her children.

She refuses to be comforted,
because they are gone.” (Jeremiah 31:15)

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There are several things I’d like us to explore today. Who were the Magi? What influenced their quest? What was significant about their gifts for baby Jesus? What influences our quests today? How is God speaking to us as we enter this New Year of 2026?

In Matthew 2, the Magi were wise men from the East, most likely Persian or Babylonian astrologers, who followed a star to find and worship the newborn Jesus. They brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.. They weren't kings as tradition later described them. But they represented a Gentile world who recognized Jesus, which is a significant theological point in Matthew's Gospel.

The Greek word magos is believed to have had Babylonian origin and refers to wise men, teachers, priests, physicians, astrologers, seers, interpreters of dreams, soothsayers, and sorcerers. These would be learned, highly educated men. While we don't see the term magos in the Old Testament, we do see them represented in the Book of Daniel, written five centuries before Jesus' birth.

Daniel was a Jew taken into Babylonian exile who headed a group called the "wise men," "magicians," "enchanters," "astrologers" that were responsible for interpreting dreams for the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

Our story tells us that they had come to Jerusalem seeking the one who had been born king of the Jews, having been guided by his star rising in the east. And they had come to worship him.

Ok stop. Remember these are pagans and yet they have come to worship this Jewish king. Certainly there must have been something else that was guiding them than just this star. What could it have been?

Let us recall five centuries earlier that when King Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, he took with him the best and brightest of God's people and put them to work in his kingdom. Meshak, Shadrack and Abendigo and Daniel were some of those exiled Jews who had a huge spiritual influence over Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. The captive Israelites brought with them to Babylon the Hebrew scriptures and prophecies. In fact, after several miraculous events noted in the Book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar commanded that his whole kingdom worship Daniel's Hebrew God.

And so for five centuries or more, these Magi would have had the Hebrew prophecies that pointed to the future birth of a Messiah or King of the Jews.

Such as Isaiah "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and call his name Immanuel."² "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse."³

Or Micah "But you, Bethlehem...out of you will come for me one who will rule over Israel who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."⁴

Or Hosea "Out of Egypt I called my son."⁵

² Isaiah 7:14

³ Isaiah 11:1

⁴ Micah 5:2

⁵ Hosea 11:1

Or Malachi and Isaiah which mention a messenger preparing the way for the Messiah.⁶

Each of these were written over two centuries BEFORE the Babylonian exile described in Daniel and were considered sacred texts by the Hebrews.

So these were just some of the texts that the Magi would have poured over to learn about the coming of God's Messiah.

And yet there was this celestial phenomenon that just happened to occur simultaneously in the eastern skies. It must have been something extraordinary to kick off their nearly nine hundred mile desert trek from Babylon to Jerusalem.

The scripture simply describes it as a star. But scientists have tried to figure out exactly what was going on in the skies about that same time. Many theorists suggest it could have been a supernova, a comet, a planetary conjunction (like Jupiter and Venus/Saturn), or even a supernatural event. In fact, around the 2 BC Jupiter and Venus had a strikingly close meeting with the star Regulus (known as the King Star) that would have appeared as a particularly bright star in the sky.

Venus is also famously known as the "Morning Star" and the "Evening Star" because it's the brightest planet in our sky. It appears prominently to rise low in the east before sunrise and set low in the west after sunset.

Interestingly, but in the Book of Revelation, Jesus said, "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."⁷

I wonder if this was what that Magi saw?

So to answer our question of what were they really following? They were following both this star and the Hebrew scriptures.

In the prologue to John's Gospel, Jesus is described as The Word of God made flesh. The light shining in the darkness. The true light who gives light to everyone. John said, "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."⁸

Sometimes it takes outsiders in our midst to point out the obvious about how God is at work in our world in ways that we often overlook.

Jesus clearly revealed his coming to these strangers, but not to his own people. Not even to Jerusalem's chief priests and teachers of the law. The chief priests were those in charge of worship in the temple. The teachers of the law were Jewish scholars, trained in the development, teaching, and application of the Old Testament Law. But they were under Herod's thumb because Herod had rebuilt the

⁶ Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3

⁷ Revelation 22:16

⁸ John 1:1-11

temple for them. Of anyone, they should have been ready for the Messiah's coming.

Notice also that it was these pagan astrologers, outsiders, who came with pure intentions to worship Jesus. They were the curious. They were the seeking. And they were the chosen. Again, not those who we would expect. They came bearing gifts to honor this new king.

Gold fit for royalty.

Frankincense used for temple worship.

Myrrh burial spice that masked the stench of death.

Very strange gifts for a baby. Yet, they were valuable, transportable, and marketable items of the day, which could have sustained Mary and Joseph during their sudden escape to Egypt.

After the Magi worshiped Jesus, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod but to go home by another route.

So they were guided by their astrological knowledge, the Hebrew scriptures, other religious experts, their dreams, and their intuition.

What guides us through life?

Some rely on spirit guides, ancestors, or angels.

Some rely on intuition and inner knowing.

Some rely on moral values and ethics.

Some rely on their own inner compass.

Some rely on their emotions and how they feel about something.

Some rely on mentors and leaders.

Some rely on professionals and specialized coaches.

Some rely on superstition.

Some rely on astronomical and horological signs.

But what do we rely on as Christians for our guidance in life?

We rely on the Bible, the gift of Jesus' Holy Spirit, and the counsel of spiritually wise men and women around us.

This morning, we are going to be randomly handing out star words for 2026. As you come forward for communion, there will be two stands with a stack of words. Take one and ponder in your heart this next year how God might use this word to guide you.

The word I got last year was "Dream." And I took this as an invitation from God to dream about my life and ministry in 2026 and beyond. It even prompted me to apply for a grant that I received that will help create space for Karen and I to do some dreaming together.

I am curious what God might say to us through these words we receive today?

Everything about today's story points us to Jesus, the king of the Jews. The Savior of the World. Who said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me

will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”⁹ I am the the great Morning Star. Look to me for guidance and wisdom, and I will set your footpaths straight.¹⁰

So may we be like the Magi who do our homework as we seek Jesus today. May we not let fear stop us. And may we know that the with the gift of the Holy Spirit that we will never have to walk in darkness again.

Amen.

⁹ John 8:12

¹⁰ Proverbs 3:5-6