

Explore: The King worshipped

December 4, 2015

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for Dec. 20 focuses on Matthew 2:1-12.*

A short test

Use the following test to start your Bible study group.

How well do you really know the biblical version of the Christmas story?

Each question has only one correct answer. The answers can be found at the end of the lesson.

1. How did Mary travel to Bethlehem?

a. on a donkey b. on a camel c. with Joseph

2. Mary gave birth to Jesus

a. the night they arrived in Bethlehem b. the Bible doesn't say c. a few days after they arrived

3. Jesus was born in a

a. the Bible doesn't say b. stable c. cave

4. Biblically speaking, the Magi should be placed at the nativity scene.

True False

5. There were three Magi.

True False

Give me the facts, ma'am, only the facts

The Christmas story can be tricky, per the test above. Although I have lost it, I once had a Christmas test that demonstrated it. When about 100 people took it, the average score was less than 50! Why? It's simple. We know the Christmas story through Hollywood, pageantry, folklore and hymns. "Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." Well, maybe, but the Bible doesn't say. "Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing or the plains." Well, the angels actually didn't sing anything. (This one will probably frustrate you. You're welcome. Read Luke 2.) "We three kings of Orient are...." The Bible doesn't actually say that there were three of them, nor does it say they were kings.

My wife is a preschool expert. She holds a degree in early childhood development, has taught special education for preschoolers, and has taught preschool Sunday school for two decades. Preschoolers don't know all of the "folklore" we have created about Christmas. In preschool Sunday school, they are being taught the biblical facts. So I asked my wife, "If you were teaching preschoolers the story of the Magi (notice, I didn't call them the "wise men"), what would you teach them?"

The facts, preschool style

The Magi traveled a long distance to see Jesus. How far? We don't actually know. But we know they possessed a deep desire to see Jesus, the "King of the Jews."

The Magi followed a great star. A cluster of stars? A bright star? A comet? Once again, we don't know. But we do know the Magi faithfully followed for a long period of time.

The Magi came to worship. The story is very clear: The purpose for the grand adventure of the Magi was to worship the King of the Jews. These Magi verbally expressed it and practiced it.

The Magi bowed before King Jesus. I love the Bible. It's so consistent.

People rarely stood in Jesus' presence. They almost always knelt or fell before him. It's as if they simply couldn't stand in his presence. Peter "fell at Jesus' knees" when he caught a boat full of fish. The one leper who returned "threw himself at Jesus' feet." The woman with the bleeding issue "came trembling and fell at his feet." There was a man named Jarius who came to Jesus, fell at his feet and pleaded for him to go heal his daughter.

The Magi knelt before Jesus. There is a certain intentionality about it. Several of those listed above, flooded with emotion, fear or praise, seemed to have thrown themselves at Jesus feet. The Magi bowed. It's a very planned, humble act of worship.

The Magi gave gifts to Jesus. In the ancient world, this was common. In fact, if you are married, you probably wear a wedding ring. In the ancient world, friends often exchanged simple gold bands as evidence of friendship and good will. We just might be able to trace your wedding ring, in some way, back to the practice of the Magi. More about the gifts in a moment.

So, preschool style, *the Magi traveled a long distance to worship the King ... Jesus.*

Something extra for us grown ups

The gifts the Magi brought were interesting, one in particular. As strange as it may sound to us, salt would have been one of the most valuable possessions that could have been given to Jesus in that day (but I'm really glad that's not part of the story). Gold we can certainly associate with today for its high value. Frankincense was basically an incense of perfume. But myrrh, as the author of our Bible study points out, was an interesting choice.

The best way I know to end this article is with the verse of a hymn "Christmas Has Its Cradle". It is hymn No. 152 in the 1991 edition of *The Baptist Hymnal*. Interestingly enough, the hymn is in the "cross, suffering

and death” section of the hymnal, even though it is entirely about the birth of Jesus. To find it online, [click here](#). The words are by Rae E. Whitney and the music by Stan Pethel. The following is the third verse:

“Christmas has its cradle, Wise men came to bring
Myrrh and gold and incense, offerings for a King;
Myrrh alone stayed with him, death’s balm for this boy,
From the Christmas cradle and to his Easter joy.”

Answers to Christmas quiz

1. c. With Joseph. The Bible doesn’t say *how* Mary traveled to Bethlehem, except that she traveled with Joseph.
2. b. The Bible doesn’t say. We are only told that Mary gave birth while they were in Bethlehem. It could have been weeks later.
3. a. The Bible doesn’t say. We only know Mary placed Jesus in a manger.
4. False. The Magi didn’t arrive until Jesus was at least 2 years old. (You can go home and remove the “wise men” and the camels from your nativity scene).
5. False. We only know there were at least two Magi. It’s assumed there were three because there were three gifts. There could have been many more.

Application ideas for your Bible study group:

- How did you do on the test? Do you know the real story or the “Hollywood and hymnal” story of the birth of Christ? Why is it this way?
- Read the entire hymn “Christmas Has Its Cradle” to your group. Read it slowly. Perhaps even recruit someone to sing it for your group. Much like the advent hymns, it’s in a minor key, therefore

evokes emotions of sadness. Ask the group to respond to the reading or singing.