

# MATTHEW 2:1–12

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## Exploring the Scripture

In the Christian calendar, today is Epiphany, the twelfth day after Christmas, which has deep roots in our text. We find people who were foreign to both the religious and governing communities of Judea but who experienced an amazing epiphany—the manifestation of God through a baby.

Only Matthew tells the story of people who came from the East bringing gifts to the baby Jesus. Over the years these people have been identified as “kings,” probably due to passages in Isaiah about gold and frankincense being brought to Zion and the psalms declaring kings would come bearing gifts of gold. Matthew identifies them as wise men, presumably reflecting their religious practice of stargazing. However, there is no mention of how many, although because of three gifts (gold, frankincense, myrrh), traditionally the number of magi was said to be three.

Following a star, the travelers stopped in Jerusalem asking about the location of the child. Had they assumed the child was in Jerusalem? Possibly. Jerusalem, the more populous, outstanding, and powerful location, must be where this new king had been born. Could such a royal occurrence happen in some dusty, peasant village? Today there are those who believe important things are associated with the popular, powerful, and glamorous. Challenge the hearers to consider what they are seeking in life. Are they missing the “Bethlehems” because the “Jerusalems” seem more attractive?

An unlikely meeting occurred during this stop in Jerusalem—a city that represented the world then, and to some degree, the world now. At that meeting were King Herod, religious leaders, and seekers from the East. Herod represented people and institutions using oppression and force to achieve their goals of power. Herod asked the religious leaders for an interpretation of the scriptures about this new king. He might be considered representative of those who use the scriptures for their own motives and agendas. We must be willing to challenge the prejudicial and oppressive acts of the Herods in today’s world. Each of us must also acknowledge the Herod-like characteristics buried in our own hearts.

Religious leaders who were among the most devout followers of the God of Abraham were also at this meeting. They knew the scriptures identified Bethlehem as the Messiah’s birthplace. However, they made no effort to go there. They interpreted the scripture, but because of their preconceived notions of the Messiah, were unwilling to be drawn into places where the scripture was calling them. Having a new vision of God, an epiphany, most often occurs when we step out in faith and journey to the Bethlehems of our own experience. The preacher may want to challenge the congregation to be more open to new places and approaches to life as disciples to which the scriptures will call them.

The final group at the meeting was the seekers, stargazers who normally studied the sky and found spiritual guidance in the signs. Something about this new star, though, drew them outside their comfort zones to become seekers. We might take our cue from the wise men, willing to leave our comfort zones in search of the king. It is amazing that the only ones who really got it right, who experienced a new vision of God, were foreigners. These wise men, as defined by Matthew, were not from the Roman or the Jewish worlds; they were from a place outside the known empire.

The writer of Matthew sends a significant message, a foreshadowing of the mission of Jesus. Even in his infancy we find the message that God’s grace is for all persons. The words that show up later in the letter to the Ephesians about Christ coming to unite all humanity and break down walls of separation (Ephesians 2:14–16), were beginning to take shape in Bethlehem.

## Central Ideas

1. Gaining new insights and experiencing an epiphany requires moving out of our comfort zones.
2. People and institutions still attempt to interpret scripture to serve their own agendas.
3. Dismantling walls of separation in our world is at the root of the mission of Christ.
4. Listening to the questions of seekers may guide us to a new epiphany.

## Questions for the Speaker

1. How am I sometimes like Herod? How am I like the priests and scribes?

2. Who are “Herods” in the world today, and what is our response to them?
3. Might this scripture empower you to go outside your normal, daily routine in mission?
4. How is the message of Christ still a threat to power structures today?