



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

**Sermon for Epiphany Sunday**

January 5, 2025

# How Did the Magi Know?

## Ephesians 3:1–12

<sup>1</sup>For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—  
<sup>2</sup>assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup>how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. <sup>4</sup>When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup>which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. <sup>6</sup>This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

<sup>7</sup>Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. <sup>8</sup>To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup>and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, <sup>10</sup>so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. <sup>11</sup>This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, <sup>12</sup>in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

Matthew reports in today’s Gospel that “wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’”

Why? This *is* very curious, isn’t it? I mean, would you, on an evening of star-gazing, see a star you’d never noticed before, and presume that a new king had been born somewhere? Even if it were an unusual star? So why did these astronomers – for that is surely what they were – presume that a new king had been born in Judea among the Jews, no less? Why the Jews? Why Judea? Let’s say you presumed that the star was significant enough to indicate some monumental event – like, perhaps, the birth of a king – why would your attention be drawn to that tiny little backwater country? It doesn’t make sense. Or does it?

In 931BC, after the death of Solomon, in fulfillment of the prophecy given through Ahijah the Shilonite (1 Ki. 11:29-32), the kingdom of Israel was divided over, among other things, the adulterous behavior of King Solomon and the heavy taxes he had imposed. The northern kingdom retained the name *Israel*, but lost the holy city of Jerusalem; the southern kingdom assumed the name *Judah*, after the primary tribe of the two it had left.



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Roughly two hundred years after the split (722BC), the Assyrian King Shalmaneser V attacked and conquered Israel. Tens of thousands of Israelites were dispossessed of their land and forcibly relocated under what is known as the Assyrian Resettlement Policy.

A hundred years later (612BC), the Assyrian Empire fell to the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar II, who consequently besieged Judah, sacked Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple, after which the people of Judah began in great numbers to join their exiled northern neighbors in Babylon.

This exile lasted 70 years, in accordance with the prophecy given through Jeremiah (29:10-14). Now, some of you have reached the 70-year mark in your life; I haven't yet, but it's not far off. So, for more than the years of my life, the people of Israel and Judah lived in captivity in Babylon. What do you suppose they did in regard to their faith? Do you think they abandoned it? Would you? Do you think they suppressed it? Do you think they kept quiet about it? Probably not. In fact, we know not. Daniel, who was elevated to a prominent position in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, was known to sit at his window and pray to the God of Israel three times a day. Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego, who were given charge over the affairs of the province of Babylon, refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue. The Jews at the time of Queen Esther refused to follow the pagan practices of King Xerxes and his people, and it took the faithful pleading of the Queen – who was also a Jew – to persuade her husband to revoke an evil plot to destroy them.

From all appearances, the Jews in captivity lived their faith openly and unabashedly. What effect do you think that would have had on the people of Assyria, later Babylon (and still later Persia), to have prominent people in positions of influence who were believers in God and who had faith that He would send Messiah?

How did the Magi know that a king would be born, a king who would be more than a king, a king worth traveling 1,000 miles to find and worship, a king whose kingdom is not of this world, a king who would be King of kings and Lord of lords? They knew because the people of God, who clung to the prophecies in faith, lived that faith for all their pagan neighbors to see.

Now, bear in mind that this faithfulness was not without its troubles. Daniel was thrown into a den of lions; Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego were cast into a fiery furnace; and plots such as the one perpetrated by the evil Haman in the days of Esther and Mordecai threatened the very existence of the Children of Israel. Undoubtedly, there were many unknown to us who gave up their lives for letting their faith be known and seen. How did the faithful Jews muster the courage to face such danger? Of course, God helped them. He instilled in their hearts a refusal, a stubbornness, to give up that faith or to hide it under a bushel. They *had* to live it, for it was part of them, the very core of who they were. To give that up would be to lose themselves. And they could not, would not, conceal their faith, by God's help and with His great grace and favor.



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The result of this God-given bravado was that many of their neighbors came to share that faith with them. The Syriac Christians in Iraq, for instance, descend from the ancient Assyrians, making up one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, in the very place of captivity for the exiled Jews. It's not an exaggeration to say that the Gentile world knows of Jesus because such believers adopted the faith of their Jewish neighbors and embraced the Son of God with the same fervor. In fact, Eastern Christianity considers Epiphany to be Christmas for them, for though Jesus had been born earlier, that is the day He became known to the Gentile world.

At times, it seems we live as exiles, does it not? We live in a post-Christian culture, in a post-Christian world. Paganism rules the day here now. Christians often feel intimidated when it comes to living their faith openly. But what if the ancient Jews in Babylon had been so intimidated that they ceased living their faith? Would the Magi ever have known? Would they have come? Would they have taken the news of the newborn king back to their homeland? What if the disciples of Jesus had let the fear of martyrdom dissuade them from preaching the Gospel? Would you ever have heard the news? Would you be a Christian today? Would salvation be yours? Would eternal life be yours? Would resurrection be your inheritance?

Beloved, do not fear. The same God who provided for the Children of Israel in Babylon is providing for you. The Messiah they looked forward to is your Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. He it is who strengthened their faith in the face of persecution and He it is who is strengthening yours. He who won your salvation at the price of His own blood has provided various means to strengthen your faith: His Word of Truth, the Holy Sacraments, and the consolation of your brothers and sisters in Christ, who encourage you in your walk through this unbelieving world, that you may believe in spite of it, but also that you may be a light shining in its darkness.

So come, dear Christian, as the Magi came. Worship the King, bring your gifts of praise and thanksgiving, for you are recipients of the ancient mysteries, children of God through the Faith handed down to you by faithful believers of long ago. You are the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies, that the Gentiles would be "fellow heirs [with them], members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

By the grace of God, then, and in the power of His Spirit, hand that faith to your neighbors. Live that faith unashamedly before them, that God, through your life, may "bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This is according to the eternal purpose that God has brought into being in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him."

Beloved, you are His witnesses, inheritors of His grace, distributors of His grace



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through the Word of Christ. Believe the Word, live the Word, share the Word, that others may come to know Jesus and be saved. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen