

**WHERE IS THE CHILD  
WHO IS BORN KING OF THE JEWS?**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

**Baraca Radio Sunday School Class**

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**Lawrence Webb**

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, ‘**Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?** For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet.”*

*<sup>6</sup> “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’*

*<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’*

*<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.*

*<sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

So that is Matthew’s story of the three Kings. The only thing is, if you listened carefully you realize the Bible does not call them kings, and the Bible does not say how many of the magi there were or whether they all were men.

I’ve told a story before about a friend of mine in seminary who taught a grandmothers Sunday school class in the church where he and I worked. His class members were in their sixties and seventies and eighties, and Bill was twenty-five. One Sunday, he gave his older ladies a list of twenty famous sayings, some in the Bible and some not. One statement was “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” One dear lady named Amy insisted this saying is Holy Scripture. In reality, it was said by Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley who became the founders of Methodism. But Amy still declared “Cleanliness is next to godliness” is from the Bible.

Bill loaned Amy a concordance — a book that finds words in the Bible. He asked Amy to take the book home and find “Cleanliness is next to godliness,” then report back next week. The next Sunday and Bill said, “Well, Amy, did you find “Cleanliness is next to godliness,” in the Bible?

With a triumphal spirit, Amy said, “It’s in MY Bible. I WROTE it in!

As you looked at the figures on your coffee table over the years, you may have mentally written those kingly figures into your Bible. But if you reread today’s Bible passage, you will see no numbers. Simply magi from the East. But Matthew lists three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So we assume each king brought his own present **for the child who is born king of the Jews. So three presents equal three presenters. These three kings have even been given names, perhaps several different sets of names. In our time, the familiar names are Balthasar, Melchior, and Caspar.**

These so-called three wise men may even include women, family groups. They’ve been likened to drifting bands of Gypsies (Karl Kuhn, “Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12,” *Working Preacher*, December 25, 2013).

Seminary Professor Karl Kuhn summed up various traditions this way:

From what we can piece together from surviving historical evidence, it appears that magi were astrologers and interpreters of dreams, especially in eastern cultures that had been influenced by Persian customs. They were not kings themselves, but some of them served in the courts of kings, functioning as advisors. It is likely that most such advisors were men, but some could have been women. There is also evidence suggesting that the magi may have been itinerant, traveling in large groups, including their families — like roaming gypsies.

We might ask how these men heard about **the child who is born king of the Jews** since they have come from a long distance in their search. Jewish history provides a ready answer to that question: From the Seven-Hundred BCE period and on down several centuries, Israelites were taken prisoners and were forcibly moved to other countries. They took their sacred writings with them and kept their historic faith alive. So astrologers could have readily encountered faithful Jews and learned the written messages of the prophets. — many of which contained visions of a Great Promised One. This could logically set these stargazers to reading the Jewish Scriptures and reading the heavens for signs of fulfillment of these visions.

These astrologers start off following a star and get their direction from the star for a while. But when they get into Judea, they stop following the star and just assume they will find this newborn king of the Jews at the royal palace of King Herod in

Jerusalem. And they ask the question: **“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”**

This shakes up Herod. What’s this about a newborn king of the Jews? He knows his wife isn’t pregnant? What are these foreigners talking about? He gathers his religious advisers and asks them about where the Messiah was to be born because many Jews expected the Messiah to be a political leader as well as religious.

His advisers tell him the prophet Micah (5:2) wrote, *But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.* So Herod sends the magi to Bethlehem, claiming he, too, wants to worship this new king of the Jews.

In reality, he wants to dispose of this child who seems to be a threat to his throne. So he, along with the magi, is asking, **“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”**

Now the magi head toward Bethlehem, and the star that had led them when they followed it was once again pointing them to their destination. The star had not deserted them.

They had turned aside from its direction. The star once again held the answer to the question: **“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”**

There the magi find the answer in the house where Mary and Joseph and Jesus are living. There the astrologers present their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to **this child who has been born king of the Jews.**

As the magi are about to go back to tell Herod they have found **the child, who has been born king of the Jews**, they are warned in a dream regarding Herod’s true intentions. So our encounter with the seekers ends with this statement: *And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

Joseph also has another dream, probably while thinking of in response to what the magi told — how they had followed the star but then went astray going to the palace and leaving the guidance of the star. The magi also told how God had warned them in a dream telling them of Herod’s sinister plans to find the babe and kill him. Realizing the danger for his baby and his wife and himself, Joseph takes them in the middle of the night and flees as refugees en route to Egypt, leaving Herod still asking, **“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”**

The family stay in Egypt until they hear that Herod is dead. So they return safely to their native land, no longer worried about the probing question: **“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”**

## TRANSITION

I have repeated that question over and over because I want you to think about it as we move from that first Christmas two thousand years ago and look at Christmas 2020. Here in our own time, we need to look carefully at whether we ask ourselves,

our family, our church friends, and every person who names the name of Jesus:  
**“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”**

So often, we blank Jesus completely out of the picture. Think of gift-buying. It’s easy to equate expensive gifts with expression of love. Those two are not necessarily connected. It’s easy to make the two synonymous as you walk through the mall, as you look through the holiday catalogs that show up in your mailbox, as you watch television or the Internet. An online article at [nerdwallet.com](https://www.nerdwallet.com) in late November says “about 48 million Americans are still paying off credit card debt from last holiday season (Laura McMullen, “Shop Intentionally to Avoid Holiday Overspending,” Nerdwallet.com, <https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/finance/shop-intentionally-avoid-overspending-holidays>”).

In all that excess, we do well to ask our recurring question: **“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”** The star we used to follow got lost down the aisle of the jewelry store or on the deck of the cruise ship or in the showroom of the car dealership.

Or think of the lyrics of the so-called Christmas songs we hear on the radio, in the wallpaper music in the retail stores. Many of those songs never even mention Christmas, much less the birth of Jesus. Lots of them are simply anthems of worship to winter weather:

“A beautiful sight, we’re happy tonight, “Walking in Winter Wonderland”  
(Felix Bernard and Richard B. Smith).

Oh, the weather outside is frightful  
But the fire is so delightful  
And since we've no place to go  
Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow (Jule Styne).

Frosty the snowman was a jolly happy soul,  
With a corncob pipe and a button nose  
And two eyes made out of coal (Walter E. Rollins, Steve Nelson, Gene Autry).

It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year mentions “Christmases long, long ago”  
and “caroling out in the snow.” Nothing specifically religious. Instead, we hear

—  
There'll be much mistltoeing  
And hearts will be glowing  
When loved ones are near (Eddie Pola / George Wyle).

In all this musical merrymaking, again we have to ask, **“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”**

Earlier in this lesson, we looked at the woman who was so determined to make “Cleanliness is next to godliness” part of the Bible that she wrote it into her Bible. People do similar things with other beliefs, including the end of the world. I keep running into people who like to set dates. In response to this mistaken practice, I offer this advice: Read Matthew 24:36 or Mark 13:32. Those two verses say exactly the same thing: *But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* I don’t want to put myself in the position of thinking I know more than Jesus.

For Christmas, people make up things they claim to have been around for centuries but really have been here less than fifty years. A prime example involves giving deep Christian meaning to the funny song about the Twelve Days of Christmas.

In the song, a woman tells the gifts her true love gave her each day. Back about thirty years ago, someone circulated the story that all twelve gifts formed a code language at a time several centuries ago when Catholics in England could not openly teach their doctrines. So each gift represented an aspect of Christian teachings.

The one partridge in the pear tree represented Jesus Christ.

The two turtle doves were the Old and New Testaments

The three French hens stood for faith, hope, and love.

The four calling birds were the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The five golden rings represented the first five books of the Old Testament.

The six geese a-laying stood for the six days of creation.

Seven swans a-swimming represented sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The eight maids a-milking were the eight beatitudes.

Nine ladies dancing were the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit.

The ten lords a-leaping were the Ten Commandments.

The eleven pipers piping stood for the eleven faithful Apostles.

The twelve drummers drumming symbolized the twelve points of belief in The Apostles' Creed (Original Source: Fr. Calvin Goodwin, FSSP, Nebraska. Printed with permission from Catholic Tradition).

So there you have the story of the coded references to Christian teachings in the Twelve Days at a time when Catholics could not openly teach doctrine. The only problem is, Catholics never used the song that way (Snopes <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/twelve-days-christmas/>). It’s an old song — about two hundred forty years old — going back to 1780, probably French in origin. But again, the claim of hidden Christian messages traces back only about thirty years, to 1990 (Snopes).

But that’s not the end of the story

December 25th is the First Day of Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus.

December 26th, the Second Day of Christmas, marks the death of Stephen the Apostle, the first recorded Christian martyr. One of the other Twelve

Days honors Mary, the mother of Jesus; another the circumcision of Jesus; still another the Holy Family: Joseph, Mary, and Jesus; John the Apostle, and Herod's slaying of little baby boys in his attempt to kill Jesus. This is often known as the Feast of Holy Innocents (Wikipedia: "The Twelve Days of Christmas"). Let me suggest, each of the Twelve Days and indeed the entire year of liturgical seasons is designed to focus on the answer of the question, "**Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?**"

## CONCLUSION

If you've tried to figure where we are in the Twelve Days, — today, Sunday, January 3rd, is the Tenth Day, which — by now I hope you realize — has nothing whatever to do with Ten Lords a-Leaping. But with three of the Twelve Days remaining, here's an idea of three gifts resembling those of the astrologers you could give to help people find the answer to our question: "**Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?**"

**With the gift of Gold**, you have the Golden Opportunity to reach out in friendship to someone through a phone call, an email greeting or a Zoom visit.

**With the gift of Frankincense**, you can provide a sweet-smelling offering, going the second or third mile with an acquaintance who no longer drives, delivering groceries, picking up prescriptions, or providing transportation to appointments for this person you hardly know.

**With the gift of Myrrh**, you can reach out with love and kind deeds to those in the sorrowing. Myrrh often has been a healing balm. Profound words are not necessary. With the pandemic, you may not be able to be there in person. But a call, an e-card, a personal note can bring a measure of healing.

Offering the spiritual version of any or all these gifts may lead the recipient to answer the

Question: "**Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?**"

That person likely will see the Newborn King in YOU!

## BENEDICTION

Now, claim these promises:

God's love that will never let you go,

God's grace that is greater than all your sin,

And God's peace that passes all understanding,

These are yours through Christ our Lord. Amen.