

The Story of the Magi



This lesson is meant accompany the video "The Story of the Magi." To get the most out of this lesson, you will need to show the video to your class. The video is currently available, at no charge, from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary at www.pts.edu/Epiphany_Resource_Kit_2017.



COMPLIMENTS OF THE
MILLER SUMMER YOUTH INSTITUTE AT
PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



THE STORY OF THE MAGI

LESSON PLAN

LEADER PREPARATION

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This lesson deals with the celebration of Epiphany, and in particular the visit of the Magi. It begins with Scripture, and then provide a 15-minute video of a legend about the Magi. If possible, watch the video yourself ahead of time. The legend contained in the video is not scriptural, and the majority of the characters in the legend never appear in Scripture. The story takes place largely in Persia, far to the east of Israel.

The source for the story is an ancient historian named Herodotus. He is thought to have been born around 480 years before Christ, and to have lived about 60 to 70 years. He wrote more than four centuries before the first Christmas. His work is entitled *The Histories*, and in some translations spans over 700 pages! The book is in the public domain and many translations are available online for free.

The following chart will provide you with some specific details of the story, as well as the references in Herodotus if you are interested in conducting your own study. Feel free to share this information if your class if they are particularly interested in history or details.

Story Action	Page in Herodotus	Approximate Date
King Astyages demands the Magi interpret his dreams.	1.107-108	580s
After they incorrectly interpret a dream and its subsequent prophecy, Astyages executes many of the Magi.	1.128	550s
The ethnic group of which the Magi are a part become slaves to the Persians.	1.129	
Cyrus rises to power.	1.130	
Smerdis, son of Cyrus, is assassinated.	3.61	520s
Smerdis is replaced by an impostor.	3.67	521
Seven Persians assault the palace and kill the Magi involved.	3.76-3.78	
Genocide of Magi.	3.79	
(Not included in video) Magi serve Xerxe.	7.19	484
(Not included in video) Magi ordered to cast spells on the wind.	7.191	480

Notes to Consider Before Class

- The video is approximately 14 minutes. Be sure to budget sufficient time to complete the video and allow for at least brief discussion afterward.
- The story presented in the video is not in the Bible, nor are most of the characters ever mentioned in the Bible.
- There are many theories on who the wise men were. If someone in your class is set on a different theory, that’s okay. This legend is presented to encourage conversation and thought.
- Some have accused Herodotus of being a better storyteller than historian. It may be fun to ask the class if they think this legend is embellished.
- This story takes place at least 400 years before the birth of Christ. While there may be a historic link between the group of Magi in the legend and the group of Magi from Christmas or Epiphany, they are separated by centuries.
- You may consider brining a nativity set to class to discuss the popular imagery of the wisemen.

LESSON PLAN

Background and Scripture

At Epiphany, we traditionally celebrate either the baptism of Christ or the visit of the Magi. For this lesson, we will be exploring the visit of the Magi, which is more frequently connected to Epiphany in Western traditions. Though we often tell their story at Christmas, we focus more specifically on the wise men at Epiphany.

As we begin, let’s read the passage Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV).

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 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.' 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 "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."

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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.' 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This passage introduces us to the "wise men." There are many theories as to their actual identity. We even use several different titles for them. In the NRSV they are called wise men. Sometimes we also call them Kings or Magi.

Reaction Questions

- What do the Magi look like in your imagination or in your nativity set?
- Which name do you prefer, kings, magi, or wise men?
- If you had to cast actors to play Herod and the wise men, who would you cast and why?

In Matthew, the name given to these visitors was "magoi." This name is very similar to the name of a group of people that were discussed by Herodotus, an ancient historian. It is difficult to tell whether they are intended to be the same people or not, but regardless, their history can help us understand why Matthew may have chosen to use that particular name for these visitors.

This video tells a portion of their story that is not found in the Bible, but in ancient history. Let's watch the video, and then we'll think about the significance of Magi visiting Jesus.

Video and Discussion Questions

Watch the video "The Story of the Magi."

- How are the Magi in this story different from the Magi in your nativity set or in your imagination?
- Does this story change your view of the Magi? How?
- If the Magi of Scripture are connected to these Magi, how would they have viewed Herod?
- How would Herod have reacted to them?
- What would it mean for these figures to encounter Christ?
- Do you think these are the same Magi? Why or why not?

Conclusion and Prayer

The mysterious "sorcerers" we find in Herodotus' writings may or may not have a connection to the Magi of the Bible. Either way, their stories are permanently attached to the same name.

If Matthew intended for us to recall stories like this, he may have been pointing us to the peace and freedom we find in Christ. As we celebrate Epiphany, consider this story and what it means for you and for the people around you to find peace and freedom through Jesus.

To Do This Week

Think of one area of your life where you need peace. Spend time in prayer, asking for the peace of Christ to be with you, and with those around you.

Closing Prayer

Jesus Christ, we thank you that you invite us to seek you. We thank you for the peace that you bring, and ask that you would show us how to proclaim a message of freedom to those around us.

Amen.

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