

THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN

Matthew 2

This is the first of our *special* lessons. In this Christmas lesson, in all classes except the Primary, it should be pointed out that the number and names of the Wise Men are not given in the Word. Tradition says there were three—possibly because of the three gifts—and gives them the names *Gasper, Melchior, Balthazar*, and many Christmas pictures, pageants, and stories are based on these traditions. But the children should know from the start what is Scripture and what is tradition, as the confusion of the two is hard to correct later.

Doctrinal Points

The gifts we should bring to the Lord are our love, our faith, and our obedience to His Word.

The Lord came into the world in the fullness of time [plenitudo temporis] when there was no longer any good, and consequently there was no truth.

Notes for Parents

Parents do a great deal for their children at Christmas time. They often make real personal sacrifices or sit up late at night working in order to have gifts and a tree and a feast to make the day a happy one. But there is one gift they sometimes deny their children which is the most important gift of all, and that is a knowledge of the meaning and holiness of Christmas.

On the first Christmas Day the Lord gave to all of us the greatest and richest gift ever given—Himself. He “bowed the heavens and came down for our salvation.” And all too often we do not even think to thank Him for this gift on His birthday or to be sure our children know of it.

And there are gifts we should bring to Him on His birthday. The

Wise Men from the East brought Him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These were all valuable things, but it was not for their intrinsic value that they were given. The Wise Men knew what these three gifts signified, just as they knew what the star meant when it appeared to them. They were of those who had cherished the knowledges which had come down to them by tradition from ancient times when men lived close to the Lord and knew what everything in His creation meant.

Everyone knows that gold is symbolic of love. Love is one of the things we should give the Lord. Frankincense is the offering of our minds, our thoughts, our trust, our faith. And myrrh—a bitter resin—pictures obedience in our conduct, which is not always easy, but is a very necessary gift if we are to be true followers of the Lord.

Sometimes we start our lives very far from the Lord, but if we try to do as well as we know how, wishing always to know more of the right way, the little truth we have will be like the star leading us always closer to the Lord. Sometimes we are like the shepherds, living in the Holy Land itself close to Bethlehem, brought up in the church and taught by our parents in the right way. The shepherds, you remember, saw a great light. It was the same light which was a star to the far-off Wise Men. The shepherds had only a short way to go to find the Lord, while the Wise Men had a long journey. But they all found Him. The condition of finding the Lord is always the same—the desire to be shown how to live good lives.

Let us today be wise like the Wise Men of old. If our minds are open to receive truth from the Lord's Word, we shall see the star and be led to the Lord, and when we find Him, we shall lay our gifts at His feet: the gold of our love, the frankincense of our faith and trust, and the strong myrrh of obedience.

Primary

This beautiful story presents no problems for this age group. The children may want to know what frankincense and myrrh are, and some of the older

ones may ask about the reality of the star. The teacher needs to be familiar with the facts given in the notes for the older classes.

What day have you been looking forward to for weeks? You know that your parents and friends will give you presents. Perhaps you are giving some presents yourself. But I wonder if you know why we have Christmas Day and why we give each other presents on that day. Christmas is someone's birthday. It is the day on which the Lord Himself was born into the world.

We have learned that in the beginning people were good, but little by little they chose to disobey the Lord and to follow their own ways instead of His. Finally even people who wanted to do right did not know what was really right.

So the Lord Himself had to come into the world to show them the way.

The New Testament tells about the Lord's life on earth.

Where was the Lord born?

Who came from the East to find Him?

How did they know He had come?

People had known almost from the beginning of things that He would come sometime, because He had told them He would. In our Bible, in the Old Testament from which most of our lessons have been taken so far, there are many "prophecies" or foretellings of His coming. But even before our Bible was written, there was another Bible called the *Ancient Word*. That Bible was lost a long, long time ago, but people all over the world remembered and treasured some of the things it said; and in the country far to the east of the Holy Land—the country Balaam came from—there were people who especially loved and kept all that was remembered of it. One of its prophecies was that when the Lord came into the world, a star would appear. So wise and good people who wanted to know and worship the Lord were always watching for the star.

The Wise Men came from the same country from which Balaam had come long before.

Where did the Wise Men go first?

How did the priests and scribes know where to send them to find the Lord?

What led the Wise Men to the right house?

What gifts did they bring to the Lord?

What was the baby's mother's name?

What was her husband's name?

When you grow older, you will understand why Joseph was not the Lord's father.

Why did the Wise Men not go back to Herod?

What did the Lord tell Joseph in a dream?

Where did Joseph take Mary and Jesus?

How long did they stay there?

The three gifts the Lord wants from us are our love, our trust, and our obedience.

Junior

These children will be quite familiar with the story and should have an opportunity to tell it. Then they should look up the Bible references mentioned in their notes and read the information given in their notes also. The teacher should read the Intermediate notes as preparation for answering questions about the star.

Whose birth do we celebrate this week?

About how long ago was He born into the world?

Where do we learn about His birth and life in the world?

What are the two parts of the Bible?

In the beginning men were not in evils but they were free to choose to look to the Lord for guidance or to look to themselves; as they chose the selfish way, they gradually became evil. Their selfishness closed their minds to the truth so that finally even those who still wanted to be good did not know how. When this time came, the Lord had to come into the world Himself to show men how to live. He knew from the beginning that this would happen. The first prophecy of His coming is found in Genesis 3:15. The Old Testament is the story of the gradual decline of the human race. The New Testament is the story of the turning of the tide by the Lord so that men could find their way back to Him. He has given us four versions of this story, called the Gospels, each written through a different man. The word *Gospel* means "good news." The Lord's life is good news for all who want to be good. Only those who do not want to give up their selfish ways are not willing to welcome the Lord.

Where was the Lord born?

Bethlehem means “house of bread.” Two other famous people in the Bible were born there, Benjamin and David. We learn from the Gospel of Luke that the Lord was born in Bethlehem because He chose to be born in a family who were descendants of David, but there was another reason, too. The Lord came to give men the food they need to nourish their souls. He called Himself “the bread of life.” This means that we must take goodness from Him into our souls just as we take good food into our bodies. Think of this when you pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

When the Lord was born, who came looking for Him?

Where did they come from?

How did they know He had been born?

Read Numbers 24:15-19. The prophecy in verse 17 was part of the Ancient Word, which had been preserved in the eastern country where the Wise Men lived. Balaam came from that same country, but he was a selfish man who used his knowledge from the Ancient Word to work magic, whereas the Wise Men were good men who wanted to welcome and to worship the Lord. All through the years good men in that eastern country had been watching for the star.

Where did the Wise Men go first?

Who was king in Jerusalem at that time?

How did Herod find out where to send them?

The scribes were those who could read and write and spent their lives reading and copying the Old Testament. The prophecy they quoted is found in Micah 5:2.

How did the Wise Men find the house where the Lord was?

What gifts did they give Him?

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are symbols of love, faith, and obedience, gifts we should all bring to the Lord. Because the Wise Men brought gifts on that first Christmas Day, it has become the custom to give gifts at Christmas time. But when we give and receive our Christmas presents, we should always remember that the Lord has given us the greatest gift of all, the gift of Himself.

- Why didn't the Wise Men go back to Herod?
Why had Herod wanted to know where the Lord was?
What did the angel of the Lord tell Joseph to do?
Do you remember any people in the Old Testament who went down into Egypt?
Why do you think Herod wanted to kill the Lord?
What terrible crime did Herod commit?
Where did Joseph take the Lord to live when they returned from Egypt?



Frankincense

Frankincense: "A vegetable resin, brittle, glittering, and of a bitter taste used for the purpose of sacrificial fumigation (Exodus 30:34-36). It was called *frank* because of the freeness with which, when burned, it gives forth its odor. It burns for a long time, with a steady flame. It is obtained by successive incisions in the bark of a tree called *Arbor thuris*. The first incision yields the purest and whitest resin, while the product of the after incisions is spotted with yellow, and loses its whiteness altogether as it becomes old. The Hebrews imported their frankincense from Arabia." (*Bible Dictionary*)

Myrrh: "This substance is mentioned in Exodus 30:23 as one of the ingredients of the 'oil of holy ointment' . . . Myrrh was also used for embalming. The *Balsamodendron Myrrha*, which produces the myrrh of commerce, has a wood and bark which emit a strong odor; the gum which exudes from the bark is at first oily, but becomes hard by exposure to air. This myrrh is in small, yellowish or white globules or tears. The tree is small, with a stunted trunk." (*Bible Dictionary*)



Myrrh

Intermediate

The lesson should be centered about the reason why the Lord had to come into the world and the nature of the three gifts which we should bring to Him. Connection should be made with the story of Balaam, pointing out the survival of knowledges from the Ancient Word in the eastern country.

The study of the Old Testament shows clearly how the human race declined spiritually when once men began to look to self instead of to the Lord. Their minds became gradually closed to truth. When we are bent on having our own way, we will not see the truth. From the time of Moses, people in the world had the Scriptures—at least the Book of the Law—but they did not want to know what it really meant. As time went on they built up ways of evading the Law; and because these were also written in books by their learned men and handed down from one generation to another, they came to regard them as holy also. The Lord said they had “made the commandment of God of none effect” by their tradition. So by the time the New Testament story began, even people who wanted to be good could no longer find out what was really right. Evil was becoming stronger than good not only in this world but even in the spiritual world, because so many evil people were going there. The Lord had to come into the world Himself to show men how to live and to restore the balance in the spiritual world by fighting and overcoming the forces of the hells. The only way in which He could do this was by taking on a body and mind like ours, for evil could not come near Him as He was in Himself. Mary was chosen as the human mother through whom the human body and mind were formed and born into the world. But we must always remember that Jesus had no human father—His father was almighty God.

There are two familiar stories about the Lord’s birth, this one in Matthew and the one in Luke about the shepherds. Everyone could not be told about the Lord’s birth. The indifferent did not care, and the wicked would have destroyed Him. But the simple good and the truly wise could be told because they would welcome Him. The shepherds and the Wise Men represent these two classes.

The Wise Men came from the East guided by a star. They belonged to a good remnant of the Ancient Church who had cherished the prophecies of the Ancient Word. Balaam's prophecy (Numbers 24:17) speaks of a star. We are not to think that it was a material star—it behaved as no material star possibly could—but that it was a light from the spiritual world. Stars represent knowledges of heavenly things. The prophecy was such a star, and when it was fulfilled, the spiritual eyes of those who had cherished it could be opened to see it as a star, a guiding light. You remember that the shepherds saw a great light. It was the same light. There is no record that anyone else saw it except the Wise Men and the shepherds.

The gifts which the Wise Men brought—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—are symbols of love, faith, and obedience, the gifts which all who are truly wise bring to the Lord. These gifts to the Lord are what we should have in mind as we give and receive gifts at Christmas. The Lord gave Himself to us that first Christmas, and if we have His unselfish love in our hearts, our happiness at Christmas time will be in what we can do to make others happy rather than in what we receive ourselves. But we must not forget that being grateful to others for what they do for us is one of the ways in which we can make them happy.

We remember that Egypt pictures memory-knowledge. The Lord had to pass through a childhood like ours and acquire memory-knowledges. He even had to learn the letter of the Word just as we do, for He had to make the body and mind He had taken on capable of receiving and expressing the divine life which was within Him. It was in order to picture this that He was taken into Egypt right after He was born.

We note that both the Wise Men and Joseph were instructed “in a dream.” Sleep is the time when our worldly thoughts and cares are put aside and so the Lord can be closer to us then than when we are awake. In the Word many people were taught in dreams and visions. The Lord seldom teaches people in that way now, but He does do much for our souls as well as for our bodies while we are asleep. So spiritually as well as physically we need a sufficient

amount of sleep, and we should be careful not to fall into the bad habit of sitting up late when we know we have to get up early the next morning.

The *Sower* gives us an interesting thought about our story for today: “The story brings into contrast two kings: King Herod ruling in Jerusalem, and the new-born King of the Jews. The Lord was King in the power of the Divine truth and love which He brought into the world. King Herod stands for the power of falsity and evil which held dominion in men’s hearts. Well might Herod be troubled at the mention of the new King, as the devils often cried out at the presence of the Lord.

“We seek the Lord as King and acknowledge Him as King especially when we learn His truth and allow it to order and rule our lives. Those who are seeking the Lord’s truth are also spiritually wise men. The little knowledge that they have is their star; they follow it joyfully, and it will surely bring them to the Lord.”

Basic Correspondences

gold = love
frankincense = faith
myrrh = obedience
Herod = falsity ruling in the mind

Senior

The emphasis here should be on the meaning of the Lord’s coming and on our responsibility as Christians to learn about His life and follow His example. The correspondence of the shepherds and Wise Men in us should be noted and the point made that the Lord cannot come into our hearts and minds if they are full of self-will and self-esteem.

We have followed in the Old Testament the story of the decline of the human race from their first state of childlike trust and obedience to the state in which they were far from the Lord in their hearts and minds and could be brought to obey Him only through hope of reward and fear of punishment. As the centuries passed the people more and more came to evade the Law as it had

been given them, covering it up with traditions of their own making, so that at the time when the Lord came into the world even those who wished to obey the Lord could not distinguish between the Law of the Lord and the accumulated tradition. As the Lord told the Pharisees, they made the commandments of no effect, “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:1-9). It was for this reason that the Lord had to come into the world to show men the true way of life and to overcome the powers of darkness which were becoming too strong for men to resist.

The Lord was born in the nighttime to picture the spiritual darkness into which the world had come. It was a time of materialism, of confusion, and of fear. Our own times are strikingly similar, but we have the light of life by which all who wish to follow the Lord may be guided. Christmas should mean something new to us every time we celebrate it, because the conditions around us change from year to year and we ourselves change, and in every state of the world and of our individual lives we need to be reminded that the Lord Himself bowed the heavens and came down for our salvation and that He calls us to trust in Him.

The Wise Men saw the Lord’s star in the east and came to worship Him. We know that stars represent knowledges of heavenly things, and Swedenborg tells us that when angels in the higher heavens are talking about heavenly truths, those in the lower heavens often see these conversations as stars in their sky (see AR 65, AE 402, TCR 160). The star which the Wise Men saw was such a spiritual light. Their spiritual eyes were opened by the Lord to see it because they had cherished the knowledges which had come down to them from the Ancient Word. Balaam, who spoke the prophecy of the star in Numbers 24:17, was from the same country as the Wise Men. We, if we are truly wise, will recognize and follow the same star. The Lord Himself is the light of the world, and the only hope for the peace and happiness of the world or of us as individuals is to walk in that light.

The Wise Men brought gifts to the Lord: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These represent the gifts which each of us will bring, if he

is wise: love, faith, and obedience. If we love the Lord, we shall put His worship and His service first in our lives, trying to make ourselves channels through which His love can work in the world. If we have faith in Him, we shall not be afraid or discouraged no matter what trials and hardships come to us and no matter how threatening the world situation seems. If we obey Him, we shall put the welfare of others before our own and not spend our lives in self-seeking. These are the gifts we should offer Him on His birthday in return for the great gift of Himself which He gave us on that day.

And He did not give it once in the dim past only. He gives it to us every day. He is in the world now and always with power to save. Every time we go to the Word for knowledge of how to live, we are following the star, and we shall always find the Lord in the Word. *Bethlehem* means “house of bread,” and the Lord later called Himself the “bread of life.”

It may help us, too, to think of the role played by Herod in our story. Herod represents all the power of falsity and evil which seeks to destroy the beginnings of spiritual life in our minds and hearts. These powers are very real. We have only to think of the temptations which come to us every day to be less than our best selves, to do little things which we know are wrong, to yield to persuasion instead of standing up for what we believe is right. Herod’s killing of the little children of Bethlehem pictures the destruction which falsity and evil can accomplish. But Herod was not allowed to destroy the infant Lord. If we once receive the Lord into our lives, He is there to stay. He may have to be kept “in Egypt” for a time—in our memory-knowledge—but He will come back “when Herod is dead”—that is, when the temptations have been conquered.

Adult

The lesson is so familiar to every adult that the teacher need only cover briefly the background of the visit of the Wise Men and the correspondence of the

three gifts and then ask what points the class would like to discuss. The question of the reason for the Advent may be raised by the class. The teacher may be helped with this by referring to the first lesson from Matthew, which precedes this lesson in this volume.

We have seen that the Ancient Church possessed the Ancient Word and the knowledge of correspondences. When it ceased to be interested in serving the Lord and began to use its knowledge for worldly and selfish ends—the state pictured by the building of the Tower of Babel—the Lord took away from it the knowledge of the spiritual meaning of its forms and symbols so that it fell into various idolatries and its people were scattered over the face of the earth. One group—Abram and his family—were chosen as the basis for the formation of the Israelitish Church. The other groups continued their development separately in various places and were the beginning of the many pagan nations which we find in the world today. At the start they still possessed the Ancient Word and considerable knowledge of its meaning—Swedenborg says that in his day the Ancient Word was perhaps still in existence in Great Tartary*—and some among them venerated the book and cherished the knowledge they drew from it so that some study of correspondences persisted. With the evil, this took the form of magic and sorcery, but there were always good individuals who felt it to be their choicest possession.

The Wise Men who came to the Lord from the East were such good individuals. They knew and remembered ancient prophecies of the coming of the Messiah and the knowledge that He was to be born in the land of Canaan and to be “king of the Jews.” They also looked for a star as the sign of His coming. The prophecy of the star comes into our Word from the mouth of Balaam (Numbers 24:17), who came from the same eastern country as the Wise Men. Balaam showed in other ways that he possessed some knowledge of correspondences, as we learn from the directions he gave Balak

*[Tatary]: Historically an indefinite region in Asia and Europe, extending from the Sea of Japan to the Dnieper River. —*Merriam Geographical Dictionary*

for altars and sacrifices, but he was an evil man who tried to use his knowledge to advance himself. When the Wise Men in the East saw the star, they knew what it meant and were willing to take the long journey to the Holy Land to pay homage to the Messiah and to lay their gifts at His feet, the gifts themselves being chosen for their correspondence. The number of Wise Men is not given in the Word, nor are their names given, although tradition says that there were three (probably because of the three gifts) and even names them.

We recall that the sun, moon, and stars picture love to the Lord, faith in Him, and knowledges of heavenly things. When the Lord came into the world, it was to give men sure knowledge about Himself and about true heavenly life. So the star was the natural and beautiful symbol of His coming. It was not a material star; there is no record that anyone saw it except the Wise Men, and it obviously appeared and disappeared in no ordinary way. But the shepherds at Bethlehem saw a great light. Both the light and the star were spiritual appearances, and the spiritual eyes of the shepherds and Wise Men were opened to see them. The shepherds saw a light all about them because they were in good, innocent states and were of the people who possessed the Scriptures. But the Wise Men, who had no knowledge of the truth except from old tradition, saw the light of the new spiritual day as a far-off star. The shepherds picture those within the church who are good; the Wise Men picture those outside of the church who cherish what little truth they have and try to live according to it. The shepherds had only a short way to go to find the Lord, but the Wise Men had to make a long journey.

The Wise Men went first to Jerusalem. Their knowledge was not specific enough to show them the exact place of the Lord's birth; so they went to the king of the country. Jerusalem, where the temple was, pictures the church as to truth. This is where "the Gentiles" expect to find knowledge of the Lord, and the Wise Men did find there those learned in the letter of Scripture who could tell them that it was prophesied that the Messiah was to be born in

Bethlehem. So the church, even when it is not all that it should be, always has truth to give to those who really wish to find the Lord.

Bethlehem, earlier called Ephratah, was the birthplace of Benjamin—the site of Rachel’s tomb—and was situated on the border between the territory of Judah and that of Benjamin, as the land was divided among the tribes. Like Benjamin, Bethlehem represents “the spiritual of the celestial.” This is the link between heaven and earth in us—the truth which is acquired as a result of goodness in the heart—just as Benjamin was the link between Joseph and his brothers, by which they could be reconciled to each other. So the Lord, in whose person God and man were united, was born in Bethlehem. Also Bethlehem was the city of David, who represented the Lord as to truth, His kingly quality. And the name *Bethlehem* means “house of bread,” and we remember that the Lord said, “I am the bread of life.” When the star appeared the second time to the Wise Men, it led them to the very place where the Lord was. Their knowledge at first was general, but after they had been instructed from the Scripture, it was specific.

In the Scriptures all offerings to the Lord picture the devotion of our lives to His service. The three gifts of the Wise Men represent this devotion on the three planes of will, thought, and deed. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” Gold is the offering of the heart, the attempt to drive out of our hearts all feelings which the Lord tells us are evil: pride, hatred, revenge, covetousness, jealousy. Frankincense is the offering of the mind: the determination to examine our ideas in the light of the teachings of the Lord’s Word and to reject as false whatever does not agree with the Word, no matter how firmly we have previously believed it; this involves trust in divine wisdom as being always and in every situation superior to our own. Myrrh is the offering of the outward life, the effort constantly to act toward others as the Lord would wish us to act.

After the Wise Men had presented their gifts, they returned to their own country by another way, not going back to Herod as he had asked them to do. We know that Herod’s motive in helping the

Wise Men to find the Lord was that he might kill Him. The Wise Men did not know this when they talked to Herod, but after they had seen the Lord, it could be revealed to them. The Lord's providence often permits selfish motives to bring us on our way toward finding the Lord—as children sometimes go to Sunday school for the sake of winning a pin or other token—but when we have found the Lord and devoted ourselves to His service, we are immediately given an understanding of the selfishness of our earlier motives, and we return to our work in another spirit.

The rest of our chapter shows us the immediate effect of the visit of the Wise Men on the worldly life which we have previously developed. Swedenborg tells us that as soon as a person begins to regenerate, temptation is permitted to come to him. The evils and falsities which have been governing his life, pictured by Herod, are stirred up to attempt to destroy the new beginning of spiritual life, to keep it from growing and coming to rule in their place. But divine providence protects the new beginning by preserving it in our memory—in Egypt—until we have gained the victory over the first temptations, that is, until Herod's death. After that, it is brought up in Galilee—on the plane of our outward conduct—first. It is the same process which we study in the Old Testament story. Every new beginning must spring from the heart and be confirmed by the mind, but then it must be worked out in the outward life before the evils and falsities in the heart and mind can finally be overcome.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 9293: “By ‘gold, frankincense, and myrrh’ are signified all things of the good of love and of faith in the Lord; by ‘gold’ those of the good of love; by ‘frankincense’ those of the good of faith; and by ‘myrrh’ those of both in things external. The reason why the Wise Men from the East offered these things, was that among some in the East there remained from ancient times the knowledge and wisdom of the men of old, which consisted in understanding and seeing heavenly and Divine things in those which are in the world and upon the earth. For it was known to the ancients that all things

correspond and are representative, and consequently have a signification; as is also evident from the most ancient books and monuments of the Gentiles. Consequently they knew that gold, frankincense, and myrrh signify the goods which are to be offered to God. They also knew from their prophetic writings, which were of the Ancient Church, that the Lord was to come into the world, and that a star would then appear to them.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Whose birthday is Christmas? *Jesus'*
- J. How long ago did the Lord come into the world? *[relate to current year]*
- P. Where was He born? *Bethlehem*
- P. Who else was born in Bethlehem? *Benjamin, David*
- J. What does the name *Bethlehem* mean? *house of bread*
- J. Where did the Wise Men come from? *the East*
- P. Why did they come? *saw His star*
- J. How did they know what the star meant? *ancient knowledge of correspondence*
- P. Where did they go first? *Jerusalem*
- J. How did Herod find out where to send them? *scribes found prophecy*
- P. How did they find the right house? *star*
- P. What gifts did they bring the Lord? *gold, frankincense, myrrh*
- J. Why did they not go back to Herod? *warned in a dream*
- P. Where was Joseph told to take the Lord? *to Egypt*
- P. How was he told? *in a dream*
- J. What terrible crime did Herod commit? *killed all boy babies in and around Bethlehem*
- J. When was Joseph told to bring the Lord back to the Holy Land? *after Herod's death*
- J. Where did they go to live? *Nazareth, in Galilee*
- I. What great gift did the Lord give us on the first Christmas Day? *Himself*
- S. What are the three gifts we should bring Him? *love faith, obedience*