



The Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

“We Three Kings of Orient Are” is one of my favorite Christmas songs. This incredible story is recorded in Matthew 2:1-12. But who were these kings and how did they know to go looking for a newborn king of the Jews? In my quest to know more about these men I discovered some legends have become part of our faith traditions.

Reportedly, there may have been up to 12 Magi, but the number three likely comes from the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh presented to Jesus. The gifts they delivered were extremely valuable, and certainly appropriate for the royalty they expected to encounter.

One of the legends that developed over the millenniums is that these smart fellows were named Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior. However, these names change depending upon which cultural history you read.¹

Even though they are remembered in song as kings, Matthew says they were magi – translated as “wise men” – not royalty.² As magi, they would have been advisors to the king, knowledgeable in many subjects, but especially the study of the heavens – astronomy and astrology. In later centuries the term magi also covered dreams, as well as magic, and mysterious references to the future.³

The first mention of “wise men” in the Bible is in Genesis 41:8 when Pharaoh “*sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt,*” to interpret a dream. Because of their combined knowledge of science, mathematics, history, and the like, these learned men wielded a good deal of influence.

Magi were also among the highest-ranking officials in the Biblical account of the prophet Daniel. Daniel was a Jewish exile who found favor with King Nebuchadnezzar. When the king’s

astrologers were not able to interpret a disturbing dream, he “*called for all the wise men of Babylon to be killed.*”⁴

Daniel and his friends (of lion’s den fame) were included in this harsh decree. But Daniel asked for more time, then prayed for God to grant him understanding of the king’s dream. When God answered his prayers, all the wise men were saved. (Read Daniel 1 and 2 for more about his story.)

The use of the title “king” in the nativity story may have come from Old Testament passages that indicated kings will come and worship the Messiah. Two such examples are Psalm 72:10-11 which mentions the Kings of Tarshish⁵ and Isaiah 60:1-6 where gifts of gold and incense are noted.

The home countries of these magi are also unknown. Many past Christian historians referred to these three kings as Semites. Thus, they would have been Jews, Arabs, Akkadians, and Phoenicians – descendants of Shem, one of Noah’s sons.⁶ But, the debate about the ethnicity of the “magi from the east” continues. Some argue they were Jewish and had learned astrology in Babylonia (perhaps from the writings of Daniel). Others believe them to have been Gentiles. As it stands, the scriptures provide no real proof either way.

What is more intriguing to me is that when they stopped in Jerusalem they had to ask, “*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*”

If they were Jewish and trained under the works of the prophet Daniel, would they not have known that the Jewish Messiah must be born in Bethlehem according to the scriptures?

Perhaps they simply expected a king to be found at the royal palace, so that is where they naturally went. Surely they expected the people in the community to be excited about the birth of their Messiah, especially the local leaders. Yet, there was no celebration underway. And, when they inquired of King Herod as to the location of the newborn king, he knew nothing about it.

Though a Jew himself, Herod was not aware of the prophecies of the Old Testament. When he learned the foretelling of “*a ruler over Israel with origins from ancient times*” from his chief priests and scribes, he hatched a devious plan.⁷

He encouraged the wise men to continue their journey to Bethlehem in Judea where they would find the child. Herod asked the magi to report back to him, reportedly so he could also worship the Messiah. But his diabolical scheme later emerged. His fears of being dethroned would lead him to decree that all boys, aged two and younger, should be killed.

When the magi set out once more in search of the babe, the star again guided them, this time to the south. Five miles away, the star stood over where the child was to be found. Jesus and his parents were in Bethlehem, just as the prophets had foretold centuries before.

It had been so long that the chief priests of the Temple, the scribes and scholars of the Torah, missed the monumental event. The priests and teachers knew the history and the law, quoting Micah 5 to King Herod – yet this promise of God was lost on them.

Incredibly, God had flipped the script once again. The Jews were *given* the Messiah, yet it was the magi who *acknowledged* him. These strangers from a foreign land made a great effort to find him and bring him gifts. They bowed down and worshipped him. Even more, they took the news of his arrival back to their homelands, the first to begin spreading the good news.

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Study Questions:

- Why is it important to look for guidance in the scriptures?
- Why were the Magi interested in worshiping the newborn king of the Jews?
- What is the significance of “his star” in verse 2?
- What were the different responses from King Herod, the chief priests, and the magi to the news about the newborn king? How does that compare to the response people have toward Jesus today?
- What did you learn from the story of the magi that you can apply to your life?

¹ Longenecker, Dwight, “Mystery of the Magi,” The Excerpta Latina Barbari composed in Alexandria, calls them Bithisarea, Melichior and Gathaspa or as we know them, Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar. Two centuries earlier a Syrian writer named them Hormizdah, King of Persia, Yazdegerd, King of Saba and Perozadh, King of Sheba. In contrast, Syriac Christians named the Magi, Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas. Ethiopian

Christians called them Hor, Karsudan, and Basanater, while the Armenians said they were named, Kagpha, Badadakharida and Badadilma. ((Regnery History, 2017, chapter 3).

² Magi is translated as “wise men” from the Hebrew: מַגִּים and Greek: μάγων.

³ Matthew 2, <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/matthew-2/>, accessed December 23, 2024.

⁴ In Daniel 2:12, “wise men” is translated from the word *chakamim*, and refers to astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers. Accessed at <https://christiananswers.net/dictionary/wisemen.htm> on December 23, 2024.

⁵ Tarshish may refer to a city or an island on the Mediterranean Sea, west of Israel. or it may simply refer to the Mediterranean people, or to the traders (their ships and ports), in the Mediterranean or Red Seas. Negev, Avraham; Gibson, Shimon (2001). "Tarshish". *Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*. New York and London: Continuum. p. 494. ISBN 0-8264-1316-1.

⁶ Baasten, Martin (2003). *"A Note on the History of 'Semitic'". Hamlet on a Hill: Semitic and Greek Studies Presented to Professor T. Muraoka on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday. Peeters Publishers. pp. 57–73. ISBN 9789042912151.*

⁷ Micah 5:1-15, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=micah%205&version=NIV>, accessed December 23, 2024.