
Who were the magi or wise men in Matthew 2? How many were there?

Surprisingly to many, the "magi" were neither "astrologers," nor did they visit Joseph, Mary and the Christ Child in the inn, nor is it biblically revealed how many there were. However, there are traditions which would support the idea that they were twelve, not three, as commonly assumed.

The idea that they were "astrologers" derived, in part, from the fact that the magi saw Christ's "star" (compare Matthew 2:2). But this was clearly not an ordinary star, as J.H. Blunt, *The Annotated Bible*, confirms. He says: "Taking the evidence into account, and not mere conjecture, the star must have been an appearance of a supernatural kind... [It] guided them westward to Jerusalem... it afterwards moved in a manner so different from that of fixed stars, planets or even ordinary comets, that they could distinguish its motion as leading them six miles southward to Bethlehem... then it 'stood,' as 'stars' are never known to stand still... it may have been a guiding angel... and such an idea is in accordance with that of ancient art which represents the star as a child [of course, the Bible never represents angels as children or babies] bearing a scepter and surrounded by a star-like glory..."

The Bible describes at times angels as stars (compare Revelation 1:20; Isaiah 14:13; Job 38:7); so it appears certain that this "star," which was not always visible to the "magi," was an angel who showed them the way to the place where Christ dwelled. At that time, Christ was no longer in a manger or an inn. Rather, He was now in a house (compare Matthew 2:11). Blunt states that some time had passed since His birth, "for the Presentation in the Temple had taken place... and during the interval the Holy Family had doubtless

left the public inn for a private dwelling-house."

We stated the following in a recent Q&A (Update 422):

"The whole Christmas manger scene is a complete fraud. There were no wise men at the manger. The number of the wise men is not specified. It is only stated that they gave three types of gifts, but they didn't see Christ until He was a young child. At that time, He was no longer in a manger, but lived in a house (Matthew 2:11). According to Matthew 2:16, Christ was at that time perhaps as old as two years, since King Herod had all children two and under killed, based on the information which he had received from the wise men."

In this regard, let us also quote from our booklet, "Is that in the Bible?--Man's Holidays or God's Holy Days":

"The Archbishop of Canterbury said that the Christmas story of the 'Three Wise Men' was nothing but a 'legend.' The British Daily Telegraph reported on December 20, 2007: 'Dr Rowan Williams has claimed that there was certainly nothing to prove there were three of them... or that they were kings. He said the only reference to the wise men from the East was in Matthew's gospel and the details were very vague. Dr Williams said: 'Matthew's gospel says they are astrologers, wise men, priests from somewhere outside the Roman Empire, that's all we're really told. It works quite well as legend.'"

"The Archbishop went on to dispel other details of the Christmas story, adding that there were probably no asses or oxen in the stable. He also argued that Christmas cards which showed the Virgin Mary cradling the baby Jesus, flanked by shepherds and wise men, were misleading. As for the scenes that depicted snow falling in Bethlehem, the Archbishop said the chance of this was "very unlikely". He added that Jesus was probably not born in December at all. He said: "Christmas was when it was because it fitted well with the winter festival.""

But as we will show, the "magi" were not

astrologers, either. The Church of England came up with even more spectacular conclusions in the past. The Telegraph reported on February 11, 2004: "The Three Wise Men who brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus may not have been particularly wise and could have been women, the Church of England has ruled."

This is of course utter nonsense.

First, let us quote from additional commentaries and encyclopedias which describe the nature of the "magi" or "wise men."

The Bible Encyclopedia states:

"The term 'wise men' appears 44 times in the Bible, and the meaning varies somewhat. The first mention of 'wise men' is in the account of Jacob's son, Joseph, in Genesis 41:8 where it says that the pharaoh 'called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men' [Hebrew: chakam] to interpret his dream. Chakam means intelligent, skillful, artful or cunning man. This same word is used throughout the rest of the Old Testament, except in the Book of Daniel. In Daniel, the word used in the original language is chakamim or chakkiym from a root corresponding to chakam. The first of these 'wise men' is mentioned in Daniel 2:12...

"[Regarding the] Magi who worshipped Jesus [the word] translated 'wise men' is the Greek word magos. This is the same as magus, an old Persian word equivalent to the chakam of the Old Testament (above). Magi is the plural of magus... There is no indication that they practiced sorcery or claimed magical powers. Their recorded conduct is sincere and worshipful. They appear to have researched the Old Testament and believed its prophecies about the Messiah... The record does not specifically say that there were three, or that they were kings... but there was obvious wealth involved... These magi did not arrive until possibly almost two years after Christ's birth, certainly sometime after his presentation in the Temple (Luke 2:22-39)... There is no mention of camels or any mode of transportation in the biblical record. There is also no mention of their names..."

The Catholic Encyclopedia adds:

"No Father of the Church holds the Magi to have been kings... Neither were they magicians... The Gospel narrative omits to mention the number of the Magi, and there is no certain tradition in this matter. Some Fathers speak of three Magi; they are very likely influenced by the number of gifts. In the Orient, tradition favours twelve."

The Lutheran Church published the following comments:

"There is no conclusive evidence that they were kings... How many magi were there? Unknown. Matthew 2:1-16 simply uses the plural... Where did they come from? The only thing we can say with certainty is 'from the east' (Matthew 2:1). Our best knowledge is that members of the Magian priesthood existed in [the] Parthian empire at this time, which encompassed a large area to the east of the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire... Did the magi visit baby Jesus while He was still in the manger? No. Matthew's Gospel clearly says that the magi entered a house (2:11)."

On December 18, 2001, the Meridian Magazine published an article, titled, "Who Were The Wise Men?" It pointed out:

"Among the more intriguing figures in the scriptures are the wise men who visited the infant Jesus. The story of their journey to Bethlehem is found in the Gospel of Matthew, where we learn that they came 'from the east' (Matthew 2:1-2) when Jesus was apparently two years old (Matthew 2:1-2, 7, 16). By that time, Mary and Joseph were no longer in the place where the shepherds had found them (Luke 2:7), but in a house (Matthew 2:11)..."

"What... did the wise men follow from Jerusalem to Bethlehem? We cannot know for certain, but it is interesting that an early Christian document indicates that it was an angel in the guise of a star... Some early traditions indicate that there were twelve wise men. The most prevalent tradition says they were three kings, their number derived from the three gifts they brought: gold, frankincense, and

myrrh (Matthew 2:11)..."

However, as we point out in our booklet, "Don't Keep Christmas," the conclusion that there were three magi, based on the three types of gifts, is not compelling:

"The P.M. magazine published an article some time ago, entitled, 'What do we know about the Three Holy Kings?' It pointed out:

"That they... became kings, can be accredited to the theologian Tertullian (160 until 220). He wrote, 'in the east, Magi were normally kings.' So we see how quickly the wise men of the Bible had become kings. According to Persian tradition, these Magi were descendants of the ancient Median priesthood... In the gospel, we are not told how many they were. The oriental churches speak of twelve Magi.

"Jacob of Edessa (640-708), one of the most important ancient writers of the Church of the Jacobites, writes: 'The Magi were from Persia, but they were not three, as portrayed by artists for the people, as derived from the threeness of the gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense, but rather twelve, as can be seen in many traditions. Those who came were princes and well-respected persons from the country of Persia. Many people, more than a thousand men, accompanied them, so that Jerusalem became very excited when they arrived.'"

"The article also speculates that the number of the Magi was reduced to 'three,' not because of the three types of gifts mentioned, but because another argument for the Trinity was searched for. Allegedly, the remains of the 'three kings' rest today in the dome of Cologne in Germany. However, P.M. notes that 'the garments, in which the bones are wrapped, were made in the second or third century after Christ in Syria.'"

Over 20 years ago, the Worldwide Church of God published the following comments about the "Magi":

"Many people believe that the Magi were astrologers. However, God condemns astrology (Deut. 4:15, 19; 17:2-5; Isa. 47:13-14)... One of

God's most righteous men [Daniel] was made leader of the Babylonian magi ["wise men" or "magi" in Daniel 2:48]! Since Daniel remained in this position for a long time, this Bible example proves there was at least one righteous magus--Daniel... Now who were the Magi of Matthew 2? And where did they come from?...

"Matthew says the Magi are from 'the east' (or 'eastern parts'...) or the distant East... One great empire east of the Euphrates... conquered the lands east of the Euphrates area, had Babylon as its capital, and included the areas of Persia, Bactria, etc. It was the Parthian Empire... the Parthians rose to power around 250 B.C. in and around the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. That was the very land into which the house of Israel--not Judah--was exiled. The exiles in this land were members of the ten tribes of Israel. The Parthian Empire included exiles from the lost ten tribes of Israel--many of whom remained in the land of their captivity until about A.D. 226. Certain of the ancient magi could claim Abraham as their father (see McClintock and Strong's Cyclopaedia, article, 'Magi.') Thus, historical and biblical evidence reveals that the Magi of Matthew 2 were not astrologers whose observations of heavenly bodies led them to the Christ Child. Instead, they were representatives of the tribes of Israel in exile who were led to their King by an angel..."

Following this rationale and concept, then additional interesting aspects would be worth considering: Since the Jew Daniel was one of the righteous "magi," and he and many other Jewish exiles lived in Babylon as captives, after King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered the house of Judah, and since the Parthian Empire subsequently absorbed the Babylonian Empire, it stands to reason that Jews continued to live in the Parthian Empire, and that they still dwelled there at the time of the birth of Christ. The tradition that it was TWELVE magi who visited Christ would be quite interesting, in that the magi could have been representatives of ALL the twelve tribes of Israel AND Judah (being descendants of the TWELVE sons of Jacob or Israel), who were led by an angel to their King.

Jesus was called the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2;

27:11, 37), as well as the King of Israel (John 1:49; 12:13). He will also be recognized as the King of all peoples (Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:6-7; Daniel 7:14), and the time will come when ALL nations will accept Him as their King and obey, honor and worship Him (Philippians 2:9-11).

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