

# *Who were the Wise Men (Magi)?*

Christmas is almost over for another year!

Almost – but not quite! Traditionally, there are twelve days of Christmas and, as always, January 6th will again be the twelfth and last day of the season. January 6th is kept as Christmas Day by some churches but is more commonly observed as the feast of "Epiphany" and is commemorated for the visit of the wise men (or magi) to the infant Jesus at Bethlehem. This event is described in the second chapter of the book of Matthew, and gives rise to many questions, a few of which I would like to discuss here:

Who were these wise men mentioned in Matthew 2:1-12?

Were they pagan, Mesopotamian astrologers?

If not, who were they and where did they come from?

What was the "star" that they followed?

## *A difficult scripture*

Let us begin by examining the account in Matthew 2:1-3 & 7-12:

**Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men [*the Greek leaves the original Chaldean word untranslated as "magi"*] from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.**

**Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when you have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.**

## ***Were they pagan astrologers?***

The first "magi myth" that we should question is the tradition of "We three kings." The Bible nowhere states how many magi visited the infant Jesus. Although Matthew mentions three types of gift they presented to the Son of God, there may have been two, three, or more of them.

No matter how many there were, who were they? Because the wise men saw and followed a "star," many believe that they were pagan astrologers. But, throughout the scriptures, God soundly condemns astrology:

**Beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and you be drawn away and worship them and serve them. (Deuteronomy 4:19)**

**If there be found among you, within any of your gates which the Eternal your God gives you, man or woman, that has... gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, either the sun, or moon, or any of the host of heaven.... then shall you bring forth that man or that woman, and shall stone them with stones, till they die. (Deuteronomy 17:2-5)**

**Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save you from these things that shall come upon you. Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame. (Isaiah 47:13-14)**

Also, the wise men that visited Jesus knew in advance whom it was they were going to visit and that the purpose of their visit was to worship Him:

**Saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him"... And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2:2, 11)**

It is highly unlikely that heathen, idolatrous astrologers would go to the great effort to travel many, many miles to give honour to the son of a deity they did not worship. With this evidence, we can be quite certain that these magi were *not* pagan astrologers.

## ***What was the star?***

Many historians have attempted to determine the date of Jesus' birth by looking for records concerning comets, meteors, supernovae, conjunctions of planets, and the like.

What was the "star" that led the wise men to Jesus Christ in Bethlehem? Was it a physical star at all? Whatever it was, the "star" (Greek *aster*) was definitely of miraculous origin, and was no ordinary, physical star. It had the ability to move, to be followed for hundreds of miles, and to stand over the house where the young Jesus was. If we allow the Bible to interpret itself, we will see that this special star was possibly – even probably – an angel:

**When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy. (Job 38:7)**

**The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches... (Revelation 1:20)**

Stars in the Bible often symbolize angels.

### ***Two types of magi mentioned in the Bible***

The Bible mentions two types of magi: heathen, idolatrous magi and righteous, God fearing magi. Let us briefly examine both types:

#### ***Heathen magi:***

**And all the princes of the king of Babylon came in, and sat in the middle gate, even Nergal-sharezer, Samgarnebo, Sarsechim, Rabsaris, Nergal-sharezer, Rab-mag, with all the residue of the princes of the king of Babylon.... So Nebuzar-adan the captain of the guard sent, and Nebushasban, Rabsaris, and Nergal-sharezer, Rab-mag, and all the king of Babylon's princes: (Jeremiah 39:3, 13)**

These verses are the earliest of ancient records mentioning magi. The word "Rab-mag" was left untranslated because the translators did not understand its meaning. However, it has since been correctly deciphered as "chief magus." The best translation authorities say that the word "magus" (a singular form of the word "magi") comes from the old Pahlavi Persian word "mag" or "mog" meaning "priest" or "great one." Thus, a man by the name of Nergal-sharezer was the "rab-mag" or "chief magus" of the Babylonians at this time (about 586 BC) when they were besieging Jerusalem. These magi were heathen physicians, priests, and learned men, from whom descended a line of evil, perverted priests and sorcerers (which is said to include Haman of the book of Esther, Barjesus (Elymas) of the thirteenth chapter of Acts, and possibly Simon Magus of Acts chapter 8). It is not at all likely therefore, that the humble, God-fearing magi of Matthew chapter 2 could be included in this category with the likes of these men!

***Righteous, God-fearing magi:***

**Then the king made Daniel a great man [*Chaldean: rebah*], and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler [*shelet*] over the whole province of Babylon, and chief [*rab*] of the governors [*cagan*] over all the wise men [*chakkiym*] of Babylon. (Daniel 2:48)**

Let us look at some of the key terms in this verse:

- Great man: *rebah*: grow, great, to grow great, long, tall or large, to increase.
- Chief: *rab*: abundant, captain, chief, great, lord, master, stout.
- Ruler: *shelet*: to have the mastery or power, bear rule, be ruler.
- Governors: *cagan*: from an unused root meaning to superintend; a prefect of a province:- prince, ruler.
- Wise men: *chakkiym*: wise, i.e. a magian (another form of the word "magus"):- wise.

Going over this verse again and paraphrasing: The Babylonian king (Nebuchadnezzar) increased God's servant Daniel to the ranks of the great in Babylon. He made Daniel a ruler, a powerful master. He made Daniel the rab-mag... the chief, captain, physical lord and master over all the other governors, princes, rulers and wise men (magi) of Babylon.

It is most likely then that the magi who visited the young Jesus would come under this second category of righteous, God-fearing, high-ranking rulers.

## ***Of Orient are?***

Returning to the second chapter of Matthew, where did these wise men come from?

As explained in Upham's "Star of the wise men", there are two Greek expressions for "east" used in verses 1, 2 and 9 of Matthew chapter 2:

**Firstly in verse 1: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold wise men from the east [*ton anatolon: the distant east*] came to Jerusalem, saying,"**

**Secondly in verses 2 and 9: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east [*te anatole: west from the magi's starting point, but still east of Palestine*], and have come to worship him... When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the east [*te anatole*] went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was."**

The "distant east" of 4 BC, as mentioned in verse 1, was the Parthian empire, which included all the conquered lands of Persia, Bactria, etc. east of the Euphrates River. It was to these lands that some of the ancient ten-tribed house of Israel had been exiled, and in which some individuals and groups remained. McIntock & Strong's Cyclopaedia article "Magi" says that some of the ancient magi claimed Abraham as their ancestor.

Biblical and historical evidence indicate that the magi of the second chapter of Matthew were not pagan astrologers whose observations of the heavenly bodies led them to the Christ child, but rather were more probably God-fearing descendants of the exiled house of Israel who were led to Bethlehem miraculously, likely by an angel.

Once again we see that if we are willing to break free of the bonds of the world's traditions, the historical evidence backs up the Bible record, and leads us to the truth!

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