

THE MAGI

This subject on Jesus deals with his place of birth, the star that appeared at his birth, and the wise men that sought Jesus after he was born. Only one out of the four Gospels of the Bible mention the episode of the wise men, therefore, our source of information regarding the wise men from biblical sources comes from just the gospel of Matthew.

To begin our discussion, let us read Matthew 2:1 to 12: *"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men 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. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. 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 ye 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."*

The first issue we will look into regarding our discussion is the number of wise men. The Bible indicates that *"... there came wise men from the east..."* (verse one). How many wise men came from the east? We do not know but because our minds have become so conditioned to hearing the number "three" and with the continual barrage at Christmas time of hearing "three wise men", this number of men is readily accepted by most people. The reference to "three" is so widespread that even we who know that no number appears in biblical text, may mistakenly refer to three when discussing matters relating to the wise men. Sometimes when manger scenes are displayed during Christmas time, "three kings" instead of "three wise men" are referenced. In the middle ages, some religious groups even went so far as to give

names to their three fictitious kings of the east: "Balthasar", the Chaldean Daniel; "Melchior", king of light; and "Kaspar", which appears in legend as Gathapar, or Gudolphorhem.

Let us now go to the scriptures to determine what they tell us about the 'magi' or wise men. All the texts relating to the wise men in the birth of Jesus will be considered. The first is verse one: **"Behold, there came wise men from the east."** Then verse seven: **"...Herod... privily called the wise men..."** And the last is in verse sixteen: **"...he was mocked of the wise men...inquired of the wise men."** These are the only verses that reference the wise men in their search of the child Jesus, and not one of the verses mentions the number "three" or of the wise men being kings. With reference to people who suggest there were only three wise men and they were also kings, these are wholly fabricated myths and not supported by the Bible. We can only surmise that people believe there were only three wise men based on the fact that three gifts were presented to the young Jesus, with the gifts being gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11b). However, to try and relate the number of wise men to the number of gifts mentioned in the Bible is presumptuous for the scriptures reads: **"...and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts..."** The gifts may have included items other than the ones mentioned in the Bible such as fine silver, baskets, blankets, etc. The rare merchandise mentioned by name does not in any way imply that they were the only gifts presented to Jesus. The number of wise men that travelled to Jerusalem is not known, nor is there any support that they were kings; that is scriptural fact. We know they came from the east but their exact number is not given. Given people normally travelled in caravans when travelling long distances in those times, it is quite possible that there were more than just three wise men. Travelling in larger groups on long journeys was common in those times given the danger of being ambushed by bandits.

So who were the wise men that visited Jesus? If you check the word "wise" in Strong's Concordance, you will notice that the four times it is mentioned in the second chapter of Matthew that it has a distinctively different code number from all the other "wise" in the bible concordance. The concordance code number is 3097 and we learn the word under this code number is "magi" (magos). Strong's definition for the word is "magos - a magician, i.e. Oriental scientist; a magician; sorcerer; wise man." The magi were a religious caste that arose out of Media and spread to Persia, Babylonia, Parthia and many other countries, even as far east as India. The magi were learned men who studied the skies. Not only did they study astronomy, but they further developed the mystics in astrology. They read the stars and were interpreters of dreams; it was the belief of the magi that every person of great importance had their own star. The references to "wise men" in the Gospel of Matthew of the King James Bible should have actually stated "magi", thus, the wording at the start of Matthew 2 should have been **"Behold, there came magi from the east...."**

At the time of Jesus' birth, there was in the middle east an expectation by not only the Jews, but by many other religious groups, of the coming of a world saviour or

prince. Many ancient writers and teachers had written on the subject of a saviour prince coming out of Judaea. We do not know why this great expectation went well beyond just the Jews, however, we do know through Roman, Greek and Oriental writings that there was a waiting among many religious groups for a religious saviour to appear.

As for the “star of Bethlehem”, as it has been called, we do not know if God caused a new star to actually appear or whether Jesus' birth happened to occur during the time of one of God's natural, re-occurring phenomena. The natural cosmic phenomenon that we know of occurring close to Jesus' time was Halley's comet, which was visible about 9 or 11 B.C. and there was also the brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter around 7 B.C. A more recent example of such a phenomenon occurred on February 22, 1901: the Nova Persei star system displayed a brilliance 100,000 times its previous illumination, and a little more than a year later, it had again returned to its former state. In the years 5 to 2 B.C., a similar occurrence of an unusual phenomenon was recorded: the “dog” star, Sirius, had shone with extraordinary brilliance. As to the star referenced in Matthew actually being the birth of a new star or one of the phenomena just mentioned, no one can say for sure. However, being that the magi were astronomers, they would be continually observing the skies and watching for the birth of new stars. As mentioned previously, new stars were considered to relate to important people being born according to the magi and any new star would be referred to as that important person's star. On this basis, even though it cannot be proved with information available to us, we are inclined to favour the belief of a new star, as we know even to this day in our present era, new stars are being created with God's Universe.

When Matthew 2:2 states *“we have seen his star in the east”*, this does not mean that the star was at its zenith, directly overhead in the east. What was being said there is that the magi that saw the star had seen it from their own eastern country (Babylonia, Syria or Persia etc). They could have been a distance of 500 to over a 1,000 miles east of the star's cited zenith at Bethlehem. This is the reason why the magi traveled west towards the zenith of the star. Why did they go to Jerusalem? As mentioned earlier, there was an expectation at that time in the middle east of a coming world saviour. A part of that belief with many people was that the saviour would come out of Judah. So the magi went to Jerusalem in their quest. Due to the star being west of the eastern nation that the magi resided in, they followed the star in its westward path to Jerusalem.

Notice that the star did not lead the magi directly to the location of the child Jesus: *“...there came wise men 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.”* Matthew 2:1b, 2a. The Magi did not know exactly where Jesus was given the star leading them did not take them directly to his location. We read from scripture that Herod summoned the chief priests and scribes to answer the question as to where the Saviour-child should be born. The priests and scribes answered Herod by quoting the prophet Micah: *“And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least*

among the princes of Juda, for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel." Matthew 2:6.

Herod wanted to know from the magi when they had first observed the star, so that he would know the approximate age of the child Jesus, for he feared this "king to be" and wanted him destroyed. When the magi left Jerusalem, they knew the town that they were journeying to, and as they travelled to their known destination, the star was before them. From Matthew 2:9b, 10: ***"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 ..."***

When the magi reached Bethlehem, the star was at its zenith over the city of David. It should be mentioned that the star did not directly lead the magi to Bethlehem, nor to Jerusalem, though its point of zenith, we are told, was over the town of Bethlehem. The star was before the magi who were travelling a south-western route. Bethlehem of Judah is the location where David was anointed to be king over the Jews, and thus, the town became known as the "house of David". As we have already read, it was prophesied that this would be the little town that God's chosen one would come from. Bethlehem was the birth place of Jesus' father, Joseph, who was of the seed of David, thus making his son, Jesus, also from the house and seed of David. Reading from I Samuel 16:4. 11 to 13: ***"And Samuel ... came to Bethlehem ... and Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest, and behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Send and fetch him: for we will not sit down till he come hither ... And the LORD said Arise, anoint him: for this is he. Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren and the spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward."*** These texts tell us that David was a Bethlehemite and his father, Jesse, was a native of this town. David was anointed by Samuel as God's chosen who was to rule Judah and Israel. The Son of God, Jesus, being the son of Joseph, who was of the house of David (Luke 2:4), was, through his father, from the seed of David. John 7:42: ***"Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem where David was?"***

From the Old Testament verses, we are showing the reader that Jesus is from that promised royal line that is to sit upon the throne of David forever. That kingship was to come through Bethlehem where God had his first chosen king, David, anointed. Bethlehem represents the promise fulfilled to David in Jesus: ***"But thou Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to rule in Israel whose going forth have been from old from everlasting."*** Micah 5:2 (see also Matthew 2:6).

In summary, we hope we have helped the reader learn more about the wise men of the Gospel of Matthew or at the very least, point out discrepancies between popular conceptions about the wise men and what the Bible actually tells us about them.