

The Basics of Christianity

Who Were the Magi?

Matthew 2:1-12

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INTRODUCTION:

This morning we are continuing with "The Basics of Christianity" series. The purpose of this series is to make us more effective in our witness to those outside the church who still need to know about the Gospel.

The Bible is filled with amazing stories of God and people. Some still carry a sort of mystery to them. I believe the Magi in the Bible (or wise men) are one of those stories.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Matthew 2:1-12 (NASB95)

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ² "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." ³ When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For out of you shall come forth a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found *Him*, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him." ⁹ After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over *the place* where the Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned *by God* in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

Prayer

I. Who Were the Wise Men or Magi?

Matthew 2:11 (NASB95)

¹¹ After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We do not know how many wise men were led to Jesus. In the west we traditionally view them as three wise men because three gifts were given to Jesus: gold, incense, and myrrh. This makes a lot of sense. One gift per person to the King of Kings. But in Eastern tradition, they believe it was 12 magi that showed up. It is also highly possible that the wise men had a caravan of servants with them as they traveled. But they are not mentioned in the Bible.

What we do know is that it was more than one. The term magi is plural. The singular term is Magus.

Tradition says that there were three and that their names were Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, but since the Bible does not say, we have no way of knowing whether the tradition is accurate.

It is a common misconception that the wise men visited Jesus at the stable on the night of His birth. In fact, the wise men came days, months, or possibly even years later. That is why **Matthew 2:11** says the wise men visited and worshiped Jesus in a **house**, not at the stable.

We know that the magi were wise men from "the East," most likely Persia, or modern-day Iran. This means the wise men traveled 800 to 900 miles to see the Christ child. Most likely, the magi knew of the writings of the prophet Daniel, who in time past had been the chief of the "court seers" in Persia. A "seer" was a prophet who saw visions or experienced dreams. Daniel includes a prophecy which gives a timeline for the birth of the Messiah.

Daniel 9:24-27 (NASB95)

²⁴ "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy *place*. ²⁵ So you are to know and discern *that* from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince *there will be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress. ²⁶ Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. And its end *will come* with a flood; even to the end there will be war; desolations are determined. ²⁷ And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations *will come* one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate."

Also, the magi may have been aware of the prophecy of Balaam (who was from the town of Pethor on the Euphrates River near Persia) in Numbers.

Numbers 24:17 (NASB95)

¹⁷ "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; **A star shall come forth from Jacob**, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth.

The wise men were guided to look for the King of the Jews by a miraculous stellar event, the “Star of Bethlehem,” which they called “His star”

II. Where was Jesus Born?

They came to Jerusalem and asked concerning the birth of Christ, and they were directed to Bethlehem. They followed God’s guidance joyfully. When they arrived in Bethlehem, they gave costly gifts to Jesus and worshiped Him. God warned them in a dream against returning to Herod, so, in defiance of the king, they left Judea by another route.

Matthew 2:1-5 (NASB95)

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ² “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” ³ When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

At the time of Mary’s pregnancy, a decree by Caesar Augustus went out that “all the world should be registered”. This meant that every person in the Roman Territory was required to return to the city of their ancestors to be counted in a census.

Joseph lived in Nazareth at the time but needed to travel south to the region of Judea, “to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David”. Naturally, Joseph took his betrothed, Mary, to go with him to be counted as a member of his family. Thus, the young couple ended up in the small town of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’ birth.

This location aligns with the prophecy foretold by Micah, proclaiming that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem:

Micah 5:2 (NASB95)

² “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.”

Because so many had returned to Bethlehem for the census, the small city was overflowing with people. There was no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn, which forced them to take refuge in the only place available—a shelter for animals. (Although the Bible never mentions animals being present at the birth of Christ, Luke does say that the baby Jesus was laid in a manger—and the presence of a manger strongly implies the presence of animals.)

Luke 2:7 (NASB95)

⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Traditionally, the “inn” referred to in Luke is thought to be a kind of commercial hotel. And the place where Mary and Joseph took shelter was a stable somewhere in the vicinity. However, we don’t know for sure if that was the case, because the Greek word translated as “inn” (*kataluma*) can also be translated as “guest room.” This translation would lead us

to envision more of a private home filled with guests, plus a separate area used to house the family's animals.

Sometimes the place for animals was located on the lower level of a house, away from where the people lived. So, when Luke refers to “no room in the *kataluma*,” he could have meant there was no room on the upper level, which was already full of sleeping visitors or family. Archaeological findings have also revealed homes that merely had a wall separating the front of the house from the back, where animals were kept safe. Both of these floor plans imply an indoor animal shelter connected to the house in some way. Regardless, there was a manger or feeding trough in the place where Christ was born, and that was used as a resting place for the newborn Jesus.

There is also a theory that the shelter in which Jesus was born was a place in the northern part of Bethlehem called Migdol Eder. This was a watchtower with a place underneath that shepherds used during the lambing season to shelter the newborn lambs that would later be used as sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple. The prophet Micah, who foretold Bethlehem as the place of the Messiah's birth, also mentions Migdol Eder:

Micah 4:8 (NASB95)

⁸ “As for you, tower of the flock, Hill of the daughter of Zion, To you it will come—Even the former dominion will come, The kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.

This theory is used to explain why, when the heralding angels gave the sign that the baby would be “wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger,” the shepherds seemed to know exactly where to look. And it would be befitting for the Messiah to be born in the same place where the sacrificial lambs were born.

III. What was the Star of Bethlehem?

The star of Bethlehem is associated with the birth of Christ and the visit of the [magi](#) (wise men) as recorded in our scripture text. The text implies the star of Bethlehem appeared only to the magi in the East (most likely the area of Persia, or modern-day Iran). There is no biblical record of anyone else observing the star of Bethlehem.

The magi in the East saw something in the heavens—the star of Bethlehem—that alerted them to the fact that the Jewish Messiah was born. The magi do not call the star of Bethlehem by that name; in verse 2 they refer to it as being “**His star**,” since it was a sign to them that a king was born. The star prompted the magi to travel to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. This would be the logical place to start looking for the birth of the King of the Jews for someone who did not know of Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem.

In Jerusalem, the magi visited King Herod. King Herod discovered from the magi the “**exact time**” the star of Bethlehem had first appeared to them in **verse 7** and he later ordered all male children two years old and under in Bethlehem to be killed in **verse 16**. Herod obviously thought the star of Bethlehem had first appeared when Christ was born; if he was right, then Jesus could have been up to two years old when the star of Bethlehem later guided the magi through the streets of Bethlehem.

The magi were told that the new king they were looking for was to be born in Bethlehem, not in Jerusalem. The wise men left Herod's palace, and the star of Bethlehem appeared to them once again went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

Regardless of **when** the magi may have first observed the star of Bethlehem, they **did** find Jesus still in Bethlehem when they arrived. Joseph and Mary almost surely stayed in Bethlehem until Mary could travel again. In fact, they probably stayed there for the 40 days necessary to complete Mary's purification. From Bethlehem, they could easily make the five-mile trip to Jerusalem for the sacrifice for Mary's purification.

Luke 2:22-24 (NASB95)

22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every *firstborn* male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

The fact that the magi came to a "house" in **verse 11** rather than the stable makes sense because Joseph naturally would have moved his family to a more protected place as soon as possible—the morning after Jesus was born, in all probability.

The question arises, how would Persian magi know about the Jewish Messiah?

Undoubtedly, they would have been exposed to the writings of the Jewish prophet Daniel, who had been the chief of the court seers in Persia, and gave a timeline for the birth of the Messiah in **Daniel 9:24-27**.

Also, they may have been aware of the words of the pagan prophet Balaam who specifically mentions "a star" and "a scepter" rising out of Jacob in **Numbers 24:17**.

There is evidence to suggest that the star of Bethlehem was **not** a natural phenomenon, but something unexplained by science. First, the fact that the star of Bethlehem seemed to appear only to the magi indicates that this was no ordinary star. Also, celestial bodies normally move from east to west due to the earth's rotation, yet the star of Bethlehem led the magi from Jerusalem south to Bethlehem. Not only that, but it led them directly to the place where Joseph and Mary were staying, stopping overhead. There is no natural stellar phenomenon that can do that.

The star of Bethlehem was likely an angel or a manifestation of the visible presence of the Lord. The manifestation of the Lord is referred to as Shekinah, (shuh kie' nuh) which literally means "dwelling of God". The most notable appearance of the Shekinah was the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites by day and the pillar of fire that led them by night during the exodus. The Shekinah can obviously lead people to specific locations. It should not surprise us that God would use a miraculous sign to signal the arrival of His Son into the world.

IV. Why did the Magi Bring Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh to Jesus?

Matthew 2:1-2 tells us that the magi, or wise men, travelled from the East in search of the Christ child. They inquired of King Herod where they might find Him, saying, "**Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.**" Matthew 2:11 tells us that when they found the baby Jesus, "**they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.**"

If you break down these gifts and study them as individual items you will see that they have a deeper meaning than just a diplomatic gift. Also, when you study the Word you will know there are types and shadows all throughout scripture. It is absolutely amazing how God has weaved layers of depth into everything He has done.

Gold is a precious metal and as such was a very valuable commodity. Its value could very well have financed Joseph and Mary's trip to Egypt. Giving the gift of gold to Jesus was a symbolic statement of His kingship and deity as is reflected in **verses 2 and 11**.

Matthew 2:2 (NASB95)

2 "Where is He who has been born **King of the Jews** (Kingship)? For we saw His star in the east and have come to **worship** Him (Deity)."

So the gift of Gold would spiritually speak of Jesus as being the King of Kings and also symbolize His divinity.

Frankincense is a white resin or gum. It is obtained from a tree by making incisions in the bark and allowing the gum to flow out. It is highly fragrant when burned and was therefore used in worship, where it was burned as a pleasant offering to God.

Exodus 30:34-36 (NASB95)

34 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. **35** With it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, *and* holy. **36** You shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you.

So frankincense was a symbol of holiness and righteousness. The gift of frankincense to the Christ child was symbolic of His willingness to become a sacrifice, wholly giving Himself up, equivalent to a burnt offering.

Myrrh was also a product of Arabia, and was obtained from a tree in the same manner as frankincense. It was a spice and was used in embalming. It was also sometimes mingled with wine to form an article of drink. Such a drink was given to our Savior when He was about to be crucified, as a stupefying potion. Matthew and Mark referred to it as "gall".

Mark 15:23 (NASB95)

23 They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it.

Myrrh symbolizes bitterness, suffering, and affliction. The baby Jesus would grow to suffer greatly as a man and would pay the ultimate price when He gave His life on the cross for all who would believe in Him.

CONCLUSION:

So, the magi were men who 1) read and believed God's Word, 2) sought Jesus, 3) recognized the worth of Christ, 4) humbled themselves to worship Jesus, and 5) obeyed God rather than man. They were truly wise men!

Go Tell it on the Mountain.