

## Searching Questions January 4, 2011: Who were the wise men?

**Question:** There are a lot of traditions about the wise men. What can be known about them for sure from history and from the bible? Why does the Bible and the Christian tradition consider their visit important?

What would be missing for you from the Christmas story if the wise men were not part of the tradition? Do you find their visit plausible? In the nativity story movie that came out a few years ago the wise men provide a kind of comic relief – is there something comical or cartoonish about the way we often picture the wise men?

**The tradition:** There were three of them. This is inferred from the fact that three gifts are named. Tradition names them Caspar, Balthazar and Melchoir. They represented the whole world, since each was supposed to be descended from one of the sons of Noah. Traditionally Noah's son Ham was the father of the black race, so in many pieces of Christian art, one is black, and came, according to tradition, from Ethiopia. Tradition, not the bible, also says they were "kings." We picture them arriving on camels on Christmas night and clustering around the manger together with the shepherds. In fact Matthew says they came to "the house" and their arrival could have been some time after the birth since Herod's purge is of all the male children "under two." Pliny, the Roman historian describes other state visits of Eastern magi and it is likely that they would have ridden Persian horses (not camels) and come not just as a party of three but with a considerable entourage. The relics of the wise men are supposed to reside in Cologne Cathedral, Germany, having been "discovered" by the bishop of that Cathedral in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Let's read the story of the wise men's visit from its original biblical source in Matthew. Matthew records the visit of the wisemen, but not the shepherds. The tradition about the shepherds comes from Luke:

*<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup> "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother*

*Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.<sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

Questions which a careful reading of this passage may prompt:

The Eastern visitors are never called “kings” but are called “magi”. Who or what were “magi?”

Why was Herod “disturbed and all Jerusalem with him” at the appearance of these visitors?

What does it mean that the wise men “saw his star when it rose?” and again “the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star they were overjoyed.” How was it possible to be led to the exact spot by following a star?

Why did this star send them off in search of a king, and with the intent to worship him?

What is the significance of the gifts they brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh?

What point is made by the fact they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but went home by another way?

Some helpful scholarship that may point toward some answers:

There is actually quite a lot known historically about Eastern magi. The Greek historian Heroditus tells us that they were one of six tribes of the Medes – the priestly tribe, much as the Hebrews had a priestly tribe, the tribe of Levi. The magi were interested in astronomy and astrology. They were masters of scientific and occult learning. Not everyone was able to have access to this learning, but they instructed kings. Crowned kings, and later advised kings. Those who sat as judges were also chosen from among the magi. (See Esther 1.13-19 and Daniel 6.8). So the magi were more powerful than kings if anything. Their religious beliefs stressed rites of fire and animal sacrifice. They observed a purity code set down in the law of the medes and Persians similar to the purity code of ancient Israel. They were different from the Jews but they shared a tendency toward monotheism which the Jews could not discount. They were not, like the Canaanites, gross idolaters, representing their gods with statues. Their interest in astrology and the interpretation of dreams also predates the Zoroastrian influence.

In 600 BC approximately, two things happened to the magi. Under king Darius of Persia they were introduced to Zoroastrianism. Darius wanted this new religion to unify his empire. Zoroastrianism is a dualistic belief system. There is an all powerful transcendent God who is the creator of everything Good, and there is a principle of chaos

or evil also present, though subordinate, in the universe. Zoroastrianism is a revealed religion with sacred texts outlining the world-view and religious liturgy to be followed. There are still Zoroastrian communities that survive today, most notably the parsees in India, a respected sub-culture known for their emphasis on learning, and their peculiar practice of exposing the dead. In approximately 600 BC the magi also came under the influence of the Hebrew prophet Daniel. In chapters 2 and 4 of the book of Daniel, Daniel shows his preeminence in the field of dream interpretation which was the speciality of the “magi, astrologers and chaldeans.” In chapter 4.9a and 5.11, Daniel is said to be made “master of the magi.” This is one explanation of why the magi would have thought Judea a place of importance, and the birth of its messianic king a matter of great importance. Daniel would have explained to them the hope of Israel and introduced them to the old testament scriptures. Although the magi mixed this interest with their more occult interests in astrology and their cultic interest in priestly practices neither we nor the Jews would recognize as the worship of the God of Israel, there was some mutual appreciation which grew from this interaction between Daniel and the magi in the court of Kings Darius and Nebucanezar, that laid the groundwork for the wise-men’s journey to see the one born king of the Jews. Philo (20BC to 50AD) a Jewish philosopher speaks warmly of the magi from Persia, showing that at least some of the magi were open to Jewish religious beliefs, and themselves practiced a form of religion that set them apart from the grosser pagans.

As king-makers, the magi had recently deposed a Medo-Persian king, and were looking for another who might lead a charge against Rome. Judea realized that it was a buffer state in between Rome to the West and Persia to the East. This is why when Herod hears that the wise men are coming looking for a king, he is disturbed and all Jerusalem with him. The fragile peace he has brokered with Rome will all be upset if these Eastern power-brokers go finding their pawn in his kingdom. The wise men as advisers of kings may have sought for a king with a political vision in mind, but the fact they come with a view to worshipping this king suggests that these wise men are sincere spiritual seekers. They would have been aware of the hope of Israel as taught to them by Daniel, and were excited to see it unfold in their own day.

There has been much scholarship, reputable and not so reputable, trying to date the birth of Jesus from what is known of the planetary movements in the years 7-2BC. In 7BC there was an unusual conjunction of the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars in triangular formation, but they would still have appeared as three separate planets, not a single star. From May of 3BC to August of 2BC there was a period of unusual astral activity, and the best guess is that there was a star seen by the wise men in this period, not a star of unusual brightness, but a star in auspicious orientation relative to the other stars according to the magi’s astrological beliefs. They identified this star with the king born in Judea, saw it at its rising, and saw it again when they left Herod, confirming that they were indeed on the right track, searching in Bethlehem. The fact that the star’s splendor and unusual quality was not obvious to everyone (a portent in the sky) but obvious only to those looking at the sky with a particular astrological belief system raises some interesting questions about astrology and Christianity: usually seen as enemies, but perhaps two complimentary parts of wisdom.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh were typical magian gifts, also presented in the days of Nero to the magus who becomes king of Armenia. However the carol “we three kings” suggests a particular prophetic significance to the gifts, identifying the Christ-child as a king (gold), a priest (frankincense) and a sacrifice (myrrh).

The narratives surrounding the birth of Jesus feature many dreams and angelic visitations. Joseph is also approached in a dream about marrying Mary, and taking the holy family to and from the place of refuge in Egypt. But the magi were specialists in dream interpretation. As were the old testament figures of Joseph and Daniel. This is one way in which God communicates with his people, seemingly outside of the scriptures he revealed only to his chosen people, the Jews. It suggests a wider sphere of special revelation than perhaps we often suppose. Does God speak only to Christians? Does God give miracles and words of knowledge only to Christians? The wisemen stand for us as the proof of a more general revelation.

### Some questions to ponder raised by the wisemen:

What do we think is the place of astrology and “other wisdom” relative to our revealed sources of wisdom in the Bible?

Read Isaiah 60, the passage from the Old Testament where the wisemen’s visit is thought by many to be foretold. What theological purpose does it suggest for including the wise men in the Christmas story?

What theological purpose do you think is fulfilled by having the wisemen visit in Matthew and the Shepherds visit in Luke?

Read the words of the “We Three Kings” carol: what does this carol tell you about the identity of the infant born in Bethlehem?

## **Isaiah 60**

### **The Glory of Zion**

<sup>1</sup> “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

<sup>2</sup> See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

<sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

<sup>4</sup> “Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip.

<sup>5</sup> Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.

<sup>6</sup> Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah.  
And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD. <sup>7</sup> All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple.

**We three kings of Orient are  
Bearing gifts we traverse afar  
Field and fountain, moor and mountain  
Following yonder star**

**O Star of wonder, star of night  
Star with royal beauty bright  
Westward leading, still proceeding  
Guide us to thy Perfect Light**

**Born a King on Bethlehem's plain  
Gold I bring to crown Him again  
King forever, ceasing never  
Over us all to rein**

**O Star of wonder, star of night...**

**Frankincense to offer have I  
Incense owns a Deity nigh  
Pray'r and praising, all men raising  
Worship Him, God most high**

**O Star of wonder, star of night...**

**Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume  
Breathes of life of gathering gloom  
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying  
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb**

**O Star of wonder, star of night...**

Glorious now behold Him arise  
King and God and Sacrifice  
Alleluia, Alleluia  
Earth to heav'n replies

**O Star of wonder, star of night...**