

Bible Studies

Three Kings



Read Matthew 2v1-18

Which verse tells us that there were three of them?

Which verse tells us that they were kings?

Which verse tells us they followed a star from the east?

Which verse tells us that they visited the stable along with the shepherds?

The idea that they were kings seems to have come from Psalm 72v10 and Isaiah 49v7.

The idea that there were three of them comes from the number of gifts.

The idea they followed a star to Jerusalem comes from a misreading of the text.

With one quick read of the Scriptures we have discovered that there is no biblical bases for most of the things that we know about the wise men. So who were they and why did they visit Jesus? Modern translations of the Bible call them Magi, a direct translation of the word Matthew uses, but he give us no explanation of who they were or where they came from.

The reason for this was that in the first century the Magi were famous. Herodotus the Greek historian (5th century BC), Philo and Josephus the Jewish writers, all give us back ground information on the Magi. They needed no introduction. The word Magi is found elsewhere in Scripture. From it we get the word magic. The Latin *magus* came to mean soothsayer.



Read Daniel 1v20

The word used here identifies these magicians or wise men as Magi. They were one of the six tribes (or castes) of Medes. They functioned in the Persian empire as priests, in the same kind of way the Levites were a priestly tribe within Israel. Sometimes the word Magi is just used to mean priest. Without a Magi no sacrifice could be made in the Persian empire.

The Magi were teachers and illuminators of the Persians, specialising in the interpretation of dreams. *Wise men*, is a good description of their function, (and not an oxymoron as women claim.) Originally pagan fire worshipers, they were much involved in the ascendance of Zoroastrianism. Some would claim that they perverted Zoroastrianism for their own uses.

Philo states that the Persian Magi were esteemed as honourable and virtuous sages. Skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science, they became the scholars of Persian society. He goes on to comment; *“And in the land of the barbarians. . . there are very numerous companies of virtuous and honourable men celebrated. Among the Persians there exists a group, the Magi, who investigating the works of nature for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the truth. . . initiate others in the divine virtues, by very clear explanations.”*(Philo, *Every Good Man is Free*, 74. See also, *On Special Laws* 100)

The Magi were both astronomers and astrologers. They searched the heavens for omen. They believed the heavens revealed things that were happening on earth.

Strabo tells us that about the time of Christ the Magi formed the upper house of the council of the Megistanes, whose duties included the election of the king of the Parthian empire (*Strabo*, XI, ix, 3). Thus they became known as king makers. Magi were used as envoys for the Parthian empire, representing the state at coronations or funerals.

The Magi seem to have been widely known and respected at the time of Jesus birth. The question is; why did the Magi come to acknowledge Jesus birth, how did they know where to go and how did they know what to expect?

Where did they first see the star?

Where did they follow it from and to?

They saw the star in the east. That means while they were in the east, Persia or Babylon, at this time part of the Parthian empire. **If the star had been in the east and they had followed it in that direction, where would they have ended up?**

Why would they be overjoyed to see a star they had been following all this time?

Why would they end up in the wrong place, if they were following a star?

The truth of the matter is that they saw a star in the east and knew to go to Jerusalem. Having arrived in Jerusalem the obvious, but wrong place, they then followed the star from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, a journey of less than 10km. There are many possible identities and dates for the star. When it says the star stood over the place where the child lay, this is a specific word used else where to indicate the tail of a comet. The tail pointed to the stable. This is only one of many possibilities.



Read Daniel 2v27 & 5v15

These verses also use the word for Magi. The Magi specialised in the interpretation of dreams. Daniel's ability and their inability, highlighted Daniel's superiority.

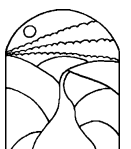
What position did Daniel hold in relation to the wise men? Daniel 2v48

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If Daniel was placed in charge of the wise men, then it is highly likely that he exercised considerable influence over them. It is possible from Daniel's writings to establish the approximate date of the birth of Christ. Maybe a memory of the teachings of Daniel, including but not limited to his book, remained among the Magi. It was this that caused them to be aware of the prophesied birth of the Messiah, to be waiting for it and to know where they should go. The star was just a signal that the time had arrived. Some have gone as far as to state that this group of Magi that had in fact converted to Judaism under Daniel's leadership.

Why did God use a star to signal the event?

He used the language the Magi understood. It does not imply that searching for omens in the stars is sanctioned by God. The star was a little like Balaam's donkey.



Read Matthew 2v3 This is a puzzling verse. **(what's wrong with it?)**
How would we expect Herod to react to news of the Messiah's birth?
How would we expect the population of Jerusalem to react?

Herod was not even Jewish, he was an Edomite. He was imposed on the Jews by the Romans and the Jews hated him. They were long expecting the birth of the Messiah, he was focus of all their hopes. Herod was paranoid and violent. He reacted exactly as expected.

So why does it say all Jerusalem was disturbed?

We don't know. We do know there was fear of war on the Egyptian boarder around this time. From what we know of the Magi they traveled in large groups and when they traveled they did so with an armed guard. Together the group could have numbered over a hundred. Jerusalem may have taken their arrival as a vanguard of war.

We do not know how many Magi arrived in Jerusalem. Early Christian art works, show between 2 and 8, numbers as high as 60 have been suggested. We know that the Magi gave gifts collectively not individually.



How do we know they rode camels?

Usually traders who had produce to move used camels, ordinary travelers and certainly aristocracy like the Magi certainly used horses, they are faster and more comfortable.

What is the significance of Jesus being 'born king of the Jews'?

He was not born to be king He was born king. It is interesting that Jesus also died as King of the Jews and so He will return.

What did Herod want the wise men to do?

What did he have planned?

Where did the Magi find the baby?

They found Him in a house not a stable. This suggests a time lag in our normal idea of how things went. The Magi did not visit the stable.

So when did they arrive? Luke 2v22-24, Leviticus 12v1, Matthew 2v16.

At the youngest, Jesus was 41 days old and at the oldest He was two.

Why did Herod choose the age of two? v16

What else is it safe to assume?

Herod surely added a safe margin for error, Jesus can have been no older than one.

This verse suggests (but does not state,) that the star appeared when Jesus was born. We do not know how long it took the wise men to make preparations and travel to Jerusalem. It is safe to assume that at least it took several months.



What did they do when they found the Child?

Do you think they expected Him to be found in such humble circumstances?

Did this effect the way they behaved?

Why did God send the Magi, why does Matthew record their visit?

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. Isaiah 49:6

Matthew is keen in his Gospel to demonstrate the fulfillment of OT prophecy. The Magi remind us that from his birth Jesus was Saviour for the gentile world. In this the Magi are the counter balance to the shepherds who represented, heartland Israel.

What other contrasts are there between the Magi and the Shepherds?

What gifts did the Magi give to Jesus?

The most important answer is their worship and adoration. The three gifts are symbolic.



Gold was a gift given to kings.

Frankincense was used as incense to God. Exodus 30v34, Leviticus 6v15, 24v7

Myrrh, was commonly used in everyday life for many reasons, usually to make things smell nice. It was used in anointing the dead.

What do these things tell us about Jesus? How do you think they were used?



Why did the Magi not report back to Herod? What did they do?

What effect do you think all this had on Mary and Joseph?

What effect do you think it had on the population?

The flight of Joseph and Mary to Egypt not only protected them from Herod, it enabled them to escape the publicity and rumour that must have been circulating.

Perhaps the most important warning the Magi have for us today is to ensure that we read what the Scriptures say instead of blindly following traditions and assumptions.