

The visit of the Magi

Artists often picture the Magi (wise men) as worshipping the infant Jesus alongside the shepherds in the stable at Bethlehem. This makes a lovely picture, but it contradicts the facts Matthew has recorded for us. We don't know the names of these men (tradition calls them Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior), how many there were, exactly where they came from, or precisely when they came.

We do know that they arrived a number of months after Jesus' birth, for Jesus had already been circumcised and presented in the temple, and Mary and Joseph were now in a house in Bethlehem, not in the stable.

The Magi were a class of priests, astronomers, and astrologers. They were influential advisors of the king, very likely in Babylon. Some of them were involved in various occult practices. During the 70 years of the Jews' captivity in Babylon (586–516 BC), Daniel was made the presiding officer over the caste of the Magi. From him they surely learned about the Messiah for whom the Jews were waiting. They also had opportunities to learn what Israel's prophets had foretold about the Messiah. They took these promises very seriously and believed in Israel's God; otherwise they would hardly have undertaken the long and dangerous journey to find and worship Jesus.

The star that guided them was a special creation of God. It did not look like other stars, and it did not act like other stars. Efforts to explain it as a conjunction of the planets Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars or as a meteor or a comet are not satisfactory.

The Magi saw this special star in the east. They saw it again when they travelled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and it guided them to the very house where Mary and Joseph were staying with the Christ Child.

How did the Magi know that this special star signified that the Messiah had been born? All we can say is that God revealed this to them. In Balaam's prophecy that "a star will come out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17), the star is the Messiah Himself, not a heavenly body announcing His birth.

It was natural for the Magi to come to the capital city of Jerusalem. They expected everyone there to know about the Messiah's birth, and they were surprised when they asked around and received no information. After a while King Herod heard about the Magi and their search. In order to understand Herod's treacherous and then violent reaction, we need to know something about the man, and secular records tell us even more than we might care to know.

Herod the Great was an Edomite or Idumean, a descendant of Esau. So he was not really an Israelite. He was the first of several Herods. He was a clever and capable warrior, orator, and diplomat. During the great famine of 25 BC, he melted down some of the golden items from the palace in order to raise money to help the poor. He built theatres and racetracks for the entertainment of the people, and in 19 BC he began rebuilding the temple, which was subsequently known as Herod's Temple. He also built the port city of Caesarea and the fortress Masada, where in AD 73 nearly a thousand Jews committed suicide to avoid being captured by the Romans. Herod truly was one of the great builders in the history of the Jews, perhaps the greatest since King Solomon. Yet he was also cruel, merciless, and jealous. He had his wife's brother, Aristobulus the high priest, drowned and then pretended to mourn at the magnificent funeral he provided. He had his own wife Mariamne killed, as well as her mother and three of his sons. Shortly before his death, he had the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem imprisoned and then gave orders that they should be executed at the moment of his own death. In that way he wanted to ensure that there would be mourning in the city at the time of his death, for he knew that otherwise there might be only rejoicing among the citizenry.

When Herod summoned the men who were authorities on the Old Testament Scriptures, they immediately told him that Bethlehem in Judah was the place where the Messiah was to be born. The prophet Micah had clearly foretold this (Micah 5:2). Although Bethlehem was a small, undistinguished village, God had chosen it as the place where His Son, the Messiah, would be born. The "little town of Bethlehem" would gain a distinction that the grandest city on earth could never match.

Herod's hypocrisy deceived the Magi. They took him at his word when he asked them to report back to him after finding the special child in Bethlehem. He pretended that he wanted to worship the newborn king too. Actually, he wanted to use the Magi to help him locate and identify the Christ Child so that he could easily destroy this threat to his personal authority.

Guided by the special star, the Magi located the Christ Child, together with Mary and Joseph, in a house in Bethlehem. They worshipped Him and presented Him with costly gifts. We can see rich symbolism in all three gifts. Precious gold suggests royalty, for Jesus was the King of the Jews. The incense reminds us of Christ's deity. Incense was regularly used in connection with worship at the temple. Its aromatic smoke rising to the heavens symbolised the God-pleasing prayers of the people ascending to the throne of God. Myrrh symbolises Jesus' humanity and pointed to His suffering and death. It was an aromatic resin used in perfume and in the embalming process. It also served as a kind of anaesthetic when

mixed with wine. That was why the Roman soldiers offered Jesus wine mixed with myrrh as He hung on the cross (Mark 15:23), but He refused to drink it.