

Who Were the Wise Men?

Scripture: Matthew 2:1

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INTRODUCTION

Who were the Wise Men? All of us have probably wondered about this at one time or another. How many were there? Were they really kings? Did they really ride camels? Why did they come to Bethlehem? Most of our ideas about this fascinating group come from the people who draw Christmas cards rather than theologians. Marvin Vincent, who has written some very helpful word studies on the Bible says, "Many absurd traditions and guesses respecting these visitors to our Lord's cradle have found their way into popular belief and into Christian art. They were said to be kings, and three in number; they were said to be representatives of the three families of Shem, Ham, and Japhet, and therefore one of them is pictured as an Ethiopian; their names are given as Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, and their three skulls--said to have been discovered in the twelfth century by Bishop Reinald of Cologne --are exhibited in a priceless casket in the great cathedral of that city." Now frankly, folks, the only thing we know about these Wise Men is some history and what is said in Matthew. We are really very limited in terms of specifics. In addition to what we have here in Matthew, which only says, "...there came Wise Men from the east..." (2:1b), we have very little information. But as we put the pieces together historically, we do get a fairly good idea about who they were, though we don't know their names. We can gain some fascinating insights about them from Old Testament books such as Daniel, where the Magi, or wise men, appear in several different texts, as well as from the writings of Herodotus and other historians. We basically have found the Magi to be members of an Eastern priestly group, descendants of a tribe of people originally associated with the Medes.

You may remember that the Medes constituted the second of four major world empires in the history of man. The first one was the Babylonian Empire, which basically was settled in the fertile crescent area east of Israel, in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates River, north of the Arabian gulf. That was where the Babylonian Empire was. It was followed by the second great empire that Daniel talks about, known as the Medo- Persian Empire. It was a conglomerate made up of the Persians and the Medes, a very large and powerful people. The third great world empire was Greece. When the Medo-Persian Empire was conquered by Alexander the Great, the world essentially became Greek. The fourth great Empire was the Roman Empire.

A. The Inception of the Wise Men

Now, we know that the Medes existed at the time of the Babylonian Empire, making them a very ancient people. In fact, there are many people in history who trace the origin of the Medes all the way back to the time when Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldees in the 12th chapter of Genesis. At any rate, we know that the Magi were people who were present in the Babylonian Empire because we see them in the book of Daniel. As an ancient and long-lived people, they continued on through the Medo-Persian and the Greek empires and were still in existence in the Roman Empire when Christ was born. Matthew 2:1 identifies them as "wise men": "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod, the king, behold, there came wise men [Gk. magoi] from the east to Jerusalem." The word magi (NASB) is simply a transliteration of the Greek that was the name of a certain tribe of people, who were the priestly line from among the Medes.

B. The Interests of the Wise Men

They were very skilled in astronomy and had a great preoccupation with astrology. Their interest in these two areas was only part of their involvement in the occultic practices of divination and a kind of sorcery. Consequently, that's why the word magi was corrupted through history into the word magician which once was a synonym for sorcerer. Unfortunately, in those days they didn't make much of a separation between the superstition of astrology and the science of astronomy.

C. The Influencing of the Wise Men

Now, while these Magi were dwelling in the area of Babylon during the Babylonian and the Medo-Persian empires, they were very heavily influenced by the Jews. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, took Judah into captivity as Jeremiah had prophesied and later lamented. Dwelling in Babylon at the time of the Jewish captivity were also the Magi, who were very high ranking officials due to their amazing intuition, wisdom, knowledge, and occultic abilities. And because they had come into contact with Jews at this time, especially influential ones like Daniel, the Magi would have been familiar with Jewish prophecy regarding the Messiah.

In order to better set the scene for the incredible incident in Matthew 2, I would like to take a closer look at...

I. THE MAGI AND THEIR BACKGROUND

Let's go back and examine their history. According to the ancient historian Herodotus, the Magi were a tribe of people within the larger people called the Medes. They were a hereditary priesthood tribe, somewhat like the Levites in Israel, who were the single tribe out of the twelve that ministered in the rituals and the religious ceremonies of Israel. Similarly, of all of the tribes within the Medes, the Magi had been selected to function as priests in their pagan rituals. Whether they originated all the way back in Ur of the Chaldees as a part of a nomadic people that were wandering about in that part of the world, or whether they first appeared in the Babylonian time, we can't absolutely determine. But we do know that from the Babylonian to the Roman empires, they maintained a place of tremendous prominence and significance in the Orient.

A. Their Powerful Prominence

Even when the Greek and Roman empires were in power, there was still a certain eastern culture and power in effect. And in both of those periods, the Magi were really the key people in the eastern governments centered in the fertile crescent. As a Semitic people who, like Arabs and Jews, traced their lineage from Shem, the Magi rose to a place of tremendous political power by virtue of their very unique priestly function, occultic powers of divination, and knowledge of astrology and astronomy. During the four world empires, they served in a powerfully influential capacity as advisors to the royalty in the East, consequently earning the reputation of being wise men. They were the ones that were consulted about the various things that the ruling kings, nobles, and princes wanted to know.

B. Their Priestly Practice

Now, we even have some history that tells us about their religious activities: The principle element of their worship seems to have been fire. Their reverence of fire has led some historians to conclude that they saw fire as some kind of incarnation of deity, though they did commonly hold with Israel a monotheistic belief in God. They believed that the perpetual flame that burned upon their altar was kindled by God from heaven. On a second altar, they offered blood sacrifices, which were eaten by the worshiper and the Magian priests.

What's fascinating about the ceremonial practice is that much of it was almost a direct parallel to Judaism (You can see how Satan was counterfeiting true religion even back then, just as he does today with Christianity.). In that day, there was a real sacrificial system with genuine worship toward the one true God, and there was false monotheism with its blood sacrifice. As I mentioned before, even their hereditary priesthood was similar to Israel's Levitical priesthood. Their priests carried about divining rods in their garments, using them much like the Urim and Thummim of the high priest in Israel by which the will of God was sought. Also like the Israelites, the Magians identified certain kinds of animals, like insects and reptiles, as unclean, and were very ritualistic about the touching

and disposing of a dead body.

So, in the Babylonian Empire, this very interesting religious group of people appeared who rose to tremendous prominence. Beyond this, we can learn more about...

II. THE MAGI IN THE BIBLE

A. In Jeremiah

In chapter 39 verse 3, a man by the name of Nergal-sharezer is mentioned who was the chief of the Magi in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. In the context of Scripture, oriental kings starting with Nebuchadnezzar had elevated the Magi to the place of being the official advisors to the king. Even when Babylon fell to the Medo-Persian Empire, great rulers like Darius the Great and Cyrus still chose their high-ranking officials of the Medo-Persian government from among this group called the Magi. They were unmatched in political power as we find even more clearly...

B. In Daniel

1. DANIEL'S INTERACTION WITH THE MAGI

a. Chapter 2 In the context of this chapter, we are in the court of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, where Daniel and the other Jews are residing in captivity. Verse 10 says, "The Chaldeans [possibly synonymous with Magi] answered before the king, and said, There is not a man upon the earth that can reveal the king's matter; therefore, there is no king, lord, nor ruler that asked such things of any magician, or astrologer, or Chaldean." And it may be that those three classifications are all synonymous with the Hebrew term for Magi. The translation "magician" is really an English corruption of the term Magi, which seems to refer to this priestly tribe. The term appears again in verse 27: "Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, The secret which the king hath demanded cannot the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, the soothsayers, reveal unto the king." The book of Daniel reinforces the fact that the Magi had a very prominent place in government at that time.

b. Chapter 4 The Magi were known as those who could interpret dreams. In spite of this, however, they were unable to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's bizarre dream. The one man who could interpret it was Daniel: "Then came in the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers; and I told the dream to them, but they did not make known unto me its interpretation.... O Belteshazzar, master of the magicians..." (vv. 7, 9a). Not only do we find the mention of Magi again, but we meet the master of the Magi, as they should be more correctly called.

c. Chapter 5 Now when Daniel came along and all these Magi who were in the high ranking place of advisors to the king couldn't give any answers, Belshazzar was informed of Daniel's superior ability: "There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him, whom the king, Nebuchadnezzar, thy father, the king, I say, thy father, made master of the [Magi]..." (v. 11). Daniel was so adept at explaining the dreams of the king, that he was made the master of the Magi so that Daniel literally was the chief over this whole priestly group in Babylon. Now, that put Daniel in the tremendously unique position of being able to dispense information about the Old Testament to the Magi...and without a shadow of a doubt, this is precisely what he did.

2. DANIEL'S INFLUENCE UPON THE MAGI

a. Their Reception of Revelation We know that Daniel was a man of God, who was totally devoted to worship and the expression of his faith, because he wound up in a lions' den for it, didn't he? And there's no question in my mind but that Daniel and the other godly remnant in the diaspora shared their knowledge of the Old Testament and their copies of the Scripture with these people in Babylon. In fact, even when the final decree of Cyrus came that they could go back to the land, the majority of the Jews stayed in Babylon, intermingled, intermarried, and throughout the remaining history of Babylon and Medo-Persia, there were people in the noble families and high-ranking offices who had partly Jewish blood. Consequently, the Magi of the East would have been very familiar with Jewish prophecy, and certainly we would have to conclude that Daniel had a profound impact in the

dispensing of that information.b. Their Refusal to RebelYou may ask the question that I did: "If Daniel was so good at winning these Magi over and convincing them about this fact of the coming Messiah, why was it that they plotted against him and threw him in the lions' den?" As I studied the 6th chapter of Daniel, it revealed a most interesting thing: In that chapter, there was a plot against Daniel based on jealousy. If you read carefully, you will find that the plot was not devised by the Magi who dominated the hierarchy of the royal court, but by the men identified as the satraps, the regional governors, who had nothing to do with the palace. The fact that the Magi were not involved in this plot leads me to conclude that Daniel was extremely believable and convincing in his impact upon them. In fact, do you realize that when Daniel was being thrown in the lions' den the king himself said, "Daniel, I have to do this, but I know that your God will deliver you" (6:16b). The king had been convinced of the power of God through the testimony of Daniel. So, the Magi, who maintained their position of great power in the court of the Medo-Persian kings, were influenced by uniquely great men like Daniel and by godly Jews in the dispersion. Such circumstances help us to understand...How the Magi became seekers of the true GodIn the sixth century B.C., there was a great king of the Medo-Persian Empire by the name of Darius the Great. Desiring to establish a national religion, he selected Zoroastrianism with its emphasis upon astrology, which may account for the preoccupation of the Magi with that field of study. So, on top of their own culture's religion was superimposed Judaism and after that, Zoroastrianism. Now that's really a can of worms, to put it mildly, but the Magi were so anxious to maintain their political power that were willing to assimilate other religions into their own. Within this priestly group, there were some who became committed to Zoroastrianism, some who were still committed to the ancient magian beliefs, and some who honestly believed in their hearts that the God of Daniel was the true God. I really believe that it was the Magi of the latter group who showed up at the birth of Christ as honest seekers of the true God.c. Their Responsibility Concerning RulersThe Magi were so powerful that historians tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king except under two conditions: he had to master the scientific and religious discipline of the Magi, and he had to be approved of and crowned by the Magi. In effect, they controlled who could be king--that's power!The law of the Medes and the Persians (Est. 1:19; Dan. 6:8) was the code of scientific and religious discipline of the Magi, which was required for anyone to be a monarch in Persia. Besides controlling the kingly office, historians tell us that they controlled the judicial office as well. Esther 1:13 implies that the royal bench of judges was chosen from the Magi. By this kind of leverage, the Magi of the massive Medo-Persian Empire were able to control essentially the entire known world of the Orient. These powerful men, then, were not only responsible for training every monarch in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, natural history, agriculture, architecture, and so on, in much the same way as "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Ac. 7:22), but they were also responsible for the actual selection of kings and judges, who served to counterbalance one another. All nobility was raised by these king-makers, and no one ruled at all apart from them. Now, you will remember that Daniel was chosen to become chief of the Magi when he demonstrated his superior ability in interpreting dreams (cf. 5:11). By the "divine coincidence" of having a great Hebrew prophet to rule the Magi six hundred years before Jesus was born, God was, in effect, setting up the situation so that one day, when a baby was born in Bethlehem, some of those Magi would find their way to the house where the baby was so that He could be acknowledged as King. That's planning history! Furthermore, the many similarities of the Magi's syncretistic religion with that of the Jews, would have made Judaism an easy system for them to accept. It is for these reasons I believe that there were some God-fearing Gentile Magi existing in that eastern part of the world. Now I want to move to the time of Jesus and consider...

III. THE MAGI AT THE BIRTH

Though centuries had passed since Daniel had lived, God had marvelously managed to maintain some truth-seeking Magi. By the birth of Jesus, there was still among the Magi, a remnant of God-fearing Gentiles. Some of these high-ranking king-makers of the great empire of the east were still

waiting for Daniel's great hope to be fulfilled.

Let me set the stage for Matthew 2 as we examine...

A. The Anxiety Of Rome

1. THE PARTHEAN EMPIRE

Politically speaking, Rome was scared of the eastern empire, because of the distance across the Mediterranean and the blazing desert which served to isolate the eastern Parthean Empire, as the Medo-Persian Empire became known, from Rome's direct control. Rome had stretched its tentacles out, as it were, to rule the world, but they never really felt secure about the Parthean Empire. Having become violent enemies, the two empires fought in 63, 55, and 40 B.C. in Israel, the land between the powers of the west and those of the east. Rome's anxiety over this eastern empire was accurately reflected in Herod's response to the arrival of the Magi in Matthew 2:3: "When Herod, the king, had heard these things, he was troubled...." When he heard that Magi, the oriental, Parthean king-makers had arrived in Jerusalem, he was rattled, and rightly so, as we shall see in our next lesson.

2. THE PRACTICE OF SORCERY

By the time of Christ, the Magi were still in tremendous power in the east. Whereas some of them used their power, position, and skills with a great amount of human wisdom, others prostituted their craft (This is no different than it is today when those in influential positions like scientists and preachers can either apply their craft deceitfully or can apply it honestly.). Both kinds of Magi were very common in the Mediterranean era when Christ was born. Let me introduce you to a couple of corrupt ones recorded in...a. Acts 8 -- "Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spoke, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did....But there was a certain man, called Simon, who previously in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest saying, This man is the great power of God" (vv. 4-6, 9-11). Now here is a man known as Simon Magus (the Magi) who had prostituted his position into deceit as an emissary of Satan. He used sorcery (Gk. *mageuo*), his Magi art, in a prostituted manner. Later on, when he tried to buy the Holy Spirit, Peter really condemned his perverse motives: "Thy money perish with thee....Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter....Repent, therefore, of this thy wickedness....For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity" (vv. 20a, 21a, 22a, 23). Peter sure didn't mince any words with this individual who had prostituted his art to bewitch the people.b. Acts 13 -- On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas met a sorcerer on a Mediterranean island: "And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Bar-jesus....But Elymas, the sorcerer [Gk. *magus*] (for so is his name by interpretation), withstood them..." (vv. 6, 8a). Elymas the Magi was another one who used this strange pagan religion in order to seek the ends of Satan. When he tried to oppose Paul, Paul said, "O full of all deceit and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand" (vv. 10-11). Paul sure dealt with him. Both Simon and Elymas were renegade Jews who had somewhere been exposed to magian training and had prostituted that so that they were brought into the bondage of Satan himself who is the god of all astrologers and sorcerers. And frankly, these were the kind of people that made intelligent folks in the Roman Empire despise such sorcerers. Philo, the first-century philosopher said that they were "vipers, scorpions, and other venomous creatures." They were the kind of people that the Romans despised. But there is no question in my mind that some among them were genuinely honest men.

B. The Arrival In Jerusalem

1. THE PURPOSE OF THE MEGISTANES

At the time of Christ in the eastern empire, there was a ruling body called the Megistanes, who would be similar in function to the United States Senate. It was totally composed of Magi who had the right of absolute choice for the selection of a king. They were king-makers. Now, they had some real problems with their present king, who had been deposed. Wanting to fight Rome with an able and willing ruler, the Magi were looking for a new king for the eastern empire. For this reason, they headed toward Jerusalem looking for a new king.

2. THE PANIC OF THE MONARCH

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem asking for the whereabouts of the new king that had been born, Herod got panicky, knowing that those Persian king-makers had come to find their king. They were no doubt traveling in full force with all their oriental pomp, wearing conical hats and riding Persian steeds (rather than camels). And accompanying them, historians estimate there were a thousand mounted Persian calvarymen. When they came charging into the city of Jerusalem and Herod peeked out his little palace window, he must have flipped. Not only was their unexpected presence unnerving, but to make matters worse for Herod, his army was out of the country on a mission. That's why the Bible says that Herod was "troubled." The Greek word conveys the idea that he was agitating like a washing machine--literally shaking. As the King of the Jews, a title that Herod had received from Caesar Augustus, the great dream of his life was to get that little buffer state in the middle of two huge contending empires, under his control. And all of a sudden this massive coterie of Persians arrived in the city and he panicked, because the new king they were coming to find would be a threat to the realization of his dream. Now at this time, because both Herod and Caesar Augustus were close to death, and because the retirement of Tiberius had left the Roman army without a commander-in-chief, the Parthians were aware that this would be the ideal time to bring about an eastern war against the west. You say, "Well, what were the Magi thinking?" I don't know. Maybe they had looked at it politically, but certainly they looked at it spiritually, because when they got to that little room in Bethlehem, the Bible says that they worshiped Him. They saw more than just a king. I believe they saw the Messiah they had heard about from the days of Daniel. I think the Magi who came to Jerusalem were God-fearing Gentiles who probably envisioned this Savior, the Anointed One (Messiah), as the king who would gather all the people of the East together against the oppression of Rome. Knowing that the people of Israel were on their side rather than Rome's, the Magi came into town and started asking the people where this new King was, expecting the people of Israel to be just as excited as they were. But sadly, the majority of Jews were blinded by their unbelief. Isn't it ironic that some of the first people in the world to recognize the arrival of the King were Gentiles. History reflects that irony of rejection in John 1:11 where it says, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." But in spite of the general rejection of the King by the Jews, the Magi wondered whether this Child could be the invincible monarch that they could crown as King, the great Messiah that Daniel had prophesied, who could unify the east and go against Rome with invincibility. And so, into Jerusalem rides the group of Magi, king-makers of the east on their fine Persian steeds, and escorted by a thousand mounted calvarymen. The stage is thus set for the exciting events which we will examine in the next lesson.

Conclusion

Isn't it exciting to you how God controls history? And do you know why it is so fascinating? Not because it is just a bunch of historical facts, but because you are seeing God at work. History is His story. Long ago He picked out a man named Daniel and put him in a place to influence some men so that they could arrive in perfect timing.

You say, "Well, why does Matthew present this?" Matthew, all the way through his Gospel, is trying to tell the world that Jesus Christ is King. And just to make sure nobody misses the point, he records the most famous king-makers in the world coming and bowing down at His feet. It's all a part of Matthew's strategy. If Israel isn't going to acknowledge Christ as King, then God is going to drag a bunch of people from Persia to acknowledge it.

God has masterplanned history. And the sad part of this particular bit of history is that the people who should have known the great significance of the event missed it, and the people from way off who should have never guessed it could happen, showed up and worshipped the One who came to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles (cf. Rom. 1:16). Jesus came and said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 15:24). Israel turned her back on Christ, and so He called a people from those who were not formerly His (Rom. 9:25). He reached out to the Gentiles, Romans says, and grafted us in (11:17). Even the unbelief of His own people could not prevent the Messiah from being honored as Jesus made clear in Luke 19:40 that if the people wouldn't praise Him, "the stones would immediately cry out." Therefore, when the King arrived, and His own people wouldn't praise Him, then God made sure that there was somebody there to do it.

And you know in our world today, people celebrate Christmas by passing around Christmas cards. They look at the Wise Men, but few really understand the significance of their presence before that Child. There are some of us, however, who have followed the example of the Wise Men and bowed down to the "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev. 19:16b).

Focusing on the Facts

1. What were the four major world empires mentioned in the Bible? Of which people are the Magi descendants?
2. By whom were the Magi heavily influenced during the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires?
3. What were the Magi selected to function as?
4. In what powerfully influential capacity did the Magi serve?
5. What similarities did the Magi have with Judaism?
6. Who does the Bible record as having been appointed as master of the Magi? Why?
7. In Daniel's tremendously unique position, what was he able to do?
8. Who were the ones responsible for the plot against Daniel's life?
9. How would some of the Magi have known about the birth of the Messiah and become true seekers of God?
10. What were the two conditions a Persian had to meet before he could become king? Consequently, who ultimately controlled the process of selecting kings?
11. Why was the eastern empire a source of anxiety for Rome?
12. Describe Peter's and Paul's reaction to the sorcerers in Acts 8 and 13? Who were these "magi" really serving?
13. Who were the Megistanes, and what were they looking for? Why?
14. Why was Herod upset when the Magi arrived in town?
15. Who would have accompanied the Magi on their journey?
16. Even if the Magi were viewing their mission politically, what shows that they probably had spiritual motives, too?
17. Why did the Magi not find the majority of Jews as excited as they were about this historic birth?
18. What was Matthew's strategy in recording the story of the Wise Men?

Pondering the Principles

1. Who are you influencing with your life?

Daniel hadn't planned on being taken captive to Babylon, but he was the man God was able to use because of his complete trust in Him. Whether you are in a job, a school, working at home, or even in the hospital, make the most of where God has placed you at the present time by influencing others with issues of eternal consequence. You may never know when the seeds that you have laboriously planted will result in others making a commitment to Christ. Do you have Bible knowledge or some spiritual gift that you should be sharing with others? Make a decision to influence those people you come into contact with in the way of righteousness. Memorize 1 Peter 2:11.

2. It's a sad commentary upon the spiritual condition of Israel at the time of Christ to see how unaware the Jews were that the King of kings was being born in their own backyard. How is the accuracy of your own spiritual vision?

Are you so enraptured with the future or imprisoned by the past that your eyes can't focus on the present? Or maybe you are one of those who are plodding through this existence we call life, rather than living abundantly. Are there people around you that need to be ministered to? Are there problems in your local body of believers that need to be resolved? Have you been given much in the way of spiritual truth? Then, of you, much is required. As you meditate upon Luke 12:42-48, ask that God would give some ideas as to how you could put to the best use those many things that you have been graciously given.

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