

CAN WE REALLY BELIEVE IN –

3: THE THREE KINGS AND THE STAR?



The familiar Christmas story tells of three wise men (kings?) travelling first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem, guided on their journey by the “star of wonder, star of night”, and bearing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But is that what really happened and can we honestly believe such a story?

Of course it *is* only popular tradition that describes these night-time visitors as “kings.” The word that Matthew uses (and it is in his Gospel that their visit is recorded), is *Magi*.

Who were Magi?

These men were star gazers, greatly interested in the study and significance of the night sky and embracing astronomy and astrology, science and superstition, in equal measure. It is known from ancient documents that Magi would travel long distances on journeys covering many hundreds of miles in pursuit of knowledge. For example in AD 66 Magi are recorded as visiting Rome.

Because they were involved in the occult, in direct contravention of the Scriptures (e.g. Deut.18v9-13), no devout Jew would have anything to do with them. As a Jewish saying went: “Whoever learns something from a magus is worthy of death.”

It is possible to read symbolism into the gifts that they brought – gold for kingship, frankincense for worship (and thus for divinity) and myrrh for death and burial. And later Christians turned to such Scriptures as Psalm 72 v.10-11,15 and Isaiah 60v6 to do just that. But these are connections that other people made; they are not ones that Matthew made himself.

Very significantly Matthew never tells his readers why the Magi came. This is crucial in deciding whether he is describing an actual event or simply writing a work of devout fiction. Elsewhere in his Nativity, Matthew is at pains to point out that such and such an action fulfilled such and such a prophecy (e.g. ch.1v22; 2v15, 17, 23). *But on the significance of the Magi’s visit also in chapter 2, he is silent.* If he had invented their visit in order to demonstrate the fulfilment of a particular prophecy or to prove a certain theological point he would have done so. But Matthew makes no connections at all. His silence points to the fact that he simply recorded what had happened.

Furthermore as a Jew himself, he would know that it would hamper rather than help Jesus’ standing and credibility for such visitors to come and worship Him.

And that brings us to another question. From where did these Magi or Wise Men come? The Bible simply says from “the east” (Mt.2v1). Perhaps Persia (modern day Iran). This has the backing of tradition and Matthew says that they came from the east (Mt.2v1). We know too that Jews were deported to Persia in earlier times (2 Kngs 17v6) and they would have brought with them their faith and their belief in the coming of Messiah. Another suggestion is that the Magi came from Babylonia, where again Jews – most notably Daniel – had dwelt for a time.

What we do know is that their visit caused quite a stir. By Jesus’ day a prophecy in Num.24v17 about a “star” coming out of Israel, was interpreted to refer to the Messiah, Israel’s promised king: *The king rises out of Jacob and the Anointed One [Messiah] of Israel becomes great and ...rules over all the children of men.* And now these men arrive in Jerusalem, asking for the “King of the Jews” and saying that they have seen his “star”!

One other point is that, the Bible never says that there were three visitors, only that three gifts were given (Mt.2v11).

The Star (Mt.2v1-2,16)

First of all it is clear that it was a real star (or planet) that was observed. It has variously been suggested that it was:-

- The planet Jupiter, often associated with the birth of kings and called the “king-planet.”
- The conjunction of Jupiter with Saturn.
- The conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars in the constellation of Aries (the “ruler”).
- A comet acting in an odd manner.
- A star of unusual brilliance.
- A supernova (as for example recorded by Chinese astronomers in 5/4 BC).

In the ancient world there was a widespread belief that the appearance of stars heralded the birth of human beings destined for greatness. And both Roman and Jewish writers report that there was also a widely held belief that a world ruler was to appear from Judea whose kingdom would usher in a reign of peace and prosperity. No wonder the wise men or Magi studied the night sky so intently!

Suetonius: An ancient and settled persuasion prevailed throughout the East, that the Fates had decreed some one to proceed from Judea, who should attain universal empire. (Vespasian IV)

Tacitus: Many were persuaded that it was contained in the ancient books of their priests, that at that very time the East should prevail, and that some one should proceed from Judea and possess the dominion. (Histories V.13)

Josephus: ...an ambiguous oracle that was ...found in their sacred writings, how 'about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.' (War.VI.312)

“We three kings of orient are...following yonder star.”

But did they? If the Magi were from Persia as tradition suggests, then they could not have seen Jesus' star “in the east” – Gk: *en tais anatolais* (Mt.2v2), because they would have seen it rising in the west, (unless they were simply saying that they were in the east when they saw the star). However an alternative and perhaps a preferred translation reads “at its rising.” – *en te anatole*, the usual expression for a star's first appearance on the horizon.

In fact Matthew never says that the Magi followed the star, only that they had seen the star at its rising / in the east and had realised its significance. They wouldn't have needed a star to guide them to Israel and to Jerusalem as they would know where were located. And if they had in fact followed the star then clearly it would have led them to Jesus and to Bethlehem and not to Herod and to Jerusalem.

The only time the wise men are actually recorded as following the star is on their very short (four mile) journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where it is clear that the star they had seen once at its rising in their own country, now appeared for a second time to lead them to Bethlehem (Mt.2v9). As Bethlehem is so close to Jerusalem, it is hard to imagine how a celestial object could hang so low in the sky that it could lead the magi over such a short geographical distance, especially as they did not need the star to guide them to Bethlehem because the teachers of the law had already told them where they should go (Mt.2v5-6).

So why did the star shine once again? Probably to confirm that Bethlehem was indeed the right place to which to go. But more importantly it shone to identify the actual house in which Jesus had been born (Mt.2v9). Although the Magi knew to which village to go they did not know the specific location. Perhaps the star then shone with particular brilliance, casting a “spotlight” on Jesus' birthplace.

And there was also going to be another reason why the magi would need a star to guide them on a night journey to a specific home, rather than them simply waiting for the morning. A few men arriving at night and leaving the very next day at early dawn (“having been warned in a dream”) would ensure that the location of Jesus' home would remain a secret. Foreign travellers arriving in broad daylight and asking around for directions to “King” Jesus' home would have ensured that Herod would swiftly have discovered where Jesus was.

Although tradition and popular belief have the Magi coming to Jesus at the same time as the shepherds, a closer look at the text suggests otherwise. They come to the “house” (and not to an inn or to a stable), and worship the “child” (and not the baby (Mt.2v11). Indeed it is explicitly stated that they arrived in Judea “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem” (Mt.2v1).

Moreover Herod would have had no reason to kill the male children of *two years and under*, “in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi,” (Mt.2v16), unless the guiding star, signalling the actual or the imminent birth of the “King of the Jews,” had not appeared in the skies two years before their arrival. Which would make Jesus two years old or less when the Magi found Him.

Further indications that the wise men did not arrive in Bethlehem at the same time as the shepherds i.e. at Jesus' birth, are given in Luke's Gospel. There, in chapter 2v21f, Luke records that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple when He was about 6 weeks old “to present Him to the Lord.” It is surely inconceivable that Herod, on tenterhooks to discover the identity of this new born “King of the Jews,” would have waited so long to hear back from the magi, when Bethlehem was no more than a few miles from Jerusalem. If they had not returned to his palace within the first day or two, he would have come looking for them and for the baby. And it is surely equally unlikely that if Joseph and Mary had received divine warning that Herod was looking to kill their child and instead had been told to flee to Egypt, they would have first brought that same baby to the very city in which Herod was living and from which it would have been impossible to escape..

Also Joseph and Mary's offering was one made by poor people (Leviticus 12). Yet with gold, frankincense and myrrh, they were hardly now poor.

So what really happened?

Around two years before the events recorded in Matthew's Gospel, an unspecified number of Magi in Persia identified an unusual star as signalling the birth of the King of the Jews. Naturally assuming that such a king would be found in the capital and in the royal palace, they set off to Jerusalem pay him homage.

Arriving at Jerusalem they sent the whole city into turmoil with their announcement that they had seen the King's star. The religious authorities consulted the Bible and told them to go to Bethlehem. The star then shone with particular and specific brilliance identifying the house in which Jesus was living. The wise men presented their gifts and then having been warned by God in a dream, left early the next day, taking a different way home to avoid Herod.

Realising that he had been tricked, Herod launched a murderous attack on the male children of two years and under, in an attempt to destroy this “King”. However having been forewarned in a dream, Joseph had already fled, taking the child to safety in Egypt - and undoubtedly “cashing in” those very useful gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to fund their escape!.

Can we really believe in Wise Men and a Star?

Yes.