

Who Were the Wise Men

One of the strangest stories surrounding the birth of our Lord is recorded in Matthew chapter 2. It is the story of the Wise Men, the Magi, who came to visit the Christ child. We don't know very much about these wise men. In fact, most of what we think we know actually comes from Christmas carols and pageants, not from Scripture. We often refer to three wise men, but the Bible doesn't tell us the number. We assume there were three because there were three gifts. It's not an assumption shared by all Christians, however. Drawings on the walls of the Roman catacombs have two wise men and sometimes four. In the medieval church there was a tradition of twelve. We often refer to the Wise Men as kings; the scriptures do not. Actually, all we know, as far as the scriptures are concerned, is contained in one verse, *Magi, from the east, came to Jerusalem. "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and we have come to worship him* (Matthew 2:2).

That's it. That's all we know, as far as the Bible is concerned. And yet, in this brief little verse there are raised many fascinating questions about these mysterious strangers who arrived at the house of Joseph and Mary about a year and a half after Jesus was born. Who were the Magi? Where is

the east? How did they know that a king of the Jews had been born? Why did they travel to Jerusalem first? And perhaps most interestingly, why does only Matthew include this strange story in his gospel? Mark, Luke and John choose to ignore it. Reflecting on these questions and some reasonable answers lead to some important lessons that are worth noting in the season of Christ's birth.

Who were the Magi? There are two other references to magi in the New Testament, both very negative. Simon the magician in Acts 8 is not a person of great character. You recall he sought to purchase the ability to lay hands on people so they might receive the Holy Spirit. Peter's response to Simon was harsh, *May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God* (Acts 8:20-21).

In Acts 13 we meet a sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus who was an advisor to the Roman proconsul. He was called "Elymas" which is a Semitic word meaning "wise man" or "magician." Paul refers to him as a "child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right" (Acts 13:10). However, in spite of these two nefarious examples, in general magi were considered respectable, even noble. They often served as special envoys for rulers who would travel to other countries to perform ambassadorial type

roles. They were astrologers and astronomers who interpreted the movement of the stars and what that meant in the lives of men. They were the ancient equivalent of our philosophers and scientists, advisors to rulers to give guidance in the important decisions that were made. Matthew obviously has this understanding of magi in mind, for the Magi who come to worship the Christ child are treated with respect in Matthew's gospel.

Where did they come from? Matthew says only they came from the East. Where is the east? There is a lot of speculation about that. Some early church fathers assumed they came from Arabia partly because the gifts they brought were associated with that country. Many scholars think they came from Babylon. More than any other place in the ancient world, Babylon was known for its study of the stars. Even today there exist Babylonian clay tablets that show the calculations of the movement of the stars and are remarkable in their accuracy. Some think the wise men may have come from Persia. There was actually a tribe from Persia known as the Magi. It may be that all three answers are partially correct.

The Magi were one of the tribes of the ancient civilization of the Medes. According to the historian Herodotus there were six Median tribes: the Busae, the Paretaceni, the Struchates, the Arizanti, the Budii and the Magi. These peoples moved into the western and north-western regions of

what is present day Iran and formed, along with the Persians, the first Iranian kingdom. The Kurdish people today from Kurdistan claim to be the descendants of the ancient Medes. The Medes were a great empire in the 7th century B. C. and joined forces with Babylon to conquer the Assyrians, forming the Babylonian empire and then later joined with the Persians to conquer the Babylonians forming the Medo-Persian empire. Just as the Levites were a priestly tribe in Israel, the Magi tribe was the priestly tribe among the Medians and they were known as “wise men.” Their skill in astronomy and science allowed them to rise and hold prominent roles as influential religious and political advisors to the kings in both the Babylonian and Persian empires. Even later, when Alexander the Great established the Greek empire and then Rome built the greatest empire the world had ever known, the Median Magi continued to enjoy much influence and esteem, especially in the East. Were the Magi of Matthew’s gospel members of this Median tribe of priests? I think it is very likely.

Why did these wise men travel to Jerusalem? Matthew says they saw a star, which indicated to them that a king had been born, and they came to worship him. Interestingly, there was a widely held belief that at this particular time in history a great world ruler would emerge from the land of Judea. The second century Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote about a belief

apparently widely held throughout the Roman empire. *There was a firm persuasion that at this very time the east was to grow powerful and that rulers coming from Judea were to acquire an unusual empire* (Tacitus, Histories, 5:13).

Suetonius, also a Roman historian contemporary to Tacitus recorded something very similar in his writings. *There had spread over all the Orient an old established belief that it was fated at this particular time for men coming from Judea to rule the world* (Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*, 4:5).

And finally Josephus, the Hellenistic Jewish historian, wrote even earlier than this in his book, *War of the Jews*, *About that time one from their country should become governor over the entire habitable earth* (Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 6: 4,5).

“At this very time,” “At this particular time,” “About that time.” Apparently the time of Jesus’ birth was seen by many, not just the Jews, as a prophetic moment in history. There was also at that time a relatively well known rumor or belief that a ruler was supposed to be born in Judea at this time. Why would such a strange belief exist throughout the world, and why at this particular time? Well, as Paul Harvey would say, “now for the rest of the story.”

If you were a wise man, a Magi from the East, and you went to school to study the ancient wisdom of Persia and Babylon, what do you suppose

you would study? When I went to college and studied psychology, there were a few people whose writings you simply had to study, men like Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, Carl Jung etc. These were the “fathers of psychology.” You could not be a respectable psychologist without knowing the works of these men. It is true of every academic field. To master any particular field of knowledge you must study those considered to be the most respected, the most insightful, the wisest. Was there anyone like that for these oriental wise men? When they went to class and their teacher assigned them homework, did they study their own ancient equivalent of “Freud”? Was there someone considered the wisest of all that all the wise men had to study to truly be wise? Perhaps there was and perhaps we know who.

In the book of Daniel, chapter two, immediately after Daniel had interpreted the dream of Babylon’s King Nebuchednezzar, you will read the following words: *Then King Nebuchednezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that offering and incense be presented to him. And the king said to Daniel, surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and the revealer of mysteries for you were able to reveal this mystery. And then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. And he made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and he placed him in charge of all his wise men. (Daniel 2:46-48).*

Daniel trained Babylon's wise men. Later when Belshazzar became king of Babylon, you recall Daniel confronted him interpreting the writing on the wall. Belshazzar's wife reminds him, *There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insights and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchednezzar, your father, your father the king I say, appointed him chief of the magicians, the enchanters, the astrologers and the diviners. And this man Daniel, who the king called Beltashazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. So you call for Daniel and he will tell you what this writing mean* (Daniel 5:11-12).

Later, Babylon is conquered by the Persians and a new ruler, Darius the Mede takes over. It is when Darius is ruler that the well-known story of Daniel and the lions occurs. Darius appointed three men to be administrators over 120 satraps (or governors) in his kingdom. Daniel was one of the three men appointed. In fact, Daniel was so well thought of by Darius that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom, not unlike Joseph in Pharaoh's day. This was what fueled the jealousy of the other administrators who convinced the king to throw Daniel's to the lions. Following Daniel's miraculous deliverance from the lions, King Darius wrote a decree *to all the*

people, the nations and the men of every language throughout the land. At that time the Persian empire was including the today's Turkey, Syria, Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of India. Darius wrote: I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom, people must fear and revere the God of Daniel. For he is the living God, he endures forever, his kingdom will not be destroyed and his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves, he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. And He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions. (Daniel 6:26-27)

Cyrus the Great followed Darius as the next king of the Persian empire, and Daniel's favor continued under his reign as well (Daniel 6:28). As a spiritual counselor to the four great leaders of the East, Nebuchednezzar, Belshazzar, Darius and Cyrus, Daniel becomes the central most influential wise man in the history of the Oriental world, the greatest Magi in all the east. To all the Babylonians and Persians, he was the wise men's wise man.

In addition, thousands of Jewish exiles continued living throughout the East even after they were given permission by King Cyrus to return to their homeland in Israel. With Daniel's reputation and the religion of Daniel taught in synagogues throughout the east, the Eastern peoples, especially their priests and teachers, surely were familiar with Daniel's teachings and the Scriptures which Daniel revered. And what did those teachings reveal?

Well, we know what Daniel taught. It's in the Book of Daniel. Among other things, surely he taught the interpretations to the remarkable dreams he had been given by God; first King Nebuchednezzar's dream of the great statue with the golden head, silver chest, bronze belly and iron legs. Then Beshazzar's dream of the four beasts, the lion, bear, leopard and finally the beast with ten horns. Did Daniel teach this to his fellow magi? Both dreams referred to four kingdoms that were going to appear and rule the world (Daniel 7:17). Most conservative Bible scholars agree that the four kingdoms were the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires, which in succession controlled the ancient world up until the time of Christ. In fact, the dream so perfectly fits these four empires that liberal Bible scholars, who dismiss the possibility of prophecy, are convinced that Daniel must have been written around the second century B.C. rather than the traditional date of 530 B.C.

In the time of the iron legs, the fourth beast, the Roman empire, Daniel prophesies that a new kingdom will be established, *the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end but it will itself endure forever* (Daniel 2:44).

Daniel describes this new king who would rule over this eternal kingdom, *one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the*

Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all people, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7: 13-14).

All this was to happen at the time of the fourth kingdom, Rome, according to Daniel. Could the wise men of the orient been aware of this? Is it so surprising that during this time of the fourth kingdom, Rome, that there would be a world-wide rumor, especially strong in the Orient, of a king appearing in Judea to rule the whole earth? Could this rumor have come from the prophecies of Daniel, the greatest of the Magi, who had taught the wise men of Babylon and Persia? Could the Magi have studied Daniel's prophecies down through history? Is it so far fetched to suggest that wise men would have studied Daniel the way students today would study the classic writers in their field of study. Further, Daniel gives them even more reason to study. He gives a timeline for his prophecy in a fascinating passage in Daniel 9:25. *Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven "sevens" and sixty two "sevens."*

Some scholars believe the phrase seven “sevens” and sixty two “sevens” refers to the Jewish concept of a “week of years” or seven year cycles. Sixty nine “seven year cycles” would be 483 years. It is at the end of these “sevens” that this great ruler is to emerge. We know both from biblical and non-biblical sources that King Xerxes of Persia made the decree to rebuild Jerusalem in 445 B.C. Bible students do the math in various ways, but anyway you calculate it, 483 years from 445 B. C. comes out to be in the first century.

If magi from the east knew of Daniel’s teaching, is it so surprising they would be looking for a king to be born in Judea at this time? They had seen the prophesied four kingdoms come and indeed would know that they were living then in the time of the fourth kingdom. Perhaps they had even calculated Daniel’s sixty nine weeks. Could it be they were ready for a sign, looking for a sign? Then one day they looked up into the heavens and there it was, a brilliant star, a celestial sight more spectacular than any before.

According to many astronomers, there was in fact an extraordinary celestial event around the time of Jesus’ birth. I’m told it is now possible to recreate any night sky for the last few thousand years in our planetariums. The movement of the stars and planets have become so well known, their cycles can be recreated with such precision that one can program the specific date into a computer and the star activity of that night can be represented.

In 1991, an astronomer, Dr. Ernest Martin, published a remarkable book that caused a bit of a stir in the field of astronomy. He made the case that there was in fact an astronomical occurrence in the year 2 B.C. that a star gazer could not have helped but notice. For the details of his research you should consult his book, *The Star that Astonished the World*. In brief, Martin discovered that in that year there was a convergence of the planet Jupiter and the bright star Regulus in the constellation Leo. Martin says that would have resulted in the dramatic appearance of a star far brighter than anyone at that time had ever seen before. (By the way, in the time of Christ, the planet Jupiter was known as the royal star; the star Regulus was known as the star of kings and the constellation of Leo was known as the constellation of kings, particularly associated with the nation of Israel.)

Dr. Martin calculated the day the brilliance of that convergence would have first been seen, even the hour of the day, sometime between 6:15 and 7:49 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, on September 11th in 2 B.C. (How could Christ's birth happen in 2 BC, Before Christ? Historians tell us that our western calendar is off anywhere from 2-7 years, creating the ironic result of Christ actually being born sometime "Before Christ!")

Martin may or may not be correct about what the Magi actually saw. There are many competing theories that attempt to explain the Bethlehem

star. But it is fascinating that there was an extraordinary celestial event in the sky very near the time of Jesus' birth. Whatever the celestial phenomenon was, the Wise Men that saw it had reason to believe this extraordinary star announced the birth of a king, Daniel's king. So, where else would they go to find Daniel's king, than in Daniel's city, Jerusalem? But when they arrive at Jerusalem they meet a very different kind of king, King Herod. And perhaps it is this dramatic contrast between these wise men of the east and the foolish King of Judea that Matthew wants us most to see.

Why does Matthew put this story in his gospel? Perhaps Matthew is trying to tell us something about God; that God does not belong to any one people. The Jews wanted a Jewish kingdom. Later, Jewish Christians wanted a Jewish church. This was a major problem in the early church that Matthew and the other apostles had to deal with. Matthew emphasized the universal nature of the gospel. He began his gospel with Gentile wise men from the east visiting the Christ child; then he ends his gospel with that same child commanding his disciples to take his gospel into all the world. Christianity is distorted if it becomes only a Jewish faith; it becomes distorted if it is ever perceived to be the exclusive faith of any nation or people.

History reveals how in every era the Church has had to deal with the particular biases that each culture brings into Christianity, perverting much

of its truth. Whether it's "Roman" Christianity, "European" Christianity, "British" Christianity or "American" Christianity, every nation and culture brings into Christianity its own cultural blind spots. So, perhaps Matthew is teaching us in the Wise Men story that our faith belongs to no one nation. It is a universal faith for every tribe and language and people.

This story also remind us that God is constantly at work in every nation, no matter how resistant to Christ that nation may seem. Recent history provides convincing evidence of that. It's not been that long since we witnessed the fall of the Soviet Empire. Some attribute that fall to various political and economic factors. Christians know that underneath such factors, the hand of God is at work. For it is God who brings down kings and raises them up. More than any other factor, it was God working through his people of God that brought down that totalitarian regime.

Africa, once referred to as the dark continent because it was so enslaved by pagan and animistic religion, is now home to the robust and growing African church, perhaps the fastest growing church on the planet. The same can be said of the remarkable growth of the church in China. At any given time such lofty goals may seem close or far away, but human headlines report the lower story, not the upper story. God is always at work in every nation. And it is good that he is. For if Christianity ever becomes

exclusively or predominantly a western or eastern faith, an American or African faith, it would become a terribly distorted faith.

And there is perhaps one final truth Matthew desires for us to learn from his Wise Men story. Matthew draws a stark contrast between these strange visitors from the east, the Magi, and the all too familiar king from Judea, King Herod. Herod should have been excited about the news the Wise Men brought. He should have been excited that his own scribes confirmed the Magi's story, for they agreed that the scriptures prophesied that Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. But the arrival of the Wise Men did not excite Herod; it disturbed him. While the Wise Men were filled with wonder about the possibility of an eternal, worldwide kingdom, Herod only worried about how to protect his own little kingdom. The Wise Men were eager to exalt a royal infant; Herod was eager to eliminate a rival insurgent.

The Wise Men and Herod represent the same two options we face today. We can choose to lay our wealth, our wisdom, our royalty down at the feet of the Christ child. We can choose to step down from our little thrones, step away from our self-rule and like the Wise Men kneel in the presence of this Child. Or we can, like Herod, see Jesus as a threat to our own little kingdoms, to our self-rule. We can ignore him and thus prevent him from having any influence in the governing of our life. Like so many of the Jews

in Matthew's gospel, it is still possible to be religious, yet still not give the king his place upon the throne of our hearts. Christmas is a good time to rededicate our lives to be loyal subjects to this king whom prophets announced hundreds of years before he came and whom Wise Men traveled hundreds of miles to worship when he came. May we surrender our little thrones and little kingdoms to serve the little king, who left heaven to be born in a humble stable, die on a horrid cross that we might live in his eternal kingdom.