

Sunday, January 2, 2022

The First Christmas: The Magi

(Epiphany 2022)

Scripture

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.
(Matthew 2:1-12)

The Message

One of the most spectacular aspects of the Christmas story is the star that lured Magi from their eastern homeland to Bethlehem. It has really never disappeared.

Today, in silver or gold, plastic, cardboard or ceramic, it still crowns the top of Christmas trees around the world. In glitter and foil, it shines on as the single most familiar motif on Christmas cards...

And yet, the star of Bethlehem has puzzled scholars for centuries.

Russian Vladimir Zaitsev says the Star of Bethlehem was really a spaceship from a higher civilization carrying the cosmonaut Jesus into this world! Others dismiss the star as a myth or simple literary device; some argue it was miraculously placed by God and is beyond natural explanation; but many have looked for some astronomical and historical explanation...

THE EXAMINATION

As we get started, we are going to test your knowledge about this well known and familiar part of the Christmas story: the Magi and the Star. Most are true or false; and the Good News is this is the last quiz you'll have to take in this series 😊.

1. The star at Jesus birth was prophesied in the Old Testament. (True or False?)
2. How many things are wrong with the song title: "*We Three Kings of Orient Are*?"
3. The Magi arrived at the stable after the shepherds. (True or False?)
4. The Magi went to Jerusalem assuming a "king" would be born in the capital city and that (King) Herod would be aware of the birth. (True or False?)
5. The religious leaders Herod summoned told the Magi where Jesus would be born. (True or False?)
6. The Bible tells us the Magi arrived on camels. (True or False?)
7. When the Magi came, they saw Jesus and Mary; the Bible doesn't mention Joseph as being present. (True or False?)
8. Frankincense and myrrh are perfumes from tree sap in either powder or oil form. (True or False?)
9. Frankincense and myrrh were considered more precious than gold. (True or False?)
10. Herod gained much of his wealth by trading in spices. (True or False?)
11. The Magi did not tell Herod about the child as Herod requested because:
 - a. An angel told Joseph to tell them not to
 - b. Mary and Joseph encouraged them not to
 - c. The Magi were in a hurry to get back
 - d. The Magi were warned in a dream
12. The Magi took the same route home as they took to Bethlehem. (True or False?)

B. Let's examine some of these questions and their answers together...

THE EXPLANATION

Who were the Magi?

The Greek calls them simply, “*magoi apo anatolon*” (i.e., Magi from the East). Magi were wise men (*hakamin*; i.e., well educated). They often specialized in **astronomy**, religion, divination, **magic**, astrology and **medicine**. The term is used in the Old Testament to describe a (pagan) king's advisors and counselors.

Pharaoh, for example, had magi(cians) to interpret dreams. They were even able to imitate some of Moses' “miracles” – some of the Ten Plagues. King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian King, had wise men and magicians. As with any profession, some were good; some were not so good; some were evil and even demonic. They were considered “spiritual advisors” who often acted as **ambassadors**—most likely they were sent by their king with the gifts to pay honor to the newborn king.

How many Magi were there?

Recent tradition places the number at **three**, most likely because they presented three gifts – the assumption being that no one would have come empty handed.

Some of these same traditions (i.e., legends) even supply three names: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. They even report their ages: twenty, forty and sixty (respectively). Their skin colors were white, yellow and black (respectively). These names and facts begin to appear in the sixth century AD, too late for any authenticity, and their ages and races are too obviously and evenly spaced.

Earlier tradition, making it more likely authentic, pictures a **large** caravan; some set the number as high as **twelve**. The truth is, no one knows for sure, but three appears too few – and not likely; a smaller number would show less respect.

Tradition also suggests that Thomas, the apostle to India, later found and baptized the Magi into the Christian faith and ordained them as priests in the early church. Later, they were martyred, and they are presumably buried in Constantinople. Then during the twelfth century their remains were transferred to the Cathedral at Cologne, Germany– where they rest today. Interesting, but very few take these claims seriously.

Where did the Magi come from?

While for most Israelites in Jesus' day anything on the other side of the Jordan was considered, "East," most scholars see three primary options for the "east" – Sheba, Babylon, and Persia – all of which we would locate in the area called **Arabia**. But that is about as far East as possible; the *Orient* – nor even India – is not considered a viable option ([map](#)).

Persia [i.e., today's Iraq] is the first viable option. The term "magi" is often considered to have originated with the Medo-persians. The majority of early church leaders leaned toward Persia. In fact, the reason invading Persians are said to have spared the Church of the Nativity in 614 was because they saw a mosaic over the doorway depicting the Magi in Persian headdresses.

Art in the second-century Roman catacombs dresses the Magi in Persian garments; early Syriac traditions give them Persian names. The Persian Magi were credited with higher religious and intellectual attainments, while the Babylonian Magi were sometimes considered imposters.

Babylon [i.e., today's Iran] is a second viable option ([map](#)). The primary reason for thinking Babylon is that astronomy was more highly developed in Babylon than in other area—including Persia. And Babylon had a large Jewish community which would have known the prophecies.

Sheba [i.e., today's Yemen] was known for its wealth of gold, jewels, and spices, and seems to have the most Scriptural precedence. ([map](#))

"The wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and frankincense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord." (**Isaiah 60:6**)

(A messianic psalm) *"He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations...He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will like the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gift...May gold from Sheba be given him."* (**Psalms 72:4-5, 8-15**)

A third reference is **1 Kings 10:1-2, 10** (we'll get to it in a moment).

What about the **star the Magi followed?**

Balaam, another pagan wise man, prophesied about the rise of a King in Israel and about a star: *"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star rises from Jacob; a scepter comes forth from Israel."* (**Numbers 24:17**)

There is nothing improbable about a group of sages, Magi, being attracted by some astral event and then trying to investigate it more closely. In that day, with the clean air, poor artificial lighting, and long nights, the heavens were

extraordinarily impressive and attention grabbing. Historians and Magi were forever interpreting the future based on what they saw each night in the sky. (The Babylonians were the first set up the signs of Zodiac.)

For those looking to ascribe what happened to plausible explanations, there are three possible, even probable astronomical options for *The Star*. (This in no way undermines God's miraculous power; it does underscore His miraculous timing.)

The first option is a **planetary conjunction**. Every 805 years, the planets Jupiter, Saturn (and Mars) come into a repeated conjunction. One would have occurred in approximately 7/6 B.C. **(Pic)**

The planets would follow closely together in the night sky; in May, September and December they conjoined. It is actually quite spectacular!

But it is the interpretation that would have been informative for the Magi. The planet Jupiter was known as the "King's Planet" representing the highest god of universe for Babylonians (Marduk), Greeks (Zeus), and Romans (Jupiter). The ringed planet Saturn was considered the "shield and defender" of Palestine; the uniting the two (in the Zodiac, it is the sign of Pisces or fishes) represented an epochal event: "*divine and cosmic ruler was to be born in Palestine at a culmination of history.*" God can even use pagan "wisdom" and understanding to bring light to a dark world.

The problem is that these two to three planets never seem to come close enough to be considered "one" star.

Since the Greek word translated "star" (*aster*) simply means "heavenly body" some believe it could have been a **comet**. Comets in Jesus' day were thought to herald an important change in the world. **(Pic)**. With a pointing head and long luminous tail, a comet makes a far more startling impression than a planetary conjunction.

In 1871, John Williams published a list of comets based on Chinese records and indicates there would have been a significant comet (#52) appearing in March-April of 5 B.C. near the constellation Capricorn - visible throughout the middle east for over seventy days. Maybe...

Then there is a nova. A **nova** is not really a "new star", but one that suddenly and dramatically increases in brilliance due to an internal explosion. No astral event is more spectacular **(Pic)**.

In the Milky Way galaxy, the last supernova was in 1604 and was so bright it could be seen throughout the day. Comet #53, a tailless comet, on Williams' list that appeared in March and April of 4 B.C.; is often considered a supernova.

Paul Maier, former professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University, a believer (Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod), projects the

remarkable *conjunction* may have alerted the Magi to an important development in Palestine; the *comet* may have sent them on their way; the *nova* may have appeared after they came to Jerusalem to lead them to Bethlehem. Maier believes all three may have been present. It underscores that Jesus' coming into the world has cosmic implications.

Because of the rotation of the earth, anything in the night sky (except Polaris and a few stars north of it) appear to move westward. And, as people travel, the stars do seem to move with them, stopping when they stop.

Whatever the celestial event - and it would have been amazing - the Magi perceived it (correctly): it was a spiritual and world-changing event.

What about the *gifts* the Magi brought?

When a king came into power, other kings would give gifts to form alliances, to show friendliness, to get and remain on the other's "good side."

A story from Solomon's life in **1 Kings 10:1-2,10** reminds us of the Magi story:

"When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD, she came...arriving at Jerusalem with a large caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold and precious stones...She gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones. Never again were so many spices brought in..."

The Magi, the Scripture notes, brought three gifts. The first gift, **gold**, was an expensive royal gift. Rich people possess gold; and gold was mined in Arabia. Gold is said to underscore Jesus' **kingship**.

Frankincense is an expensive small whitish spice in beaded or chunk form that is ground into powder and gives off an odor like balsam when burned. It is found only in Arabia. Spices no longer seem (all that) precious and expensive today, but aromatic oils were once worth more than their weight in gold because of their rarity and their use as perfumes, incense and medicine.

Frankincense was burned on the altar by priests in the temple; the smoke and resulting aroma pictured the prayers of the people—requesting forgiveness of their sins. This fragrant gum resin burns as incense, and some say denotes Jesus' future **priesthood** and maybe his role as the sacrificial lamb.

Myrrh is an expensive, aromatic, orange-colored resin from small, thorny trees in the *commiphora* family used in perfumes, anointing oil, medicine, and embalming. It is also available only in Arabia.

In Biblical times, a king was not crowned in a coronation ceremony, he was anointed with anointing oil – usually a blend of olive oil and myrrh. The anointed king would have an aroma that said he was chosen by God.

Kings would continue to wear their “fragrance” to show their kingliness- in contrast to mere citizens and peasants.

“God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of joy above your fellows. All your garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.” (Psalm 45:7f)

“Perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all scented powders of the merchant? Behold, it is the carriage of Solomon.” (Songs 3:6)

Myrrh would also underscore the kingship of Jesus - Hebrew for “**anointed one**” is *Messiah*; In Greek, the word is *Christ*.

On the cross, Jesus would be offered wine mixed with myrrh (**Mark 15:23**); hours later, he would be buried with myrrh (**John 19:39**) - *our suffering servant*.

Gold was mined in Arabia; frankincense and myrrh are harvested from trees only found in southern Arabia. Wealth and royal dwellers in these desert regions would naturally have gold, frankincense and myrrh. The early church was aware of this. Traveling and transporting these gifts over 1800 miles of dry, barren Arabian desert was dangerous – not only because of marauders but because of the lack of water and would normally necessitate (although the Bible doesn’t mention it) camels. These are extravagant gifts - fit for and worthy of a king.

Herod, ironically, had gained much of his personal wealth by monopolizing the regional trade in spices; these spices, however, came without his control or supervision – a hidden message of Herod’s lack of ultimate control.

THE ELUCIDATION

1. The star at Jesus birth was prophesied in the Old Testament. (**True; Numbers 24:17-18**)
2. How many things are wrong with the song title: “We Three Kings of Orient Are?” (**Three**, we don't know how many there were, but it's not likely there were just three; they were not kings; they didn't come from Orient).
3. Magi arrived at the stable after the shepherds. (**False**, they came to the house; **Matthew 2:11**)
4. Magi went to Jerusalem assuming a “king” would be born in the capital city and that (King) Herod would be aware of the birth. (**True**)

5. The religious leaders Herod summoned told the Magi where Jesus would be born. (**False**, the religious leaders told Herod; Herod told the Magi; **Matthew 2:7-8**)
6. The Bible tells us the Magi arrived on camels. (**False; it is likely they did, but the Bible doesn't mention it**)
7. When the Magi came, they saw Jesus and Mary; the Bible doesn't mention Joseph as being present. (**True; Matthew 2:11**)
8. Frankincense and myrrh are perfumes from tree sap in either powder or oil form. (**True**)
9. Frankincense and myrrh were considered more precious than gold. (**True**)
10. Herod gained much of his wealth by trading in spices. (**True**)
11. The Magi did not tell Herod about the child as Herod requested because:
 - a. An angel told Joseph to tell them not to
 - b. Mary and Joseph encouraged them not to
 - c. The Magi were in a hurry to get back
 - d. The Magi were warned in a dream (cf. Matthew 2:12)**
12. The Magi took the same route home as they took to Bethlehem (**False, Matthew 2:12**)

While the Magi disappear from history after their visit to Bethlehem, their likenesses and clumsy camels continue to lumber back into our nativity scenes year after year after year (their visit did not coincide with the shepherds). Their appearance transforms history. Up until their arrival, the Nativity was localized – a few people of the lower classes of a single nationality, actually just one lineage (David's), have been involved. With the star in the sky, both the physical and the spiritual world were impacted. With the arrival of the Magi, rich Gentiles joined poor Jews. With pagan Magi worshipping the small child, both the temporal and the eternal are transformed.

This amazing story underscores the impact Christ's coming had on the whole world – both physical (visual) and **spiritual.** We may hear about angels, but the news of Jesus' coming also shook the unseen world.

Not only were angels telling the shepherds, but the pagan magicians in distant countries were hearing about a powerful king who had arrived on earth. Those in the unseen world knew Jesus would be king of all creation and he was more than just human—he was the Son of God who would have authority over the entire spiritual world. It made the demons shake in fear.

The great authority and power of Christ's coming was not just earth-shaking but "*heaven-shattering*" and rocked the entire physical and spiritual world.

This amazing story also underscores the impact of Christ's coming on the **Gentile world.**

The visit of Eastern sages has great significance for Christianity. The Magi were not only Gentiles; they were pagans. The fact that Gentile Magi came and offered the same adoration as the Jewish shepherds symbolizes the universal outreach of Christ.

"And Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." (**Isaiah 60:3**)

This is what Epiphany is all about: Christ - the light of the world - came to transform the whole world – Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, visible and invisible!

Where the Magi come from is not nearly as important as the fact that people come from *everywhere* – still today - to worship the King who was born in Bethlehem.

Before their arrival, the nativity was localized—only a few poor Jewish shepherds from nearby fields had come to see and worship him. But the visit of the Magi changed **everything** and opened the door for **you** and **me** to become part of the family of God.