

THE VISIT OF THE MAGI



FACT OR FICTION?

How much time elapsed between Christ's birth and the visit of the Magi is not known, but they do not seem to have arrived until after Jesus' presentation at the Temple in Jerusalem, 40 days after He was born. Tradition says there were three, probably because of the three gifts they presented. But some earlier traditions set the number as high as twelve, traveling with a large caravan. The names Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar don't appear until the 6th century.

Is this beautiful Epiphany story just a pious tale, or do the evidence and historical context bear it out?

by Paul L. Maier

For years, biblical critics have questioned many details in the Christmas Gospels, such as the Annunciation, the Roman census, the Virgin Birth, the angelic announcement to the shepherds, and the infant massacre at Bethlehem.

While secular evidence from the ancient world actually supports many aspects of the Nativity, one objection is quite formidable. It involves the Magi of Epiphany and runs like this: "How could the (presumably) wise men, who were never in touch with

Hebrew prophecies regarding the star as a Messianic symbol, traipse across the desert following a 'star' and then arrive in Jerusalem asking that too-perfect question in Matt. 2:2: 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him?' It sounds as if they were in a Christmas pageant, being coached by a Sunday-school teacher behind the curtain!"

Ouch! Was the visit of the Magi just a pious tale after all, a device used by Matthew to make of the Nativity a cosmic event, using a great star as the prime prop—a first-century version of Hollywood arc lights?

This needling challenge used to bother me—until I found that the entire argument is based on a false premise. To see if we are dealing with fact or fiction here, we should set Matthew's claims into their historical context.

Who were the Magi?

"We Three Kings of Orient are. ..." So the familiar Christmas carol begins. But already it has made three mistakes in the first line! We don't know that the Magi were three in number, they were not kings, and they did not come from as far away as the Orient, that is, the Far East.

The Greek of the New Testament calls them simply *magoi apo anatolon*, "magi from the East," and the term *magoi* is usually translated as magicians (hence the derivation of that term), wise men, or astrologers. And "the East" has variously been identified as any country from Arabia and Babylonia to Media and Persia (both in modern Iran), but no farther east.

The magi were an ancient priestly caste among the Babylonians and Medo-Persians. These priest-sages, extremely well educated for their day, were experts in religion, history, medicine, astronomy, astrology, divination, and magic. Their caste

eventually spread across much of the East. As in any other profession, there were both good and bad magi, depending on whether they did research in the sciences or practiced augury, magic, and necromancy (reading the future, or changing the course of events, by conjuring up and consulting with the spirits of the dead).

As Gentiles, the magi were our representatives at the Nativity.

The safest conclusion is that the Magi of the Nativity were either Persian or Babylonian, perhaps both, since Persia controlled Babylon for many years. And if the astronomical aspects of the Nativity are emphasized—the great star and its significance—a case could be made that the Magi were late Babylonians, since astronomy reached its highest development in ancient Mesopotamia.

Whatever the origin of these eastern sages, their visit was of great significance for later Christianity: The Wise Men were pagans, not Hebrews, and the fact that Gentile magi performed the same adoration as Jewish shepherds symbolized the universal outreach for future Christianity. "Nations [Gentiles] shall come to your light," the prophet Isaiah had foretold, "and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (60:3).

And so they have. Since Gentiles comprise the overwhelming majority of Christians today, the Magi were *our* representatives at the Nativity, and the light they saw in the baby at Bethlehem pierced the darkness of their paganism, just as the Light of the World can illuminate the darkness of sin, ignorance, fanaticism, and terrorism surrounding us today.

Running with the wrong assumption

The Wise Men could never have been in touch with Hebrew prophecies regarding the star as a Messianic symbol, the skeptics argue. But this premise, which is the foundation of most challenges to Matthew's reliability, happens to be false! The critics seem to have forgotten Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C., destroying the city and burning the temple. Many assume that in the notorious "Babylonian Captivity of the Jews" that followed, all Jews were deported to Babylon until most of them returned to their homeland under Ezra.

Wrong on both counts! Nebuchadnezzar took as Jewish captives not the common people, laborers, or farmers, but the professional leaders in the land, including priests and rabbinical scholars. Nor did they all return with Ezra. Many of the Jews fared so well during their captivity that a large Jewish colony remained in Babylon for at least the next 1,000 years. What is the greatest collection of Jewish writings? The Babylonian Talmud, of course, which was edited at Babylon in A.D. 400.

Here, then, is the point: Four centuries earlier, magi scholars—especially the religious historians among them—would certainly have had regular contact with their Jewish counterparts in the scholarly community at Babylon. Accordingly, they, too, would have had access to Hebrew Scriptures involving Messianic prophecies and the star, including rabbinical traditions explaining Balaam's oracle that "a star shall come forth out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Num. 24:17), Isaiah's prophecies cited earlier, and others.

The Magi's question to Herod in Jerusalem, then, was not asked out of a vacuum.



Too far-fetched?

In responding to this evidence, critics sometimes object, “You’re really reaching here, Maier! The surrounding Gentile cultures of the time wouldn’t have been interested in the Hebrew Scriptures or Jewish traditions.” Oh, but they would indeed!

One familiar example should suffice. Ptolemy II (“Philadelphus”), the Hellenistic king of neighboring Egypt, was establishing the greatest collection of scrolls in the world: the great library at Alexandria. In 283 B.C., he wrote the high priest in Jerusalem, asking him to send Jewish scholars to Alexandria in order to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Eleazar, the high priest at the time, gladly complied, sending 70 scholars, who were accorded a warm and colorful reception in Alexandria.

They were given a beautiful island retreat in the harbor of Alexandria in which to do their translation. The result was the famous Septuagint that rendered Hebrew Scriptures into Greek—the very version of the Old Testament used so often by the earliest church.

Yes, pagans were interested in Hebrew writings and Jewish culture.

An invented star?

Finally, skeptics argue that Matthew “created” the Star of

Bethlehem for literary purposes. Of all the Gospel writers, so they claim, Matthew is the one who loves the sensational effect: the earthquake on Good Friday, the tearing of the temple curtain, saints walking out of opened tombs (27:51 ff.), another earthquake at the Resurrection (28:2), and, earlier, the Nativity star. Matthew, then, goes for the extraordinary, the supernatural, the cosmic.

The star motif, however, twinkles throughout Hebrew history and makes no sudden debut at Bethlehem. The six-pointed Star of David has symbolized the Chosen People from Old Testament times to today’s Israeli flag. The five-pointed Star of Solomon shows up in stone at the archaeological excavations at Capernaum, as does its six-pointed counterpart.

The Star: What might it have been?

Scientists and Bible scholars have offered explanations for the “Star of Bethlehem.” The “Star” could have been a miracle sign, a miracle star, Jesus Himself, an angel, a supernova, a comet, or a conjunction of planets.

In order to use science to test these possibilities, they must be testable. Astronomical records were kept 2,000 years ago, so we can look back for sightings of a supernova, comet, or conjunction of planets. But the appearance of a miracle sign, a miracle star, Jesus, or an angel cannot be tested—or discounted, for that matter.

Where does this leave us?

The Magi probably came from Persia (modern-day Iran) all the way to Bethlehem. Why would they do this? One possibility is that God used the Magi’s fascination with the heavens to draw them to Jesus.



Finally, 130 years after the first Christmas, Rabbi Akiba, the greatest sage of his day, put a Jewish rebel on the back of a white horse and led him through the streets of Jerusalem, crying, "Bow down! The Messiah has come! The Messiah has come!" And the people did. The name of the rebel? Simeon Bar-Cosiba. Yet the rabbi, on the basis of Num. 24:17, had changed his name to

Bar-Kokhbah, which means "Son of the Star."

(The rebel, however, proved to be a falling star, since the Bar-Kokhbah revolt of A.D. 132 was put down by the Romans with utter devastation, after which Jews were excluded from Jerusalem, which was renamed for the emperor Hadrian's family, Aelia Capitolina.)

Here again, the star symbol was

linked directly to the Messiah in Jewish tradition. No, Matthew did not invent the star of Bethlehem. Whether or not the star was a supernatural phenomenon or a natural astral event is discussed in the sidebar story.

So often, skeptical critics are prone to shoot from the hip rather than evaluate all the surviving evidence. And there may have been more evidence. If he had had the time, incentive, and opportunity, Matthew might have written an entire book on how the Magi were alerted to the Nativity. But he had a far more important story to tell: the great good news of how God revealed His Son not just to Jewish people, but to all of humanity everywhere. What began as the light from a single star has now illuminated the entire globe through the One who said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Jupiter, which ancient Jewish astrologers called the "King's Star" (God), and Saturn, which they called the "Star of the Messiah," came together in the constellation Pisces three times between 7 and 6 B.C. Those same astrologers assigned a country to each of the Zodiac constellations, with Pisces, the sign of the fish, representing Judea, or the "House of the Hebrews."

It was certainly noteworthy when the "God" and "Messiah" planets rose in the eastern sky (the east signifying birth) and settled in Pisces, the "House of the Hebrews." The Jewish astrologers, whose thinking may have been known to the gentile Magi (see main story), had predicted that the Messiah would arrive when Jupiter and Saturn conjoined in Pisces. This prediction would have been highly significant to the Magi—it would have alerted them to the birth of Jesus.

Even though this possibility can be tested with computer programs and has a certain logic to it, it remains only an interesting idea. How the Star of Bethlehem, the Star of Epiphany actually happened remains a mystery. That it did happen remains a blessing.

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