How Did the Magi Know About Jesus?
Scripture: Matthew 2
Code: BQ060812

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." (2:1–2)

Few biblical stories are as well known, yet so clouded by myth and tradition, as that of the **magi**, or wise men, mentioned by Matthew. During the Middle Ages legend developed that they were kings, that they were three in number, and that their names were Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior. Because they were thought to represent the three sons of Noah, one of them is often pictured as an Ethiopian. A twelfth-century bishop of Cologne even claimed to have found their skulls.

The only legitimate facts we know about these particular **magi** are the few given by Matthew in the first twelve verses of chapter 2. We are not told their number, their names, their means of transportation to Palestine, or the specific country or countries from which they came. The fact that they came from **the east** would have been assumed by most people in New Testament times, because the magi were primarily known as the priestly-political class of the Parthians-who lived to the east of Palestine.

The magi first appear in history in the seventh century b.c. as a tribe within the Median nation in eastern Mesopotamia. Many historians consider them to have been Semites, which if so, made them-with the Jews and Arabs-descendants of Noah's son Shem. It may also be that, like Abraham, the magi came from ancient Ur in Chaldea. The name magi soon came to be associated solely with the hereditary priesthood within that tribe. The magi became skilled in astronomy and astrology (which, in that day, were closely associated) and had a sacrificial system that somewhat resembled the one God gave to Israel through Moses. They were involved in various occult practices, including sorcery, and were especially noted for their ability to interpret dreams. It is from their name that our words *magic* and *magician* are derived.

A principle element of magian worship was fire, and on their primary altar burned a perpetual flame, which they claimed descended from heaven. The magi were monotheistic, believing in the existence of only one god. Because of their monotheism, it was easy for the magi to adapt to the teaching of the

sixth-century b.c. Persian religious leader named Zoroaster, who believed in a single god, Ahura Mazda, and a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Darius the Great established Zoroastrianism as the state religion of Persia.

Because of their combined knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and the occult, their religious and political influence continued to grow until they became the most prominent and powerful group of advisors in the Medo-Persian and subsequently the Babylonian empire. It is not strange, therefore, that they often were referred to as “wise men.” It may be that “the law of the Medes and Persians” (see Dan. 6:8, 12, 15; Esther 1:19) was founded on the teachings of these magi. Historians tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king without mastering the scientific and religious disciplines of the magi and then being approved and crowned by them, and that this group also largely controlled judicial appointments (cf. Esther 1:13). Nergal-sar-ezer the Rab-mag, chief of the Babylonian magi, was with Nebuchadnezzar when he attacked and conquered Judah (Jer. 39:3).

We learn from the book of Daniel that the magi were among the highest-ranking officials in Babylon. Because the Lord gave Daniel the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream-which none of the other court seers was able to do-Daniel was appointed as “ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon” (Dan. 2:48). Because of his great wisdom and because he had successfully pleaded for the lives of the wise men who had failed to interpret the king’s dream (Dan. 2:24), Daniel came to be highly regarded among the magi. The plot against Daniel that caused him to be thrown into the lions’ den was fomented by the jealous satraps and the other commissioners, not the magi (Dan. 6:4–9).

Because of Daniel’s high position and great respect among them, it seems certain that the magi learned much from that prophet about the one true God, the God of Israel, and about His will and plans for His people through the coming glorious King. Because many Jews remained in Babylon after the Exile and intermarried with the people of the east, it is likely that Jewish messianic influence remained strong in that region even until New Testament times.

During both the Greek and Roman empires the magi’s power and influence continued in the eastern provinces, particularly in Parthia. As mentioned above, it was the Parthians that Herod, in behalf of Rome, drove out of Palestine between 39 and 37 b.c., when his kingship of Judea began. Some magi-many of them probably outcasts or false practitioners-lived in various parts of the Roman Empire, including Palestine. Among them was Simon of Samaria (Acts 8:9), whom tradition and history have come to refer to as Simon Magus because of his “practicing magic” (Greek, *mageuo*,

derived from the Babylonian *magus*, singular of *magi*). The Jewish false prophet Bar-Jesus was also a sorcerer, or “magician” (Greek, *magos*). These magicians were despised by both Romans and Jews. Philo, a first-century b.c. Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, called them vipers and scorpions.

The *magi from the east* (the word literally means “from the rising” of the sun, and refers to the orient) who came to see Jesus were of a completely different sort. Not only were they true magi, but they surely had been strongly influenced by Judaism, quite possibly even by some of the prophetic writings, especially that of Daniel. They appear to be among the many God-fearing Gentiles who lived at the time of Christ, a number of whom-such as Cornelius and Lydia (Acts 10:1–2; 16:14)-are mentioned in the New Testament.

When these magi, however many there were, **arrived in Jerusalem**, they began asking, **“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?”** The Greek construction (**saying** is a present participle emphasizing continual action) suggests that they went around the city questioning whomever they met. Because they, as foreigners, knew of the monumental birth, they apparently assumed that anyone in Judea, and certainly in Jerusalem, would know of this special baby’s whereabouts. They must have been more than a little shocked to discover that no one seemed to know what they were talking about.

During that time there was widespread expectation of the coming of a great king, a great deliverer. The Roman historian Suetonius, speaking of the time around the birth of Christ, wrote, “There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world.” Another Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote that “there was a firm persuasion that at this very time the east was to grow powerful and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire.” The Jewish historian Josephus reports in his *Jewish Wars* that at about the time of Christ’s birth the Jews believed that one from their country would soon become ruler of the habitable earth.

As seen in the writings of the Roman poet Virgil (70–19 b.c.), Rome was expecting its own golden age. Augustus Caesar, Herod’s benefactor, had for some time been hailed as the savior of the world. Many magi could be found in the great cities of the west, including Athens and Rome, and were frequently consulted by Roman rulers. The Romans were looking for a coming great age, wise men from the east had long influenced the west with their ideas and traditions, and-though the particulars varied considerably-there was a growing feeling that from somewhere a great and unprecedented world leader was about to arise.

We are not told *how* the God of revelation caused the magi to know that the **King of the Jews** had been born, only that He gave them the sign of His [the One called **King**] **star in the east**. Almost as much speculation has been made about the identity of that **star** as about the identity of the men who saw it. Some suggest that it was Jupiter, the “king of the planets.” Others claim that it was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, forming the sign of the fish-which was used as a symbol for Christianity in the early church during the Roman persecutions. Still others claim that it was a low-hanging meteor, an erratic comet, or simply an inner vision of the star of destiny in the hearts of mankind.

Since the Bible does not identify or explain the star, we cannot be dogmatic, but it may have been the glory of the Lord-the same glory that shone around the shepherds when Jesus’ birth was announced to them by the angel (Luke 2:9). Throughout the Old Testament we are told of God’s glory being manifested as light, God radiating His presence (Shekinah) in the form of ineffable light. The Lord guided the children of Israel through the wilderness by “a pillar of cloud by day … and in a pillar of fire by night” (Ex. 13:21). When Moses went up on Mount Sinai, “to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop” (Ex. 24:17). On a later occasion, after Moses had inscribed the Ten Commandments on stone tablets, His face still glowed with the light of God’s glory when he returned to the people (Ex. 34:30).

When Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John, “His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light” (Matt. 17:2). On the Damascus road, just before Jesus spoke to him, Saul of Tarsus was surrounded by “a light from heaven” (Acts 9:3), which he later explained was “brighter than the sun” (26:13). In John’s first vision on the Island of Patmos, he saw Christ’s face “like the sun shining in its strength” (Rev. 1:16). In his vision of the New Jerusalem, the future heavenly dwelling of all believers, he reports that “the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23).

Both the Hebrew (*kôkab*) and the Greek (*aster*) words for star were also used figuratively to represent any great brilliance or radiance. Very early in the Old Testament the Messiah is spoken of as a “star [that] shall come forth from Jacob” (Num. 24:17), and at the end of the New Testament He refers to Himself as “the bright morning star” (Rev. 22:16). It was surely the glory of God, blazing as if it were an extremely bright star-visible only to the eyes for whom it was intended to be seen-that appeared to the magi in the east and later guided them to Bethlehem. It was a brilliant manifestation of “the sign of the Son of Man” (see Matt. 24:29–30; Rev. 1:7). The Shekinah glory of God stood over Bethlehem just as, centuries before, it had stood over the Tabernacle in the wilderness. And just as the pillar of

cloud gave light to Israel but darkness to Egypt (Ex. 14:20), only the eyes of the magi were opened to see God's great light over Bethlehem.

That the magi were not *following* the star is clear from the fact that they had to inquire about where Jesus was born. They **saw His star in the east**, but there is no evidence that it continued to shine or that it led them to Jerusalem. It was not until they were told of the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah (2:5–6) that the star reappeared and then guided them not only to Bethlehem but to the exact place "where the Child was" (v. 9).

These travelers from the east had come to Palestine with but one purpose: to find the One **born King of the Jews** and **worship Him**. The word **worship** is full of meaning, expressing the idea of falling down, prostrating oneself, and kissing the feet or the hem of the garment of the one honored. That truth in itself shows that they were true seekers after God, because when He spoke to them, in whatever way it was, they heard and responded. Despite their paganism, quasi-science, and superstition they recognized God's voice when He spoke. Though having had limited spiritual light, they immediately recognized God's light when it shone on them. They had genuinely seeking hearts, hearts that the Lord promises will never fail to find Him (Jer. 29:13).

On a plane trip several years ago I was hoping that whoever sat next to me would take a nap and not want to talk, so that I could get some urgent work done. The Lord obviously had other plans, because as soon as the man next to me saw I was studying he asked if I were a teacher. I replied that I was not a classroom teacher but that I did teach the Bible. His next question was, "Can you tell me how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?" After I explained the way of salvation, he received Christ. He was looking for God's light and, like the magi, when he saw it he knew it.

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