

Who Were the Magi?

Scripture: Matthew 2

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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.

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