

THE VISIT OF THE MAGI AND THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT

THE VISIT OF THE MAGI (Mt. 2:1-12)

The visit of the magi has long been one of the favorite stories of Christmas.

The Greek term *μαγοι* (= magi, astrologers) is not easy to identify with precision. It loosely covered those who interpreted signs and dreams, were specialists in astrology, and were practitioners of magic. That they came from “the East” is also a very general designation, though Babylon in Mesopotamia is not unlikely. In Babylon, they would have had direct contact with the scholarly Jewish Diaspora and the rabbinic messianic interpretation of Numbers 24:17, which speaks of a kingly star coming from Jacob’s family. The rising of a particular constellation in the zodiac at the time of a person’s birth had from ancient times been interpreted as a sign.

Spurred on by astrological calculations connected with the Jewish expectation of such a kingly figure, the magi came searching after seeing an unusual stellar phenomenon that Mathew describes as a “star in its rising” (not “in the east” as rendered in the KJV). The Greek phrase *ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ* is a technical expression used two millennia ago to describe a stellar body when it would rise above the horizon just before the appearance of the sun. Moments later, it would disappear in the glare of the morning sunlight.

For Matthew, the significance of the magi lay not in their astrological or mathematical abilities but in their pagan origin. The questions the magi asked in Jerusalem suggest that they were not Hebrews, and it appears that they had come from far away. The wonder, mystery, and reverence of these gentiles

LEGENDARY ACCRETIONS OF THE MAGI

The Magi, more popularly known in the earlier English Versions as the Wise Men (KJV, RSV, ASV), have been enlarged in Christian tradition with several non-biblical accretions. In Matthew’s Gospel, their number is indeterminate, though in Western Christian tradition they are usually spoken of as three (in Syrian Christianity, the traditional number is 12). The traditional number three is probably derived from the three gifts which are mentioned later (2:11), but it would not have been a particularly wise man who attempted a desert trek with only two other fellows. More than likely, they came in a caravan. The tradition that they were kings is also speculative, possibly derived from the richness of their gifts or from the OT statements that kings would worship the messiah (cf. Ps. 68:29, 31; 72:10-11; Is. 49:7; 60:1-6). That they came from “the East” is specified in the text, but this term must not be confused with any modern definition of “the East.” They hardly came from the Orient (contra the famous Christmas carol, “We Three Kings of Orient Are”), nor were they kings of Arabia, Persia, and India, as indicated in the 14th century Armenian Infancy Gospel.

By the 6th century they had acquired names, Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar, but these are purely legendary, first appearing in the 6th century as Bithisarea, Melchior, and Gathaspa. Later, even personal descriptions were added, where Melchior was an old man with a gray beard, Caspar was young and beardless, and Balthazar was swarthy with a fresh beard. Another legend asserts that they were found in Persia by the Apostle Thomas, who baptized them and commissioned them as evangelists. Their relics were supposedly discovered in the 4th century by Helena, the mother of Constantine, and by AD 1162 the relics had been moved to Cologne, where they are presently enshrined. (How Helena could possibly identify them after three centuries of decomposition considerably strains the imagination!)

clearly fits with the universalism of Matthew's gospel.

THE STAR

Astronomers have made careful studies of the celestial decade of 14-4 BC, and several candidates have been proposed as possible stellar phenomena that would fit into Matthew's description. Johannes Kepler of the 17th century argued that the star was possibly a nova or supernova, a stellar explosion which gives out a tremendous amount of light for several weeks or even months. An alternative theory is that Halley's Comet, which made an appearance in about 12-11 BC, might have been what the magi saw in the east. Somewhat more plausible is the suggestion that the star was a planetary configuration of Saturn and Jupiter which had three high points of conjunction in May/June, September/October and December of 7 BC. Alternatively, some interpreters hold that the star was supernatural and/or that it was seen exclusively by the magi, though the text does not require either of these conclusions. In the final analysis, the reader cannot know with certainty exactly what the magi saw.

The arrival of the magi in Jerusalem with news of a newly born king deeply disturbed Herod. The last decade of Herod's reign had been turbulent. He was getting old, and there was much infighting among his sons by his various wives, each hoping to succeed him. Herod wrote and rewrote his will no less than six times during this period of family turmoil, court intrigue, imprisonments, executions, and assassination attempts. (It was after Herod had murdered one of his wives and her mother as well as three of his own sons that Caesar Augustus quipped that it would be better to be Herod's pig than his son, given that Herod followed the Jewish kosher custom of not eating pork.) The possibility of a new threat to the throne was now even more unsettling. The people of Jerusalem were equally unsettled, though probably not out of any sympathy for Herod's himself. Herod, because he was half-Idumean,

was not well-liked by the Jews, and recently two rabbis, Judas and Matthias, had incited the citizens of the city to tear down the offensive Roman eagle from the temple gate. The offenders were seized and ordered to be burned alive. Thus, the Jerusalemites were troubled, indeed, but probably out of fear of Herod's reactionary violence.

Herod made careful inquiries as to the predicted location of the Messiah's birth from the leading priests and the experts in Torah and Jewish oral law. Their response was that the prophet Micah indicated Bethlehem, David's ancestral city (cf. Jn. 7:41-42). Matthew even quotes for his readers the OT passage, and he closes the quotation by conflating it with a phrase from yet another passage referring to David's kingship (Mic. 5:2; 2 Sa. 5:2).

After hearing their views, Herod privately conferred with the magi about the time when they first observed the star. His expressed desire to worship the newborn king was no more than a ploy, of course. That he did not intend to trust the magi to find the child is evident in that he did not even send an escort with them. Rather, he now possessed the two important pieces of information which he needed to carry out a terrible purge -- the place and time of the birth. Matthew will return to Herod's treachery later.

When the magi left Herod, the star which they had originally seen when they were still in their homeland once more appeared to them. It is traditional that the magi "followed the star" all the

way from the east to Bethlehem, but this is not strictly according to the biblical text.¹ The star apparently had not been visible to them during their journey from the east. They came to Jerusalem, no doubt, because as the capital it was the natural place for a king to be born. It was only upon leaving Jerusalem, however, that the star reappeared to them once more. This reappearance was a powerful confirmation, and they were overjoyed when they saw it. Matthew does not say that the star indicated to them which house was the residence of the newborn child, and it is likely that they made local inquiries to find it.



*Unfinished painting of the Adoration of the Magi by
Leonardo da Vinci for the Augustinian monks in Florence
(1481)*

When they finally arrived, they worshiped Jesus, the child of Mary. Once again, tradition has expanded the story in that it usually depicts the magi as coming on the night of the birth, along with the Bethlehem shepherds, to the manger. This is hardly correct. Three details strongly suggest that the visit of the magi may have been a considerable time after the birth of Jesus. First, Herod's slaughter of the Bethlehem children two years and under seems to suggest that the original appearance of the star to the magi had been two years previous, an appearance that the magi believed pointed toward a royal birth and a time factor that Herod was anxious to verify as accurately as possible (2:7). To be sure, Herod may have given himself a margin of safety, but even then, the trek from the east

must have taken an appreciable amount of time. Second, by the time the magi arrived, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were staying in a house (οἰκία), possibly the home of Zechariah and Elisabeth (2:11). Third, we know from Luke's account that some forty days after the birth, when Joseph and Mary offered the customary sacrifices for post-natal purification, they presented the offering prescribed for the poor (cf. Lk. 2:22-24; Lv. 12:6-8; 5:7-10), an offering that seems to reflect nothing of recently acquired wealth.

The expensive gifts² were providential in that Joseph would shortly need them to finance a trip to

¹ Such phraseology appears in the familiar carols "The First Noel," "O Holy Night," and "We Three Kings," but it is beyond the actual biblical statements.

²The value of gold needs no comment. Frankincense was a gum extracted from trees growing in southern Arabia and India, a substance with a strong balsamic odor when heated and valued for fumigation and embalming. Myrrh was a valuable resinous perfume, also extracted from shrubs in Arabia and Ethiopia, which was compounded with oil and used for perfuming clothes and general deodorant purposes. Such ointments had to be imported, and therefore, were quite valuable.

Egypt. Such gifts to royal persons were important in the ancient Near East as symbols of homage. When the magi had concluded their presentations and worship, they did not return home by way of Jerusalem but chose another route due to a warning they received in a dream.

THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT (2:13-18)

After the Magi began their journey home, Joseph received a second dream warning him to flee to Egypt. Under Roman occupation since 30 BC, Egypt was well outside the jurisdiction of Herod. There was a large Jewish community in Alexandria, a city which had burgeoned to half a million people by 60 BC. It is not unlikely that Joseph took his family there. Joseph's flight to Egypt was immediate, and he left the same night as the warning. The stay in Egypt was to be indefinite, and Joseph was not free to return to his homeland until he had been instructed by the angel.

The stay in Egypt also made full another OT statement so that Matthew can say that the prophet's words were "fulfilled." The statement by Hosea was not a prediction, however, and in its original context, the phrase "out of Egypt I called my son," clearly refers backward to the exodus (Ho. 11:1-4). In the exodus account, the nation Israel was described as God's son by Moses to Pharaoh: "Israel is my firstborn son." Yahweh's word to Pharaoh was, "Let my son go" (Ex. 4:22-23). Drawing from this imagery, Hosea recalls that Egypt was the place from which this "son" began the trek toward Canaan.

LEGENDS ABOUT THE STAY IN EGYPT

Various Christian legends have arisen about the stay in Egypt, none of which have biblical verification. Miracles were said to have been worked in their favor, lions and leopards wagged their tails in homage, and palm trees bent down to feed them. In one location, Jesus supposedly was responsible for the growth of balsam trees, a legend which eventually found its way, of all places, into the Muslim Koran. At another place, the idols in pagan temples were said to have fallen as the family passed through. Churches and monasteries, each with diverse traditional claims relating to the family's sojourn in Egypt, have become sites for pilgrimages. One of the most imaginative is the story of two robbers who accosted the holy family and later turned out to be the thieves who were crucified with Jesus.

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS

From the early 3rd century, the children whom Herod executed were considered to be martyrs, and by the mid-4th century, they were called the "Innocents," the phrase "Slaughter of the Innocents" becoming the traditional title for the massacre. The number of executed children is unknown, though early Eastern Orthodoxy canonized 14,000 of them and later expanded that figure to 144,000. These figures seem unnecessarily large, particularly since there is a profound silence in Josephus regarding the event. Nevertheless, such a massacre is certainly within the known brutal character of Herod and his paranoia regarding throne succession.

Matthew's allusion to the passage is far from arbitrary. Just as the nation Israel found refuge in Egypt but had to return to Canaan to fulfill its calling, so Jesus, also, found refuge in Egypt but had to return to Galilee to fulfill his.

Once more, Matthew explains a prophetic connection with the OT. Rachel, the ancient mother of the Benjamite tribe in the southern nation and the ancient grandmother of Ephraim, the Joseph tribe in the

northern nation (Ge. 30:22-24; 41:50-52), was depicted by Jeremiah in a poetic metaphor as a ghostly mother grieving over the tragic loss of her children in exile (Je. 31:15). In a profound recapitulation of that ancient description, Matthew saw once again the weeping figure of Rachel, this time not because of exile but because of Herod's treachery. As in Matthew's quotation of Hosea, the words of Jeremiah are not a prediction. Rather, they are an historical recapitulation.