

MATTHEW 2:1-12

HOW MANY WISE MEN WORSHIPPED THE CHRIST?

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

“Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.’ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.”¹

Everyone knows there were three wise men! It says so in ... er, in... Surely, it must be recorded somewhere because everyone says there were three wise men. Every crèche includes three wise men, often with camels mingling with donkeys, sheep and oxen (and to satisfy the courts, a gnome and perhaps some whitetail deer). Every church pageant includes three children dressed in bathrobes and wearing foil crowns! Our hymns assert there were three magi.

Ultimately, the number of magi is unimportant; what is important is the purpose of their journey. Frankly, we do not know how many magi saw the Christ; they did not find a child in a manger. They came to Joseph’s home where they found the One for whom they were searching.

THEIRS WAS AN INCONVENIENT JOURNEY — No one knows who these wise men were. We don’t know their names; we don’t know how many of them were in their caravan. We cannot say with certainty where their home was. Nevertheless, we can draw some conclusions from what we do know. They are called *mágoi*—magi in the Latin tongue. We get our word “magician,” or “magic” from this Latin term. The word itself had the connotation of “great,” but it often had a bad connotation in the New Testament. Simon, whom Peter cursed, had for a long time presented himself to the populace as a “magi” [see [ACTS 8:9-24](#)]. Paul encountered a magician named Bar-Jesus who attempted to thwart the work of the Lord by endeavouring to turn the proconsul from believing the Gospel he heard from the missionaries [see [ACTS 13:6-12](#)].

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In later Christian literature, the term is pointedly used to reject certain practises. One ancient source pointedly commands believers, “You shall not practise magic; you shall not engage in sorcery” [**DIDACHE 2:2**].² Ignatius writes, “All magic and every kind of spell were dissolved, the ignorance so characteristic of wickedness vanished, and the ancient kingdom was abolished, when God appeared in human form to bring the newness of eternal life; and what had been prepared by God began to take effect. As a result, all things were thrown into ferment, because the abolition of death was being carried out” [**IGNATIUS, EPHESIANS 19:3**].³

Nevertheless, while the term carried a bad connotation, it pleased God to draw precisely such individuals to seek out His Son, showing us something of great value, even at this date late in the history of mankind.

The magi are said to be from the east, calling to mind Arabia, or Babylon, or Persia. It is impossible to make a choice between these possibilities. However, appealing to Scripture, I would be inclined to opt for Arabia because of what is written in the Old Testament.

“May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands
render him tribute;
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts!
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations serve him!”

[**PSALM 72:10, 11**]

God, in His wisdom, has not chosen to tell us who these men were or from whence they came.

They were likely learned individuals; and to the popular mind, their learning perhaps appeared “great,” even magical! They are presented as men of learning and insight, for they appear to have studied the heavens. They interpreted the meaning of the star that appeared at the birth of the Christ; this suggests that they were astrologers, not mere astronomers. The distinction between the two terms is a fine one which has been drawn only in recent times; however, the distinction would have been less of an issue in earlier times. It is not even certain that they all came from the same country.

What is apparent is that the magi represent the wisdom of the Gentiles. Throughout the ancient world, there was a general expectation that a Deliverer of the world would come from the east.⁴ This may have been an indirect reflection of Jewish influence resulting from their being scattered throughout the world. More likely, it was a part of the collective memory of mankind who dimly recalled the promise pronounced by the Lord God when our first parents plunged the race into ruin through their sin [see **GENESIS 3:14-21**].

Uniting to discuss the events they witnessed in the heavens would disrupt their routine. Whilst it is true that the acquisition of knowledge depends upon a measure of adaptation to changing events, each disruption is still inconvenient. Moreover, their journey would entail a trip of months covering thousands of kilometres. They would experience hardship, not knowing where their journey would conclude. The quest on which they embarked would be inconvenient.

² Michael William Holmes, **The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 1999) 253

³ Op. cit., 149

⁴ See A. T. Robertson, **Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew** (Macmillan Co., New York 1911) pg. 62

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THEIRS WAS A JOURNEY ENTAILING RISKS — In addition to the risks associated with travel across vast distances in that day; there were risk these wise men could not possibly have foreseen. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they sought out Herod the king. These men had asked, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews” [MATTHEW 2:2a]? When you read the Herod “was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him,” you can believe this is serious understatement. Herod would brook no threat to his rule.

He had his sons, Aristobulus and Alexander, murdered; their mother, one of his ten wives, was also executed. Nearing death, Herod had two popular teachers, Judas and Matthias, together with their students, burned alive because they removed a golden eagle from the entrance of the Temple. They saw it as idolatrous, and an affront to pious Jews. He was concerned that no one would mourn his death, so he ordered a large group of distinguished men to come to Jericho. Then, he gave orders that they should be killed at the time of his death so that the displays of grief that he craved would take place. You can believe that he was troubled at the news that a king had been born!

His request of these magi was disingenuous, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him” [MATTHEW 2:8]. However, after discovering where the child was, they were “warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way” [MATTHEW 2:12]. They risked incurring the wrath of the king, for he would be furious when he learned that he was duped. Indeed, we read that, “Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men” [MATTHEW 2:16].

This incident is not recorded elsewhere in history; however, there can be no doubt that it did occur. Matthew records the incident, including it in his Gospel. Such an action certainly was in keeping with Herod’s character. Moreover, the small number of children involved would not attract great attention beyond the immediate area. Remember, only children two years old and under were killed. For Bethlehem and the surrounding area, there were likely not more than a score of children that would meet the criterion set by the king. However, for the parents whose children were murdered, there would be a blot over their soul for the remainder of their days.

THEIRS WAS A JOURNEY LEADING TO WORSHIP — What is perhaps most pertinent for us to note is that the magi came specifically to worship the child. The worship presented was in the form of gifts presented for his use. To this day, the presentation of our gifts during our services is an act of worship. We do not “pay” tithes; we offer gifts as an act of worship. Thus, we read, “Going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” [MATTHEW 2:11].

They were prepared for inconvenience and for risks, if only they could worship. It was obvious to them that this was no ordinary child. He lived with his family in a humble home. The man who greeted them was a carpenter; the mother a teenage girl of perhaps twelve or fourteen years of age. There was no ostentation, no obvious wealth or power apparent in this rude home. And yet, they worshipped.

The magi had discovered a wonderful truth—one that wise men to this day must learn. The Living God had said through Isaiah:

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“Thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
‘I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly,
and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”

[ISAIAH 57:15]

How many wise men worshipped the Christ? All of them; and to this day, wise men still worship Him. And what of you? Do you merely go to church? Or do you meet the Risen Saviour and worship Him there? Do you merely say prayers? Or do you pray, knowing that you are in the presence of the Son of God?

Christ the Lord was born that He might present His life as a sacrifice. Now, He calls each one who will be wise to come, receiving the life that He offers to all who will accept it. Thus, we are invited, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is my Master,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free. With the heart one believes resulting in a right standing with the Father, and with the mouth one confesses resulting in freedom.” That gracious invitation concludes with this delightful promise, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Master shall be set free” [free translation of **ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

I trust that at this Christmastide you are counted as a wise man. And you shall be so counted if you come to worship Him who was born to take away our sin. Amen.