

Who Were the Magi Who Visited Jesus?

Who were the magi, and should they be part of the Nativity?

by Liz Abrams on January 6, 2023 – (posted on-line at – ‘Answers in Genesis’)

January 6 is traditionally celebrated as the day the magi visited Jesus, and it marks the end of the “Twelve Days of Christmas.” These magi, or wise men, saw the rising of a new star in the sky and traveled to Jerusalem to find the newborn king. When they understandably went to the palace to find this king, they set into motion events that would lead to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fleeing to Egypt and also lead to the death of all boys two years and under in Bethlehem.

“We Three Kings?”

The famous song speaks of “three kings,” but there is nothing in the biblical text to suggest that the magi were kings. The Greek word used to describe them is *magos*, from which we get the word “magic.” It denotes a person who practiced astrology, dream interpretation, and various types of enchantment. This makes sense, because they made their journey because of a star that rose in the sky. It “was originally applied exclusively to members of a priestly caste of the Medes and Persian who had esoteric skills in interpreting dreams. However, the use of the word broadened to embrace various categories of persons who were marked out by their superior knowledge and ability, including astrologers, soothsayers, and even oriental sages.”¹

Matthew’s text says they were “from the east,” which makes it possible they were from Babylon, a popular interpretive option. Because the wise men presented three gifts to Jesus (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), tradition says that there were three wise men. In reality, the Bible doesn’t say how many there were.

How Did the Wise Men Know to Look for the Star?

The Messiah was promised to Israel, and the Jews were expecting him to come around that time. But how did these gentile astrologers know to look for him, and how did they know the vicinity of where to go?

During the Judean exile to Babylon, Daniel rose to prominence among the royal court of wise men when he was able to interpret dreams and make true predictions. While we don’t know the degree to which he converted anyone in the court, some seem to have kept records of his predictions—among which was the coming of the Jewish Messiah (Daniel 7:13-14, 9:24-27).

Daniel 7:13-14 - NRSV

¹³ As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
 coming with the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One
 and was presented before him.

¹⁴ To him was given dominion

 and glory and kingship,
 that all peoples, nations, and languages
 should serve him.
 His dominion is an everlasting dominion
 that shall not pass away,
 and his kingship is one
 that shall never be destroyed.

Daniel 9: 24-27 - NRSV

²⁴ “Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, **and to anoint a most holy place.** ²⁵ Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the **time of an anointed**

prince, there shall be seven weeks, and for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time. ²⁶ After the sixty-two weeks, **an anointed one** shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. ²⁷ He shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week **he shall make sacrifice and offering cease**, and **in their place shall be a desolating sacrilege** until the decreed end is poured out upon the desolator.”

Were the Wise Men at the Manger?

Nativity sets often include the wise men, leading many to suppose that they were perhaps present at Jesus' birth alongside the shepherds. However, Nativity sets are in the tradition of religious artwork that exists to teach about biblical narratives, not exactly reproduce a moment in history. Before the average person could read, imagery like the Nativity scene and other religious artwork helped to teach about biblical events. While the magi are included in the infancy narrative of Matthew (hence their inclusion in the Nativity scene), they probably arrived between one and two years after Jesus' birth.

The Bible gives us several indications that the scene is different than that of the night of Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph were situated in a house, while when Jesus was born they were somewhat inconveniently located in some sort of animal housing because there was no room in the upper room. Early tradition suggests Jesus was born in a cave (caves were often used to house animals), and the Church of the Nativity is built over a cave site in Bethlehem which tradition states is the place. However, we cannot be certain because the birth accounts do not tell us specifically *where* Jesus was born. However, by the time the magi came, the family was no longer housed with the animals. Furthermore, Jesus is referred to as a “young child” with the Greek word *paidion*, not an “infant” with the Greek word *brepbos*, as in [Luke 2:12](#).

Why would it have taken so long for them to get there? Presumably, it took some time for the wise men to gather an envoy and get royal permission for the trip. Camels can travel around 25 miles a day going top speed, meaning the 1700-mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem would have taken over two months even if the conditions were absolutely ideal.

And after their visit, Herod would not have immediately realized he was fooled and the wise men weren't coming back. He also may have adjusted the age up to ensure the right boy was killed. Herod was known for being excessively murderous when he believed someone was after his throne. He was not a Jew—he was half-Edomite and half-Arab. He was only king because Rome made him the king. Rumors of a true heir to David would absolutely be enough for him to slaughter some children.

What Was the Star?

There are all sorts of interesting astronomical theories about what the star could have been. However, it likely was not some sort of alignment of stars and planets. First, the star appeared and disappeared, and while the magi could follow it, Herod's men presumably couldn't. Furthermore, the Bible never tells us to search the heavens for astrological signs, so why would [God](#) reveal Jesus' birth via an astrological sign?

Rather, it is likely that the wise men had some records of Daniel's prophecies, which included the timing of Jesus' birth (but not the place, which is why they went to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem). They were searching the sky for signs because that's all they knew to look for. God graciously gave them a sign in the sky—not an astrological sign, but the rising of a new star, which was a miraculous occurrence, perhaps even a manifestation of God's glory. This explains how the star could appear, disappear, appear again, and lead them to a particular house.

Their purpose in coming to see him was to "worship" him. The Greek word *proskyneo* has various levels of meaning, from showing deference to a person to worshipping God. However, if the magi merely viewed Jesus as human, it would be odd for them to take a long journey to offer costly gifts and worship to a king that had no authority over them. But if they understood him to be God in human flesh, as they might have from Daniel's prophecies, they might have done exactly that. Matthew often contrasts the faith of gentiles with the faithlessness of Jewish leaders, and the worship of the magi compared with the apathy of the priests who pointed them (and Herod) to Bethlehem is a nice contrast.

Why Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh?

The gifts of the wise men were imbued with theological significance early in [church](#) history. Gold is meant to signify Jesus' royalty, frankincense his deity, and myrrh his sacrificial death. If the magi meant to prophesy with their gifts, Scripture does not record this detail. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are all precious and easily portable, so they were suitable to bring on a long journey to honor the newborn king.

Incidentally, the wise men's gifts may have providentially been given just in time to fund the family's flight to Egypt. We know from the offering they gave at his dedication that Jesus' family was poor. Even if Joseph was able to set up shop in Egypt to earn a living, travel would have been expensive.

Jesus, the Savior of the World

While the Old Testament consistently prophesied that the Messiah would bring salvation for Israel, God repeatedly emphasized that the Messiah would not just save Israel, but the whole world. While the Old Testament consistently prophesied that the Messiah would bring salvation for Israel, God repeatedly emphasized that the Messiah would not just save Israel, but the whole world ([Isaiah 11:10, 42:1–7, 49:6, 60:1–3](#)). Jesus came to reverse Adam's curse for all of Adam's descendants.

The first people recorded as worshipping Jesus were lowly Israelite shepherds and foreign gentiles, while the people who might be expected to know the most about the Messiah's coming—the Jewish elite with access to the Scriptures that told the exact location of his birth along with its timing—did not worship him but aided Herod in discovering which infants to slaughter.

Do we in this day and age come to the manger to worship Jesus. Do we follow his star, and learn from his teachings. Even the animals of the time, the sheep, the cattle, the donkey, and even the camels worshipped Jesus. They knew Jesus the Messiah was the Saviour for all in the world, not just the peoples of Israel. This anointed one who was born, and died to save the world and all those who believe, and make claim to this belief. Does this star that arrived in Bethlehem lead us as well. **Amen.**

Footnotes

1. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text in New International Greek Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans; Bletchley, Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2005), 108.
2. The Greek *kataluma* most likely refers to an upper room in a private house, not an inn. Bethlehem was so small that it likely did not even have a formal inn, and *kataluma* is also used in [Luke 22:11](#) to refer to the upper room where Jesus and the disciples ate the last supper.
3. Perhaps they had also studied other biblical prophecies, like [Genesis 49:10](#) and [Numbers 24:17](#) which mentioned a kingly line and a star rising in Israel.

Recommended Resources

Jesus and Adam AND Jesus, Scripture, and Creation - ID 1002399 -

Scripture Readings – January 4, 2026 – LCUCPC

Psalm 72 - VU 790 Part 1,2and 3.

Refrain: Hail to God's own anointed, who rules in equity.

Give the ruler your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal heir,
for judging your people rightly, and upholding the poor with justice;
that the mountains may bring forth peace for the people,
and the hills, prosperity with justice R.

May our anointed defend the cause of the poor among the people,
save the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor.

May your anointed live as long as the sun endures, as long as the moon from age to age. May your anointed be like rain falling upon the grass, like showers that water the earth;

may your anointed be one in whose days justice shall flourish and peace abound till the moon is no more. R.

May the rulers of Tarshish and the isles pay tribute, the monarchs of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

May all rulers do homage, and all nations render service.

For your anointed shall deliver the needy when they cry, the poor and those who have no helper.

Your anointed shall have pity on the weak and the needy, and save the lives of the poor.

From oppression and violence your anointed shall redeem their life,
and count as precious their blood. R.

Blessed are you, O God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvellous things.

Blessed is your glorious name for ever. May the whole earth be filled with your glory. R.

Matthew 2: 1-12 NRSV

The Visit of the Magi

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem,² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him,⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

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

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.