

The Three Wise Men

To: The Neal Children
19 December 2002

Mystery surrounds those intriguing visitors of the infant Jesus we oft refer to as the Three Wise Men, the Magi, or the Three Kings. Matthew 2:1-2 tells us they came from the east to Jerusalem, the political seat of power for the nation of Judah (Judea), which was then under Roman rule. Jerusalem was by this time only a shadow of its former glory when it was the capital city of the united House of Israel almost a thousand years prior. Scripture and historical documents tell us that Herod was king when the wise men arrived in the land seeking audience with the child whose coming had been prophesied for many hundreds of years.

Common tradition and ubiquitous nativity scenes place the wise men as witnesses at the manger, the birthplace of Jesus. The scriptures, however, seem to report their arrival as much as two years later and show them as first visiting king Herod and later at the home of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. In the second chapter of Matthew the first and second verses we read: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him." According to Matthew 2:11, by the time the wise men arrived, Mary and Joseph were no longer at the inn where the shepherds had found them with the newborn but were in a "house" and Jesus was a "young child."

Luke 2:1-2 says: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria." From external sources we discover that the Roman tax and census which required that Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem, was likely conducted in the spring, in concert with the feast of the Passover, and considering Mary gave birth in Bethlehem immediately upon her arrival there, the Saviors birth would logically be in the spring, with two independent sources identifying April 6th as the correct date. * (Evidently the reason we observe the birth of Jesus on the 25th of December has to do with the merging of older elements of Roman religions with Christianity in about 325 AD coupled with the ancient festivals of the Winter Solstice, the coming forth of

* In 1830 Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, stated the correct birthday of Jesus, correlated to the modern calendar, is **April 6th**. The ancient Mixtec Codex Nuttall of Oaxaca, Mexico, (a pre-Columbus document) translated by Jill Furst in the 1980's, includes this comment regarding the "fair god": "In the fixed religious calendar ... the date Four Earthquake would be the 6th of April. The date Seven Flower would be three days later, or the 9th of April.... *Birth* and rebirth are symbolic of Seven Flower. What is shown in the pages of this codex is that on **April 6th** a deity shown first as dead and descending into the underworld leaves the underworld and comes back to life or is resurrected or reborn, three days later."

Egyptian goddess Isis, which is also on the 25th of December and the Roman god Mithras, who was celebrated on the 25th of December and believed to have been born on that date .)

It is widely thought that the wise men followed the star from the east to Bethlehem. However, Matthew does not say they followed a star at this point in their journey, only that they had “seen his star in the east” and “came . . . from the east to Jerusalem” seeking he who was “born King of the Jews.” Upon arriving in Judea, the Magi first inquired at King Herod’s palace, the logical place for a prince to be born. King Herod received the visitors, a clear sign of their status, and apparently showed great interest in their story about their having seen the long-awaited sign in the heavens.

After conferring with his counselors Herod “sent them to Bethlehem,” because it was there that prophesy indicated the King of Kings would someday be born. It was after the Magi left Herod’s palace that the star is reported to have gone before them, leading them not to Bethlehem but rather to the home of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, presumably in Galilee.

According to John A. Tvedtnes, a Biblical and Near Eastern Scholar, an early Christian document indicates that it was an angel in the guise of a star (*1 Infancy Gospel* 3:3) that led the Wise Men to the Christ child. The new star that appeared in the heavens, perhaps two years earlier, had also been seen in the Americas as recorded in Helaman 14:5; 3 Nephi 1:21. A new star that suddenly appears in the eastern night sky was recorded in several external sources about this time.

From historical records we learn that Herod died just before Passover in the year 4 BC and therefore Jesus would have been borne before that date, probably in 5 BC. At the time of Herod’s death Varus, the Roman Governor of Syria was called upon to quell a riot that broke out during Passover in Jerusalem. Varus had earlier stationed a legion outside Jerusalem to keep the peace and had struck coins bearing his name dated from 6 BC through 4 BC. By the time the traditional year zero rolled around Varus had already returned to Syria and Herod was long dead.

An interesting correlative to this particular dating is that in March of 5 BC Chinese records describe a new long lasting and brilliant “broom star” that appeared in the heavens moving from east to west. Probably a brilliant comet with a sweeping tail, this “star” is a serious candidate for the star of the Magi and the date fits perfectly with the death of Herod.

The Magi, or Wise Men of the biblical record, were surely from the geographical area of ancient Babylon and the adjacent lands of the Medes and Persians. These lands comprise modern-day Iraq and Iran and are east of Jerusalem. Six hundred years before the Savior’s birth Zoroastrianism was the most important and influential religion in this region. It was at this time that Jerusalem was

attacked by the military leader known as Nebuchadnezzar who ransacked the land of Judah in retaliation for king Zedekiah's having formed a political alliance with Egypt. (Nebuchadnezzar was later to become the king of Babylon, replacing his father as head of the known world.)

When Jerusalem was first attacked in 597 BC the Jews called on Egypt for support. Egypt sent an army in response to Zedekiah's ambassadors and the Babylonians left off from the siege of Jerusalem in order to engage the Egyptians. Ultimately both the Egyptians and Judah were defeated in separate battles, and the core of Jewish society was taken into captivity and interned in the area that constituted the cradle of Zoroastrianism, "one of the world's historically great religions whose importance far out-weighs its present small numbers."¹

The high priests of Zoroastrianism were called Magi, which is the root of our word for magician. These highly skilled and educated "wise" men were responsible for development of the Zodiac; the same one used today by fortune-tellers the world over. The Zodiac was initially developed to teach and track astronomical observations. Like the Mayas of the Americas, the Magi were great astronomers, patiently recording events over hundreds of years. Textbooks frequently credit the Magi as the forerunners of modern-day astronomy.

An important tenet of Zoroastrianism is the belief in a prophesied Savior, that he would be born of a virgin and that a new star would herald his coming. This religion has been described as "an ethical monotheism...a faith which believes that there is one God who gives guidance and direction to his people through laws and commandments."² They believed in angels, Satan, resurrection and the afterlife. The Magi were stargazers, keepers of calendars, and perhaps the most educated people of their day. "Within Zoroastrianism, history has a beginning and an end, and at the end people will be judged against the laws which God gave. In addition, the faith has an eternal view which spans a possible premortal life, mortality, and an afterlife."³ They believed in the absolute goodness of God (Mazda) and the wickedness of Satan (Ahriman) and that all men were free to choose between good and evil.

Two books of the Old Testament were written during the period of the Jewish captivity in Babylon, both books, (Daniel and Ezekiel), are known by the Prophets who wrote them. Neither of these Prophets could have escaped knowing a great deal about Zoroastrianism and may well have influenced its thinking. Mary Boyce, a scholar for this time and place says: ... "(Zoroastrianism) is one of the oldest "revealed" religions having done more to influence ... mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith. In its own right it was the state religion of three great Iranian empires, which flourished almost continually from the sixth

¹ Spencer Palmer, "Religions of the World" Brigham Young University 1990

² Palmer, page 125

³ Ibid

century BC to the seventh century AD and dominated much of the Near and Middle East.”⁴ The Magi of Zoroastrianism shared a common belief with the Jews, (and all of Israel for that matter), regarding the coming of a Messiah (some authors claim the Jews actually adopted the concept of a Messiah from Zoroastrianism.) Both groups believed a new star would appear in the heavens to announce the event. It was surely the followers of this faith who hundreds of years later were patiently watching the heavens for the sign of the prophesied Savior, who identified the new star, and correlated it with his birth. When the new star appeared as prophesied, high ranking Magi, perhaps kings in their part of the world, commenced the long journey to honor the Christ child.

Marco Polo, during his travels in the thirteenth century, reported that the three Magi had set out from Saba in Persia, (Iran) where their tombs were still known and shown to visitors in his day. Local tradition named these three kings, Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, names given the wise men in documents as early as the eighth century. The same names are used in Christian tradition today.

John A. Tvedtnes tells us that Chapter 9 of the Armenian “*Gospel of the Infancy*” names the Magi as Melkon, King of Persia, Gaspar of India, and Balthazar of Arabia. These names appear to be Akkadian, the language used in ancient Babylon, whence names like these spread through other parts of the Persian Empire from the fifth century B.C. (For example, when Daniel was taken captive to Babylon eleven years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonians renamed him Belteshazzar; see Daniel 1:7.)

One ancient and curious external resource says “And it came to pass, when the Lord Jesus was born at Bethlehem, a city of Judea, in the time of Herod the King, the wise men came from the East to Jerusalem, according to the prophecy of Zoradasht.”⁵ The balance of the chapter of this work discusses the sacred fire, a hallmark that confirms its Zoroastrian origin.

Even today Zoroastrian worship involves the eternal flame and water purification rites. In Marco Polo’s time the village of Cala Ataperistan, three days travel from Saba, told Marco Polo of three local kings from the towns of Saba, Ava, and Cala Ataperistan who long ago went away to worship a newborn prophet. They brought to him gold (symbolic of his kingship), frankincense (symbolic of his divinity) and myrrh (symbolic of his healing abilities). Christian tradition refers to these three gifts as symbolic, respectively, of Jesus’ kingship, divinity, and passion.

⁴ Mary Boyce, “Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices” (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979)

⁵ 1 *Infancy Gospel* 3:1