

EASTERN WISE-MEN, OR MAGI, VISIT JESUS.
THE NEW-BORN KING.

Text: Matthew 2:1-12.

Jeremiah 39:13: ¹³ So Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard sent, and Nebushasban, Rabсарis, and Nergalsharezer, Rabmag, and all the king of Babylon's princes

Daniel 5:11 - ¹¹ There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; whom the king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king, I say, thy father, made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers; ¹² Forasmuch as an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar: now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation.

- (a) **behold, Wise-men** [This word designates an order, or caste, of priests and philosophers (called magi), which existed in the countries east of the Euphrates, from a very remote period. We first find the word in Scripture at *Jer 39:13*, in the name rab-mag, which signifies chief magi. This class is frequently referred to in the Book of Daniel, where its members are called magicians, and it is probable that Daniel himself was a rab-mag (*Da 5:11*). The magi were, in many ways, the Levites of the East; they performed all public religious rites, claimed exclusive mediatorship between God and man, were the authority on all doctrinal points, constituted the supreme council of the realm, and had charge of the education of the royal family. They practiced divination, interpreted auguries and dreams, and professed to foretell the destinies of men. They were particularly famous for their skill in astronomy, and had kept a record of the more important celestial phenomena, which dated back several centuries prior to the reign of Alexander the Great.

Genesis 49:10 ¹⁰ The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be...

Numbers 24:17 - ¹⁷ I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.

Isaiah 11:1 - And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: ² And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; ³ And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: ⁴ But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth: with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. ⁵ And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins.

Micah (5:2):

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."



Romans 10:14...and how shall they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!

Bishop George Lockhart, Ed.D Pastor

[Lake Park Mission](#)

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A Christmas Surprise:

Who Were the Magi?

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by Chuck Missler

Each year as we approach the holiday season, our preparations for Christmas include revisiting the events surrounding the birth of Our Lord. Bethlehem,¹ the shepherds, and the angels are all familiar to us. But not much is generally known about the mysterious "Magi" who came to worship the infant Jesus. The following background may be helpful to stimulate conversations around the fireplace, as our thoughts turn to this incredible event from which we measure our very calendar.

Traditions

Most of what we associate with the "Magi" is from early church traditions. Most have assumed that there were three of them since they brought three specific gifts. (But the Biblical text doesn't number them.) They are called "Magi" from the Latinized form of the Greek word *magoi*, transliterated from the Persian for a select sect of priests. (Our word "magic" comes from the same root.)

As the years passed, traditions became increasingly embellished. By the third century, they were viewed as kings. By the sixth century they had names: Bithisarea, Melichior, and Gathaspa. Some even associated them with Shem, Ham and Japheth, the three sons of Noah, and thus with Asia, Africa, and Europe. A fourteenth century Armenian tradition identifies them as Balthasar, King of Arabia; Melchior, King of Persia; and Gasper, King of India.

(Relics attributed to them emerged in the fourth century and were transferred from Constantinople to Milan in the fifth century, and then to Cologne in 1162, where they remain enshrined today.)

These are all very interesting traditions, but what do we really know about the Magi?

The Priesthood of the Medes

The ancient Magi were a hereditary priesthood of the Medes credited with profound and extraordinary religious knowledge. After some Magi, who had been attached to the Median court, proved to be expert in the interpretation of dreams, Darius the Great established them over the state religion of Persia.²(Contrary to popular belief, the Magi were not originally followers of Zoroaster.³ That all came later.)

It was in this dual capacity whereby civil and political counsel was invested with religious authority, that the Magi became the supreme priestly caste of the Persian Empire, and continued to be prominent during the subsequent Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods.⁴

The Role of Daniel

One of the titles given to Daniel was Rab-mag, the Chief of the Magi.⁵ His unusual career included being a principal administrator in two world empires: the Babylonian and the subsequent Persian Empire. When Darius appointed him, a Jew, over the previously hereditary Median priesthood, the resulting repercussions resulted in the plots leading to the lion's den.⁶ Daniel apparently entrusted a

messianic vision (to be announced in due time by a "star") to a secret sect of the Magi for its eventual fulfillment. But first, let's cover some historical background.

Political Background

Since the days of Daniel, the fortunes of both the Persian and the Jewish nations had been closely intertwined. Both nations had, in their turn, fallen under Seleucid domination in the wake of Alexander's conquests. Subsequently both had regained their independence: the Jews under Maccabean leadership, and the Persians as the dominating ruling group within the Parthian Empire.

It was at this time that the Magi, in their dual priestly and governmental office, composed the upper house of the Council of the Megistanes ("magistrates") whose duties included the absolute choice and election of the king of the realm. It was therefore a group of Persian-Parthian "king makers" who entered Jerusalem in the latter days of the reign of Herod. Herod's reaction was understandably one of fear when one considers the background of Roman-Parthian rivalry that prevailed during his lifetime.

Rome on the Rise

Pompey, the first Roman conqueror of Jerusalem, attacked the Armenian outpost of Parthia in 63 b.c. In 55 b.c. Carssus led Roman legions in sacking Jerusalem and, in a subsequent attack, Parthia proper. The Romans were decisively defeated at the battle of Carrhae with the loss of 30,000 troops, including their commander. The Parthians counterattacked with a token invasion of Armenia, Syria, and Palestine. Nominal Roman rule was reestablished under Antipater, the father of Herod, who retreated before another Parthian invasion in 40 b.c.

Mark Anthony reestablished Roman sovereignty in 37 b.c., and, like Carssus before him, also embarked on a similarly ill-fated Parthian expedition. His disastrous retreat was followed by another wave of invading Parthians, which swept all Roman opposition completely out of Palestine (including Herod himself, who fled to Alexandria and then to Rome). With Parthian collaboration, Jewish sovereignty was restored and Jerusalem was fortified with a Jewish garrison.

Herod, by this time, secured from Augustus Caesar the title of "King of the Jews." However, it was not for three years (including a five month's siege by Roman troops) that he was able to occupy his own capital city. Herod had thus gained the throne of a rebellious buffer state, which was situated between two mighty contending empires. At any time, his own subjects might conspire in bringing the Parthians to their aid.

At the time of Christ's birth, Herod may have been close to his final illness. Augustus was also aged, and Rome, since the retirement of Tiberius, was without any experienced military commander. Pro-Parthian Armenia was fomenting revolt against Rome (which was successfully accomplished within two years).

The Tensions in Parthia

The time was ripe for another Parthian invasion of the buffer provinces, except for the fact that Parthia itself was racked by internal dissension. Phraates IV, the unpopular and aging king, had once been deposed, and it was not improbable that the Persian Magi were already involved in the political maneuvering requisite to choosing his successor. It was conceivable that the Magi might be taking advantage of the king's lack of popularity to further their own interests with the establishment

of a new dynasty, which could have been implemented if a sufficiently strong contender could be found.

At this time it was entirely conceivable that the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, culminating in Daniel's writings (one of their own Magians), was of profound motivating significance. The promise of a divinely imposed world dominion at the hands of a Jewish monarch was more than acceptable to them. (Their own Persian and Medo-Persian history was studded with Jewish nobles, ministers, and counselors.)

The Entourage to Jerusalem

In Jerusalem the sudden appearance of the Magi, probably traveling in force with every imaginable oriental pomp and accompanied by adequate cavalry escort to insure their safe penetration of Roman territory, certainly alarmed Herod and the populace of Jerusalem.

It would seem as if these Magi were attempting to perpetrate a border incident, which could bring swift reprisal from Parthian armies. Their request of Herod regarding the one "who has been born King of the Jews"^z was a calculated insult to him, a non-Jew ⁸ who had contrived and bribed his way into that office. Consulting his scribes, Herod discovered from the prophecies in the Tanach (the Old Testament) that the Promised One, the Messiah, would be born in Bethlehem.⁹ Hiding his concern and expressing sincere interest, Herod requested them to keep him informed.

After finding the babe and presenting their prophetic gifts, the Magi "being warned in a dream" (a form of communication most acceptable to them) departed to their own country, ignoring Herod's request. (Within two years, Phraataces, the parricide son of Phraates IV, was duly installed by the Magi as the new ruler of Parthia.)

Daniel's Messianic Role

Living six centuries before the birth of Christ, Daniel certainly had an incredible number of Messianic prophecies. In addition to several overviews of Gentile world history,¹⁰ the Angel Gabriel told him the precise day that Jesus would present Himself as King to Jerusalem.¹¹ It is interesting that Daniel's founding of a secret sect of the Magi also had a role in having these prominent Gentiles present gifts at the birth of the Jewish Messiah.

The Christmas Gifts

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were also prophetic, speaking of our Lord's offices of king, priest, and savior. Gold speaks of His kingship; frankincense was a spice used in the priestly duties; and myrrh was an embalming ointment signifying His death. In the millennium, He will also receive the gifts of gold and frankincense;¹² but no myrrh. His death was once and for all. What gifts are YOU going to give Him this year? Discuss it with Him.

Herod strengthened Israel's position in the ancient world by increasing its commerce and turning it into a trading hub for Arabia and the East. His massive building program included theaters, amphitheaters, a port, markets, temples, housing, palaces, walls around Jerusalem, and aqueducts. He kept order in Israel but by using secret police and tyrannical rule.

Herod the Great's Strengths: Herod worked well with Israel's Roman conquerors. He knew how to get things done and was a skilled politician.

Herod the Great's Weaknesses: He was a brutal man who killed his father-in-law, several of his ten wives, and two of his sons. He ignored the laws of God to suit himself and chose the favor of Rome over his own people. Herod's heavy taxes to pay for lavish projects forced an

To further reinforce his claims to the throne, as well as the illusory claim that he was part of the Hasmonean Dynasty, Herod prevailed upon Hyrcanus to give him his granddaughter, Mariamne (Miriam), in marriage. It appears from Josephus and Roman historical accounts that Herod truly loved her. However, it was unrequited. She viewed herself as the victim of an arranged marriage most likely to a monster..

Distraught, Mariamne attempted to commit suicide, but was unsuccessful. Herod then had her tried and executed. According to the Talmud (Baba Basra 3a), the last Hasmonean was a young princess, Herod preserved her body in honey so that he could claim that he wed the daughter of a royal house.

Josephus wrote that Herod's final illness—sometimes named "Herod's Evil"[49]—was excruciating.[50] Based on Josephus's descriptions, one medical expert has diagnosed Herod's cause of death as chronic kidney disease complicated by Fournier's gangrene.[51] Similar symptoms attended the death of his grandson Agrippa I in 44 CE. Modern scholars agree he suffered throughout his lifetime from depression and paranoia.

Herod's Death

Having dealt with the major events of Herod's life, we now turn to his death. The disease Herod had caused him to have a great appetite, his "entrails were ulcerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his colon; an aqueous and transparent liquor also settled itself about his feet, and a like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly. Nay, farther, his privy member was putrefied, and produced worms, and when he sat upright, he had a difficulty of breathing, which was very loathsome, on account of the stench of his breath, and the quickness of its returns; he had also convulsions in all parts of his body, which increased his strength to an insufferable degree...." He had tried to be cured, even going over the Jordan to bath at some place called Calirroë, drinking the waters there. It is possible that this was some kind of sexually transmitted disease, seeing that Herod had many wives and followed many Hellenistic ways. The NIV version of the "New Testament" says, in Acts 12:23, "And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died"

This picture of Herod, the man and the king, is based on the information available. While it cannot be known for certain where the histories are biased in one way or another, it seems clear that Herod was great in name alone. Even though he rebuilt the Temple and built a building around the tomb of the patriarchs, his cruelty overshadows his life

Herod "the Great" was a very complex man, a man of many contradictions. He was cruel to many and helpful to some. He seems to have been insecure and even paranoid that others close to him were after his power. Herod was a man with a passion for building.

- He also offered (Mark) Antony money to make him king, just as he had given him money to make him Tetrarch. On Antony's advice, the senate decreed that Herod be king. **When Herod became king**, he slew all the members of the Sanhedrin and eventually Hyrcanus the High Priest as well.
- Herod was now fully in control of his kingdom, encompassing Idumea, Judea, Samaria, Batanea, Auranitis, Trachonitis, and Peraea, as well as Galilee.²³ Herod was "unflinchingly loyal to and dependent on Rome".
- From the very start of Herod's reign as king, he showed the many sides of his personality. In order to reduce the power of the High Priesthood, he appointed and dismissed many High Priests, ignoring the hereditary nature of the post. From then on, the High Priest was nothing more than a Roman underling, owing allegiance to Herod and the Roman government.

Herod the Murderer

- One new High Priest was only 17, though tall for his age (which was not permitted to be held until age 20). The people were very warm towards him, professing their happiness too openly for the young man's own good. When Herod heard this, he "resolved to complete what he had intended against the young man." He was not more than 18 at the time he was murdered (drowned).
- At this point, Herod saw that Hyrcanus was the only man of "royal dignity" left, so, wanting to ensure that there would be no future obstacles, he had him killed.
- Herod suspected Miriamne of having an affair with his uncle Joseph and so had Joseph killed. Herod killed both his sister's husbands (she married one after he killed the first one).³⁰ Herod eventually, according to Josephus' account, had Miriamne executed. He seems to have gone a bit mad after this since, Josephus says, Herod had loved her. The Talmud confirms that Herod was mad, preserving Miriamne in honey and possibly having relations with her corpse (Bava Batra).
- Herod built a great many palace/forts. Herod's most famous building project, however, was the rebuilding of the Second Temple (Solomon's Temple) in Jerusalem. As a way for Herod to repent for having the rabbis killed. "*He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a glorious building in his life*" in reference to Herod's Temple."
- He may have also acquired some of his money by robbing a grave. Herod opened a room in David's tomb at night and took out the gold furniture that was there, as well as precious goods. He did not enter the area where the bodies of **David and Solomon** were, reportedly because of fear.
- Herod reduced the power of the Great Sanhedrin to the point where they were virtually powerless. It is even possible that he may have "abolished the Great Sanhedrin altogether". Another source says the Great Sanhedrin was stripped of all political power..