

Visit from the Magi: They fell down and worshiped Him

A poignant element in the Nativity Story is the visit of the Magi – The Wise Men

Who were these Wise Men, from where do they come, and why did they come? These are interesting questions in themselves, but they are also important for us. If these wise men sacrificed time and money to travel one-and-a-half to two years to fall down and worship the Christ Child, what can we do?

What we know about their visit is recorded only in the second chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew who gives us very little information about them. We do not know their names (Balthazar, Melchoir, and Gaspar were names given to them in the 7th century), we do not know from which countries they came (Persia, Mesopotamia, India, Assyria), by what route they took, or indeed how many there were.

On the basis of what Matthew wrote we can surmise some things. He tells us they came from the East. Natural philosophers in Persia and Bagdad were universally recognized as outstanding astronomers. They studied the stars and their movements; indeed, it was in Mesopotamia that the base 60 place mathematical system was invented – the system we still use in astronomy and in telling time. The East was also the setting of the religion of Zoroasterism – a monotheistic religion waiting for a savior born of a virgin. If a new star appeared in the heavens they would notice it. This nova suggested to them that something special had occurred: “For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” [Matt 2:2]

Who exactly were they? Were they priests, or kings, or philosophers? All we know is they were “wise.” In all likelihood they probably knew about the prophecies of Balaam, the Gentile diviner whose efforts at prophesizing are recorded in the Book of Numbers [22 – 24] where he prophesies about the coming of “A Star shall rise out of Jacob, And a Man shall rise out of Israel.” [24:17] The people in the “East” knew about the writings of the Jews who had elected to stay in Babylon once they were permitted to return to Jerusalem after their forced captivity.

One thing we can assume about The Magi is that they had to have been wealthy to afford to leave their places of employment or privilege for close to four years (about one-and-a-half or two getting there and then returning). For a trek of over a thousand miles and maybe more, they would need supplies and equipment. They would also need servants to set up tents, oversee the provision, cook the meals, arrange for bodily functions, and defend them from attacks of wild animals or roadmen. We can also say they were seekers.

Matthew’s account does not say how many wise men there were. We know that there were at least two as the noun is “men,” not “man.” But, were there three as we have come to believe? We get the number three because there were three gifts given to Christ. But, that does not follow that there were three givers. There may have been only two, or as many as twelve as some ancient writings suggest. Clearly, there was quite an entourage.

When they got near their destination of Jerusalem they went to see the ruling monarch. It happened to be Herod the Great, who was not a Jew. He had sought favor from Octavian who when he became emperor, Augustus Caesar, gave him the rule over the unruly Roman subjects, the Jews. He ruled with an iron hand, and his rule recorded in Josephus was marked with ruthlessness and cruelty.

When the Wise Men inquired of Herod where they could find the Christ Child, “he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” Not only was Herod anxious about his status, but so were the Jewish authorities who had reached a working arrangement with him. A new king could call everything into question and change things. When Herod inquired of the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah was to be born, they searched the Scriptures and found in the writings of Micah the Prophet that it would be Bethlehem. [Mic 5:2]

Interesting to observe that the “good tiding of great joy” [Luke 2:10] the Angels declared to the poor shepherds at least a year-and-a-half earlier had not yet reached them. What does this say about God’s message to us? High and mighty people are too busy to hear the word of God? Only humble and poor shepherds hear? What about us? Are we too busy with worldly things? Do we have time to be humble and listen for the “small still voice?”

After The Wise Men left Herod they followed the Star until they arrived at the home of Mary and Joseph. “And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshiped Him.” Jesus is referred to as a “young Child” not an infant.

It was the Shepherds who visited Jesus and Mary and Joseph in the cave that glorious night when the Angels told them, “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” So, “the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.’” [Luke 2:11.15] It was not the Wise Men who came to the cave that first night as they had not yet started on their journey. Of course in our icon of the Nativity we have them all there at the same time, but that is an iconographic account in one place showing not only the arrival of the Wise Men almost two years later, but also the Devil raising questions in Joseph’s mind at least eight months earlier about this pregnant woman to whom he was betrothed.

After the Magi worshiped Him – the first Gentiles to do so – they gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh: gold for a king, frankincense for God, and myrrh for a man who is to die and suffer. When they saw Him they recognized Him as the “Star shall rise out of Jacob, And a Man shall rise out of Israel,” the Sun of Righteousness [Malachi 4:2], and the Orient (the rising sun from on high). [Isaiah 59:19] Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed another way to return home.

What happened to them? We do not know for sure, but we can surmise that they told others of their travels, what they had seen, and who they had worshiped. Thus, preparing the way for the Apostles who after Christ’s Ascension about thirty three years later came

to that part of the world to witness and to preach the Good News, baptizing in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit the people were ready to hear the rest of the story of this King.

What can we say about the travels and the experiences of the Wise Men, the Magi? One thing we can say with certainty is that when they saw the new Star, they left their livelihoods and followed. They sacrificed time, money, and perhaps their health to seek the One whose Star in the East they followed.

As we reflect on the Nativity of Christ – His taking on flesh for our sakes, not His – are we prepared to leave our anger, frustrations, envy, lust, greed, and other sins and shortcomings to seek and to follow Him?

Are we prepared to acknowledge that He opened the doors of Paradise for us so that we need not fear death as the end of our lives, but merely as a passage into the Kingdom of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

Are we prepared to greet Christ at His First Coming in such a way that gives us an indication of how He will greet us at His Second Coming?

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!