

IDENTIFYING THE WISE MEN

The most surprising fact about the Magi, or wise men, is how little we actually know about them. Unlike “We Three Kings,” the writers of the Bible never mentioned their number or lineage. Readers of the Bible are kept in the dark about their racial characteristics, their nationality, and their names. Did the Magi follow the star from their home, or did the star appear at the beginning of the journey and reappear to lead them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem? Tradition argues for the former while the biblical text suggests the latter. Did the Magi appear at the stable, or did they arrive at a house after Jesus’ birth (Matt. 2:11)? To separate the myths from the truth, one should carefully examine the nationality of the Magi.

The Magi were not well respected by the Jews, as demonstrated by two episodes in the Book of Acts. In Acts 8, Luke described Simon as a magician. His greed and quest for power cast him in a negative light. Another person described as a Magi was Elymas, the proconsul of Sergius Paulus. In both cases negative connotations surrounded the Magi. However, Matthew presented the Magi in a positive light.

The Gospel writer never specified a home for the Magi. He only stated that they came “from the east” (Matt. 2:1). Exactly how far east is not known. Three theories have gained prominence. The most popular theory today is that the Magi came from Babylon. The Babylonian theory is popular because the culture of Babylon contained a developed form of astronomy and an extensive knowledge of Jewish messianic expectations. Many Jews continued to live in Babylon after the exile ended in 538 BC. The Babylonians first encountered these beliefs during the exile, and the Book of Daniel confirmed that there were Magi in the Babylonian court (1:20; 2:2; 4:7,9; 5:11). The weakness of this view is that no early Christian writers suggested Babylon as the home of the Magi.

A second point of origin for the Magi could be Persia. This was the primary location suggested by

early Christian writers. Depictions of the Magi in artwork reflected Persian dress. A Persian origin for the Magi would best explain their connection with Zoroastrianism as mentioned by early Christian writers in the second century.¹ The Persians may have encountered Jewish messianic expectations from Jews who did not return to Jerusalem in 538 BC. They were probably aware of the Jews’ messianic hopes and prophecies of a coming king because of the presence of Jews such as Mordecai and Esther during the Persian period.

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh have led some scholars to suggest that the Magi came from Arabia. A wisdom tradition was associated with this region since the time of Solomon (1 Kings 4:30). Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century, pinpointed Arabia as the home of the Magi.² As early as AD 96, Clement of Rome noted the presence of frankincense and myrrh in Arabia.³

When they saw the star and deduced that it pointed to the birth of the Jewish king, they traveled to the political capital of the Jews—Jerusalem. After Herod pointed the Magi in the direction of Bethlehem they traveled there, and the star they had seen in the east reappeared over the house where Jesus was staying. Evidently, the star didn’t lead the Magi from their homeland to Jerusalem. It appeared to notify the Magi of the birth of Christ, and it reappeared to guide them from Jerusalem to the specific place where Jesus lived in Bethlehem.

The exact location of the Magi will remain a mystery. Babylon, Persia, and Arabia are all possibilities. Perhaps the strength of all three sites suggests that the Magi had gained acceptance in all three societies. Out of this common milieu the Magi came to see the Christ.

1. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.15. “the Magi of the Persians, who foretold the Saviour’s birth, and came into the land of Judaea guided by a star.”
2. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 77.1. “For at the time of His birth, Magi who came from Arabia worshiped Him, coming first to Herod.”
3. Clement of Rome, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* 25. 1-2.

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