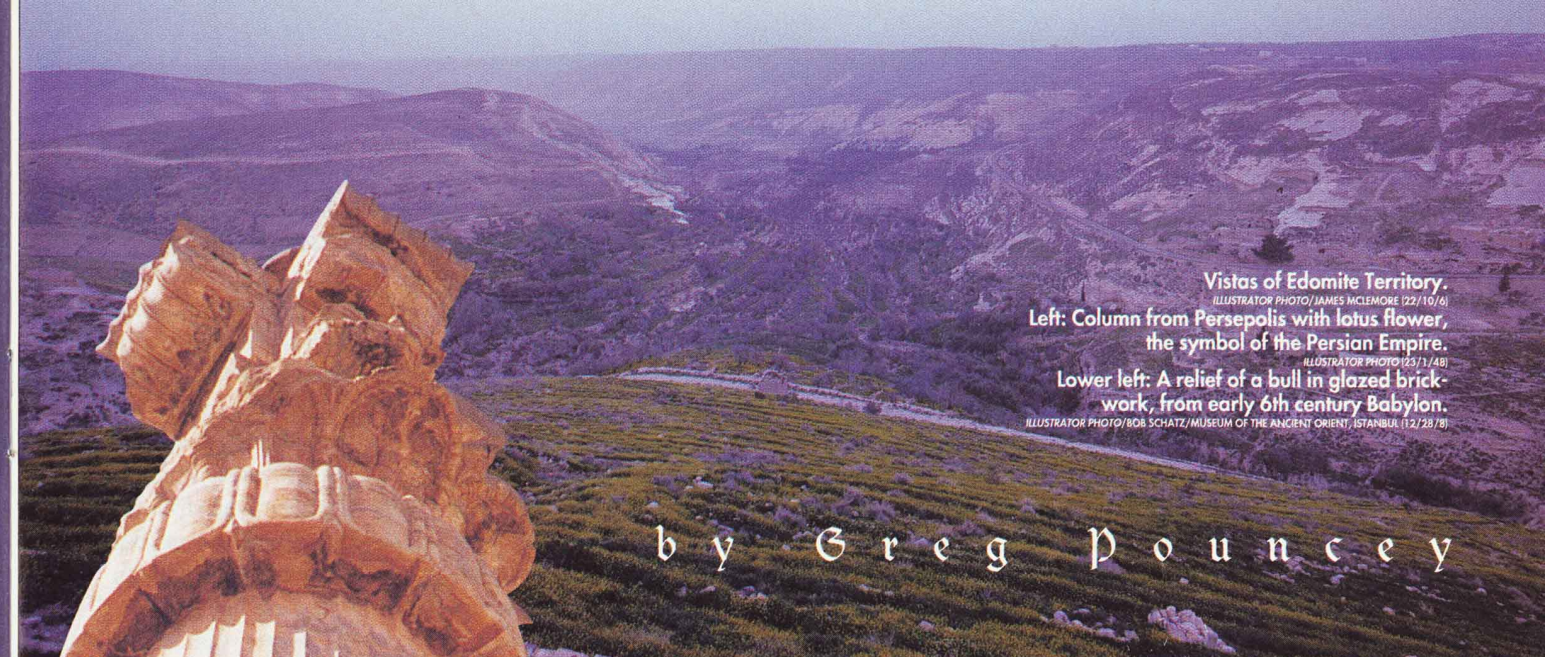




Zoroastrian Fire Temple still under excavation.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (23/1/53)



Vistas of Edomite Territory.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JAMES MCLEMORE (22/10/8)
Left: Column from Persepolis with lotus flower,
the symbol of the Persian Empire.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (25/1/48)
Lower left: A relief of a bull in glazed brick-
work, from early 6th century Babylon.
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/MUSEUM OF THE ANCIENT ORIENT, ISTANBUL (12/28/8)

by Greg Pouncey

Who Were the Magi?

THE MOST SURPRISING FACT about the Magi 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 (as seen in Christmas cards), or did they arrive at a house after the birth of Jesus (Matt. 2:11)? Surprisingly little is known of the Magi, and most of that knowledge is based on myth rather than biblical or historical truth. To separate the myths from the truth, one should carefully examine the nationality of the Magi.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, first mentioned the Magi in the fifth century B.C.¹ He described them as a tribe of Persian priests who served in the Zoroastrian religion. According to Herodotus, the Magi offered sacrifices and interpreted dreams. The Magi were in conflict with many of the teachings of Zoroaster, such as the belief in a monotheistic god. This conflict may explain their disappearance from Persian literature dominated by Zoroastrianism.

By the Roman period, historians connected the Magi with sorcery and astrology.² However, the connection with Zoroastrianism reappeared during this era.³ 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



Lesson Reference:
FBS: Matthew 2:1-23

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. 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 B.C. 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; 4:9; 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.⁴ A Persian origin for the Magi would best explain their connection with Zoroastrianism as mentioned by early Christian writers in the second century.⁵ The Persians may have encountered Jewish messianic expectations from Jews who did not return to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. 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.⁶ Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century, pinpointed Arabia as the home of the Magi.⁷ As early as A.D. 96, Clement of Rome noted the presence of frankincense and myrrh in Arabia.⁸

In summary, 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.

If the Magi were definitely connected with Zoroastrianism, a wealth of information would be available about their religious background. However, with the prominence of the Babylonian view and the early attestation of the Arabian view, one should concentrate on what is known for certain. First, the Magi studied the stars. They knew enough about the night sky to recognize something different and unique on the night of their departure to Jerusalem. This connection with astrology would have put them at odds with the Jews (Deut. 17:2-7), but ironically the Jewish prophecies of the coming Messiah probably alerted the Magi to the strange occurrence in the sky. The oracles of Balaam in Numbers 22—24 would have intrigued the Magi because they desired to foretell the future. In Numbers 24:17, Balaam prophesied, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." While the New Testament authors never quoted this passage in a messianic context, its absence from Matthew cannot rule out the possibility that some Jews interpreted this passage

as a messianic prophecy. If the Magi encountered these claims, they would have looked for that star with curiosity. In a culture that had a fascination with the meaning of the stars, this prophecy by an Old Testament seer, or "Magi," would have impressed the Magi of the first century.⁹

Second, the Magi were priests of a syncretistic religion. They offered sacrifices to many gods. This had set them at odds with Zoroastrianism. Rather than deciding which religion was correct, the Magi seemed to embrace elements from many religions. This would explain their openness to the Jewish prophecies of a coming king. Since the Magi worshiped many gods, are there any indications that their journey led them to abandon their syncretistic religion? The Magi bowed down and offered costly gifts to Jesus, but were these gifts offered because of their desire to convert to Judaism or because they wanted to appease yet another religion? The narrative leans toward the former view. Since they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they obviously had communicated with God. Likely the occurrence of the star, the encounter with Herod in Jerusalem, and the "coronation service" with Christ had led the Magi to a conversion experience, though the Bible neither verifies this nor ever mentions them again.

The scene where the Magi stopped at Herod's palace raises two important considerations. 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 to Bethlehem, and the star they had seen in the east reappeared over the house where Jesus was staying. Evidently, the star did not 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. Second, the interchange with Herod indicated an approximate age of Jesus. After the Magi deceived Him, Herod ordered the execution of all babies less than two years old.

Amazingly, Jewish shepherds and Gentile astrologers both paid homage to the birth of a Savior who would finally bring Jews and Gentiles together.

¹Herodotus 1:101. "Thus Deioces collected the Medes into a nation, and ruled over them alone. Now these are the tribes of which they consist: the Busae . . . and the Magi." Compare Herodotus 1.107, 120, 132; 3.65, 73, 79; 7.19.

²Tacitus, *Annals* 2.27; 12.22, 59.

³Pliny 30.2

⁴Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 168.

⁵Clement 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."

⁶"Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt," 1 Kings 4:30 (NASB).

⁷Justin 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."

⁸Clement of Rome, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* 25.1-2.

⁹Brown, *Birth*, 170. Virgil believed a star marked the spot of Rome's founding. Josephus noted that a comet meant a ruler would come from the Jews. Pliny fought a popular conception that each person had his/her own star that began when they were born but faded when they died (*Natural History* II vi 28). Could this explain the Magi's statement, "We saw his star in the east" (Matt. 2:2)?

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