

**CHRISTMAS MAGI**  
Matthew 2  
By Raymond White

Who were the magi? Where did they come from? How did they know there would even be a Christ, when he'd be born, and where he'd be born? All Matthew tells us is that they saw his star in the East, and that tells us precious little. How did they know that the star meant anything at all? Surely there is a story, a long story, behind this brief episode in Matthew's gospel.

So let's grope back in time and see what we can learn about Magi.

**[1] MEDES**

Our Christmas cards frequently show three magi, riding on camels, and dressed in Arab garb. None of that comes from Matthew. There were not three, not Casper, Belthesar, and Milceor whose skulls were supposedly found in the twelfth century by the Bishop of Cologne. No one knows if they rode camels, maybe they rode horses. And they weren't Arabs from Arabia, they were Persians from Persia.

Herodotus wrote that the Magi were a priestly tribe of the Medes. They were monotheistic and they used altars for sacrifice and had a perpetual flame. Their sacrificed animals were eaten by both the offerers and the priests, and they also distinguished between clean and unclean animals. They were, therefore, a Magian Priesthood, similar in many respects to the Levite priests of Israel.

But the Magi were more than just religious leaders. They were highly influential in government matters as well. During the lifetime of Jesus, Strabo wrote that Magi formed the upper house of the Megistanes council whose duties included electing kings of the Parthian empire (Strabo, XI, ix, 3) — similar, I suppose, to the American senate which approves Supreme Court Justices. That would make them, quite literally, Persian king makers.

The biblical connection begins with the Greek word Magoi in Matthew 2. Some versions (KJ) translate the word to wise men while others (NIV) transliterate it to magi. Earlier, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the Greek Septuagint translated a Hebrew word in Daniel 2:2 to the Greek word Magos, which the King James renders as magicians who were astrologers and sorcerers.

So, putting it all together, we get an interesting picture of who the Magi were. They were a priestly tribe of the Medes, astrologers and sorcerers, who were also in the Babylonian court, and who, later, during the life of Jesus, were high in the Parthian government and elected kings. That's the back story.

By the way, Medes still exist today. They are the Kurds. You know, that tough bunch in northern Iraq and southern Turkey.

**[2] JEREMIAH**

So now let's track these magi back to as far as we can to see how they might have been influenced by Jewish prophets.

Let's recall that the ten northern tribes of Israel were conquered by Assyria, then the southern tribe of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. Then the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians and the Medes. Then later, the Persians and the Medes were conquered by the Greeks. And still later, the Greeks were conquered by the Romans. Well, the Greeks were not really conquered by the Romans, they just sort of acquiesced to them. But whatever.

The first appearance of magi in the Bible was long before the Persian conquest. When Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army marched into Jerusalem, his entourage included a man named Nergalsharezer Rabmag.

***Jeremiah 39:3** And all the princes of the king of Babylon came in, and sat in the middle gate, even Nergalsharezer, Samgarnebo, Sarsechim, Rabsaris, Nergalsharezer, Rabmag, with all the residue of the princes of the king of Babylon.*

This word Rabmag was not a name but a title, and it means “head of the magicians,” or “head of the magi.” Now later, the Magi and the Medes were allied with the Persians, but at this earlier time, they appear to be associated with the Babylonians.

***Jeremiah 39:11** Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave charge concerning Jeremiah to Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, saying, **:12** Take him, and look well to him, and do him no harm; but do unto him even as he shall say unto thee. **:13** So Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard sent Nebushasban, Rabsaris, and Nergalsharezer, Rabmag, and all the king of Babylon's princes; **:14** Even they sent, and took Jeremiah out of the court of the prison, and committed him unto Gedeliah, the son of Ahikam the son of Shaphan, that he should carry him home: so he dwelt among the people.*

What we learn here is that when Nebuchadnezzar entered Jerusalem, he knew who his friends were and he considered Jeremiah a friend. And Jeremiah was Babylon's friend — Jeremiah had tried to persuade Zedekiah king of Judah to not rebel against Babylon. And so Nebuchadnezzar's first order of business was to deliver Jeremiah from prison and escort him safely home. Among the princes who were tasked to do that was Nergalsharezer, Rabmag. And so what we have here, apparently, is the first documented contact between a Magi and a Jewish prophet, and it was on the most friendly terms imaginable.

Later, however, God does not look favorably on Babylon and Jeremiah prophecies against it.

***Jeremiah 51:57** And I will make drunk her princes, and her wise men...*

This label “wise men” may or may not be a reference to magi in Babylon's government. But be patient, you are about meet Nebuchadnezzar's magi.

So far, what we have learned is that there were magi, one anyway, in Nebuchadnezzar's entourage as the Babylonians entered Jerusalem. Let's find some others.

### [3] DANIEL IN BABYLON

Before Jerusalem fell to Babylon's military might, there were already Jews in Babylon. They were young men, not prisoners, but more like exchange students taken to Babylon to create a cross culture. Among this group was a boy prophet Daniel and his three friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

Here's the story in a nutshell. King Nebuchadnezzar had a bad dream. He wanted to know what it meant so he asked his wise men, his magicians, his magi, what it meant. But he suspected they were charlatans so he tested them by demanding that *they tell him* what the dream was. In other words, "If you're so smart, you figure it out." Well, they couldn't figure it out, and so in his rage, the king ordered all the wise men to be killed, and that included Daniel and his friends.

To save himself and all the others, Daniel told the king that he would learn from God — the God of Israel, the true God — what the dream was and its interpretation. And that is indeed what happened.

So the happy ending was that the magicians — Magi according to the Septuagint — were not killed, and Daniel had saved all their lives. As a bonus, Daniel was promoted over them all, and they, likely, were grateful and happy to have him in charge.

Here is my abridgment of the text — just to underscore the main characters.

*Daniel 2:2 Then the king commanded to call the magicians, and the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, for to shew the king his dream. :10 The Chaldeans answered before the king, and said, There is not a man upon the earth that can shew the king's matter: therefore there is no king, lord, nor ruler, that asked such things at any magician, or astrologer, or Chaldean. :12 For this cause the king was angry and very furious, and commanded to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. :14 ...slay the wise men of Babylon. :18 ...that Daniel and his fellows should not perish with the rest of the wise men of Babylon :24 Therefore Daniel went in unto Arioch, whom the king had ordained to destroy the wise men of Babylon: he went and said thus unto him: Destroy not the wise men of Babylon. :27 Daniel answered...cannot the wise men...shew unto the king?:48 Then the king made Daniel a great man...and made him ruler over...all the wise men of Babylon. 4:7 Then came in the magicians ... :8 But at the last Daniel came in before me, whose name was Belteshazzar...:9 O Belteshazzar, master of the magicians...5:11 ...whom the king Nebuchadnezzar...made master of the magicians...*

Daniel has become the top magician, top magi. And from then on, whatever he said, they, no doubt, took to heart and took careful notes. (Two apocryphal books confirm Daniel's rise to power. They are: "Bel and the Dragon" and "Suzanne and the Elders").

Later, Daniel had a further spat with the king. And when that was settled, the king was in further awe of Daniel and his Jewish God.

*Daniel 4:37 Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven...5:21 And he was driven from the sons of men...till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men.*

So the king was probably taking notes too.

#### [4] DANIEL IN PERSIA

But that was Babylon. What about Persia?

Daniel was a young man in Babylon but he was an old man in Persia. Actually he was an old man in Babylon first, and retired, and brought out of retirement by Babylon's last king, Belshazzar, for a single day.

Belshazzar was having a party when he and others saw a mysterious hand write mysterious words on the wall. The king was troubled and called in the usual wise men to try to read it. They couldn't.

So the queen made a suggestion.

*Daniel 5:11 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... :12 Now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation.*

The king took his wife's advice, brought Daniel in, and Daniel read the strange text. But it was not good news.

*Daniel 5:25 And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. :26 This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God has numbered thy kingdom and has finished it. :27 TEKEL, Thou art weighted in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES, Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. :30 In that night was Belshezzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. :31 And Darius the Median took the kingdom... 6:1 It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom an hundred and twenty princes, which should be over the whole kingdom. :2 And over these three presidents; of whom Daniel was first... :4 Then the presidents and princes sought to find occasion against Daniel concerning the kingdom...*

And so a complicated series of events took place. Daniel was brought out of retirement to read the writing on the wall. Daniel read the writing which said that Babylon would fall that night. Then, just as Daniel said, Babylon was conquered by the Medes and Persians that very night.

Now there is some confusion about who the conqueror was. History says Cyrus the Persian. Daniel says Darius the Mede. It was probably both, the two separate nations confederated together to conquer Babylon so they probably each had their own king.

In any case, the Medes appreciated talent, and since they did not destroy the city of Babylon (indeed it became one of the five Persian capitals) and they needed someone in charge, that man was Daniel.

So Daniel who had been a ruler in Babylon was now a ruler in Media, the home nation of the Magi.

But, you might ask, didn't they try to kill Daniel? Didn't they persuade the king of Persia to throw Daniel to lions? No, they did not. The people who tried to kill Daniel were "presidents and princes," governors, political leaders, or "satraps" to use the Persian word who were jealous of his sudden promotion, not religious leaders who owed their lives to Daniel.

Those political leaders tricked Darius into throwing Daniel to the lions. Daniel survived and that's a well known story. And when the lion incident was over, Darius the Median king was as impressed with Daniel's God as the Babylonian king had been.

***Daniel 6:26** I [Darius] make a decree, That in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for he is the living God, and stedfast forever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end.*

The Jewish God, which was worshipped in Babylon, was now also worshiped in Persia. The point of that is that Daniel and the other Jewish prophets have such influence over Persian religion that what they prophesied would be documented and revered and remembered.

So now we need to know, what did Daniel prophesy? And that question brings us to the most important prophecy of the Old Testament.

***Daniel 9:24** Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon the holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy. **:25** Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. **:26** And after threescore and two weeks, shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself...*

This is indeed the most important prophecy of the Old Testament. First, because it specifically prophesies of the coming Messiah. But as importantly, it gives a precise calendar that is pegged to a specific event; namely, a command to rebuild the city of Jerusalem.

Here is what the prophecy says: 490 years (that's 70 times 7) after the decree to rebuild Jerusalem will come Messiah the Prince. He will be anointed the most holy and will put an end to sin and will make reconciliation for transgression. But only 476 years into that (68 times 7) he will die (cut off) but not for anything he did, but for everyone else.

This is a very complicated verse and there are many interpretations so I won't venture to give you mine. But there are interpretations that claim to pinpoint the day of Messiah's arrival to the day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Whether that's true or not, you have to be impressed that 476 years from the time of Daniel drops us

pretty much right into the life of Jesus. I know, “pretty much” is vague. But there are better scholars than me and you should do your own research.

In any case, you can understand that this prophecy would cause people of Jesus’ time to anticipate a Messiah, and particularly the people of Persia who had Daniel as their own personal prophet until the day he died.

A side note: All of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew (of course, you would expect that) *except* for six chapters of the book of Daniel. Those chapters, which include chapter 9, were written in Aramaic; that is, the language of Babylon. Well, guess why. Because that’s where Daniel lived.

## [5] ROME AND PERSIA

When Rome finally came to power, they tried their best to conquer everyone. There were three notable failures. First, they conquered England but they never conquered Scotland, thus they built Hadrian’s Wall. Second, they never conquered Germany. They had troops stationed in Germany for awhile but in a single battle, three Roman legions were wiped out. And third, they never conquered Persia. And that was a particular embarrassment because Alexander the Great and the Greeks had conquered Persia. And it wasn’t that the Romans didn’t try, they just kept losing.

At this time, Persia was ruled by the Parthians which was one of the regions of Persia. And the Parthians were tough. In 63 B.C. Pompeii invaded Persia. He lost. In 53 B.C. Crassus invaded Persia. He lost. In 36 B.C. Mark Anthony invaded Persia. He lost. And then even a century later the Romans were still at it. Trajan invaded Persia and fought all the way to the Euphrates Valley. He held his position long enough to bivouac in Damascus where he died of old age. Then his successor Hadrian looked over the field and with a cooler head mumbled something like, “We can’t hold this. We’re going to get creamed!” So he went hat in hand to the massing Parthians and said, “Sorry about the mixup. Tell you what. We’ll just tippy-toe back on out of here and you can have your land back. Okay?” Well, he did. Hadrian got his troops safely out of Persia and the Parthians got their land back without further fighting.

There was one Roman general, however, who was modestly successful. He wasn’t Roman, he was Edumean. And his name was Herod. In 37 B.C. Herod and his Roman army conquered Palestine anyway and held it for Rome, and as a reward, he was appointed king over the land he had conquered. And that is how Palestine, this middle ground between Europe and Persia came to be Roman territory.

So, what’s the point? The point is that over those centuries, there was a constant tension and mistrust and hatred between Rome and the East.

Now, to add to the mix, here is what some of the historians had to say.

**Suetonius:** There had spread all over the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world.

**Tacitus:** There was a firm persuasion that at that time, the East was to grow powerful and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire.

**Josephus:** About that time the Jews believed that one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.

**Josephus:** What chiefly incited the Jews to the wars, was an ambiguous prophecy found in their sacred writings that about that time one from their country should obtain the empire of the world.

Well, now it all begins to make sense, doesn't it?

Then one day, some visitors from the east, magi, king makers, came to Jerusalem. And they asked Herod this question: "Where is he who is *born* king of the Jews?" In other words, "A *true* Jewish king was recently born, we want to know where he is."

## [6] MATTHEW

*Matthew 2:1* Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men [Magi] from the east to Jerusalem.  
*:2* 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.

"Behold" means "Yikes! Can you believe this?" The arrival of magi in Jerusalem was unexpected and unimagined. Nothing could have enraged Herod more. Herod murderously guarded his throne as he proved once again a few days later by murdering the Bethlehem babies. Certainly these Magi knew that of Herod. They were not stupid, Herod's reputation was well known far and wide. After Herod murdered the Bethlehem babies, Augustus, the Roman Emperor was even taken aback and said, "It's better to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son." The historian Macrobius wrote that among the dead of Bethlehem was one of Herod's own babies.

So, why didn't Herod kill the magi? And why were the magi so bold that they felt safe to make such an accusation (because that's what it was) to Herod face to face?

The only rational explanation is that Herod didn't kill them because he *couldn't* kill them. And the only way that could be true is if there weren't just three of them, there was a bunch. Notice that Matthew does not give us a headcount so we're free to use our imagination.

Also notice "from the east." That's not quite correct. The Greek reads, "from the *far* east"; in other words, from Persia, from Iran. These were enemies of Rome, enemies of Herod and they were looking for a promised divine king of Israel, obviously, to replace Herod.

*Matthew 2:2* ...for we have seen his star in the east...

Magi were in Persia and Persia was east. That is, Iran. And they, these Parthians, were very much enemies of Rome.

Now, what about the star? The one Old Testament text that talks about a star is —

*Numbers 24:17* I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not night: there shall come a star out of Jacob, and a scepter out of Israel...

But that was not a stretch. The magi knew to expect a Jewish messiah, that he'd be a ruler, and, from *Daniel 9*, when. They just needed to know that he had arrived, and so the star was their final clue. They were, after all, astrologers — among other things.

***Matthew 2:3** When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*

Yes, he was troubled. He was angry enough to kill, and that's why Jerusalem was troubled with him. When Herod got angry, people died. They weren't troubled that a messiah might have been born, they were troubled about *Herod* being troubled.

***Matthew 2:4** And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. :5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet. :6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.*

There was no dispute about that. The magi knew what all Jews should have known but Herod didn't know: that Christ must be born in Bethlehem.

Why Bethlehem? Because Bethlehem is the City of David the King. And since Christ is the Son of David — (**Matthew 1:1, 12:23, 21:9, 22:42, Luke 18:38, Revelation 22:16, 2 Samuel 7:16, 23:5**) — he must come from Bethlehem.

***Matthew 2:7** Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.*

His intentions were murderous. He only wanted to know how long ago they had seen the star so he would know how many babies to kill. Not even the magi imagined Herod to be so evil.

***Matthew 2:8** And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.*

It's not clear whether Herod directed them to Bethlehem or they already knew and Herod was just saying, "Go on ahead." But if the magi knew he'd be born at Bethlehem, then why the initial question, "Where is he?" Well, two years is a long time. Just because someone is born at Bethlehem doesn't mean that two years later he'd still be there. He could have been (and should have been) in Jerusalem being taken care of by the royal family. So the question "where is he?" makes sense. It must have been a surprise that he was probably still in Bethlehem.

***Matthew 2:9** When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. :10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.*

It's poetic to think they followed the star from the east. But they didn't. They saw his star in the east, prepared their journey, took their journey, and two years later arrived



in Jerusalem. And they must have certainly been surprised to see the star again as a homing beacon at the end of their trip.

*Matthew 2:11* And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

These three gifts were very appropriate for the occasion. Gold is a gift for a king, and that's what they came for, to find and identify a Jewish king. They were, after all, king makers. Frankincense was a gift for God, used in the temple. And Myrrh was a gift for, of all things, a corpse. It was used to embalm the dead. Mary must have thought, what a strange gift. Or maybe she knew, and grieved.

But they were all practical, the more so since they had to flee from Herod's wrath. Those gifts financed their trip to Egypt until they could get financially settled there.

God gives us so much, isn't it nice when we can give something back. The magi had just that opportunity.

#### [7] EPILOG

The miraculous birth of Jesus was no incidental thing. Everything happened exactly the way it did because everything *had* to happen exactly the way it did. And Jesus knew it. And his followers knew it.

*John 18:37* ...To this end was I born...

Jesus reflected back to the beginning, to his birth. It was the virgin birth that set for him the course of his destiny.

Peter also understood the significance of the story's beginning.

*Acts 4:27* ...thy holy child Jesus... :30 ...thy holy child Jesus.

Peter is fixed on Jesus' son-ness. Even that late, Peter had not forgotten that Jesus is God's literal son. That fact is central to the entire gospel message.

John, too, understood that the beginning of the story was the driver for the entire story, the whole Christian message.

*John 20:31* But these things are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God ...

That, then, is the Christmas story. Merry Christmas.