

The Mysterious Magi Who Visited Jesus

Who Were They?

The Untold Story of Jesus' Birth

By Wesley White
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Will Durant wrote that Christianity was the last great creation of the pagan world. Durant was a famous historian with no particular religious act to grind. But in his research, he discovered what the Church of God has been preaching for years and that is that the churches of this world have their feet firmly rooted in paganism! Some might say this is a harsh statement, but note the following.

While newspapers and magazines describe how Christmas was originally a birthday celebration of the *sun god* and how it was not included in the Christian calendar until hundreds of years after the death of Jesus, our society goes through a frenzy of commercialism as the day approaches. Nearly any Bible commentary or encyclopedia admits that the Gospel accounts indicate a time other than December for the birth of Jesus. Yet people continue to blindly accept the Christmas season as one of their holiest.

If the professing Christian world is going to go through the charade of honoring the supposed birth date of Jesus, they should at least get a portion of the story straight. They could at least consider the **profound historical significance** of His birth.

As pointed out by a leading writer, "The Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2:1-12) is probably the best known text in the entire New Testament. It is read every year in Christian churches...often performed by Sunday school children and enlivened by hymns. The story is beautiful and romantic: Joseph and Mary come from

Nazareth in Galilee in the midst of winter over the mountains of Judea to the little town of Bethlehem; the stable cradles the babe; the ox and donkey look on while shepherds gather by night with their flocks; peace is proclaimed on earth; angels sing on high and shepherds hurry to worship the child."

"Unfortunately, all this overlooks the purpose of the story and the political impact it must have had when it was first written and told...Luke, who also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, composed his gospel as a political tract in full knowledge of the imperial propaganda of his time" ("A Political Christmas Story," **Bible Review**, October 1994 issue, p. 23).

Jesus and the Roman Empire

When Jesus was born, it was not merely a local event involving 20-50 or even several hundred people. *His birth caused the world's greatest empire to move exactly according to God's plan!*

When Jesus was born, He did not stimulate mild curiosity in a few local provinces. His birth caused great rulers and masses to be electrified by the event. It was not a time of revelry and a so-called Christmas spirit. It was a time of fear for the ruling powers, but a time of elation for the people of God.

Let's begin by looking at what was going on just before the birth of Christ. The emperor was Octavius, adopted son of Julius Caesar. He lived during the *Pax Romana*, the greatest time of peace and prosperity the empire had ever known.

When Caesar was deified by the Senate in 42 B.C., Octavius immediately became the son of a divine one. By 40 B.C. Roman poets were calling Octavius the offspring of an ancient and divine ancestor--a Trojan Caesar who came to bring peace to the world. His name was changed to Augustus, a title that showed him to be both divine and human. He was also Princeps, the First among equals. One month after his death in 14 B.C, he was deified by the Senate. In 9 BC, we find temple inscriptions in Asia Minor speaking in this manner about the coming of the Caesar:

"... Since the Caesar through his appearance has exceeded the hope of all former good news [good news here is **evangelia**], surpassing not only the benefactors who came before him, ...and since for the world the birthday of the god was the beginning of his good news, it may therefore be decided, [etc., etc.]."

These people believed that Caesar's appearance brought the good news never before told in the world and that his birthday was the beginning of that good news. Can you see how the Greek-speaking world would later want to celebrate the supposed birthday of the Son of Man who brought the genuine good news of a better world?

The Roman writer Suetonius records a tradition that a public portent alerted the Roman people some months before the birth of Octavius that nature was preparing to provide them with a king, and this so frightened the Roman Senate that it issued a decree forbidding the rearing of any male child for a year.

At the same time, Suetonius wrote that there was an ancient and abiding belief in the Orient that those proceeding out of Judea would ultimately obtain the empire of the world. Josephus likewise mentioned the existence of this belief, and said that it was one of the contributing factors in the fall of Jerusalem. Tacitus, another Roman historian,

also mentioned this oracle concerning the Jews. In addition, two heavenly signs were recorded a few years before Jesus's birth. In 12-11 B.C., Halley's Comet was visible during the winter. In 8 B.C., there was a rare juxtaposition of three planets--Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars, which together created bright glow. In a world as superstitious as that of the Roman empire did these signs went unnoticed? *Not likely.*

This sets the historical stage. Twice, within the span of about 70 years, two men would be acclaimed first as the Son of God, and then as God, in an era when there was a widespread expectation of a Savior for mankind. Now let's look at some of the other important issues involved in the birth of Jesus. The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. But Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and there was no compelling reason for them to leave, especially since they were in an occupied country under the control of Roman armies.

Luke 2:1-2 :

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria."

Augustus Caesar, the man the Romans thought was the son of God, creates a whole new bureaucratic office that will force Joseph and Mary to return to their home town.

Furthermore, the Jewish genealogical records, extremely important in establishing that Jesus was a descendant of David, are still intact in Jerusalem. Within 75 years, those records will be completely lost. To this day, no Jew can trace his lineage before the fall of Jerusalem.

How did they know? Who ARE the Magi?

Another issue relates to spreading the news of Jesus' birth. *In an era without mass communication, what is the best way to announce the event?* For obvious reasons, neither Joseph nor Mary would be considered credible witnesses. So the news is first brought to shepherds tending their flocks.

But these are not ordinary shepherds. According to Alfred Edersheim, these men tended a special flock of sheep at "...Migdal Eder, the watch tower of the flock. For here was the station where shepherds watched the flocks destined for sacrifices in the Temple...It seems of deepest significance, almost like the fulfillment of type, that those shepherds who first heard tidings of the Savior's birth, who listened to angels' praises, were watching flocks destined to be offered as sacrifice in the Temple...

"We can understand the wonderful impression made on those in the courts of the Temple, as, while they selected their sacrifices, the shepherds told the devout of the speedy fulfillment of all these types in what they had themselves seen...Thus the shepherds would be the most effectual heralds of the Messiah in the Temple, and both Simeon and Anna be prepared for the time when the infant Savior would be presented in the sanctuary" (*Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, pgs. 80-81).

Along with the shepherds, another group of men bring the news of Jesus' birth, but in this instance to the courts of Judea. These men, known as the Magi, are high-level dignitaries from another land.

The term Magi is found only in Matthew in the New Testament, yet the first biblical mention of Magi is in Jeremiah 39:3:

"And all the princes of the king of Babylon came in and sat in the middle gate, Nergal-sharezer [...other names of princes are listed here] Rab-Mag, with all the residue.."

Rab-Mag actually refers to chief Magi, with the word *Mag* meaning priest in the old Persian language.

By the time of Jesus, there were many kinds of Magi, including pagan priests, physicians, learned men, and sorcerers. But there were obviously some God-fearing Magi as well. Daniel 2:48:

"Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many gifts, and made him ruler of the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men [Hebrew/Aramaic = *Magi*] of Babylon."

Who were the Magi in Matthew? Where were they from? Matthew 2:1 tells us they came "**from the east.**" Arabia? No, the Bible usually refers to this area as Arabia or the South. India? Sir William Jones in *Asiatic Researches*, Vol.10, pages 27-28, recounts that the "king of India, uneasy at the prophecy of a world ruler, and hearing a report about the Magi to the west, sent emissaries in 1 AD to find out whether the predicted royal child had actually appeared."

If the Magi were Indian, they would have already reported back to him.

Babylon? Possibly. Daniel lived in Babylon and was a Magi there. Furthermore, there were still a great many Jews in that city during the time of Jesus.

Parthia? Probably. Chances are good that the Magi came from the Parthian empire, which was second only to Rome in power and ruled parts of Persia and Babylon. It was the only empire Rome couldn't conquer and referring to things *Parthian* became a byword. A Parthian shot, even today, means the ultimate put down. The Parthian light cavalry shot from moving horses and devastated Roman foot soldiers in battle.

During the time of Herod, the king of Parthia invaded Judah, set free the captive high priest of Judaism and gave him a habitation in Babylon. In Acts 2, we find that devout worshippers from throughout the Parthian empire were in attendance for the day of Pentecost. These included Medes, Persians, Elamites, Phrygians, Mesopotamians, and Cappadocians.

The king's council in Parthia consisted of two groups: his relatives and the Magi. The Parthian senate was called the Megisthanes, which includes the word Magi. In 66 A.D., secular historians record that the king of Armenia arrived in Rome with the sons of three Parthian rulers to pay homage to Nero. The Roman historian Pliny referred to them as Magi.

In early Christian art, the Magi are depicted in Parthian dress (belted tunics, full sleeves, Phrygian cap, and trousers). Eastern traditions say that 12 Magi went to Judea to

worship the Messiah. One of them was said to be Gaspar or Gathaspar, a name which can be traced to Gundophar, a prince ascending the Parthian throne around 19 A.D. An interesting story is told of the Basilica of Bethlehem, originally built by Constantine. When the Persian armies swept through the Holy Land, they spared this church because it had a mosaic representing the magi as Persians. An excellent discussion about the Magi can be found in *The Birth of The Messiah*, by Raymond Brown.

Were the the Magi following the star prophesied in Numbers 24:17 by none other than Balaam, a prophet of Midian?

"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."

Could it be that the people of Midian preserved this prophecy from the time of Joshua until the coming of Jesus? We know that Moses' father-in-law Jethro was a priest of Midian, which later was absorbed into the Medo-Persian empire. Lamentably, there are no direct historical links, but it is an interesting speculation.

The Magi go to Herod first. Apparently they believe that as ruler of Judea he might have known where the Messiah is located. But like the king of India, Herod is troubled by the news and consults with the chief priests and scribes, some of whom were probably members of the Sanhedrin.

Matthew 2:4-5:

"And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet. "

This group publicly and officially proclaims that the child would be born in Bethlehem; by inference they recognize "*Jesus is the king of Israel.*"

Herod knew the Messiah was there or he would not have ordered the slaughter of all male children two years and under. The last thing he wanted was another legitimate descendant of David (and there were thousands of David's descendants at the time) laying claim to his throne.

Yet 30 years later, the ruling class of Judea acted as if they had never heard anything about a Messiah being born in Bethlehem. Perhaps they thought the holy Child had been massacred. Just like Herod, they did everything in their power to try to stop Jesus and to keep their own position.

It's a pity that people do not understand the great drama involved in Jesus' birth. It was not the accidental birth of a child from a noble Roman family that ushered in world peace. It was the foreordained birth of a man from another noble family --that of David--but belonging to a despised and downtrodden race.

The professing Christian world has conditioned our minds to think of His birth as being connected to snow and ice and sleigh bells. It has trivialized Jesus' appearance as a human being, portraying him as a helpless baby, with only animals and humble people in

attendance to Him. It has accepted an erroneous date completely foreign to Jesus' Jewish roots.

Christians should always keep the Savior in mind--especially during the season called "Holiday Celebration." We show proper respect for Him by acknowledging that His birth was not a time for celebration as we understand it today. It was a momentous political event that electrified the people of Judea and rulers of other nations because *it signified the beginning of the end of man's dominion over this earth.* Let us never forget that Jesus was born to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and that one day every knee will bow to Him. This is the real story of the nativity.

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