



The Wise Men are a prominent part of a traditional nativity scene, but what do we really know about them?

BY WENDY KENNEY

Have you ever looked closely at a nativity display and wondered about the three elaborately dressed men delivering gifts to the infant Jesus? We know, of course, that they represent the three Wise Men, but just who were they? Why were they visiting Jesus, and why were they bringing Him such unusual gifts?

The scriptural account of the Savior's birth actually reveals little about the Wise Men (see Matthew 2). But because their visit was so significant, scholars throughout the centuries have attempted to discover information about their background and purpose in visiting the Christ child. Though some details have emerged through scholarly investigation, much of what the Christian world has traditionally believed about the Wise Men may be based more on myth and speculation than on history.

This is what we know:

How Many Wise Men?

Tradition holds that there were three men who visited the Christ child, a belief that comes from the fact that there were three gifts given: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Presumably, each man brought one gift. Some scholars, however, believe there could have been many more Wise Men, perhaps as many as 12.¹ The Bible Dictionary indicates that since the Wise Men were essentially witnesses of the Savior's birth, there would have been at least two or three (see Deuteronomy 19:15; 2 Corinthians 13:1; D&C 6:28).²

The belief that the Wise Men were kings comes from passages in the Old Testament that foretell of kings visiting the Lord. Isaiah 49:7 says, "Kings shall see and arise," and Isaiah 60:10 records, "Their kings shall minister unto thee." (See also Psalm 72:10.)

Scholars have found other records that refer to the Wise Men as kings. The 13th-century writings of Marco Polo contain a report from the town of Saba in

“WE THREE KINGS”



Persia about three kings who took gold, frankincense, and myrrh with them on a journey to visit a newborn prophet. According to Marco Polo's record, the men were named Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, the names usually associated with the Wise Men today.³

Origin of the Term *Wise Men*

The term *Wise Men*, as used in the King James Version of the Bible, is translated from the Greek word *magoi*. *Magoi*, usually rendered as *magi* in English, is actually Persian in origin and refers to priests in Persia's ancient religion. Given this use of the word *magi*, some scholars think the Wise Men were likely priests in a Persian religious sect. However, Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles stated in his

Doctrinal New Testament Commentary: “To suppose they were members of the apostate religious cult of the *Magi* of ancient Media and Persia is probably false. Rather, it would appear they were true prophets, righteous persons like Simeon, Anna, and the shepherds, to whom Deity revealed that the promised Messiah had been born among men.”⁴

Of the Orient?

Were the Wise Men from the Orient, as the Christmas carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are” claims?⁵ The author of the song likely used the term *Orient* to replace the common word *east* used in Matthew's account. Anything east of Palestine was somewhat exotically referred to as the Orient. Matthew's use of the generic locality “the east” could simply indicate that no one knew for sure where the Wise Men came from.⁶

Some scholars cite Psalm 72:10 as evidence that the men were from regions in present-day Spain, Ethiopia, and Saudi



Arabia: “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.” Others believe the Wise Men were from Persia (modern-day Iran) and may have been Jewish, since there were many people of Jewish descent living in that region at the time.⁷

When Did the Wise Men Visit Jesus?

Artistic renderings of the Nativity typically depict the Wise Men worshipping a *newborn*, as if their visit occurred shortly after the Savior’s birth. The scriptures, however, reveal that the Wise Men were not present at Jesus’s birth in the stable or anytime during His infancy.

The Wise Men actually visited the *child* Jesus with His mother, Mary. “When they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and . . . presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11).

The Wise Men’s Gifts

Why did the Wise Men bring Jesus such rare gifts? Most scholars agree that the gifts were symbolic. The gold symbolized Jesus’s kingship, frankincense His divinity, and myrrh His suffering and death, since myrrh was a substance used to perfume dead bodies before burial.⁸

Warned of God

When Herod directed the Wise Men to Bethlehem, he told them, “When ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also” (Matthew 2:8). However, according to Matthew’s account, the Wise Men were “warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod,” so, after visiting the Christ child, the Wise Men bypassed Herod and “departed into their own country another way” (Matthew 2:12). Herod was furious, not only because the Wise Men had ignored his order but also because there was apparently now a child residing in Bethlehem who would one day rule the nation.

On the Lord’s Errand

The Bible Dictionary effectively summarizes our beliefs about the Wise Men: “They were righteous men sent on an errand to witness the presence of the Son of God on the earth. . . . It seems likely that they were representatives of a branch of the Lord’s people somewhere from east of Palestine, who had come, led by the Spirit, to behold the Son of God, and who returned

to their people to bear witness that the King Immanuel had indeed been born in the flesh.”⁹ ■

NOTES

1. See John A. Tvedtnes, “What Do We Know about the Wise Men?” *Insights: An Ancient Window* (newsletter of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS]), Dec. 1998.
2. See Bible Dictionary, “Magi,” 728.
3. See John A. Tvedtnes, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1981, 25–26.
4. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (1966–73), 1:103.
5. John Henry Hopkins Jr., “We Three Kings of Orient Are” (1857).
6. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (1977), 168.
7. See John A. Tvedtnes, *Ensign*, Oct. 1981, 25.
8. See John A. Tvedtnes, *Ensign*, Oct. 1981, 25.
9. Bible Dictionary, “Magi,” 727–28.



GIFTS OF THE HEART

“When we find him, will we be prepared as were the wise men of old to provide gifts from our many treasures? They presented gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These are not the gifts Jesus asks of us. From the treasure of our hearts Jesus asks that we give of

ourselves: ‘Behold, the Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind’ (D&C 64:34).”

President Thomas S. Monson, “The Search for Jesus,” *Tambuli*, June 1991, 5–6; *Ensign*, Dec. 1990, 5.