

Three Magi and a Baby

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While figures of the three wise men are often included in our Christmas nativity scenes, the Bible actually indicates that they arrived as much as two years later. But I'm often amazed that these mages—magicians—were ever there at all! We really aren't told much about them—in fact, we only assume there were three of them because three gifts are mentioned. Tradition has given them the names of Melchior, Caspar and Belthazar, although again we just don't know. So I've taken a few liberties with this story, but I suspect this is a reasonable version of what happened. The original story is recorded in Matthew 2:1-12.

The royal court of Babylon buzzed with rumors of doom.
The court magicians and astrologers,
tasked with the duty of warning the king
when danger might threaten his kingdom,
had spotted a star hanging low in the western skies.
But these royal advisors could not agree
on the seriousness of this sign.

To some, it signified a new king born to the royal house of Israel—
important, of course, but hardly a reason for fear.
The mighty hand of the Persian army
feared no upstart king from a far-off land!
But to others, influenced by Jewish thought learned long ago
from the exiles who lived among them,
this star, interpreted by portents observed not long before,
foretold the birth of a Jew so powerful
that even their mighty empire might fall before him.

The debates raged for months, with increasing emotion, until
even a busy Persian king could no longer ignore them.
“My kingdom is at stake! Can you give me no better advice than this?
I need wise men, not children fighting over a toy!”

But they only argued more loudly, each faction imploring the king
to ignore those foolish enough to disagree with the clear truth.

At last the king stood up and silenced them all:
“I need answers to gird strong warriors,
not babblings to entertain bored scholars!
Choose from among yourselves truly wise men;
Send them to Israel and find this king.
Determine if he is a threat to me...
and don't come back until you have a sure answer!”

So the chastened magicians hurried from the king's presence.
They drew lots
so their gods might choose those best suited to the task,
outfitted a caravan
to see them through the long journey to Israel,
and prepared gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh
which their magic arts deemed appropriate for a new king's birth.

Then they began the long journey west,
sleeping by day and
traveling—and debating—by night.
The one joy they shared was the star itself,
which appeared each night without fail and
led them westward toward the answers they sought.
Soon they would settle this debate once and for all!

After several weeks of travel they arrived in Jerusalem;
what better place to begin their search for a king?
But there they received their first surprise—
King Herod knew nothing of this new king's birth!

Instead, Herod—a Roman, not a Jew—was greatly disturbed by the news...
and when the king of Jerusalem was disturbed,
everybody in Jerusalem was disturbed.

First Herod called in the Jewish priests and teachers.
They told him that the prophet Micah had predicted
the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Then he summoned the magi privately and questioned them
to find out how long ago they had first seen the star.

Finally he told them to travel to Bethlehem...
but not before commanding them to return
and tell him who and where this new king was
so he too could go and “honor” him.

If Herod's behavior troubled them,
it was soon forgotten when they saw the star again.
It was indeed leading them to Bethlehem!

And they followed the star until
they reached the house where Jesus and his mother were.
They talked to Mary about her son
and learned all about the strange circumstances of his birth.

Then, knowing that this small child was the predicted Messiah,
they fell down before him and worshipped him
and gave him the gifts they had brought.

At last it was time for them to return to Babylon
and tell their king what they had learned.
But God warned them in a dream
that Herod meant to do Jesus harm
so they went a different way when they left for home.
After all, if God was willing to talk to them
they were willing to listen and obey.

Perhaps that's why we call them *wise men*.