

Views from the Pews: The Magi

The Gospel of Matthew is the only one of the four canonical gospels to mention the Magi, and in minimal detail. Matthew 2 simply presents an event at an unspecified point after Christ's birth in which an unnumbered party of unnamed "wise men" visits him in a house, not a stable. Tradition simply assumed there to have been three of them, because they brought three gifts.

The visit of the Magi is commemorated in most Western Christian churches at Epiphany, 6 January. Matthew does not state that they were present on the night of the birth; later traditions allowed the visit to have been up to two winters later. Hence, Herod's command at Matthew 2:16–18 that the Massacre of the Innocents included boys up to two years old. Traditional nativity scenes depicting three "Wise Men" visiting the infant Jesus on the night of his birth, in a manger accompanied by the shepherds and angels, are simply an artistic convention allowing the two separate scenes of the Adoration of the Shepherds on the birth night and the later Adoration of the Magi to be combined for convenient presentation.

The word *magi* is the plural of Latin *magus*, originally referring to the Persian priestly caste of Zoroastrianism. Several translations refer to them outright as astrologers. The King James Version translates the term as wise men; the same translation is applied to the wise men led by Daniel (Daniel 2:48). Although the Magi are commonly referred to as "kings", Matthew does not imply that they were rulers of any kind. Their identification as kings in later Christian writings is probably linked to Isaiah 60:1–6, which refers to "kings [coming] to the brightness of your dawn" bearing "gold and frankincense". Further identification of the magi with kings may be due to Psalm 72:11, "May all kings fall down before him".

Matthew's phrase "from the east", more literally "from the rising [of the sun]", i.e., from Persia, is the only information he provides about the region from which they came. He does not explicitly cite the motivation for their journey (other than seeing the star in the east, which they took to be the star of the King of the Jews), but one ancient source states explicitly that they were pursuing a prophecy from their prophet Zoroaster. Later Christian interpretations stressed the adoration of the Magi and shepherds as the first recognition by the people of the earth of Christ as the Redeemer.

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