

Views from the Pews - The Magi

We don't know a lot about the Magi or where they came from. Matthew 2 simply mentions a party of strangers visiting Mary and her newborn in a house, not a stable. The universal assumption that there were three of them is based simply on the number of symbolic gifts they brought. All the details beloved by traditional nativity plays, including the manger surrounded by shepherds, lambs and angels, are simply artistic conventions.

Traditional nativity plays make much of the idea of three "Wise Men" visiting the infant Jesus on the night of his birth. But Matthew does not state that they were present then; later traditions allowed the visit to have been up to two winters later. That explains why Herod's command at Matthew 2:16–18, known as the Massacre of the Innocents, included boys up to two years old. In most Western Christian churches the visit of the Magi is actually commemorated at Epiphany, 6 January. But the two separate scenes of the Adoration of the Shepherds on the birth night and the later Adoration of the Magi are usually combined for convenient presentation.

The Magi are commonly referred to as "kings", but Matthew does not imply that they were rulers of any kind. Several translations refer to them as astrologers. The King James Version translates the term 'magi' as wise men; the same translation is applied to the wise men led by Daniel (Daniel 2:48). 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 own 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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