

Faith Pulpit

The Mysterious Magi: Sages Seeking the Savior

In the German city of Cologne, on a hill high above the Rhine River, stands Germany's largest cathedral. This impressive example of gothic architecture was built between 1248 and 1880. The purpose of this towering cathedral was to provide a suitable home for a spectacular golden shrine, containing according to Catholic tradition the mortal remains of the three wise men. The bones of Balthasar, Caspar and Melchior were brought here from Italy in 1164 and soon attracted hosts of pilgrims from throughout Europe. These revered relics of Romanism have little to do with the mysterious magi who feature prominently in the biblical Christmas tradition.

The Evangelist Matthew relates the story of the coming of the magi or wise men to Jerusalem in search of the King of the Jews to worship Him. Directed by the chief priests and scribes whom King Herod had hastily called together, they proceeded on to Bethlehem where a supernatural star directed them to the house of the newly-born King. There they worshipped the young child, presenting Him with precious gifts and returned to their home country.

1. The Anticipation of the Wise Men: Matthew 2:1

a. Their Shrouded Identity

Matthew relates that "there came wise men from the east" to Jerusalem. The wise men or magi were a priestly caste among the Persians and Medes, which occupied itself primarily with the secrets of nature, medicine and astrology. Daniel was the head of such an order in Babylon (Daniel 2:48). The word magi is the same as "magician" and in the New Testament sometimes carries that idea, as in the case of Simon Magus (Acts 8:9,11) and Elymas Barjesus (Acts 13:6,8).

The wise men in Matthew said that they saw the star in the east, literally "at its rising." The words of the magi thus mean, "we were in the east when we saw His star" or "we saw His star when it arose."

They could have come from Arabia, Babylon, Persia or elsewhere. The notion that they were kings, perpetuated in the Carol, “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” is based on a faulty interpretation of Is. 60:3 and Rev. 21:24. These dispensationally significant passages speak of kings worshipping Christ in the millennial Kingdom and eternal state, not at His birth.

The belief that they were three in number is undoubtedly based on the three kinds of gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh). It is much more likely, as Gaebelien suggests, “that a large number made their appearance in the city, followed by a large train of attendants. Their appearance in number was striking enough to startle Jerusalem, and to bring trouble into the heart of its wicked king” (The Gospel of Matthew, 41).

b. Their Special Information

How did the magi know about the King of the Jews and of His birth? Perhaps a combination of natural expectation and supernatural revelation best explains their diligent search. There was evidently a fervent expectation among the Gentiles at that time concerning the appearance of some notable person, as witnessed by writers such as Tacitus, Philo and Josephus. As A. T. Robertson observes, “The whole world was on tiptoe of expectancy for something” (Word Pictures in the New Testament, Matthew, 16).

The magi must have had a more specific source for their understanding that a King of the Jews was born. They may have had contact with Jews of the Diaspora who would have held tenaciously to their Jewish faith and hope. Some have suggested that the magi were Jewish proselytes and thus would have known of the Messianic hope. Equally possible is the view that they were Gentile believers who had received direct revelation from the one true God. Abraham and Terah of Ur were idolaters when God directly spoke to them (Gen. 11:24–26; Josh. 24:2). Melchizedek of Caanan and Job of Edom were worshippers of the Most High God. The prophet Balaam of Moab who came “from the eastern mountains” (Num. 23:7) knew of the God of Israel and uttered a beautifully suggestive prophecy of a star which would come out of Jacob, a reference to Christ’s spiritual deliverance of Israel in the Millennial Kingdom (Num. 24:17). As Unger fittingly suggests, “These noble ‘wise men from the East’ assuredly had lived up to the light they had, and found themselves recipients of more light, even the brilliant luster of a luminous star shining through the darkness and leading them to worship Him Who was ‘born King of the Jews’ ” (Matt. 2:3) (Starlit Paths for Pilgrim Feet, 142).

2. The Arrival of the Wise Men: Matthew 2:1–8

a. Their Searching Inquiry

The earnest seekers of the Messiah arrived in Jerusalem with the question, “Where is he who is born King of the Jews?” The great city with its magnificent institutions, its nearly completed temple and

aristocratic priesthood had no knowledge of the King. The people of Jerusalem neither expected the King to come nor desired his arrival. The Jerusalem scene foreshadows the whole story of the rejection of the King. There was no room in the inn, neither was there room for Him among His own.

b. The Scribal Investigation

King Herod, half Jew and half Idumean, a murderous old man in his last days, called together the religious experts, the chief priest and scribes. They consulted on the question of the birthplace of the Messiah and concluded unanimously that he would be born in Bethlehem in Judaea. Sadly, the religious authorities knew the biblical answers but had no personal interest in the reality of the King. The Jews of Jerusalem would not journey the half-dozen miles to Bethlehem to greet Him and yet the magi of Mesopotamia or beyond, strangers to the covenants and promises, traveled uncounted miles of inhospitable terrain to worship the new-born King of whom the Old Testament spoke.

3. The Adoration of the Wise Men: Matthew 2:9–10

a. The Spectacular Guidance

Herod requested of the wise men to report to him of the success of their journey but concealed his real intentions, the murder of the King. His diabolical cunning would have been successful, had it not been for the divine intervention. As the wise men departed Jerusalem, the star appeared which they saw in the east. According to Matthew, it appeared suddenly and dramatically, “And look! the star appeared which they had seen in its rising.” Matthew’s arresting language indicates that this unique star actually went ahead of the wise men and stood still over the very house where the little child was. This strange luminary was no ordinary star but the radiance of the Shechinah Glory of God which departed eastward during Israel’s apostasy (Ez. 9:3; 11:22,23) and now returned to indicate the presence of God with men. The same “glory of the Lord” which manifested itself to the Jewish shepherds (Luke 2:8,9) appeared to the Gentile sages, heralding the miraculous and joyous news that God was present on earth once again (1 Tim. 3:16)

b. The Supreme Gifts

The wise men found the child in the house. Their arrival was probably soon after the birth of the Savior-King. Following the night in the stable which, according to Justin Martyr, was a cave under the inn, the holy family would have naturally moved into the inn above. Interestingly, the wise men worshipped only the child. There is no adoration of Mary. Joseph is completely absent in the account. The outcome of their tedious and treacherous journey, their seeking and searching, was worship. Unger notes, “These so-called ‘wise men’ were wise men indeed. In the first place, they sought the Savior; in the second place, they sought Him until they found Him; in the third place, when they found Him they fell down at His feet in adoration and surrender, presenting themselves and their gifts to Him” (Starlit

Paths for Pilgrim Feet, 143).

The account of the sages in search of the Savior affords several valuable lessons for the believer today. There are lessons in the area of priorities, practicality and prophecy.

Matthew does not inform his readers of the origin of the magi, their number, appearance, the nature of their star or their background, in order to concentrate on one preeminent fact, mainly, “we have come to worship Him.” Whoever the magi were, wherever they came from, it was their intention to fall down before the Savior-King. May that be the believer’s focus during the Christmas season.

There are also certain practical lessons to be learned from the account. The wise men opened their treasure chest and presented their King with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These wealthy, wise and worshipful Gentiles presented the Christ-child the most valuable items their country afforded. Can we do less than give the Christ-child our best as we contemplate His nativity?

Finally, the gifts are of prophetic significance. They are not just lavish but symbolic of the child’s royalty, deity and mortality. Hendriksen stresses their appropriateness: “gold, for he was and is indeed a King—yes, ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’—frankincense, for he is indeed God—the fullness of the godhead dwells in him—myrrh, for he is also man, destined for death, and this by his own choice” (Hendriksen, Matthew, 174, Italics in the original).

O run, present them with the humble ode,

See how far upon the Eastern road

The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet.

And lay it lowly at his blessed feet;

Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,

And join thy voices with the angel quire

From out his secret altar touched with hallow’d fire.

(John Milton)

Dr. Manfred Kober

Former Professor at [Faith Baptist Bible College](#) | [Other Articles](#)

Dr. Manfred Kober (Th.M. and Th.D., Dallas Theological Seminary) is a German-born theologian and educator who has significantly contributed to Christian scholarship and ministry. After enduring the hardships of post-war Germany, he emigrated to the United States

in 1953. Dr. Kober pursued theological studies at Baptist Bible Seminary in Johnson City, New York, the University of Erlangen in Germany, and Dallas Theological Seminary.

He served as a professor and chaired the Department of Theology at Faith Baptist Bible College in Ankeny, Iowa, from 1969 to 1999. Today, he resides in Bondurant, IA, with his wife, Sharon, and they have two children and three grandchildren.