

The Three Wisemen

This came from a study conducted by Chuck Missler. Chuck is the founder of Koinonia House (www.khouse.org). I used his notes for my Sunday School class.

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Apparently birthdays were celebrated from at least the time of Job on. See Job 1:4 His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. (NIV) and Job 3:1 After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. (NIV)

The early Christian church didn't celebrate Jesus' birth, therefore the exact date has not been preserved. The first recorded mention of December 25th is in the Calendar of Philocalus (354 AD), which assumed Jesus' birth to be Friday, December 25, 1 AD

December 25th was officially proclaimed by the church fathers in 440 AD. This date was a vestige of the Roman holiday of Saturnalia, observed near the winter solstice (Dec 21st), which was among the many pagan traditions inherited from the earlier Babylonian priesthood. But just when was Jesus born?

Although the Bible doesn't explicitly identify the birthday of Jesus, many scholars have developed diverse opinions as to the likely birthday of Jesus.

The year of Jesus' birth is broadly accepted as 4 BC, primarily from erroneous conclusions derived from Josephus' recording of an eclipse, assumed to be on March 13, 4 BC, shortly before Herod died.

There are several problems with this, in addition to the fact that it is more likely the eclipse occurred on December 29, 1 BC. Considerable time elapsed between Jesus' birth and Herod's death, since the family fled to Egypt to escape Herod's edict and they didn't return until after Herod's death. Furthermore, Herod died on January 14, 1 BC

Tertullian (born about 160 AD) stated that Augustus began to rule 41 years before the birth of Jesus and died 15 years after that event. Augustus died on August 19, 14 AD, placing Jesus' birth at 2 BC. Tertullian also notes that

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Jesus was born 28 years after the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC, which is consistent with a date of 2 BC

Irenaeus, born about a century after Jesus, also notes that the Lord was born in the 41st year of the reign of Augustus. Since Augustus began his reign in the autumn of 43 BC, this also appears to substantiate the birth of Jesus in 2 BC.

Eusebius (263-340 AD), the “Father of Church History,” ascribes it to the 42nd year of the reign of Augustus and the 28th from the subjection of Egypt on the death of Anthony and Cleopatra. The 42nd years of Augustus ran from the autumn of 2 BC to the autumn of 1 BC. The subjugation of Egypt into the Roman Empire occurred in the autumn of 30 BC. The 28th year extended from the autumn of 3 BC to the autumn of 2 BC. The only date that would meet both of these constraints would be the autumn of 2 BC

Another approach is from information about John the Baptist. Elisabeth, John’s mother, was a cousin of Mary and the wife of a priest named Zacharias who was of the “course” of Abijah. (Priests were divided into 24 courses and each course officiated in the Temple for one week, from Sabbath to Sabbath.) These “courses” were established by David in I Chron 24:1-19.

When the Temple was destroyed by Titus on August 5, 70 AD, the first course of priests had just taken office. (Both the Talmud and Josephus confirm this.) Since the course of Abijah was the 8th course, we can track backwards and determine that Zacharias ended his duties on July 13, 3 BC. If John’s birth took place 280 days later, it would have been on April 19-20, 2 BC, precisely on the feast of Passover.

John began his ministry in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1). The minimum age for the ministry was 30 (Num 4:3). As Augustus died on August 19, 14 AD, that was the accession year for Tiberius. If John was born on April 19-20, 2 BC, his 30th birthday would have been April 19-20, 29 AD, or the 15th year of Tiberius. This seems to confirm the 2 BC date and, since John was five months older than Jesus, this also confirms the autumn birth date for Jesus.

Elisabeth hid herself for five months before the Angel Gabriel visited her cousin. Mary went “with haste” to visit Elisabeth, who was then in the first

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week of her sixth month, or the fourth week of December, 3 BC. If Jesus was born 280 days later it would place the date of his birth on September 29, 2 BC, which was also the first of Tishri, the Feast of Trumpets.

The bottom line of all of this is to keep in mind that if God really wanted us to know for certain the date Jesus was born, He would have told us. It is fun to speculate these things, but don't get hung up on these things.

Read Matt 2:1-12 Matt 2:1-12

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." 3 And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet,

6 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;
For out of you shall come forth a Ruler,
Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "

7 Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him." 9 And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. 10 And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way. NASB

This story is peculiar to Matthew. This presents Jesus as the true "King of the Jews" in contrast with the unworthy King Herod. This also shows Jesus

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as the Messiah of all nations, opposed by the leader of the Jewish nation but recognized as the fulfillment of the hopes of the Gentiles.

The Magi had learned about the birth of Jesus by divine revelation. They knew, because of the Septuagint reading of Micah 5:2 where to look for Jesus. Mic 5:2

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (NIV)

It is evidently a mistake to suppose that Mary and Joseph, with Jesus, were still in the stable where the shepherds found them. They were now in a house. Doubtless some weeks or even months had elapsed since the birth of Jesus.

The three gifts pointed to the ministry of Jesus.

Gold	Divine nature and righteousness
Frankincense	His human perfection
Myrrh	His sacrificial death

The Eastern Orthodox religion celebrates Christmas on January 6. For us, this would be the twelfth day of Christmas. This is typically when we celebrate the wise men coming to Bethlehem.

It wasn't until the third century that the Magi were considered Kings bearing gifts. At Christmas, who do we give gifts too? Not Jesus, but to each other. The only place in Scripture where people do that is in Revelation 11 celebrating the death of the two witnesses. In a sixth century chronicle, they are given names, and in a fourteenth century Armenian tradition they are identified as Balthasar, King of Arabia; Melchior, King of Persia; and Gasper, King of India.

Also, by tradition, in the seventh century these three are identified as representing three sons of Noah.

They are called Magi from the Latinized form of the Greek word *magoi*, transliterated from the Persian for a select sect of priests. Our word *magic* comes from the same root word.

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The ancient Magi were a hereditary priesthood of the Medes credited with profound and extraordinary religious knowledge. They were established as the State religion in Persia by Darius the Great. This was after some of the Magi were considered experts in the interpretation of dreams.

One of the titles given to Daniel was ***Rabmag***, the Chief of the Magi. See Dan 4:9

I said, "Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me. (NIV)

and also Dan 5:11

There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father-- your father the king, I say-- appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. (NIV)

Rabmag is an untranslated title in Nebuchadnezzar's court in Jer 39:3

And all the princes of the king of Babylon came in, and sat in the middle gate, even Nergalsharezer, Samgarnebo, Sarsechim, Rabsaris, Nergalsharezer, Rabmag, with all the residue of the princes of the king of Babylon. (KJV)

These are Magi of a lesser rank in Daniel chapters 2, 4 and 5. There they are magicians and astrologers.

Remember, the Magi were a hereditary priesthood but here find that Daniel was awarded the head of them and he was a Jew. Remember Dan 4:9 and 5:11. This probably really frosted the other Magi because the position was inherited by them. This is probably what led to the plot in Daniel 6 to have Daniel put in the lions den.

From Daniel on, throughout the world, the Persian Magi were regarded as having extraordinary religious knowledge. Babylonian Magi were considered phony and impostors. Since the days of Daniel, the fortunes of both the Persian and the Jewish nations had been closely intertwined. Both nations had, in their turn, fallen under the domination of the Seleucids in the wake of Alexander's conquests. Alexander the Great was the leader of the Greeks and he conquered the Medo-Persian Empire.

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Subsequently both had regained their independence: the Jews under Maccabean leadership, and the Persians as the dominating ruling group within the Parthian Empire.

The Magi emerge as religious leaders and also as the primary civil advisors.

The original religion of the Magi had a lot in common with the religion of the Jews. It was mono-theistic, one God who was the author of all creation who was opposed by an evil spirit. It involved this hereditary priest-hood who were the mediator's between God and man by virtue of blood sacrifice. They also had the concept of clean and unclean animals.

Pompey, the first Roman conqueror of Jerusalem, attacked the Armenian outpost of Parthia in 63 BC. In 55 BC Carssus led Roman legions in sacking Jerusalem and in a subsequent attack, Parthia proper. The Romans were decisively defeated at the battle of Carrhae with the loss of 30,000 troops, including their commander. The Parthians counter-attacked with a token invasion of Armenia, Syria, and Palestine.

Nominal Roman rule was re-established under Antipater, the father of Herod, who retreated before another Parthian invasion in 40 BC.

Mark Anthony re-established Roman sovereignty in 37 BC, and, like Carssus before him, also embarked on a similarly ill-fated Parthian expedition. His disastrous retreat was followed by another wave of invading Parthians, which swept all Roman opposition completely out of Palestine (including Herod himself, who fled to Alexandria and then to Rome).

With Parthian collaboration, Jewish sovereignty was restored and Jerusalem was fortified with a Jewish garrison.

Herod, by this time, secured from Augustus Caesar the title of "King of the Jews." However, it was not for three years (including a five month's siege by Roman troops) that he was able to occupy his own capital city. Herod had thus gained the throne of a rebellious buffer state which was situated between two mighty contending empires. At any time, his own subjects might conspire in bringing the Parthians to their aid.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Herod may have been close to his final illness. Augustus was also aged, and Rome, since the retirement of Tiberius, was

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without any experienced military commander. Pro-Parthian Armenia was planning a revolt against Rome (which was successfully accomplished within two years).

It was during this time that the Magi, in their dual priestly and governmental office, composed the upper house of the Council of the Megistanes ("magistrates") whose duties included the absolute choice and election of the king of the realm.

It was therefore a group of Persian-Parthian "king makers" who entered Jerusalem in the latter days of the reign of Herod. Herod's reaction was understandably one of fear when one considers the background of Roman-Parthian rivalry that prevailed during his lifetime.

The time was ripe for another Parthian invasion of the buffer provinces, except for the fact that Parthia itself was racked by internal dissension. Phraates IV, the unpopular and aging king, had once been deposed, and it was not improbable that the Persian Magi were already involved in the political maneuvering requisite to choosing his successor. It was conceivable that the Magi might be taking advantage of the king's lack of popularity to further their own interests with the establishment of a new dynasty which could have been implemented if a sufficiently strong contender could be found.

In Jerusalem the sudden appearance of the Magi, probably traveling in force with every imaginable oriental pomp, and accompanied by adequate cavalry escort to insure their safe penetration of Roman territory, certainly alarmed Herod and the populace of Jerusalem. Tradition said that there were three Magi, but this idea comes from the list of gifts they brought.

It would seem as if these Magi were attempting to perpetrate a border incident which could bring swift reprisal from Parthian armies. Their request of Herod regarding the one "who has been *born* King of the Jews" was a calculated insult to him, a non-Jew who had contrived and bribed his way into that office.

From His birth, Jesus was in a special way under divine protection. Even though He was God in the flesh, He was not exempt from human suffering. It is also evident that Satan did all in his power to destroy Jesus to prevent Him from accomplishing His ministry.

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Joseph was commanded in a dream to take his family to Egypt and to wait there until further instructions came, in order to protect the Child from Herod. Dreams were a common method of communication that God used to speak to men. See Job 33:14-17

For God does speak-- now one way, now another-- though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, (NIV)

Consulting his scribes, Herod discovered from the prophecies in the Old Testament that the Promised One, the Messiah, would be born in Bethlehem. See Mic 5:2

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (NIV)

Hiding his concern and expressing sincere interest, Herod requested them to keep him informed.

After finding the babe and presenting their prophetic gifts, the Magi "being warned in a dream" (a form of communication most acceptable to them) departed to their own country, ignoring Herod's request. This history paints a different picture of Matt 2:1-12. When these guys show up, Herod gathers his whole staff to see where this Child is to be born. This "star" in Matt 2: 7 probably appeared at least a year before because Herod kills all the male children two years old and younger. This "star" (vs 9) is probably also a supernatural experience, not a star like we would normally see. Also, they didn't show up the night Jesus was born. Notice in verses 11a that Joseph and his family lived in a house and were not in the stable.

The gifts brought were Gold, which was the usual gift brought to a king; Frankincense, which was a scent or perfume derived from the Boswellia trees. It is mentioned fourteen times in the Old Testament and twice in the New. The third gift was Myrrh. It is mentioned in John 19:39 as being part of the embalming substances brought to the grave of Jesus by Nicodemus. As we review the entire scene, we see the wise men seemingly recognized three vital facts. The Baby King was indeed the King of Kings, who would eventually become the High Priest of His people. At the right hand of the majesty on high, He would make intercession for those who trusted Him.

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Yet that remarkable ministry would never become possible, until He consummated His plans by dying to redeem men and women from the power of sin. The wise men apparently recognized Royalty, Representation, and Redemption in the One they saw.

The word telling us that they (the Magi) were warned by God is: chrematizo (khray-mat-id'-zo); to utter an oracle, i.e. divinely intimate; by implication to constitute a firm for business, i.e. (generally) bear as a title: KJV-- be called, be admonished (warned) of God, reveal, speak. Ivor Powell points out that the Amplified translation says that they received an answer to their asking a question. Even though they were wise men, they still had limitations. Possibly they asked God for Divine direction and the dream was in response their question.

Before we leave Herod, there is one other important fact that he imposed on the legal system that caused the Jews to believe that God's word was broken. Turn to Gen 49:8-10

"Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. You are a lion's cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness-- who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. (NIV)

Jacob prophesied that Judah would be the "Royal line" and that the scepter would not depart until he, the Messiah (Shiloh KJV) came. Shiloh is 7886 Shiyloh (shee-lo'); from 7951; tranquil; Shiloh, an epithet of the Messiah: KJV-- Shiloh.

The scepter is the emblem of tribal identity and signifies the right to enforce Mosaic law. This includes capital punishment. Under Herod, the legal power of the Sanhedrin was removed, that is, they could no longer judge capital offenses. This transfer of power is recorded in history. The Sanhedrin believe the Word of God had been broken because the scepter had departed from Judah and Shiloh had not yet come. Josephus says that in 6-7 AD Herod was removed from office and replaced by a Roman Procreator named Caponius. The Romans maintained their own enforcement of the law. They removed the legal power from the Sanhedrin and they lost the ability to order capital punishment. The Babylonian Talmud says that the members of the Sanhedrin put on sack cloth and ashes and went around

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Jerusalem wailing when this happened saying "woe is us for the scepter has departed and Messiah has not yet come." They believed scripture was broken. NOTE: The word Talmud means "study or learning: and is a commentary on the Mishnah. The Mishnah is the oldest post Biblical collection and codification of the Jewish Oral Laws, systematically compiled by numerous authors over a period of two centuries. The Mishnah was completed around 200 CE by Rabbi Judah. It represents various oral traditions that had been preserved since the time of Ezra, 450 BCE. It is made up of 6 Orders, called Sedarim and 63 tractates. The Talmud contains quotes from the Mishnah with commentary called Gemara. When the Mishnah was combined with these commentaries they were given the name Talmud. The Talmud Bavi (Babylonian Talmud) was written from the years 200-400 CE and was taken from oral and written materials from the time of Ezra. It comments on the whole Mishnah while the Talmud Yerushalemi (Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud), completed in 500 CE comments mainly on the first four orders of the Mishnah. Authorities agree that it was never completed. In 1631 the Talmud was edited to remove many of the references to Jesus because there were many derogatory references to Jesus and the Church used these to justify persecution of the Jews.