



Who were the Magi?

The Feast of the Epiphany is when Western Christians celebrate the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. The account of the visit of the Magi can be found in Matthew 2:1-18. According to Scripture, “wise men from the East” followed a star to Jesus’ location and then “fell down and worshipped him” (Matt. 2:11).

What do we know about the Magi?

The traditional belief that there were three wise men is a development based on the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh recorded in Matthew 2:11. The identification of the wise men as kings may have developed from a reading of Psalm 72 that says, “May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him” (Psalm 72:11).

Most Nativity scenes include the Magi, but we know from Scripture that they did not arrive until later. Some Bible scholars suggest that this may not have occurred until up to a year and a half later, based on King Herod’s command in Matthew 2:16: “Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.” The fact that Herod had all the male children up to two years old killed suggests that some time had passed before he ascertained the age of the Christ child from the Magi. In any case, Matthew does not tell us exactly how much time had elapsed between the birth of Jesus and their arrival.

A Star in the East

Some mythicists will claim that, like Jesus’ birth, the births of certain pagan gods were heralded by a star in the east. Mythicist author and blogger D. M. Murdock writes, “Rather than representing a ‘historical’ event surrounding the birth of a Jewish messiah, the star at the coming of the savior can be found in the myths of Egypt.”

Of the Magi, Pope Benedict XVI explains that it is possible these men could have been part of a Persian priesthood, or they could have been something else (cf. *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, p. 94). Whoever they were, they were probably not Jewish. This point is significant, because even if there were a parallel here with some pagan god and the birth of Jesus, it makes sense that the Magi would recognize a sign familiar to them and respond to it. But there are no pagan parallels.

Gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh

As was customary for royal visits, the wise men came bearing treasured gifts intended to honor the newborn king. Because of its scarcity and immense value, gold was particularly associated with royalty and nobility. By bringing a gift of gold, the wise men showed that they did indeed consider Jesus a king. Myrrh was used as a perfume or medicine. It was also used to anoint the dead. The gift of myrrh foreshadowed Jesus' death. Another gift brought to Jesus was frankincense. Frankincense was used by priests and it symbolizes our prayers rising up to Heaven. A **priest** is a mediator, or bridge, between God and human beings. He offers sacrifice to God on behalf of all. Frankincense also symbolized Jesus' office as Priest and Prophet, while gold acknowledges his title as King.