

THE MAGI - NOTES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Magi were not kings. They did not ride camels, or come to the stable! As the Magi departed the Holy Family fled to Egypt. But the Babe had to be at least 6 weeks old when presented in the Temple. (Lk.2:21 + Lev.12:2-8, 5:11). So the visit of the Magi took place at least 6 weeks after the birth. Other clues suggest it was much later; the reference to a Child not a Babe; a house not a stable; Herod's order to kill all the babies under two years.

Matthew's first readers would have understood his precise word "Magoi". Translators of the KJV should not have rendered it "wise men". The Magi were G-d's witnesses to the civil authorities, Herod and his court. G-d's witnesses to the religious authorities were Simeon & Anna, Lk.2:22-38. Note the principle, Dt.19:15, and a pattern: G-d's grace came first to the Jews, then the Gentiles (Mt.10:5-6 + 28:18, Ac.13:45-46, 18:6, Rom.1:16, 2:9-10). But judgment begins at the household of G-d (1 Pet.4:17)

Prophecy required Messiah to be born in Bethlehem, 5m south of Jerusalem, but Mary & Joseph were in Nazareth, 60m north of Jerusalem. G-d's solution: Caesar's decree (Lk.2:1).

Three external sources, Josephus, Tacitus & Suetonius all confirm a widespread expectancy that Messiah was due, from Hebrew writings were available everywhere Jews had been. The woman at the well knew (Jn.4:25). Simeon had been given an un-conditional promise that he would see Messiah, plus an insight into His mission (Lk.2:25-).

Israel reached a peak under David & Solomon. The temple was built and the nation became wealthy through international trade and strategic location (1 Kgs.10:14-29). Division and decline ensued for 400 years. Northern kingdom went into captivity, then the Southern kingdom, then the ultimate low when the Temple was destroyed.

Israel remained a vassal state under various powers, briefly independent from 160BC until captured by the Romans. She disappeared from view in 70AD. Miraculous revival in 1948. "Can a nation be born in a day?" (Isa.66:8). Jerusalem became the capital again in 1967. Six million people now speak what was a "dead" language!

Mesopotamian empires affecting Israel.

Assyrian Empire	Northern captivity, 722BC. Ten "Lost" tribes.
Babylonian Empire	Southern captivity, 586BC.
Medo-Persian Empire	Ca. 500BC Return & restoration, Temple re-built.
Alexandrian Empire	Ca.330 BC
Seleucid Empire	Ca.310 BC
Parthian Empire	Ca.250 BC – 250 AD.

Always in the middle of the action – the Magi.

In the Court of Kg. Neb.	(ca.600BC) Dan.2:2, 4:7
Beside Kg.Neb. in victory	(ca.586BC) Jer.39:3,13
In the Court of Kg. Belshazzar	(ca.545BC) Dan.5:7
In the Court of Kg. Xerxes	(ca.500BC) Est.1:14
Kg. Artaxerxes & 7 advisors	(ca.458BC) Ezra7:14

King Tiridates of Armenia and his Magi visited Nero in 66AD. Imagine a "family photo" of the visit. Magi would be the unknowns in the back row. We find Magi in every court for 700 years, around whoever is in power. Originally the priestly tribe of the Medes, their special skill is in the interpretation of dreams. Thus they deserve a place in the Advent narrative; in Matthew's Gospel G-d spoke 5x through dreams. Two Magi in Acts: Simon Magus (Ac.8:9-19) and Elymas the Sorcerer (Ac.13:8) in typical role, advising the Governor of Cyprus.

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See G-d's plan. Hebrew culture was carried to Assyria, and then Babylon. Daniel was taken to Babylon where through his ability to interpret dreams he became chief advisor to King Neb who became a believer (Dan.2:47-49, 3:29, 4:34). Neb made Daniel responsible for training Magi. Daniel had huge influence. He survived regime change when the Medo-Persians came in, and held high office under Darius (Dan.6:1-2, 28). Thus there was established throughout Mesopotamia a school of Magi who knew of the G-d of Israel and the promised Messiah

In 60BC Pompey captured Jerusalem. Ten years later the Romans tried to expand further into Parthian territory and were routed by Parthian weaponry and horsemanship. The Parthians captured Jerusalem and appointed a Jewish vassal king, Antigonus. In 39BC Caesar Augustus summoned Herod to Rome and made him king of Judah while Judah was still controlled by the Parthians. Herod could not take up his kingship until 37BC when Antigonus was killed by Mark Anthony.

An uneasy truce existed between the two Empires. Israel on the border, like West Germany in the 1950s. Magi "from the east" could only have come from Parthia. When they rode in with an armed cavalry escort it looked like an attack. Herod's garrison was useless to withstand an invasion. We see why Herod was "disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (Mt.2:3).

The Parthian Empire was governed by a two-house system. The Upper House was the Magoi or Great Ones whose main responsibility was the appointment of kings. At home in Parthia saw a sign. They put it together with their knowledge of prophecy and deduced that Messiah had been born. The sign was particular to the Magi in Parthia; it could not have been astral, or it would have been seen by Herod's astronomers (it was their job to notice!).

No will-o-the-wisp was needed to guide them. Jerusalem was the obvious place to look a new King of the Jews, and they knew the way. Cyrus had authorised the re-building of the Temple (Ez.6:15) and his successors authorised the re-building of the walls (Neh.6:15).

G-d could have ensured that the Magi knew the Micah prophecy naming Bethlehem as the birth-place before they set out, but did not. He wanted them to meet Herod, and wanted Herod to know that a new King was born. Notice their question, "Where is the One Who has been born King of the Jews?" You do not worship a new king, not even Obama; you might bring a message of congratulations. You only worship a G-d. The Magi may have had direct revelation that the sign they had seen foretold the coming of the Messiah the world awaited, but the Text does not say so.

But there were many clues that the expected One was a Deity to be worshiped. Scripture truths are hidden for us, not hidden from us (Deut.29:29 with Prov.25:2). Messiah would be the Seed of Woman (Gen.3:15), the Seed of Abraham (Gen.12:3), the Seed of David (2Sam.7:16, Isa.9:6, Jer.23:5). He was coming not just for Israel but for the Gentiles also (Gen.49:10, Ps.110, Isa.42:4, Zech.14:9, Ps.47:9). Prophecy even foretold when Messiah would appear (Dan.9:25-27). See also I Chron.16 & 17; Isa.2:1-5, 11 all, 60 all; Job.19:25.

Others knew of the Deity of the Babe: Zechariah had prophesied over J the B: "and you my child will be called a prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for Him" (Lk.1:76); Joseph had been told, "You are to give Him the name Jesus for He will save His people from their sins" (Mt.1:21); Mary had been told: "He will reign over the House of Jacob for ever .." (Lk.1:33); The shepherds had been told: "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord" (Lk.2:11). The Magi would have received these confirmations, and others, during their visit.

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WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM HEROD?

Herod was nobody's fool. He would have seen that something was happening greater even than the political situation. He recognised the new King as One to be worshipped, but saw there was room for only one king. Is there any area in our own lives which we have not yet yielded to King Jesus?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE MAGI?

See Israel as the land always in G-d's sight, the eternal centre of world events (Deut.11:12)

Recognise our debt to the nation entrusted with the very words of G-d (Rom.3).

Love Israel – not necessarily always agreeing with her (Ps.122:6, Mt.25:40, 45).

Be students of the Word. Search for the things that are hidden for us (Prov.25:2).

Understand the times (IChron.12:32, Est.1:13).

Watch for signs, and be ready to respond (Mt.24:42).

Test all prophecies – work as a team, come into agreement.

Be willing to get up and go, accept discomfort & danger.

Journey together. Enjoy fellowship, Encourage one another.

The Magi gave expensive gifts; they invested their substance.

The Magi were rewarded. We will be too, if we do all these things.

THE CHURCH AGE

What additional information did the Magi acquire from their visit? How would they have they use their knowledge and influence when they returned home? The “Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia” of Ac.2:9 formed the core of a receptive mission field for Thomas, Thaddeus & Peter. See I Pet.1:1, 5:13. The dispersions of Ac.8:1 and of 70AD would have further reinforced the community of believers in Mesopotamia.

APPENDIX – SOURCES OF UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION ABOUT ISRAEL

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