

Chapter 9 - The Magi

The term "wisemen" is a tactful way of referencing the strange intellectuals from the east. The word "wisemen" in the Greek language is "magos" a term that often referred to sorcerers. (Acts 13:6,8) The more appropriate name for these visitors is Magi. The Magi were eastern Median priests from Persia who were skilled in many different pseudo-scientific skills of the age such as astrology, necromancy, and interpretation of dreams. Daniel was promoted to head of the magicians (Magi) while in Babylon. Though he did not practice the curious arts he was considered wise in the mysteries and especially gifted with the ability to interpret dreams. It would not be necessary then to believe that all Magi were equally into the cults. Certainly Daniel was not. The Magi are mentioned in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 39:3, 13 and in Daniel.

The most likely place of origin of these Magi was Persia. Jews were dispersed among all nations during the Babylonian captivity but a large portion lived in Babylon. Babylon was located in what we know today as Iraq and Persia is Iran. The center of activities for the Magi would have been in Persia during the 7th century B.C. The Magi formed themselves into a guild of scholars and seers who among other things studied the movement of the stars and planets and believed that the destinies of men and nations could be discerned from the heavens. They were a priestly cast who were highly regarded for their wisdom. Royalty sought advice from them. Generally speaking the Medo-Persian Magi believed in the primacy of the elements: fire, water, earth and air. Their worship centered around a perpetual flame which was believed to have come from heaven. They permitted no images. Their temples were merely shelters for the sacred fire. They offered blood sacrifices. They had no defined theology until Zoroastrianism was introduced in the 6th century which became the state religion of Persia and Media.

It is important for us to understand the political ramifications of the Magi coming to Jerusalem. For centuries the Persians and the Jews had a history that intertwined. It was to Babylon that the Jews took their scriptures and religious influences during their captivity. Daniel, as well as many other Jews, found their way into the political power and influence beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's reign, and then in the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians. According to one historian, the Persian and Medo-Persian history "was studded with Jewish nobles, ministers and counselors" eventually even some of the kings themselves were apparently of Jewish blood. (Zondervan, Vol. 4, p. 34)

The Selucides had conquered both Persia and Palestine after which the Parthians gained control of the region just prior to the Roman domination. The Persians were still the dominant ruling party within the Parthian Empire. It was the Parthians that had aligned themselves with Antigonus against Herod and invaded Palestine, successfully removing Herod from power for a time. When the Parthians invaded and won they allowed for Jewish sovereignty over their own people, but this freedom lasted but for a

moment. The Romans returned with a vengeance and once again conquered Palestine and reinstated Herod as "king of the Jews." The Parthians continued to be a formidable threat to the Roman border countries. The Magi had an important political and religious role in the Parthian Empire. They were the king-makers. They alone had the power of absolute choice over who would be king over the realm. It is also suspected that at the time of Christ's birth the Magi were actively looking for the next successor to the Parthian throne.

It is into this caldron of political intrigue that a troop of strangely dressed Magi, probably traveling with all their pomp and pageantry, accompanied by a military escort to guarantee their safe passage through this hostile territory, came riding into Jerusalem. Such a scene would attract much attention and arouse grave suspicions. It seemed a calculated political insult to Herod, who they knew was not even a full Jew, and who bribed his way into power, to arrive asking for the one who was born "King of the Jews." Herod must have been outraged! (Zondervan, Vol 4, p. 34)

No one knows for sure how many Magi arrived in this caravan to worship the "King of the Jews." Tradition says there were three and even records their names as Gaspar, Melchior and Baltasar. Early second century art depicts three Magi dressed in their traditional Persian garb:

"The Magian priesthood dressed in white robes and wore tall, somewhat conical hats made of felt which had long side flaps covering their cheeks as far as the chin. They carried small bundles of divining rods, known as barsoms, with which they offered sacrifices; these rods also were utilized in divining and soothsaying by arranging them in various patterns on the ground while chanting their incantations." (Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol 4, p. 31)

One might wonder how these foreign dignitaries knew about the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah. We must remember that Persia was still filled with Jews. The Jewish scriptures were librated with all the other sacred scrolls which the Magi spent their lives studying. When they saw the Star they must have recollected the prophecy of Numbers 24:17 concerning "a Star which would arise out of Jacob, and a Sceptre out of Israel." Strangely enough, this prophecy came not from the lips of a prophet in Israel but from another foreigner, Balaam, (whose name means "devourer") a soothsayer from Mesopotamia! (Joshua 13:22) Balaam was from Pethor which Fausset believed was "the headquarters of oriental Magi" at that time. Perhaps beyond the sacred scriptures the Magian libraries of oracles contained this prophecy of Balaam too. (Fausset, p. 71)