

Pentwater Bible Church

The Magi

December 16, 2019



Adoration of the Magi by Leonardo DaVinci

Daniel E. Woodhead

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THE MAGI
Christmas Time
December 15, 2019
Daniel E. Woodhead

As part of the birth of Jesus we read an account in Matthew's Gospel of Herod the king of Judea receiving some people from an eastern land who were alerted that the true "King of the Jews" had been born. As a result of their visit Herod and the general population of Jerusalem were threatened. Just who were these people and why was Herod threatened? God was bringing His long-awaited Messiah to the earth and the ungodly were going to try but would not be able to stop His plan.

Matthew 2:1-12

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, ² saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. ³ When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. ⁵ And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

(From Micah 5:2)

⁶ And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

⁷ Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. ⁹ When they had heard the king, they departed; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. ¹¹ And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way (KJV).

The vast majority of Jewish people, who should have been looking for their Messiah, were unaware of the birth of Christ, whereas these Gentiles, who were not God's people

at that time, did seek to acknowledge this King. The same situation exists today as we anxiously anticipate His second arrival. Most could care less; but those of us who know Him look for Him to appear at any time (Matthew 24: 42-44; Mark 13: 33-37; I Thessalonians 4: 4-6; II Timothy 4:8; II Peter 3:12 etc.).

Not only was Christ a physical earthly King by virtue of His lineage from David, but also by virtue of the fact that those in the world who were official kingmakers recognized Him as such. The Magi were from Media-Persia and were Persian kingmakers. After the Babylonian Empire fell in 539 B.C. the Media-Persian Empire took control of that region of Mesopotamia. Following that empire Alexander's armies conquered it for the Greeks in 328 B.C. When Alexander died in 323 B.C. one of his generals, Seleucus Nicator, took control of the area and finally lost control of it to the Parthians in 139 B.C.

Magi is the Old Persian word magav, which refers to a certain very wise hereditary priestly tribe of people who came from the Medes. This term is also translated as "megistanes" from which we get our term magistrates. The Magi were so powerful that historians (Herodotus) tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king except under two conditions: he had to master the scientific and religious discipline of the Magi, and he had to be approved of and crowned by the Magi. In effect, they controlled who could be king within the Mesopotamian region.

The ancient Magi were a hereditary priesthood of the Medes (known today as the Kurds) credited with profound and extraordinary religious knowledge. After some Magi, who had been attached to the Median court, proved to be expert in the interpretation of dreams, Darius the Great established them over the state religion of Persia. They all came from "the east" (Matthew 2: 1, 2, 9). East of Israel lay, only ancient Media, Persia, Assyria, and Babylonia that had a Magian priesthood at the time of the birth of Christ.

Having through the years risen to a place of great prominence in the kingdoms of Babylon, Media, and Persia, they served as advisors to the rulers, and so the term became synonymous in many ways with being a wise man. This is how our English translations render the word magav. Now, some time after the birth of Jesus, some God-fearing Magi arrived in Jerusalem asking for the King of the Jews.

From Persia, from where the Magi came, to Jerusalem was a journey of between 1000 and 1200 miles. Such a distance may have taken any time between three and twelve months by camel. Besides the time of travel, there were probably many weeks of preparation. The Magi could scarcely have reached Jerusalem till a year or more had elapsed from the time of the appearance of the star. They knew well in advance of the birth of Jesus that He would be born and they would come and honor Him.

Most have assumed there were three of them, since they brought three specific gifts (but the Biblical text doesn't number them). As the years passed, the traditions became increasingly embellished. By the 3rd century they were viewed as kings. By the 6th century they had names: Bithisarea, Melichior, and Gathaspa. Some even associated them with Shem, Ham and Japheth-the three sons of Noah-and thus with Asia, Africa,

and Europe. A 14th century Armenian tradition identifies them as Balthasar, King of Arabia; Melchior, King of Persia; and Gasper, King of India.

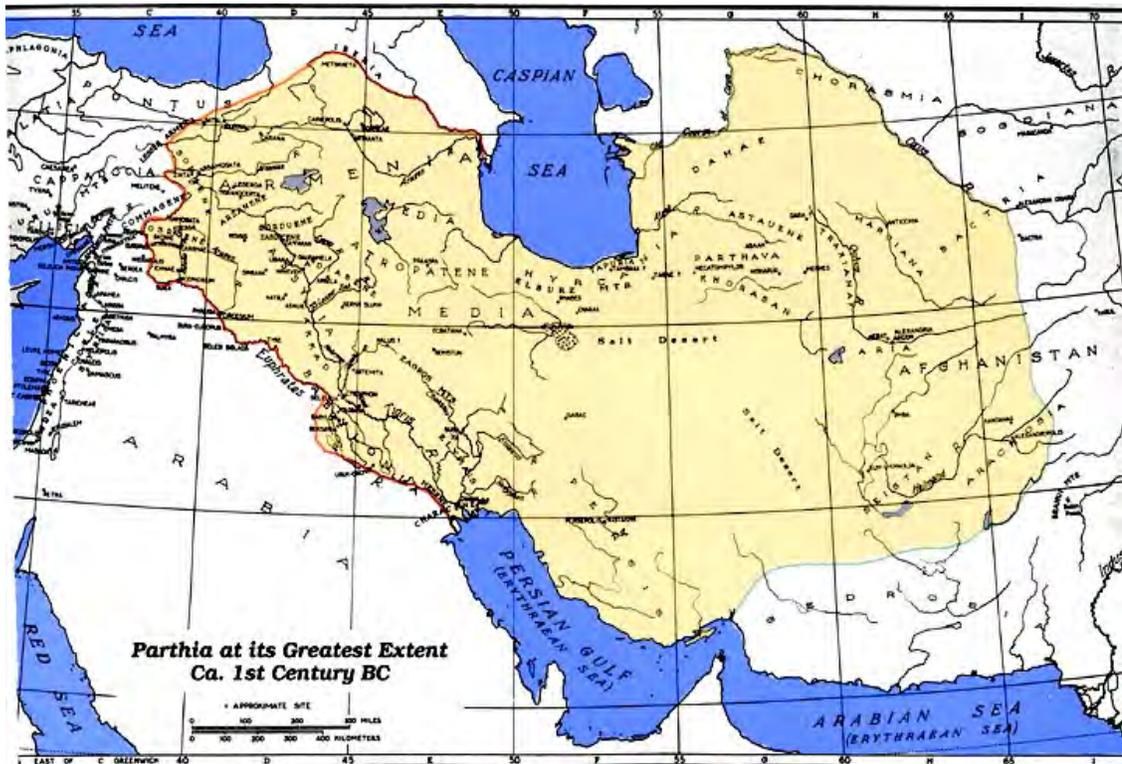
HEROD THE GREAT

Herod was half Jew and half Idumaeon, being a partial descendant of the Edomites who lived southeast of Israel. He gained favor with the Romans, who controlled the land of Judea. As the son of Antipater, the procurator (governor) of Jerusalem and Judea, Herod had played up so much to the Romans that they appointed him as the tetrarch of Galilee in 47 B.C. It was a lesser position in significance, but nonetheless it was a position of honor among the Romans. Seven years later in 40 B.C. when the eastern Parthian Empire attacked the Romans at Israel, civil war broke out and Herod quickly fled to Rome. Convincing the Senate that he was pro-Roman, and from that part of the world, he knew how to handle regional political situations. The Romans made him the king of the Jews, gave him an army and charged him with the job of bringing Israel under control. After three years, Herod being successful, was finally able to gain the full authority that had been promised and truly became the king of the Jews, a title that he maintained until he died.

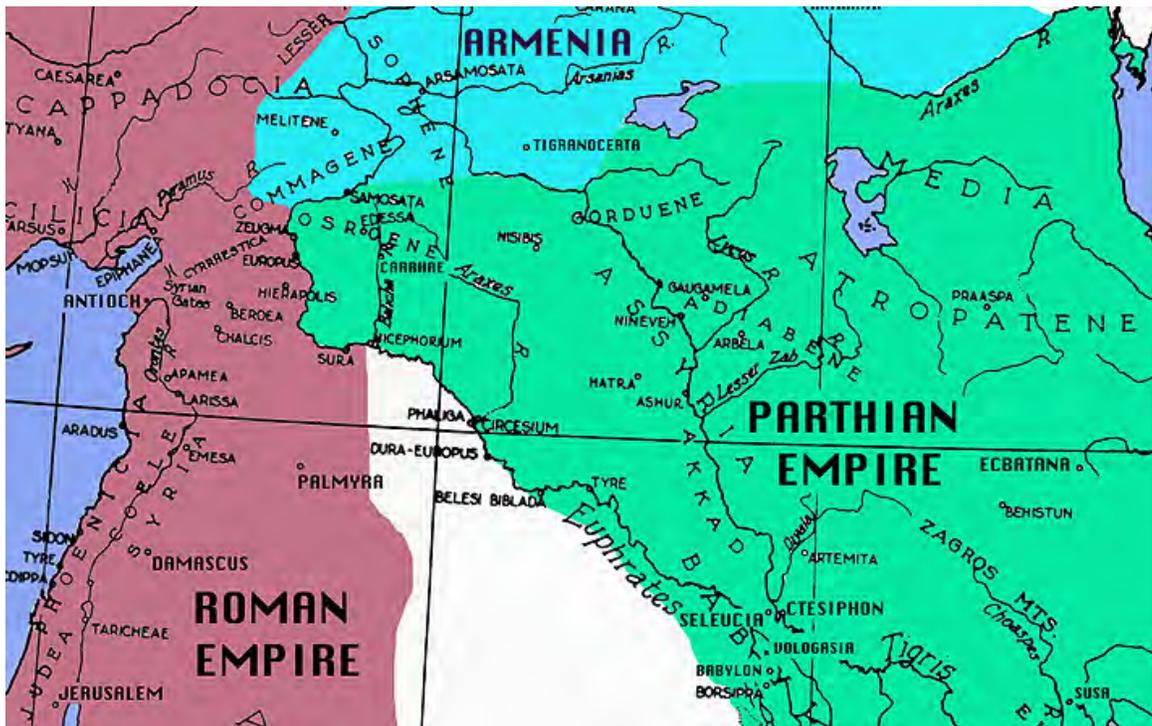
Politically speaking, Rome was strategically concerned with the eastern empire of Parthia, as the old Medo-Persian Empire became known. Rome had stretched its tentacles out to rule the world, but they never really felt secure about the Parthian Empire because they did not conquer them. Israel (situated between these two powers) became the battleground between these violent enemies in 63, 55 and 40 B.C.



Roman Empire First Century A.D. by C.S. Hammond & Co. NY



Parthian Empire First Century B.C. from: <http://www.magyar-megmaradas.eoldal.hu/cikkek/our-beliefs/the-scythian--part-3.html>



Roman Parthian Empires coincide in Syria just north of Israel from:
<http://iranpoliticsclub.net/maps/maps04/>

Rome's anxiety over this eastern empire was accurately reflected in Herod's response to the arrival of the Magi in Matthew 2:3: "When Herod, the king, had heard these things, he was troubled..." When he heard that Magi, the oriental, Parthian kingmakers had arrived in Jerusalem, he became justifiably politically insecure. By the time of Christ, the Magi still had tremendous power in the east. Whereas some of them used their power, position, and skills with a great amount of human wisdom, others prostituted their craft. Both kinds of Magi were very common in the Mediterranean area when Christ was born (Acts 8 & 13 speak of corrupt ones). At the time of Christ in the eastern empire there was a ruling body called the Megistanes who would be similar in function to the United States Senate. It was totally composed of Magi who had the right of absolute choice for the selection of a king. They were kingmakers.

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem asking for the whereabouts of the new king that had been born, Herod panicked, knowing that those Persian kingmakers had come to find their king. They were no doubt traveling in full force with all their oriental pomp, riding Persian steeds (rather than camels). And accompanying them, historians estimate (from John MacArthur) there were a thousand mounted Persian cavalymen. When they came into the city of Jerusalem and Herod saw them he became very nervous. That's why the Bible says that Herod was "troubled." The Greek word conveys the idea that he was agitating like a washing machine--literally shaking. As the King of the Jews, the great dream of his life was to get that little buffer state in the middle of two huge contending empires, under his control. All of a sudden, this massive group of Persians arrived in the city and he panicked because the new king they were coming to find would be a threat to the realization of his dream.

At that time both Herod and Caesar Augustus were aged and close to death. Also because the retirement of Tiberius, Augustus' future successor, the Roman army was left without a commander-in-chief. The Parthians' were aware that this would be the ideal time to bring about an eastern war against the west. Herod knew this too. The Bible says that they worshiped Christ. They saw more than just a king. They saw the Messiah they had heard about from the days of Daniel. The Magi who came to Jerusalem were God-fearing Gentiles who envisioned this Savior, the Anointed One (Messiah), as the king who would gather all the people of the East together against the oppression of Rome.

Knowing that the people of Israel were on their side rather than Rome's, the Magi came into town and started asking the people where this new King was. Most of the ruling Jews were blinded by their unbelief. Interestingly some of the first people in the world to recognize the arrival of the King were Gentiles. History reflects that irony of rejection in John 1:11 where it says, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." But in spite of the general rejection of the King by the Jews, the Magi knew this Child could be the great Messiah that Daniel had prophesied. They could have hoped this would be the one who could unify the east and go against Rome with invincibility. Most Jews were looking for a Messiah that would resemble a strong military man capable of throwing off the suzerainty of the Romans and freeing them. And so, into Jerusalem rides the group of

Magi, kingmakers of the east on their fine Persian steeds, and escorted by a thousand mounted cavalymen.

They came into town asking, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?", and Herod became afraid. A little of the shock of this whole scene is indicated in Matthew 2: 1. It was completely unexpected and shocking for Magi to come from the east, asking where the King of the Jews had been born.

Historians record for us that at that general time there was a strange expectation in the world for a coming king. The people in the east had it, which partly explains why the Magi came. People in many places were anticipating the arrival of a king, something even the Roman historians acknowledged:

- 1) Suetonius wrote in *The Twelve Caesars*, "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world." Writing during the second century A.D. about such things as Vespasian's conquering of Israel in A.D. 70, Suetonius looked back and said that the first century was a day when there was an expectation for men coming from Judea to rule the world. Consequently, people's eyes were focused upon that place.
- 2) Tacitus, the famous Roman historian, tells of the same belief in *The Annals* that "there was a firm persuasion...that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judaea were to acquire a universal empire."
- 3) Josephus, in *Wars of the Jews*, said that the Jews had a belief that "about that time one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth."

The Magi came to Jerusalem based upon information they had received from Daniel and other Jews (who were now living in their land since the captivity), upon their own sense of faith in the true God who would fulfill His Word, and upon what they saw in the sky. They repeatedly asked the Jews "Saying, Where is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:2)

Herod must have known that Child was more than a human king. He apparently knew that this was the Messiah, the Anointed One, which the Magi were seeking. Herod knew that the true King of the Jews, and the Messiah of Israel, were one and the same. Like the Wise Men, he was aware that there was more than a humanly king coming to the earth. He knew that someday a God sent Messiah would arrive.

Herod's interrogation of the chief priests, about where the Christ was to be born, shows how subtly deceptive he really was. It is amazing how many people look to the Bible for information. But they will not accept Christ as their Savior and Lord. The chief priests and the scribes quoted Micah 5:2 to Herod, informing him that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. They knew that, and still paid absolutely no attention to the events in Bethlehem. It's amazing that these orthodox literalists had perfect head knowledge, but were never touched in their souls. No wonder the Bible says, "...for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life" (II Corinthians 3:6b.) It didn't take long before the indifference of

the chief priests and scribes issued in the hateful plotting of Christ's murder. From the indifference of Matthew chapter two to the plots and the murders at the end of the Messiah's life, they had full knowledge of all the prophecies being fulfilled by Jesus Christ, and yet they rejected them with full information. Jesus Himself even reminded them that all they had to do was to check the Scriptures which they were supposed to be so expert in: "Search the scriptures; for...they are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39).

BETHLEHEM

Bethlehem has an interesting history. In the book of Genesis, Jacob buried Rachel there, setting a marker by her grave (Genesis 35:19-20). Ruth married Boaz and she lived in the town of Bethlehem (Ruth 4:11), from where she could see her homeland, Moab, across the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. Bethlehem was the home and city of the great king of Israel David. It is called the city of David, as 1 Samuel indicates (16:1; 17:12; 20:6). It was there in that little village that the people of God had long expected their Messiah to be born, in accordance with the prophecy of Micah 5:2. They waited for David's greater Son, the Messiah, to come out of David's city. But when the time of His birth did arrive, few were even aware of it.

Herod was afraid that this little baby would interfere with his status in life. Jealous and fearful, he sought to eliminate Him. People felt the same way thirty-three years later, successfully completing Herod's original plot of killing Jesus. Some people feel that way today. Jesus is interference in their life. He bothers them, upsetting their plans, and if they had their choice, they too, would eliminate Him. Like the book of Hebrews says, those people know all about Christ and still reject Him, in effect, "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6: 6b). Jesus cautioned His disciples about the hatred and the hostility of the world toward Him and His servants: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you" (Jn. 15:18). "...the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" (Jn. 16:2b). And, of course, we see the hatred and the hostility exemplified by Herod.

The chief priests and the scribes, who were engrossed in their political intrigues and their acquisition of power as well as making money in the Temple at the expense of the people, didn't care that their Messiah had been born. There are many who are indifferent like that today. They conduct church services for the sole purpose of making a living as if the work of Christ was a business. They will be the people the Bible speaks of as having no awareness of His coming for His Church (Matthew 24: 36-51).

The Magi came to worship Him knowing full well who he was and what He represented. This was all due to what they learned from Daniel the prophet. Living six centuries before the birth of Christ, Daniel certainly received an incredible number of Messianic prophecies. In addition to several overviews of all of Gentile world history, the Angel Gabriel told him the precise day that Jesus would present Himself as King to Jerusalem (Daniel 9:24-27).

Daniel was chosen by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar to become chief of the Magi when he demonstrated his superior ability in interpreting dreams (Daniel 5:11). One of the titles given to Daniel was Rab-mag, (Belteshazzar) the Chief of the Magi Rab-Mag, "Chief Magus" (Jeremiah 39:3, 39:13, in Hebrew). When Nebuchadnezzar's successor Darius appointed him, a Jew, over the previously hereditary Median priesthood, the resulting repercussions led to plots against him, which ended with him in the lion's den. Daniel must have conveyed a Messianic vision (to be announced in due time by a "star") to a secret sect of the Magi for its eventual fulfillment. Thomas Hyde, an eminent Orientalist (1636-1703), writing on the ancient religion of the Persians, quotes from ABULFARAGIUS (an Arab Christian Historian, 1126-1286), who says that ZOROASTER, or ZERDUSHT, the Persian, was a pupil of Daniel the Prophet, and that he prophesied to the Magians that when they should see a new star appear it would notify the birth of a mysterious child, whom they were to adore.

THE GIFTS

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were also prophetic, speaking of our Lord's offices of king, priest, and savior. Gold speaks of His kingship; frankincense was a spice used in the priestly duties; and myrrh was an embalming ointment anticipating His death. Myrrh is an herb and its odor only becomes noticeable by "crushing" or "bruising". When Jesus reigns over the earth from David's throne in Jerusalem during the 1,000 year Messianic Kingdom He will also receive the gifts of gold and frankincense, (Isaiah 60:6) but no myrrh, which represents His death because it was once and for all.

By divinely ordaining a great Hebrew prophet to rule the Magi six hundred years before Jesus was born, God was, in effect, setting up the situation so that one day, when the Messiah as a baby was born in Bethlehem, some Magi would find their way to the house where the young child was so that He could be acknowledged as King by known Gentile kingmakers.

God controls human history; and we are seeing God at work. Long ago He picked out a man named Daniel and put him in a place to influence some men so that they could arrive in perfect timing. Interestingly, the people who should have known the great significance of the event missed it, and the people from way off who should have never guessed it could happen, showed up and worshipped the One who came to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16). Jesus came and said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). Israel turned her back on Christ, and so He called a people from those who were not formerly His (Romans 9:25). He reached out to the Gentiles, Romans says, and grafted us in (Romans 11:17). Even the unbelief of His own people could not prevent the Messiah from being honored as Jesus made clear in Luke 19:40 that if the people wouldn't praise Him, "the stones would immediately cry out." Therefore, when the King arrived, and His own people wouldn't praise Him, then God made sure that there was somebody there to do it.

And you know in our world today, people celebrate Christmas by passing around Christmas cards and giving gifts. They look at the Wise Men, but few really understand the significance of their presence before that Child. There are some of us, however, who have followed the example of the Wise Men and bowed down to the "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Revelation 19:16b).

NEXT WEEK'S MESSAGE: THE SPECIAL STAR OF GOD

Please call or e-mail with any questions or comments

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