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## THE WISE MEN

Christmas pageants often contain an error. They show the three wise men or three kings standing alongside shepherds when they all visited baby Jesus in the manger.

In fact, we do not know for sure that there were three of them. Who ever visited Jesus arrived when he was child and living in a house. They did not visit the baby in the stable. The shepherds were long gone before the Magi arrived.

In April 2004 the Anglican Church in England decided to give them a makeover. Church officials agreed to drop the term “Three Wise Men” from a newly approved prayer book because there is no proof that the three visitors were actually male.

The odds are that they were men because men were far more involved in leadership than women, and women were rarely educated in those days. But the Church is correct in that the text does not state explicitly that they were men.

The Church of England now prefers the term “Magi”, which is a name for an official of the Persian court. This is the term used in the Gospel of Matthew 2: 1-12 (where the visit is recorded).

The Magi were a Median (Kurdish) priestly caste who rose to power in ancient Persia (present day Iran). Their religion, Zoroastrianism, was founded in the 6th century BC by a Median man named Zoroaster. The Magi were held in awe as highly educated scientists and scholars who could interpret dreams.

In 614 Persian armies invaded the Holy Land and destroyed Christian buildings. But when they got to the Bethlehem building commemorating the visit the Magi they suddenly stopped their destruction. It had a mosaic depicting the visit of the Magi and they recognized their Persian clothes. The Magi had been Persian and so that building was not destroyed.

The Magi of the Nativity were probably important people in their own country and may well have been of noble or royal birth. The idea that they were kings arose in the Middle Ages and was based on earlier Biblical prophecies about kings bearing gifts.

The Magi of the Nativity were probably from Persia but could also have been from Babylon or Arabia. Although they travelled together there is no reason why they all came from the same land.

Magi were involved in the affairs of kings and often had the responsibility of deciding who would be king in the event of a dispute. Therefore it was not unusual that a group of them would travel hundreds of miles west to Jerusalem to find out more about the person who had been born king of the Jews. They were expected to know about such important things.

The number “three” arises from the number of gifts, with the assumption that each person brought a gift. Matthew does not give a number of persons. Given their status, they would have travelled in a group including servants and guards and so the total number would have been well above just three.

The three gifts of gold, incense and myrrh were of great symbolic and practical use. Gold was then the main source of money, acceptable across all sorts of national boundaries. It was also a gift to give to a king. Incense is a gift for a priest (recognizing Jesus’ spiritual role). Myrrh is a burial ointment to anoint a dead body and so was a gift for one who would die.

The last two gifts had a market value and so could be sold. The proceeds from those sales plus the gold were all very necessary because suddenly Jesus, Mary and Joseph would become the world’s most famous refugees and have to flee the Holy Land into Egypt.

The Magi were part of the ruling elite and so their arrival in Jerusalem was a major event. They had been following a star which had led them thus far. “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” they asked people in Jerusalem.

Jesus had been born just outside Jerusalem, in the village of Bethlehem. This had been predicted in the Old Testament seven centuries earlier.

King Herod got to hear about their inquiries and asked to meet them. Herod was one of the cruellest tyrants in history. He killed a large of Jewish people to maintain control.

Even his own family were not spared. He drowned his brother-in-law, a youth of 16 who was High Priest of Israel; he killed his uncle Joseph, his wife Mariamne and his mother-in-law Alexandra. A few years before the birth of Jesus, he had had his two sons killed. He was always worried that someone else would try to take over.

Now he was afraid that Jesus would be yet another rival. He was mad but not stupid. He hoped to be able to trick them into doing his detective work for him. He pretended he was on their side. He asked the Magi to report to him on where they located Jesus so that he too could go to worship him.

Herod was not Jewish. He was an Idumaeon (from Edom, a strip of land at the southern end of present day Israel), with an Arab mother. He was now worried that a person had been born who would have a more direct claim on the Jewish throne.

The Magi found Jesus in his house and gave him the three gifts. In a dream they were warned not to return to Herod in Jerusalem and so went back via another route, steering clear of Herod. They would also probably have known by now of his record for killing real or imagined rivals and so they did not want to assist his murders.

Herod was anxious to find out about this potential rival. Then he realized that he had been tricked because the Magi were not returning via Jerusalem. He decided that all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two should be slaughtered. Bethlehem was a small village of about 2,000 people and so the number killed would be 15 or 20.

Mary and Joseph took Jesus into Egypt to escape the massacre. Those three gifts were of great use to finance the trip. They did not return until Herod was dead. They went north to live in Nazareth.

Herod's death was as unpleasant as most of his life. Just before his death he realized that few people would mourn his passing. He therefore ordered the heads of families to come to Jerusalem, where they were rounded up in a horse-racing ground. He then gave orders to his sister that upon his death they were all to be executed. This would mean that the entire nation would be in mourning when he died, if only for the loss of their own kin.

Fortunately, when Herod died his sister released the imprisoned Jews and allowed them to return home. Herod died 37 years after being declared "king of the Jews". Four sons survived him and each was given a quarter of his kingdom.

The Magi were wise people. They knew their scriptures on where Jesus would be born, they avoided being tricked by Herod, they knew what gifts to take, and they knew who would be born king of the Jews. Wise people still seek Jesus.

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