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Searching for the King! Part 2
The Wise Men: "We Saw His Star in the East."

By Tal Davis

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: 6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him." 9 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12 NASB)

One of my favorite subjects is astronomy. Astronomy, of course, is the science of observing objects in space. Planets, stars, galaxies, and the Moon are all objects of interest to astronomers who peer deep into the sky to observe their movements and characteristics. Some are literally billions of light years away.

One of the most revolutionary scientific discoveries of the 20th century occurred quite by accident in 1964. Two astronomers at Bell Laboratories, Robert Wilson and Arno Penzias, were scanning space with a newly built radio telescope. As they checked their data, they noticed an odd factor in their findings. Their instruments recorded an extremely low level of microwave radiation noise everywhere and anywhere they pointed their radio telescope. At first they thought it was a flaw in the equipment. However, after checking every system in the radio telescope the unexplained microwave noise remained. Soon other radio telescopes around the world confirmed what Wilson and Penzias had discovered.

So what was it they were hearing? The answer had actually been suggested many years before by several astrophysicists including George Gamow, Robert Dicke, Ralph Alpher, and Robert Herman. Those scientists, in the 1940s, had predicted, theoretically, just such a phenomenon they called Cosmic Background Microwave (CBM) radiation. The CBM, they asserted, would exist as a remnant echo of the beginning of the universe, later called the "Big Bang." Many astronomers and physicists rejected the Big Bang Theory saying the universe was eternal, a theory known as the "Steady State." However, Wilson's and Penzias'

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accidental discovery, and its later confirmation, provided indisputable proof that everything, including all time, space, matter, and energy, had a beginning point from nothing, and came into existence in an instant.

That discovery only confirmed what the Bible, in Genesis, asserted all along. However, the Bible answers one key question that science cannot: Who created it? Genesis 1:1 simply states, "In the beginning GOD created the heavens and the earth."

The discovery of the CBM radiation was a hard pill for many naturalistic and atheistic scientists to swallow because of its theistic metaphysical implications. Some even went to their graves rejecting it, for that reason alone. On the other hand, the discovery changed the minds of some atheists and influenced them to embrace theism (e.g.: Anthony Flew). By now you are probably asking, "What has this got to do with Christmas and the wise men?" We'll see.

In Matthew's Gospel, the birth of Jesus is told in chapter one, verses 18-25. Chapter two begins some time after Jesus' birth, perhaps as long as a year or more. In that chapter (vss. 1- 12), we find mentioned a group of men who traveled to Bethlehem to see the new King of the Jews. Often we find figures of these men in Nativity scenes.

So, just who were these men and why did they come? In this article we will look at who and what they were, and who and what they were not. Hopefully, we can dispel some common misconceptions while learning what we can about them and from them.

Most people are familiar with the words of the old Christmas carol:

"We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.

O star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect Light."

For many people, the lyrics of that song are all they really know about the men who came to see Jesus. Unfortunately, that has only compounded the misunderstandings that many people, even many Bible believing Christians, have about them and the star of Bethlehem.

So let's begin by correcting a couple of false notions about the "Three Kings." To start with, the men who saw the star of Bethlehem were not kings. They were actually professional star gazers known as Magi (plural of Latin: *Magus* - from where we get "magic;" Greek: *magos*). The King James Version translates it as "Wise Men."

Obviously people have been looking at the heavens for thousands of years. Perhaps you heard a few years ago about the famous Mayan calendar which some thought predicted the end of the world in 2012. In any case, the calendar was based on the Mayan's careful observations of the stars, planets, and the sun, which they thought had great influence on human events.

That was an example of the ancient superstition of astrology. The modern science of astronomy was preceded, historically, by astrology. The difference is that astronomy looks at the heavens with scientific neutrality. Astrologers, however, looked (and some still look) for spiritual or prophetic meaning in the locations of stars, constellations, and planets in the sky.

A surprising number of people still read and rely on their horoscopes, a modern form of astrology. A friend of

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mine was, at one time, an official certifier of licensed astrologers in Georgia (yes, in Georgia you have to pass a board examination to get legally certified to read horoscopes). My friend is now a Christian who exposes the fraud and deceit of astrology, and other forms of the occult. Visit her website at <http://christiananswersforthenewage.org>.

The Magi mentioned in Matthew were a class of astrologers, priests, and wise men. They probably lived in ancient Persia (modern Iran) or Babylon (modern Iraq). They came to Jerusalem to inquire about a new king being born.

So how did they know? The text says they had seen his star "in the East" and came to worship him. The phrase "in the east" (vs. 2) does not mean the Magi were looking in the eastern sky and saw the star; otherwise they would have gone in the wrong direction (Jerusalem was to their west). It probably means that they were standing "in the east" when they saw it in the west. Remember, they were astrologers and constantly looked for portents in the heavens.

Now we need caution – this was not an endorsement nor an implied validation of astrology on Matthew's part. He merely reported the facts of what happened. The Bible condemns all forms of occultism, including astrology. In fact, this report enhances the historical credibility of Matthew's account since he included this event. (This may be why the KJV translators chose "Wise Men" instead of the occult term "Magi," to identify the men.)

Another mistaken concept we need to address is the fact that Matthew nowhere says how many Magi there were, or that they rode on camels. Verse one simply reports that at some point they had seen the star

and traveled to Jerusalem to find the king of the Jews. Why? Verse two says they wanted to worship Him. That may seem like an extreme thing to do, even for a king. They must have known He was special and no mere man.

Not only do the Scriptures not say how many Magi there were, they also make no mention of the Magi's names. The three names traditionally identified them – Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar – were legendary, and actually originated much later. Those names have no basis in Scripture or history.

Whoever they were, the Magi went first to see King Herod I in Jerusalem. This was the infamous "Herod the Great" who ruled Judea under the Roman aegis from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC. He was called "Great" only because of the ambitious building programs he initiated during his rule. He rebuilt and expanded the Jerusalem Temple, built a fortress on the mount of Masada, and constructed a major seaport at Caesarea. Nonetheless, Herod is better known for his murderous behavior fueled by a paranoid fear of those around him. At one point, according to Roman historians, in a fit of anger, he even had his wife and other members of his family killed.

When Herod heard that the Magi were in Jerusalem, he called them in to see him. He told them to go to Bethlehem, which was where the Scriptures said the Messiah was to be born (vs. 6; Micah 5:2). Herod wanted them to find the child, whom he regarded as a threat to his rule, so he could kill him (vs. 8). This led to what may have been Herod's most wicked act, the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18). Jesus was spared because an angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to take his family to Egypt. The family remained

there until Herod's death in 4 BC (Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23). (By the way, this event provides a clue as to the date for the birth of Jesus. Since Herod died in 4 BC and Jesus was at least one or two years old when the Magi found him, Jesus would have had to be born in either 6 or 5 BC.)

Soon after the Magi arrived, they noticed that the star had moved and rested over Bethlehem. They traveled to the town and located the house where Mary, Joseph, and the child Jesus then lived. Note, also, that since the Magi arrived in Bethlehem a year or more after Jesus' birth, they and their camels (if they had any) were never at the manger in the stable, as most Nativity scenes traditionally portray.

We are told that the Magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (vs. 11). This may be why the tradition arose of there being three of them. In any case, they were warned in a dream not go back to Herod. The text does not actually say who warned them in the dream. The KJV and NASB translators assumed it was "by God," but that phrase is not in the Greek text (as indicated in the NASB with italics). Regardless of who gave them the warning, they heeded it and headed home a different way, avoiding Jerusalem (vs. 12).

So what can we learn from the Magi's visit? First, the Magi were not Jews so they really could not have fully understood what was at stake in Jesus' birth. Nevertheless, they had deep passion for finding the truth about God. They were even willing to leave their homes and search for many miles, and probably months, to find the Messiah. It also indicates that by putting the star in the sky for the Magi to see, God intends salvation in Christ to be available for all peoples; Jews and Gentiles alike. Even now our eternal destiny depends on Him. Therefore, we all should be like the shepherds and the Magi. We should all search for the King!

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