

THE MAGI



The Magi are popularly referred to as wise men and kings. The word Magi is a Latinization of the plural of the Greek word magos, itself from Old Persian maguš from the Avestan moyu. The term, a specific occupational title, refers to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism. As part of their religion, these priests paid particular attention to the stars, and gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science.

Their religious practices and use of astrological sciences caused derivatives of the term Magi to be applied to the occult in general and led to the English term magic. Translated in the King James Version as wise men, the same word is given as sorcerer and sorcery when describing "Elymas the sorcerer" in Acts 13:6-11, and Simon Magus, considered a heretic by the early Church, in Acts 8:9-13.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem asking, where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this he was disturbed. When he had called together all the chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. According to most forms of Christianity, the Magi were the first religious figures to worship Christ, and for this reason the story of the Magi is particularly respected and popular among many Christians.

The visit of the Magi is commemorated in most Western Christian churches, but not the Eastern Orthodox, on the observance of Epiphany, 6 January. The Eastern Orthodox celebrate it on 25 December. This visit is frequently treated in Christian art and literature as The Adoration of the Magi.

As Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, theologian Dr Robert Beckford investigated amazing parallels to the Christ story in other faiths, some of them pre-dating Christianity by thousands of years.

The Hindu god, Krishna, was conceived by a virgin and his birth was attended by angels, wise men and shepherds.

Buddha was also the result of a miraculous birth and visited by wise men bearing gifts. He too began his ministry at about 30 years old and performed miracles such as walking on water and feeding 500.

In India some believe that Jesus didn't die on the cross, but escaped to Kashmir where he continued to preach, had a wife and child, died and was buried.

Jesus was born a Jew and Christians believe he is the Messiah prophesied in the Torah.

Meanwhile Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, but do not believe he died on the cross.

Dr Beckford attempts to unravel the mystery of why there are so many versions of the Christ story across the world and which is the real one.

