

WE THREE KINGS

Micah 5:1, *Now gather thyself in troops, O daughter of troops: he hath laid siege against us: they shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek. 2, But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. 3, Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel.*

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. Two facts thus far unrecorded regarding Jesus' birth are here set forth: **a. that he was born in Bethlehem**, and **b. that this event took place in the days of Herod the king**. The specification that this Bethlehem was the one in Judea serves not so much to distinguish it from the one located west of Nazareth in the tribe of Zebulun (hence, in Galilee) as **to make clear that Micah's prophecy was indeed fulfilled in Jesus' birth.**

The text specifies no interval between the birth and the visit, and artistic depictions and the closeness of the traditional dates of December 25 and January 6 encourage the popular assumption that the visit took place the same winter as the birth, but later traditions varied, with the visit taken as occurring up to two winters later.

Although the Magi are commonly referred to as "**kings**," there is nothing in the account from the Gospel of Matthew that implies that they were rulers of any kind. The identification of the Magi as kings is linked to OT prophecies that describe the Messiah being worshipped by kings in [Isaiah](#) 60:3, [Psalm](#) 68:29, and [Psalm](#) 72:10, which reads, "**Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations serve him.**"

The New Testament does not give the names of the Magi. However, traditions and legends identify a variety of different names for them.^[18] In the [Christian church](#), they have been all regarded as saints and are commonly known as:

- [Melchior](#) (also Melichior), a Persian scholar;
- [Caspar](#) (also Gaspar, Jaspar, Jaspas, Gathaspa, of India or Ethiopia);
- [Balthazar](#) (also Balthasar, Balthassar, and Bithisarea), a [Babylonian](#) scholar.

There is an [Armenian](#) tradition identifying the "Magi of Bethlehem" as [Balthasar](#) of Arabia, [Melchior](#) of Persia, and [Gaspar](#) of India. Historian [John of Hildesheim](#) relates a tradition in the ancient [silk road](#) city of [Taxila](#) (near [Islamabad](#) in Pakistan) that one of the Magi passed through the city on the way to Bethlehem.

A [Shrine of the Three Kings at Cologne Cathedral](#), according to tradition, contains the bones of the Three Wise Men. Reputedly they were first discovered by [Saint Helena](#) on her famous pilgrimage to [Palestine](#) and the Holy Lands. She took the remains to the church of [Hagia Sophia](#) in [Constantinople](#); they were later moved to [Milan](#) (some sources say by the city's bishop,), before being sent to their current resting place by the [Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I](#) in 1164. The Milanese celebrate their part in the tradition by holding a medieval costume parade every 6 January.

It might seem strange for the Jewish Gospel to give us the visit of the Gentile wise men from the east. But one of the things that we learn about God's plans for the Nation Israel, is not only is the Messiah the glory of his people Israel, but he is also a light to lighten the Gentiles. And as we have seen in the

opening of this wonderful gospel that Matthew wrote, the Lord Jesus is not only presented as the Son of David, but as the Son of Abraham. And in the Old Testament, even in those sections of the Old Testament that seem to us to be so closely related to God's plans for the nation Israel, there is frequent mention of the fact that his plans encompass not only the nation but also the Gentile nations.

In one of the great Messianic sections of Isaiah we read, "And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. And so we should not be surprised, then, that the Jewish Gospel should, instead of Luke (which might be called a Gentile Gospel) give us this beautiful account of the coming of the wise men, in order to worship the Lord Jesus at his birth with their gifts.

Frankincense: A substance referred to in, e.g., Ex. 30:34; Lev. 2:1f, 15f.; Neh. 13:5, 9; Isa. 66:3. The Hebrew term, from a root meaning "whiteness," refers to the milky color of the fresh juice. The English term comes from the Old French *franc encens*, "pure incense."

The references are to the true frankincense, derived from three species of the genus *Boswellia*: *B. carterii*, *B. papyrifera*, and *B. thurifera*. These trees grow in southern Arabia, India, and elsewhere and are related to the terebinth and the shrubs yielding balsam and myrrh. The gum is exuded from the incised bark in pale glittering drops. It is bitter in flavor and has a strong balsamic odor when heated. It was highly valued by the Egyptians for fumigation and embalming and was used ceremonially among the Hebrews. A refined variety was presented with the showbread (Lev. 24:7). It was often associated with myrrh (Cant. 3:6; 4:6) and was offered to the infant Jesus (Mt. 2:11).

1. All three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king. Myrrh being commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume, and gold as a valuable.
2. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (an [incense](#)) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death.

Myrrh: This substance is mentioned as valuable for its perfume (Ps. 45:8; Prov. 7:17; Cant. 3:6; 4:14), and as one constituent of the anointing oil (Ex. 30:23; see also Cant. 4:6; 5:1, 5, 13). Several shrubs produce a perfumed resinous substance described as "myrrh," but the one compounded in the anointing oil was most probably from the *Commiphora myrrha* Nees, a low thorny tree which is distributed across south Arabia and Ethiopia. The exudate from the branches is pleasantly scented and dries quite readily into a solid resin. Myrrh was capable of being diluted to form a liquid cosmetic product (Ex. 30:23;), and this was probably the "oil of myrrh" mentioned in Est. 2:12. Such a liquid was known to the Canaanites in the 2nd millennium b.c. (C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* [1949], p. 130), and according to Herodotus ii.86 seems to have been used by the Egyptians in embalming. A reflection of this is seen in the use of myrrh in connection with Jesus' burial (Jn. 19:39). The specific mention of myrrh in this context, as opposed to the more general "spices" of Mark (16:1) and Luke (24:1), suggests an eyewitness report. As the end of Christ's life was associated with myrrh (Mk. 15:23), so was its beginning, since this aromatic substance was one of the gifts tendered by the Magi (Mt. 2:11).

Myrrh was also used as a medicine, for perfuming clothes (Ps. 45:8) and harlots' beds (Prov. 7:17), as well as for general deodorant purposes. Myrrh was a familiar symbol in Hebrew poetry (cf. Cant. 4:6, 14; 5:1, 13; Sir. 24:15).

The Order of Events

See Luke 2:21-40. From the reading of these events, it would seem that Joseph and Mary immediately returned to Galilee, 8 days after the birth of Jesus. However, is this the order of events. For Jesus was taken to Egypt until Herod should die.

How different is the reality from the symbolism of this account. Today, Israel, instead of being a light, is blind. And the nations, instead of listening to the light which has come to us through our great Israelitish Messiah, are raging. And it is, of course, not too surprising to us to see this, but I think it is surprising for us and shocking to realize that the church of Jesus Christ is also in spiritual disarray.

Vance Havener said, a number of years ago, "We are living in an age of hazy standards of right and wrong. The old line of demarcation has practically disappeared from modern thinking." And then he points to a prominent minister who has said, "The delineation of sin has undergone a transformation somewhat similar to that which has taken place in the world of painting. The old clear-cut lines have given way to an impressionistic indefiniteness, and the black and white contrasts to low-tone grays. The churches have adopted a hush-hush policy on the doctrine of depravity, and a **Rotarian** (*Relating to or characteristic of Rotary International, a worldwide charitable society of business and professional people.*) gospel takes the place of repentance." And Mr. Havener comments—I like this reference to painting, "***There was a time when you could look at a picture and tell what it was. Today, black and white have become gray.***"

It is rather striking and almost stimulating to notice the little that is said about these wise men in the Word of God. McLaren says, "Where they came from, how long they had been traveling, how many there were, what was their rank whither they went—all of these questions are left unsolved. They glide into the story, they present their silent adoration, and as silently steal away. The tasteless medieval tradition knows all about them: they were three. It is not said, of course, they were three. It is said they brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and on the basis of that it has been reasoned that there must have been three of them, but the text of Scripture does not say. They said they were kings, evidently relying on the text of the book of Isaiah. It knows their names. And if we chose to pay the fee, we can see their bones today in the shrine behind the altar in the cathedral in Cologne in Germany.

The wise men have a lengthy and uncertain ancestry, but they were men who were skilled in philosophy. They were skilled in medicine. They were skilled in natural science, and they were also very interested in interpreting dreams and in soothsaying. In the early days of the history of the wise men, they had been looked upon, as far as we can tell, they were men who were learned men. In the later days they came to be associated with the charlatans and fortune-tellers and others. But so far as we can tell from this account, these men were learned men, and they evidently were very good men, and they evidently were very earnest men who were anxious to interpret the things that they had seen in disguise. And since they had come into contact with something that was supernatural, and since they responded as they did, I think we are justified in saying that these were men were a tribute and a glory to the profession of the Magi.