

Word of Life Lutheran Brethren Church
Community Group Bible Study – week of Dec. 15
The Magi – Foreign visitors.

Open with prayer as you begin. Pray specifically for the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind in order to understand God's Word.

How many types of each animal did Moses bring with him on the ark? **If you know your OT stories and you're paying attention the answer is; none! Noah was the one on the ark, not Moses. It's a trick question.**

So how many Magi, or “wise men”, came to visit Jesus at the manger?

I imagine that your first inclination is to say that there were three. But the popular myth is wrong on two counts. First, the Bible never says how many of these men came to see Jesus. The word *Magi*, is plural, so we know there was more than one, but beyond that we can only guess.¹ Second, they did not arrive until well after the evening of Jesus' birth. By the time they arrived (some months after the birth²) Jesus, Joseph and Mary were living in a house (Matt 2:11) somewhere in Bethlehem.

Read Matt 2:1-12

So who were these men? Where did they come from and why does Matthew include their arrival in his Gospel?

Let's start at the top. Who were they?

- They came “from the East”, which would infer Persia or possible southern Arabia.
- They were astrologers, following a star, looking for a king to worship. Persian magi were astrological priests, which would fit the bill nicely.

Does it disturb you a little that the first “priests” to visit Jesus were pagan astrologers and not “good, Bible believing priests for Israel”? **What these astrologers knew about the “King of the Jews” was limited, since they had to consult Herod's priests to find out that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem. This is not a Biblical endorsement of astrology! God was behind the star**

¹ The popular idea of three wise men rose in the Western church and has its roots in the three gifts brought for Jesus.

² We know that at least 40 days had elapsed between Jesus' birth and the visit of the magi. Luke records that Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the Temple after the “completion of their purification”. According to Mosaic Law, after the birth of a son, a woman would wait 40 days and then come to the Temple to offer sacrifices and dedicate the child (Luke 2:22-23). This had to have happened before the visit from the magi because according to Matthew, Joseph took the family to Egypt immediately after the magi left because the Lord had sent an angel and warned him in a dream of King Herod's plan to kill Jesus (Matt 2:13-14). If 40 days is the minimum, can we calculate a maximum? Yes. Jesus must have been less than 2 years old. Herod deduced from the information he got from the magi that the child could not be older than 2. When the magi didn't return to tell Herod who the child was, he gave orders to kill all the male infants in Bethlehem and the surrounding area who were under 2 years of age in an effort to kill the new “King of the Jews” (Matt 2:16).

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that led them to look for Jesus. God may well have used a natural astronomical occurrence to lead them, but the truth of what they learned was revealed by God not the stars.

While these gentile “pagan” priests respond to Jesus with faith and worship, how did the priests of Israel respond when they came into contact with Him? See Matt 21:33-45; 26:1-4; 57-68. They responded with fear and anger. They sought to arrest Jesus and eventually succeeded in having Him condemned to death by Pontius Pilate.

What significance does the presence of the Magi have in the Christmas story? Why does Matthew include them in his gospel? It was promised in the OT that the Messiah would come from the Jews, but the Messiah would bless the whole world (Gen 12:1-3), not just the Jews. The fact that gentiles recognized Jesus as the Messiah and worshiped Him again reminds the reader that the gift of grace is indeed meant for all people.

What do you think Mary and Joseph thought about these strange visitors? They were certainly not accustomed to wealthy, powerful people dropping by with gifts! The Magi worshipped the little baby that Mary was holding, which could only have served to strengthen their faith that the Child was exactly who the angels said He was.

So what happened to the gifts? These were precious gifts that had great value. Was God providing for the family in a miraculous way? Read vv. 13-15

I believe that the gifts given by the Magi financed the trip to Egypt. They could have sold the gifts in Egypt and lived in safety while they waited for Herod to die. This is only a theory, but would explain a real practical provision given by God through these men from the East.

We don't know what happened to the Magi after their visit other than that they returned to their home on a route that avoided Herod because they had been warned to do so in a dream by God. Like so many other characters in the Bible we only get a glimpse of their role in the history of God's salvation. But as the first gentile worshipers they foreshadow the great multitude of gentile believers who would come to worship Jesus in the future.

As you close in prayer praise God that He has revealed Jesus to you and has invited you to come and worship at His feet, just as He did with the Magi.