

The Story of the Three Wise Men

After Jesus was born, Eastern wise men or magus, the singular form of magi, (priests and astrologists who studied the stars in the heavens and who were experts in interpreting dreams), came to look for Him. Probably, today they would be called philosophers or scientists. Not much is known about these magi, other than what Matthew records in the first book of the New Testament. They may have been from Babylon, Persia or the Arabian Desert, which is now in either Iran or Saudi Arabia. We know that the magi had some knowledge of the history and prophecies concerning Israel. Although they are often called the “Three Kings” or the “Three Wise Men”, the Bible does not mention any names, or say how many there were, or if they were of royal lineage. Three is suggested because three gifts were given to the Christ Child. In the various religious cultures tradition alone has given them names.

These wise travelers had seen an unusual new star in the sky, which is known now as the Star of Bethlehem, and knew of the birth of a special king. They followed the star in the direction it led and eventually found the place where Mary, Joseph and Jesus were staying. Although we always associate the wise men around the Nativity scenes, they probably arrived a year or two after Jesus’ birth.

We do know for a fact that it was important enough for Matthew to mention that these wise men came to find and honor our Lord Jesus Christ, the newborn King and they brought with them three rich gifts: Gold – this is a valuable and costly ore and represents a gift to Jesus’ kingship, Frankincense – this is a resin that burns with a beautiful smell that was used in worshiping God and also as a symbol of Jesus’ purity, and Myrrh – this plant oil, with its strong sweet smell, is a symbol of Jesus’ mortality.

On route to finding the Christ Child the magi received a private message from Judean king Herod to come and see him; at this meeting he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him too!” After finding the Christ Child the magi entered the house where Jesus and Mary were, they threw themselves down before Him, worshiping Jesus. Then they opened their presents and gave him the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But when the magi returned home they didn’t go through Jerusalem to report to Herod, because God had warned them in a dream to go home another way.

After the magi were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, “Get up and go to Egypt with the Christ Child and his mother,” the angel said,” and stay there until I tell you to return. That same night they left for Egypt.

Herod was furious when he learned that the magi had disobeyed him. He sent his soldiers to Bethlehem and ordered them to kill all the male children two years or younger in and around the town of Bethlehem to eliminate the rival heir to his throne. This act was called the Massacre of the Innocents.

The act of the magi throwing themselves down or kneeling or bowing before Jesus had an important impact on Christian religious practices. They showed great respect and were adopted in the early Church and still practiced to this day.

With Christ’ birth, God announced His universal love for all mankind.

