

About the wise men

The wise men are tightly connected to the Christmas traditions. Who hasn’t really seen images of the supposedly three wise men worshiping, together with the shepherds, the baby Jesus in Bethlehem’s manger, shortly after his birth? But are these traditions correct? Who were the wise men (Magi)? Were they three? Where did they come from? When did they visit Jesus? What does the Bible say about them?

1. Who were the wise men and how many were they?

Concerning the names of the wise men, these are not mentioned in the Bible. Therefore any names that you may have heard as supposedly being their names are simply traditions.

About their number: though the Word of God tells us that the wise men brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:21), it nowhere says that they were also three. What the Bible says is that they were of plural number ("wise men"), which means that they were certainly more than one. How many more, we cannot know since the Bible does not say. However, it can very well be that they were more than two or three since such long journeys as the journey they did to reach Bethlehem were, for security reason, usually organized in large caravans.
About the identity of the wise men, the Greek word that is translated as “wise men” in Matthew 2:1 is the word "magos". Concerning the meaning of this word, it is first used for the characterization of a member of a caste of priests and wise men among the Medes, Persians and Babylonians, whose learning was chiefly astronomy, astrology and enchantment. The LXX (ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses this word with this meaning in the book of Daniel (see Daniel 1:20, 2:2, 10, 27, 4:7, 5:7, 11). It also uses for them the word “wise” (Daniel 2:12, 18, 24, 27; 5:7, 8). So, when for example Daniel 5:11 says that Daniel was made "chief of the magicians [LXX: "magoi": plural of "magos"]" it means that he was made chief of this caste of learned, wise men. Apart from this meaning, the word "magos" is also used with the meaning of a sorcerer (Acts 13:6, 8). However, in our case, it is clear that the wise men (Magi) that came to visit Jesus belonged to the first category i.e. they were members of this caste of learned men (a sorcerer would have never come to worship the Son of God).

2. Were the wise men present the night of Jesus’ birth?

We have all seen during Christmas, images of the wise men worshiping together with the shepherds the baby Jesus in the manger. As customary as this tradition may be, it is not what really happened. We first read about the visit of the wise men in Matthew 2:1:

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Matthew 2:1
"Now AFTER Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem"

According to this passage, the wise men did not arrive at Jerusalem but only AFTER Jesus was born. Therefore, since they stayed in Jerusalem able time for the events of Matthew 2:2-9 to happen (the wise men arrived at Jerusalem and started searching for the child; Herod was troubled by what they said, and called the chief priests and the scribes of the people to ask them where the Messiah was to be born; Herod called again the wise men secretly, enquiring of them to tell him about the time the star appeared; finally Herod sent the wise men away to Bethlehem), it is evident that they could by no means be in Bethlehem in the night of Jesus’ birth, as tradition teaches. Furthermore, Matthew 2:11 tells us:

Matthew 2:11
"And when they [the wise men] had come into the HOUSE, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him"

As we can see, when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem, they didn’t find Jesus in a manger, but in A HOUSE i.e. in a place where he, Mary and Joseph were living regularly and properly. Obviously, this was not the night of Jesus’ birth but "AFTER Jesus was born" (Matthew 2:1). From this, it can
be concluded that after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary settled in Bethlehem in a house.

Furthermore, as Matthew 2:11 tell us when they arrived in Bethlehem Jesus was no longer a baby but a young child. Concerning the age of the young Jesus during the visit of the wise men, Matthew 2:16-18 tells us that Herod after finding out that the wise men had deceived him and had not come back to report to him:

Matthew 2:16-18
"he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired from the wise men."

It is important to note here that according to this passage, Herod put the age limit of the male children to two years and under "ACCORDING TO THE TIME WHICH HE HAD DILIGENTLY ENQUIRED FROM THE WISE MEN". In Matthew 2:7, during his interview/interrogation of the wise men, Herod had enquired accurately from them what time the star appeared. By this he came to know the age of Jesus. Thus, if Jesus was born when "his star appeared" in the east", it can be concluded that when the wise men visited him he could have been even up to 2 years old.

To sum it up:
i) The Bible does not say that the wise men were three nor does it mention their names.
ii) The wise men were learned people coming from the East

iii) The wise men did not visit Jesus in the night of His birth. According to the Bible when they visited Jesus, he was not a baby in a manger but a young child in a house and he could even be up to 2 years old.

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