

THE MAGI, ARE THEY ASTROLOGERS?
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Some time ago a well known writer-friend, Mr Yashwant Kadikar phoned me. He said that he had heard about the Christmas celebrations and knows something about Jesus' Crib, the Christmas Tree, Santa Claus and the Christmas dinner. He had also heard about the Magi but had no idea about the Magi. So he wanted me to explain about the Magi on the phone. Who are the Magi? What is their importance at Christmas?

I told Mr Kadikar what the Bible says about the Magi. Gospel writer St Mathew says this about the Magi : "Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judaea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterwards, some men who studied the stars came from the east to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him'" (Mt 2,1-2 - Good News Bible).

St Mathew says further, " On the way they saw the same star they had seen in the east. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They went into the house and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him" (Mt 2, 9-11).

The Magi are those whom the well known translators of the "Complete Bible" (in Gujarati) Mr Nagindas Parekh and Fr Isudas Cueli render as "The wise men from the east". The Good News Bible refers to them as "some men who studied the stars."

Some versions of the Bible like The New International Version (NIV) Study Bible use the word 'Magi.'

The Bible does not have any detailed information about the Magi. So the Bible scholars and researchers have come to various conclusions and different explanations. The footnote in the NIV Study Bible says that the Magi were "probably astrologers, perhaps from Persia or Southern Arabia, both of which are east of Palestine."

The Magi came to Bethlehem because they "saw his star." So the Magi are believed to be astrologers or experts in heavenly bodies. They say that in olden times many people believed in astrology and studied the stars. They could foretell the future of a person on the basis of his/her star. They believed that the destiny of a person is decided by the star under which he/she was born.

We can understand the faith of the people in astrology. The stars and the whole universe move in a predetermined course. We can see a fixed, definitive pattern in creation. But if a new bright star appears in the sky, it is but natural that it will attract the attention of the astrologers. They may see God's special intervention in creation in a new star.

An expert in the Bible, Scottish theologian William Barclay says that we do not know what type of star was seen by the wise men from the east. But the astrologers' job is to study the stars and other bodies in heaven. So the wise astrologers from the east must have concluded from their studies and research that the bright new star seen by them must be a sign of the birth of the king of kings.

These astrologers are called some times as Magi kings. Bible scholars say that the word 'Magi' is the plural form of Magus. They say that the people known as Magi were living in Median near Saudi Arabia. They belonged to a kingly clan. But they got defeated in the fight for the throne and they began to live as a priestly clan.

The Bible clearly says that the Magi came from the east. So they could be kings from Persia. The gifts brought by the Magi are found in the eastern region of Palestine. So they could have been kings from that country.

The Magi brought with them the gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. From the nature of these rich and royal gifts Bible scholars conclude that the Magi were kings.

In the four Gospels only Mathew speaks about Magi and the star. They saw the star stop over the house and they went in and saw the Child with his Mother Mary and they bowed down and worshipped him.

The new-born child king of the Jewish people is Jesus of the royal lineage of David. The Bible scholars see a special significance and message in the coming of the astrologers to meet Jesus born as a Jew. The child Jesus has come into this world not only for the Jewish people but also for the non-Jewish people. The Magi from the east proclaim that Jesus has come for the whole world.

As Bible scholars note, St Mathew, writing his Gospel for the Jewish Christians, has a special purpose in writing the story of the Magi. Mathew tries to prove that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecies predicted by the prophets of old.

In the book of 'Numbers' in the Bible, Balaam prophesied: "I look into the future, And I see the nation of Israel. A king, like a bright star, will arise in that nation (Num 24:17). Mathew portrays the birth of Jesus, the appearance of the star and the visit of the Magi as the fulfillment of these types of prophecies.

The story of the star leading the Magi to Bethlehem to worship the newborn Babe has a message for all, that God speaks to people through his creation like a star. But the Magi discover the newborn king only with the aid of the Scriptures. Showing their importance too human lives.

King Herod gathers religious heads and scripture scholars to learn about the new-born king when he was approached by the Magi. From the Scriptures King Herod learns as quoted in Mathew, "Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah; for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel."(Mt, 2:6)

Some people believe that the story of the Magi and the star is folklore. But the Bible scholar William Barclay who has written a commentary on every book in the New Testament says that there is no need to believe that the story of the Magi is folklore; because these sort of things happened in olden times. When Jesus was born the people of that time were eagerly waiting for the redeemer and through the Magi kings the whole world is drawn to the child Jesus in the manger.

There is the custom of making cribs during Christmas in all Churches, Christian institutions and also in Christians homes. In the crib along with the status of the child Jesus you will find not only Mother Mary and St Joseph but also the status of the Magi in the form of three kings.

I hope that the writer-friend who phoned me about the Magi will now get an idea of the Magi or astrologers or the wise men from the East mentioned in St. Mathew's Gospel.