

WHO WERE THE WISE MEN?

S.L.H.
Soli Deo Gloria!

In Matthew 2:1, "wise men from the east" came to the land of Israel in association with the birth of Jesus Christ. Here, "**wise men**" is a translation of the Greek word, **μαγοι**. Modern Bible translations tend to transliterate this word as **magi**, from which the English words *magic* and *magician* are derived, but in doing there is a danger that an occultic connotation might be associated with them. It should be noted that the text/context of Matthew 2 suggests no such wicked association; indeed, they are the good guys in Matthew's birth narrative. Thus, the KJV translators properly translated **μαγοι** as "wise men". In contrast, the singular **μαγος** is translated as "sorcerer" relative to the "false prophet" who went by the name "Barjesus" (cf. Act13:6).

Recognizing these "**wise men**" as such is an important aid in their proper identification. They came "from the east", which is understood to be relative to Jerusalem and the land of Israel. In Scripture, such a geographic designation generally denotes Babylon and/or Persia (cf. Gen11:2; Isa43:5; 46:11). In Daniel 2:2, the advisors to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon are designated as "magicians", "astrologers", "sorcerers", and "Chaldeans". Certainly, "magicians", "astrologers", and "sorcerers" are all categories of occult practitioners; however, the "Chaldeans" are to be distinguished from these. Strong's Hebrew lexicon indicates that the "Chaldeans" (when used as a title, rather than a geographical designation) were "those persons considered to be the wisest in the land". After successfully interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel was promoted by the king to be "chief over all the **wise men** of Babylon" (Dan2:48). Daniel outlived the Babylonian empire, and "prospered in the reign of Darius, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian" (Dan6:28). In Esther 1:13, we see that even during the Persian empire this caste of advisors to kings continued, characterized as "**wise men**, which knew the times". Research into extra-biblical literature indicates that these "Chaldean" wise men were an ancient and hereditary caste of scholars with particular expertise in astronomy and dream interpretation (which was undoubtedly why Nebuchadnezzar made Daniel the "chief" of their order).

That Daniel was made chief of these **wise men** "from the east", and that they were experts at astronomy, provides the outline of a plausible explanation for why they knew what they knew, and why they came to Jerusalem when they did. Balaam, the ancient prophet from Mesopotamia (cf. Deut23:4), who some suggest belonged to (or even began) their order, had long before prophesied that "there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel" (cf. Num24:15-17); that is, the arrival of a future Jewish king (i.e., the Messiah) would be heralded by a "Star". Observing an unusual "star", they associated it with "he that is born King of the Jews" (Matt2:2). That they were anticipating the season of His arrival was nearing can be inferred from the fact that they were undoubtedly in possession of, and revered, the Book of Daniel (their former chief) which predicted the very day of Messiah's arrival (cf. Dan9:25).

To dispel common myths, they were not kings; this is erroneously supported by Psalm 72:10, which describes the millennial kingdom. Coming from Persia, they would have ridden horses, not camels. Nothing in the text of Matthew 2 indicates how many "wise men" there were, but there were likely many more than three. Furthermore, having undertaken a journey of almost a thousand miles, they would have travelled in a sizable caravan that almost certainly included a military escort. Such a large delegation from

Persia arriving unexpectedly in Jerusalem was undoubtedly the reason "Herod ... was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matt2:3).

Who were the "**wise men**"? They were an hereditary caste of Babylonian/Persian scholars (not occultists) who had been influenced by the prophet Daniel to anticipate the coming of the Messiah who was to be the King of Israel, and who was to be "worship[ed]" by all (Matt2:2).