

THE WISE MEN (MAGI) ENCOUNTER JESUS CHRIST, THE WISDOM OF GOD. – Elizabeth Jordaan. 24 December 2022.

Matthew 2:1-2 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, [2] saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

The Greek word for *wise men* is "*magus*" meaning magician or sorcerer. The Magi were from Median (Iranian) tribes and formed the hereditary priestly clan for centuries, like Levi was the priestly clan in Israel.

They occupied an influential position at the Median court as dream interpreters and soothsayers. From at least the time of Darius I onwards, the Magi were the official priests of the Achaemenid kings and played an important role at the royal court and enjoyed a great influence. Along with their religious functions (in particular, performing cultic libations to rivers and mountains, as well as making sacrifices of livestock), they were also engaged in administrative and economic activities.

The Persian king Xerxes did not undertake any important decisions without preliminary advice of the Magi. They interpreted his dreams and gave him prophecies; they also accompanied the Persian army on campaigns with the sacred fire. The historian Herodotus adds that no sacrifices could be offered by the Persians without the presence of a Magus who performed the appropriate rites and chanted hymns of the birth of the gods.

Magi were not only expert performers of worship rites but also tutors and teachers of the sons of the Persian kings and took part in the coronation ceremonies of each new king. An integral part of the activities of the Magi was comprised of their ritual functions connected with astrology and magic.

The Magi were disciples and followers of Zoroaster. The Iranian tradition, represented in Middle Persian literature, considers them experts on rituals and keepers of the cultural and religious customs of a number of Iranian tribes. Zoroastrianism is an Iranian religion and one of the world's oldest organized faiths, based on the teachings of the Iranian-speaking prophet Zoroaster. They worshipped the deity called "*Lord of Wisdom*" and taught that there was a struggle between good and evil. The prediction was that good will eventually conquer evil. It also taught monotheism, messianism, free will and judgment after death. They were influenced by other religions, including the Abrahamic religion, Gnosticism, Buddhism and Greek philosophy.

In polytheistic societies, where many deities were worshipped, any cult was considered to be valid, and new gods were always welcome. Therefore, it was natural that the Magi, along with Zoroastrian teaching, absorbed also other religious ideas. They became masters of the occult crafts.

The Magi and Israel

After the Flood in the time of Noah, people congregated in the area called Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia means "the land between the rivers", referring to the region between the Tigris (on the east) and the Euphrates (on the west). It stretched from the source of these rivers south-west

of the Ararat mountain range in the north-east of Turkey, to the Persian gulf south of Iraq. Modern countries that were part of Mesopotamia are Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Idolatry and the worship of Baals (lords of the land) took root after the Flood when Nimrod conquered much of the land of Mesopotamia and built several cities, including Babylon and Nineveh. They began building towers (a form of pyramids) to worship the gods, the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets. The movements of the planets and star constellations were observed and believed to influence the lives of people, especially when they were born when a certain star constellation was prominent in the night sky.

In the oldest book of the Bible, Job, we read that after the Flood there were still people who believed in the Creator God. They called Him *Elohim, the All-Mighty*, the One who created the constellations of the Bear, Orion and the Pleiades (Job.9:7-10).

Abraham was born in Mesopotamia, in an area called Ur of the Chaldeans. There are two possible sites for his birthplace. One is in southern Iraq, the other is in southern Turkey, just 10 kilometers north of a place called Harran. Abraham was born to an idolatrous family, who served other gods and idols (Joshua 24:2).

God called Abram out of idolatry and sent him to the land of Canaan. At this time, Canaan and Trans-Jordan were dominated by *the mighty men (giants)* and their tribes. In Genesis 14, we read about the war between four kings of Mesopotamia against five kings of Canaan. In this war, six tribes of *giants* were defeated: Rephaim, Zamzummim, Emim, Horites, Amalekites and Amorites. In the process Abram's nephew Lot was abducted and Abram set out to rescue him. On his way back from the rescue, Abram met a mysterious king from Salem, who was a priest of *Elohim Elyon, God Most High*. Melchizedek came to bless Abram and to present him with a ceremonial meal of bread and wine, and to tell Abram that *Elohim Elyon* was the Possessor of heaven and earth.

Twenty-five years later, Elohim revealed Himself to Abram as *El Shaddai, God Almighty*, made a covenant with Abram and changed his name to Abraham. Our Bibles translates this name of God as God Almighty. He is not a *mighty one*, He is *The Almighty*. Abraham's descendants all knew *El Shaddai*, until they became slaves in Egypt. They lost their knowledge of *El Shaddai* and were confused by all the gods of Egypt.

Four-hundred years passed and suddenly God appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush. Moses was confused. He asked: What is your Name? God revealed Himself to Moses as *YHVH, I AM WHO I AM* (Ex.3:14; 6:3), the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who knew Him as El Shaddai. *YHVH* led the Israelites out of Egypt back to Canaan, and a short journey that should have lasted about one year, changed into forty years in the Great and Terrible Wilderness. The reason? They were too afraid and unbelieving to trust *YHVH* to overcome the *Anakim giants* (Deut.13:33).

After the forty years, Moses and Joshua led the Israelites towards Canaan again, this time through the Trans-Jordan, the land previously belonging to the *Rephaim*, the *Zamzummim*, the *Emim*, the *Horites* and the *Amorites*. They travelled north on the King's Highway and totally annihilated two kings, king Sihon of the *Amorites* and king Og of Basan, the last ruling *Rephaim giant* (Deut.3:11). The Israelites turned south-west to cross the Jordan River to Canaan. As they camped on the Plains of Moab, Moabite king Balak, became terribly afraid of the Israelites. He summoned help from a *Magus, Balaam*, that lived near the Euphrates in Mesopotamia, to curse the Israelites. *YHVH*, the God of Israel, warned Balaam to not go, He even made his donkey to speak! Balaam was unable to

curse Israel. He ended up cursing Moab and blessing Israel. Then he gave a prophecy that was fulfilled by the birth of Jesus Christ:

Numbers 24:17 "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult."

Sadly, the Israelites failed to conquer the whole land of Canaan. The worship of the Baals proved too attractive. Israel (both Northern and Southern kingdoms) fell into idolatry. The worshipped Baal and his female counterpart, Asherah, on every street corner and under every green tree. It provoked YHVH to such an extent that He declared a divorce with Israel because they broke their covenant with Him (Jeremiah 3). He sent them to exile in Babylon.

The Magi and the prophet Daniel.

Daniel was a young boy when he was taken to Babylon to serve in king Nebuchadnezzar's court. He and his three friends decided early on that they will not defile themselves with the idolatry of Babylon. Daniel became a trusted servant. Then king Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and wanted the Magi of his empire to not only interpret the dream, but to tell him what he dreamt, as he had forgotten the dream! (Dan.2:2). In spite of their reputation as soothsayers or dream interpreters, they were unable to perform this impossible task. But Daniel knew his God was not like the idols of Babylon. YHVH was the Almighty, the all-knowing God, and He could impart wisdom to those who know Him. He told the king that YHVH would reveal the dream, and He did. King Nebuchadnezzar pronounced Daniel the wisest man in all of Babylon and made him the head of the Magi (Dan.2:48).

Not long after this, king Nebuchadnezzar had a second dream, which Daniel also interpreted. The dream came true. King Nebuchadnezzar was humbled to eat grass like an ox for seven years, after which he publicly acknowledged YHVH as the King of Heaven!

Daniel was educated in all the wisdom and religions of Babylon, but his God gave him wisdom beyond any other wise man that ever lived in any nation. He was shown many visions. In one of them he saw the Ancient of Days sitting on His throne in heaven, and someone like a Son of a man, coming on the clouds of heaven into the presence of the King of Heaven, from Whom He received dominion and a Kingdom that would never end. He had a special messenger, the angel Gabriel, sent from heaven to interpret to him these visions. He learned about the immediate future, the coming kingdoms, when the Messiah would be born (Dan.9:25), and what will happen at the very end of human history. Daniel also read his own people's history and especially the prophecies of Jeremiah (Dan.9:2), so it was reasonable to believe that he knew about the prophecy of Balaam, that a Star shall come from Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise in Israel. It was the custom of all the magi (wise men) to study the prophecies from the nations they conquered. The prophecy of the Star was just waiting to be discovered at the right time.

The Magi and the Messiah.

According to the Magi's testimony to king Herod, they saw a Star in their home country in the East, and identified it as a sign of the birth of the King of the Jews. This was not just any king in Israel. It was definitely not a king from Herod's line. This was the birth of a King that was prophesied in an ancient prophecy by one of their own, a Magus like them, coming from their homeland, from near the Euphrates. They knew the stars, they knew the ancient prophecies. For a

Star like this to be seen from the East and pinpointed it to have risen in Jerusalem, was not something arbitrary. It prompted them to take a hazardous journey across the desert to reach Jerusalem that was south-west of Iran, probably with a caravan of camels and an entourage of servants like Ezra did (Ezra 2).

King Herod was shaken. Who was this King and where would He be born? The chief priests and scribes knew about the prophecy according to the prophet Micah, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). King Herod wanted to know when they first saw the Star and the Magi told him that it was about two years before their arrival in Jerusalem (Matt.2:7,16). King Herod told them to find the young king of the Jews, and report back to him. But the Magi were warned in a divine way to not go back to Herod, so they took another road back to their country.

The triumph of Jesus Christ – the Wisdom of God!

Tradition has it that the Magi returned to their homeland. Their encounter with Jesus, the King of the Jews, changed them forever. They returned back home, firm believers that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

In the Iranian city of Urmia (Orumieh) is the oldest church in Iran, the Church of St Mary, that claims to be built upon the tomb of at least one of the Magi who visited Jesus in Bethlehem. It stands as a testimony of how an encounter with the One who is called *The Wisdom of God* can change a wise man, a sorcerer, an astrologer, a Magus, into a worshipper of Jesus Christ.

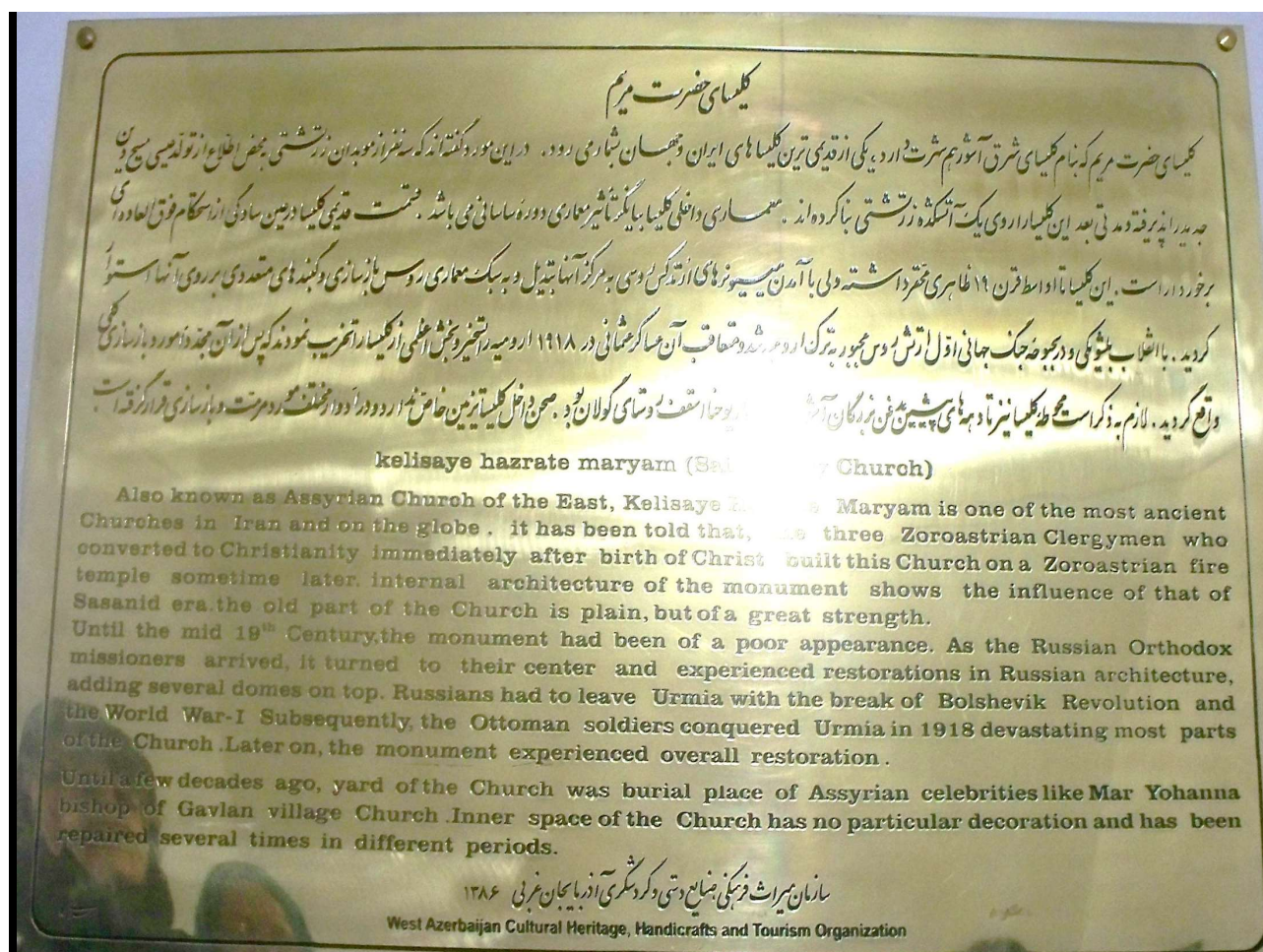


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And not only that, the Church in Iran is the fastest growing church in modern times. It has outlasted the Roman Empire, the Parthian Empire, the Sassanian Empire, the Arab-Muslim invasion, the Abbasid Caliphate, the Samanid Empire, the Crusades, the Mongol conquest, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian-Persian war, the Anglo-Soviet invasion, the Iranian Revolution, the Iraqi invasion and the Ayatollahs.

Balaam's vision has come true, Daniel's visions have come true, the Magi followed the Star of the King of the Jews, and it set their nation on a course to become followers of Jesus Christ, the Bright Morning Star. Are you following Him? Is He your Messiah, your Saviour, your King? Don't you want to follow the example of the Magi and bow before Him in worship, presenting to Him your life, your body, your soul and your spirit as a living sacrifice, the only gift that is worthy of the King of kings and the Lord of lords, Jesus Christ our Lord!

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. [19] For it is written: "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND BRING TO NOTHING THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE PRUDENT." [20] Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? [21] For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. [22] For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; [23] but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, [24] but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, CHRIST THE POWER OF GOD AND THE WISDOM OF GOD. [25] Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.