

THE MYSTERIOUS MAGI
SERMON 1 | WHAT IS A MAGI?

WHAT IS A MAGI | MATTHEW 2:1-2

- The phrase **wise men** (Matt. 2:1) is from the Greek μάγος [magos], from which we later got the English word *magi*.
 - Some modern translations transliterate the Greek rather than translate.
 - While no English word fully translates *magus*, the word *magi* had gained two meanings by the time of the writing of the Scriptures, and a separation of the two meanings is essential for our understanding.
- The original meaning, as used by Matthew:
 - The original meaning of *magi* told their nationality and their character.
 - By the time of the birth of Jesus, the *magi* were the only remaining remnant of the Persian empire.
 - They were not *kings*, for the Persian Empire had fallen.
 - They are sometimes *called* kings because they had been *king-makers* and they were the closest thing to a King the Persian people had.
 - The *magi* in this sense were a *priestly* tribe that excelled in the knowledge of science, math, astronomy, history, and philosophy. They were the educators of the kings (until the Kingdom fell), and then they carried on the religion and learning of the Persian empire.
- The Roman meaning, as used by Luke
 - By the time Luke wrote Acts, there was a secondary, *Roman* use of the term *magi*.
 - Acts 8:9 speaks of *Simon the Sorcerer* (as he is often called).
 - The verb and noun forms of *magos* are used in verses 9 and 11, and clearly relate to the sorcery rather than wisdom.
 - Acts 13:8 speaks of **Elymus the sorcerer**. His Jewish *name* Bar-Jesus is interpreted Elymus in the Roman world.
- Note how carefully Matthew and Luke distinguish their *magi*.
 - Acts 13:6 is careful to note the character of Elymas, likely knowing that *some would recognize that Magi had an honorable use*, and wanting to ensure that use was not adopted in evaluating Elymas.
 - He also notes that Elymas was **a Jew**, knowing that the honorable sense of the word would not be used of a Jew.

- Matthew notes that the **wise men** are **from the east** (the home of Magi) and that Herod (a desperate despot) invited them into his presence, even calling the Sanhedrin together for an audience.
- Unfortunately, many early Christian writers viewed the **wise men** of Matthew 1 as having come from wickedness. This is because these early writers adopted a *Roman* rather than a *Persian* definition of the word. This is also likely why the King James Bible chose to translate the word.

WHERE WERE THE MAGI FROM?

- They came **from the east**. There is virtually no doubt that this means *from Persia*.
- That Matthew knew this is almost certain. Matthew 2:12 states that **they departed into their own country by another way**. If Matthew didn't know where they were from, wouldn't he have just said, "they left without returning to Herod?"

THE RELIGION OF PERSIA

- Historians agree that the Persian religion was both monotheistic and ancient.
 - Many secular sources make this religion as the source of Judaism, in an effort to discredit Judaism.
 - In doing so, they let us know how *similar* the Persian religion was with Judaism.
- This ancient religion was *forward looking* to a *redeemer* who would *conquer evil* and *establish everlasting life*.
- My assumption about the Persian religion: *it was learned from Noah's son Jephthah and slowly perverted, but always had a large dose of truth*.
- Evidence for my assumption:
 - Jonah's call to Nineveh. Why is God sending a prophet there?
 - Isaiah 46:9-11 – a reference to Cyrus the Great of Persia. (See also Is. 45:1).
 - God seems to have a gracious work among ancient Persians.

SUMMARY: THE PRIESTLY PERSIANS

- The word *magus* seems to require that the **wise men** were priestly Persians, looking for a Redeemer from God.