

THE WISMEN CAME TO WORSHIP

Matthew 12:11

The Wisemen, Magi, came to worship. They didn't give each other gifts in celebration of the Birth of Christ. Their gifts were for Jesus. The reasons we give each other gifts at Christmas come from a variety of traditions, including the Roman celebration of the Saturnalia, and perhaps, the Hebrew festival of Purim founded in the story of Esther (9:19). It is good to give gifts simply because giving to others is what Jesus would want us to do in His honor. If, however, we are supposed to give gifts to Jesus at the celebration of *His* Birth, perhaps the reasons for doing so are based primarily on the story of the Wisemen, or, Magi....depicted in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Magi were a priestly class of the Chaldeans in Persia. They were not kings, as some of our traditions have made them to be. They did not come from different nations. And they probably did not come alone... but with a substantial caravan. They would have been very conspicuous, and so they probably went to Jerusalem in order to show respect to the local king, not to find answers in Herod's court, not really; but to avoid a failure to acknowledge that he was, in fact, the current king in the region...even though he was more of a puppet of Rome than a rightful monarch of the Jews.

Becoming a Mage, or, Magus, was a long process. The Magi were able to interpret signs and wonders, especially as they appeared in the sky. They were more like astrologers than magicians, though there is some scholarly testimony that would indicate that they dabbled in sorcery. But, however they were perceived, they were learned men, scholars, even scientists for their day. Their religion would have been based on Zoroastrianism, which basically claims that the powers of darkness and light are battling each other on a cosmic level, undetected by most common people; and revealed by the activity of the stars and planets, comets and asteroids.

It is not known how one became a Magus, what the course of study might have been, but it probably took several years of study and training to achieve a level of knowledge required to be able to interpret the signs they saw. Pastors are to have an undergraduate degree, which usually takes four years in college, and then at least three more years in seminary to get a Master's Degree. But I assume, for the Magi, it was a lifetime of study...and worship. Just as we can't quite understand how astrology is supposed to predict special events in a person's life, we could probably never quite understand how the Magi determined the coming of events on earth. But we accept the idea that they had seen a star rising in the East, and to them it indicated a birth so significant that it compelled them to journey an incredible distance, in order to honor the One who had come.

Consider all that went in to what their actions proclaim. Years of study, of observing the heavens...night after night, noting the motions of the stars (or is it their positions above the earth as the earth moves through the sky, since the stars don't move observably? Actually the only star that has been detected to have moved at all is our Sun). Study...producing star charts, detecting changes as planets move through the skies...this is their life. This was done for hours and hours at night. If a comet or asteroid, meteor shower, or, anomaly occurred, they made special note of it.

Something different happened. Many have tried to determine exactly what it was, whether it was a special alignment of planets and stars, or, a comet, but the reality is that God, in His divine providence, mysteriously revealed something to them...and they responded. Their interpretation was that a very significant birth had occurred, or, would occur, in the region of the Jews. They quickly prepared their caravan in order to go west. They very likely traveled with servants, perhaps there was about a dozen people accompanying them on their journey. And they made their way. Their intention was to worship. The word translated does not mean *show reverence, or humble themselves, or to pay homage*, but all that is included in the meaning of the word that is translated *worship*. It is a serious presentation of themselves to the One they want to honor, to glorify, to praise. The Wisemen came to worship.

The angels that met the shepherds glorified God for what was being experienced in Bethlehem. We should want to do everything we can to bring glory to Jesus...as we celebrate His Coming. We should want our actions to honor Him, to give Him glory and praise. We should bring Christ our *gold*, the precious elements of our lives; *incense*, a symbol of our deepest hopes and prayers, our wants and wishes, our desires. As incense burns it is thought to rise up as a pleasing odor to God with our prayers. And we should bring Christ our *myrrh*, the balm that soothes...words that heal and comfort. All this...we should want to offer as a gift to Christ. He is the reason we worship tonight. He is the object of our devotion. He is the subject of our commitment. He is the destination in our journeys. He is our savior!