

# The Wise Men: FACT OR FICTION?



**DEAR FATHER KERPER:** Ever since I was a child, the Wise Men have fascinated me. As I got older, I became confused, especially when I saw the Wise Men in the Nativity scene in our church. St. Matthew’s Gospel clearly says they saw the Christ child in a house, not a stable. I started to think: If the Church can’t get the Nativity scene right, maybe the Wise Men never existed. Were they real? If they were, how did the Church get the story so mixed up?



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

Your comments touch upon two separate issues: first, the “inerrancy” of sacred Scripture; and second, the Church’s manner of depicting biblical stories through words and visible displays such as Nativity scenes.

“Inerrancy” means that sacred Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, never makes false propositions. However, this guarantee of truthfulness protects only core truths of our faith, not the details.

The story of the Wise Men serves as a perfect example of the difference between revealed truths and details.

Let’s consider the liturgical setting of the Wise Men. We read St. Matthew’s account of the adoration of the Magi (Greek for Wise Men) on Jan. 6, the feast of the Epiphany. The 12 days between Christmas and Epiphany “re-enact” the time between the birth of Christ and his encounter with the Wise Men. Biblical scholars have long speculated that the actual time was perhaps two years. Herod’s order to kill boys as old as 2 suggests that Jesus was not a newborn child.

The core truth of the Epiphany — indeed the whole story of the Wise Men — is about divine revelation. This has two aspects.

First, it teaches us that God, who is hidden and absolutely unknowable, has approached humanity and freely “unveiled” himself “in the flesh.” We call this the Incarnation — the complete union between God and a human being, the divine person called Jesus Christ.

Second, the Epiphany celebrates the extension of divine revelation to the gentiles, all the non-Jewish people in the world. The Wise Men, then, were the first gentiles to lay eyes on Christ in his divinity. Moreover, they intuitively recognized his divinity and worshipped him as divine.

Now let’s turn to a few details about the Wise Men. The first two are relatively unimportant; the third and fourth have greater significance.

First, St. Matthew clearly identifies the Wise Men as “coming from the East.” Various non-biblical traditions identify two of the named Wise Men as coming from Persia — contemporary Iran.

This note about ethnicity and foreign origins does two things. It affirms the universality of divine revelation. And it attests to the working of God's grace, even beyond the boundaries of "true religion."

The second point pertains to kingship, which Matthew never attributes to the Wise Men. Early Christians, however, viewed the Wise Men as kings because of several prophecies in the Old Testament. The best known comes from Isaiah: "Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; All from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord." (Is 60:6) The image here is very striking: three powerful, foreign kings bow down and worship a baby boy, the only true king. This prefigures the eventual impotence of all worldly power.

Third, sacred Scripture does not specify the number of Wise Men. St. Matthew wrote: "Then they opened their treasure boxes and brought out gifts for him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh." (Mt 2:11) This mention of three gifts led people to assume that each gift came from one wise man. However, one of earliest paintings of the Nativity shows only two Wise Men and no shepherds.

Fourth, sacred Scripture never names the Wise Men. Christians in the West, however, began calling them Melchior, Balthasar and Casper. Christians in the East had two sets of names: Hormizdah, Yazdegard and Perozadh; as well as Hor, Basanater and Karusdan.

You asked about the reality of the Wise Men. Yes or no?

Following the standards of modern "scientific" history, most historians would not consider the Wise Men to be historical figures. After all, they had no birth certificates, passports, credit card bills, and so forth. This absence of documentary evidence in no way "proves" their non-existence. Indeed, other "proofs" exist, especially the pious devotions of ordinary people through the centuries.

One compelling "proof" is the veneration of relics derived from the remains of the Wise Men. As early as the sixth century, faithful Christians travelled to Cologne and Milan to honor the Wise Men. This custom continues even today.

On a personal note, I must confess to being a believer in the Wise Men. When I was maybe 5 or 6, my maternal grandmother assured me that if I prayed to the Wise Men on Jan. 6, I would never go broke. So far, neither I nor any parish under my charge has gone bankrupt. She must have been correct.

Though my grandmother certainly could not explain the Epiphany to me, she surely believed that it had happened. And that was enough for her — and for me.

After all, God's continuous self-revelation comes to us in many forms, including beautiful stories like the Wise Men. Simple faith, perhaps more than academic theology, affirms God's truth. ■

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