

What exactly are Magi?

By Rev. Phil Greetham

The term, like a lot of words, has changed its meaning over a period of time. It was originally associated with the Medes and the Persians and has its beginning with a man called Zoroaster. Around the year 1000 BC, Zoroaster began to proclaim a religious message based on the principle 'Do good, hate evil'. He preached that there was just one god, Ahura-Mazda, (Wise Lord). Ahura-Mazda was the good force in the world represented by purifying fire and water and was apparently a god that one could talk to. Opposed to the good, taught Zoroaster, was a dark power of evil. This code of belief has survived in one form or other throughout history and even has its followers today in the poorer communities of modern day Iran.

The term Magi was originally reserved for a tribe of the Medes who were priests for the Persian empire and the Zoroastrian Religion. Having said this the term 'Magi' became popular and eventually by the 1st century AD, it was being used of any mysterious person who had access to knowledge not normally known to most people. Thus in the book of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:9 ff) we have the exploits of a man calling himself 'Simon - the Great Power'. He earned himself a living by performing magic - doing the work of a 'magos'. This is very similar to modern stage magicians, who having learned the art of illusion, use it to make the impossible seem possible. Today most of these magicians would not claim to have magic powers but simply special knowledge, (although there are exceptions!) Simon, like all magicians, always on the look out for new tricks to add to his repertoire, saw the miracles performed by the apostles and tried to buy the secret off them! Needless to say, this attitude was given short shrift by the apostles! Also in the book of Acts we have a Jew called Elymas, also described as a 'magos'. (Acts 13:6-12) He was an advisor to the proconsul in Paphos, Serginus Paulus. Luke describes him as a false prophet and he is later accused of 'perverting the ways of the Lord.'

These individuals are both depicted as being wicked and opposed to the work of God. They are in fact charlatans whose lack of real wisdom leads to their own downfall. The Magi in Matthew's gospel, however, seem a very different group of people to either the conjuror Simon or the deceiver Elymas. They seem to be quiet, sincere and of admirable conduct. They had apparently come across knowledge through careful research and wished only to respond to it. At no time is there any indication that they gained anything material from their research. Is there perhaps any use of the word, 'Magi', which fits this description better than the ones we have seen? Well, some Magi at this time were employed by rulers of countries much the same way as specialists are employed by modern governments today; to keep them up to date on latest developments and to provide advice. Being high up in social circles, but not military people, Magi were sometimes used as envoys to travel to other countries, representing the royal family. They would gather for important events like coronations, funerals or the opening of new cities

or harbours. This was particularly so if the Magi were related to the royal family in some way. They would have been interested in time keeping, calenders, tides, medicine, religion, alchemy and many other subjects. They would have been particularly interested in the study of the night sky. It was thought at that time, that what was observed in the sky was reflected in the events upon the earth. Monitoring of events in the heavens, **it was believed gave insight into what was happening, or going to happen upon the earth.** A knowledge of the night sky was therefore essential. Is this what our Magi were, religious, scholarly envoys? It does seem to fit better the kind of 'Magi' we find in Matthew's account.