

WE THREE KINGS OF ORIENT ARE...OR ARE WE?



Well, yet again we are back to the problem of translation. English versions of the stories have chosen 'kings' or 'wise men', but Matthew's own choice of word was 'magoi' which translates best as 'astrologers'. Do you read your horoscope? Do you believe any of it? 'Reading' the stars is an ancient belief across many cultures.

Matthew does not give us the number, so three is a guess based on the three gifts that they offered the child: gold, frankincense and myrrh (there could have been ten of them, but still only

three gifts!) Christian tradition has even given them names: Balthasar (usually portrayed in art as white), Caspar (often portrayed as brown) and Melchior (portrayed as black), but Matthew mentions no names or nationalities.

Are they from 'the orient'? Matthew simply says they came from 'the East'? That could be anywhere East of Jerusalem.

Can you think of reasons why the Early Church might have given the 'Magoi' nationalities/colours and made them into 'kings' when they had no real textual evidence to support these ideas?

(HINT: 300 years after Jesus, Christianity became the official religion of the whole of the Roman Empire)

But why does Matthew choose to include 'Magoi'?

To answer that we might look at other ancient literature to discover what people thought of 'magoi'/astrologers. We learn that they came from Persia (Iran), and the Roman poet, Juvenal, describes such people as 'low life's... full of superstition'. Philo, a well-educated Jew who lived in Alexandria (Egypt) around the same time as Jesus, tells of gullible people being conned by magoi. Yet, many ancient people believed they could indeed interpret the movement of the stars and thus future events, and Kings did consult them.

Like the Early Church, did Matthew include them because they were foreigners and he wanted his audience to realise that Jesus' message was for all people? Or is the fact that they were astrologers the main reason for including them? They see the movement of a new star, and realise that it means something important; the birth of a new king.