

The Songs of Christmas

ADVENT: Day 18

"WE THREE KINGS"

*We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar;
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.*

*O, star of wonder, star of light,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.*

Pop quiz: How many wise men saw the baby Jesus? It wasn't three, despite what this song may tell us.

It may have been as many as twelve, but don't worry about buying more magi for your nativity scene.

The actual number of magi isn't recorded in Scripture. Matthew 2:1 says, "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem." And nowhere else in that passage nor elsewhere in the Bible is the number of magi recorded.

So why do we assume that there were three wise men? Likely due to the three gifts they brought to Jesus, i.e., the gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The story behind the song

"We Three Kings" was composed in 1857 and probably has more to do with our thinking than the actual passage of Scripture upon which it's based. In other words, don't take Christmas carols as Scripture. Rather, just as this devotional attempts, allow these lyrics to point you back to the Scriptures upon which they're based.

This Christmas carol is based on Matthew 2:1–12 and describes the magi, a.k.a. the wise men, who traveled from the East to find the newborn King. We may think of the "Orient" as Japan or China, but the wise men were probably from the part of Asia known as Persia.

Why do we call these men "wise"?

The word magi actually meant skilled magician or astrologer. We know these men followed the star, so we believe them to be astrologers. But how did they know to follow the star? That is a more difficult question to answer.

It's possible that, while the prophet Daniel was held captive in Babylon, he might have taught men about the promised Messiah of Israel. Daniel was considered a wise man in one of the most educated and advanced cultures of that time. Babylon was the eastern area that would be called Persia, which is known as Iran today.

The distance from Babylon to Bethlehem is 107 miles. The wise men probably lived near that region and traveled the long distance by riding camels and walking.

The magi were wealthy men, and the gifts they brought were expensive. They would have brought servants to protect them, and they would have packed food, water, and tents.

The wise magi knew whom to worship

To add another twist to our traditional nativity scenes today, Jesus wasn't a baby in a manger by the time the magi arrived. The Bible uses a different word for boy when describing a child under the age of two. The magi might not have begun their trip until after Jesus had been born.

And one more fun fact about those "three" kings is the gifts they brought. Those valuable gifts are probably the reason Joseph, a poor man, was able to care for his family when the angel told him they all needed to flee to Egypt.

When you picture the arrival of the magi, think about all that the arrival meant, especially in the tiny village of Bethlehem! Wealthy, knowledgeable men worshipped the newborn king, acknowledging that "thy perfect light" had finally come to a dark world.

A popular saying reads: "Wise men still seek him." How will you be wise today?

"The Songs Tell the Story"

An Advent Devotional By: Janet Denison