

Imagining the Magi

What did the magi look like on your Christmas cards? Riding camels over distant dunes? Humbly approaching the Christ-child in the manger? Richly dressed? Exotically foreign? Decidedly 'eastern'? Were they differentiated in any way, for example by one of them being black, or by varying in age? Bearing gifts, often in elaborate caskets? Always three, though, and occasionally even named: Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior. Where does all this come from?

The story of their coming is told only in Matthew's gospel, where they are called *magoi*. It's a word that occurs elsewhere in the bible, and is usually translated as 'magician'. Here, though, this rather disparaging term is avoided and it is instead rendered as 'wise men'. These are clearly 'good *magoi*'! The gospel specifies their costly gifts which, in light of the Christian belief about the nature of the child who has been born, bear symbolic and prophetic meaning: gold signifying kingship, frankincense signifying priesthood, and myrrh signifying death. But we are not actually told that there were three of them. That's an assumption based on the reference to three categories of gift. As for their names, these first appear in texts from the sixth century, although Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior are special to Western Christendom. Other traditions have different names and even different numbers of 'wise men', sometimes as many as twelve.

It's clear that the story is told in Matthew to demonstrate that Jesus' birth fulfilled a biblical prophecy. This is found in Micah chapter 5, v. 2 and is quoted in Matthew chapter 2, v. 6. Matthew's narrative embodiment of the prophecy, directed at his Jewish audience, will doubtless have generated the assumption that, coming from east of Judaea and being interested in interpreting heavenly bodies, the *magoi* were Zoroastrians from Persia — a religion and a region and where the study of the stars flourished. Of course, getting to Judaea from there would involve crossing deserts, so the camels which we see in art are a logical elaboration. But there is nothing in the gospel to suggest that they were imagined as kings. That's a much later creative development, as is their portrayal which distinguishes them by age and ethnicity.

What has happened over the centuries is that this powerfully symbolic story, which makes a point about the nature of the Christ-child, has had its symbolism imaginatively heightened, so that the initial 'epiphany' or 'manifestation' of the Christ-child is represented visually in Christian art as being to gentiles from around the world (the magi) as well as to Jews (the shepherds), to rich (the magi) as well as to poor (the shepherds), and to young and old (often shown in the portrayal of the shepherds as well as the magi). So the Christmas cards work well, if you know the symbolism, despite the fact that the details are mostly non-biblical.

What is 'wrong' with the standard depictions is that the visit is shown as taking place in a stable very soon after the birth. In Matthew the *magoi* enter a house; and if Herod ordered all children under two in Bethlehem to be killed, that implies a considerable time-delay before the magi arrived at Herod's court to ask about the new child-king. But we should not worry too much about these discrepancies since the story functions not as a piece of historical rapportage but rather as a narrative intended to convey symbolic meaning. It is this important symbolic dimension that has been strengthened, very effectively, by the artistic imagination.