Were there three Nativity wise men—or twelve?

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Early Christian sources differ on how many Magi visited the infant Jesus, and whether they were kings at all. Tradition has landed on three wise men for the Nativity story but early and medieval Christian sources listed anywhere from two to twelve kings from the east.

By Candida Moss. December 17, 2025.

Few scenes in the Christian imagination are as iconic as the three travellers kneeling before the infant Jesus, their camels waiting patiently as they present gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Yet these visitors—variously called wise men, astrologers, or kings—remain among the most mysterious figures in the biblical world.

The Gospel of Matthew, the only canonical source to mention them, provides minimal details about who they were or what compelled them to undertake a long journey westward. Over the centuries, storytellers, theologians, and artists have filled in the gaps. As a result, the Magi are some of the most elaborated figures in Christian tradition, inspiring everything from medieval liturgical dramas to Renaissance paintings.

What are magi—and what does the Bible actually say?

Matthew refers to the three men who visit Jesus as magi (Greek magoi). Centuries beforehand, the Greek historian Herodotus used the term to refer to a priestly caste from Persia who interpreted dreams. Classical authors such as Xenophon and Strabo used it to describe religious experts. The term was regularly associated with Zoroastrianism, and, by the first century CE, the Greek-speaking Mediterranean world also used the word more broadly to refer to astrologers or practitioners of esoteric knowledge.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Magi “from the East” arrive in Jerusalem after observing a rising star that signals the birth of a new king. The reference to the star strongly suggests that Matthew viewed them as astrologers. The Magi consult King Herod, who is disturbed by the news, and then follow the star to Bethlehem. There they find the child Jesus, offer gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and depart “by another way” after receiving a warning

in a dream. Notably, Matthew does not identify the Magi's homeland, does not call them kings, does not describe their mode of travel, and does not specify their number. Later Christian tradition inferred there were three because of the three gifts. But in the earliest surviving Christian interpretations, the Magi could be as few as two or as many as twelve.

Early Christian accounts of the 'wise men'.

Because the biblical account is so spare, early Christians sought to elaborate on who these mysterious visitors were. One of the richest sources was the Revelation of the Magi, an apocryphal text preserved in an 8th-century Syriac manuscript that was translated into English in 2010. In this version, the Magi hail from a distant land called "Shir"—a location some interpreters link to regions east of Persia, even as far as China. They are descendants of the biblical patriarch Seth, the third and least famous of the named children of Adam and Eve, who had entrusted his offspring with a secret prophecy that a star of divine light would one day appear and reveal the Savior of the world. In the story, which is told from the perspective of the Magi, the star becomes a small luminous being (probably Jesus, though this is never explicitly stated) that speaks to them and guides them, transforming the journey into a visionary pilgrimage rather than a purely physical trek. The Magi eventually return home, where they evangelize about Jesus in their homeland.

Brent Landau, author of the first English language translation of the Revelation of the Magi, and an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, said that the text is "not simply 'fan fiction' that was created for entertainment. The author seems to believe that since Jesus can appear to anyone, at any place, in any time, this means that potentially all of humanity's religious revelations are based on appearances of Jesus. So, the author has a relatively unusual perspective on non-Christian religions compared to other ancient Christian writings, which tend to be much more negative about the religions of other people."

Meanwhile, the 3rd-century The Legend of Aphroditianus transformed the Magi into royal ambassadors who not only visited the toddler Jesus, they brought a portrait of him back to a temple of Hera in Persia.

Three kings … or two… or twelve?

Most of the details now associated with the Magi developed gradually across the centuries. According to Raymond Brown, author of The Birth of the Messiah, the idea that the Magi were kings likely comes from early Christian readings of Isaiah 60:3-6 (“Nations shall come to your light…they shall bring gold and frankincense”) and Psalm 72:10 (“May the kings of Tarshish…bring gifts”). Citing additional verses from the Hebrew Bible, North African Christian writer Tertullian wrote that “the East generally regarded the Magi as Kings” and transformed the astrologers into monarchs. By the sixth century it was taken for granted throughout the Christian world that the Magi were kings.

The number of Magi also varied by region. Only two Magi appear in the earliest image of them in the catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, while four are depicted in a 3rd-century fresco at St. Domitilla, and 12 are mentioned in the 13th-century Syriac texts the Book of the Bee and the Revelation of the Magi. The number was set at three in the Western Church by the sixth century, both because three gifts are mentioned in Matthew and because the triadic pattern fit well with the developing Christian emphasis on the Trinity and symbolic numbers.

The names Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar appear in Latin texts from the Christian West, with the first reference found in the early medieval Excerpta Latina Barbari. Prior to this the earliest Christian sources, Brown writes, name them Hormizdah, king of Persia; Yazdegerd, king of Saba; and Perozadh, king of Sheba (confusingly scholars tend to see Saba and Sheba as the same place). An Ethiopic Christian text known as the Book of Adam and Eve calls them Hor, king of the Persians; Bassanater, king of Saba; and Karusudan, king of the East. Their animal companions—typically camels—entered the story through artistic convention and the pragmatics of ancient trade. Roman depictions of eastern embassies often showed camels because, as Sarah Bond has written, camels were regularly used for transport and even military service. (Osteoarchaeological remains of camels have been found as far afield as Roman Britain.) Early Christian artists, familiar with these models and armed with a reference to camels in Isaiah 60:6, visually connected the Magi to diplomatic envoys from Arabia or Persia.

Collectively, these mythic elaborations show how Christian communities crafted a story that spoke to their own hopes and concerns—for some, the Magi were "embodiments of global kingship," says Eric Vanden Eykel, author of The Magi: Who They Were, How They've Been Remembered, and Why They Still Fascinate, "for others, astrologers whose scientific expertise testifies to God's revelation; and for still others, missionary saints whose faith precedes that of the apostles."

The Magi remain compelling because they are seekers. In Matthew's sparse narrative, they observe a sign in the sky, interpret it, and set out toward a distant land in search of meaning. In later traditions, they become kings, sages, mystics, missionaries, even visionaries who encounter divine light in ways beyond ordinary human experience.