

## Were the Magi astrologers?



Question: This Christmas I've heard the wise men, who came to see the infant Jesus, described as astrologers. But I've always understood astrology and divination by the stars to be occult in origin. Can you help?

You are perceptive to have been thinking along these lines. The Scriptures are indeed consistent in their hostility to all occult activity. (Isaiah 8:19) However, we may – in fact we must – investigate those things that God has chosen to reveal, and not least in prophecy.

The birth of Jesus – and the star which heralded his birth – was the activity of God himself. This was nothing to do with horoscopes. At significant stages of Jesus' life, certain phenomena featured – the dove at his baptism, the light at his transfiguration, the darkness and earthquake at his death, the cloud at his ascension. These occurrences attested Jesus to those who had minds to understand. Similarly then, at his birth, there was a star.

The significance of the wise men – the 'Magi' as they have been termed – is that they were Gentiles, probably from Mesopotamia. They would not have benefited directly from the privileges of Judaism or its Scriptures. It is, however, very likely that they would have taken note of a prophecy that had been uttered centuries earlier – by a Gentile prophet, Balaam by name.

In fact he was from their own area, Pethor, by the river Euphrates (Numbers 22:4,5). His words would have been remembered down the ages.

The star stood for regal power and splendour; the second couplet here is a firm indication of kingship. Further lines point to the widespread rule of this coming individual. Consequently, when a special start came to the attention of the Magi, they decided to investigate further.

### 1. Their sensitivity to revelation.

Traditionally it seems that the Magi (who were a kind of priestly tribe) were to the Persians what the Levites were to Israel; they were respected instructors of the Persian kings. Their enquiring minds predisposed them to recognise and then follow the star, when it appeared.

### 2. Their persistence in the search.

On reaching Jerusalem, the Magi cause great disruption with their enquiry as to where the new king has been born. Herod's advisers look up the prophecies, and announce Bethlehem as the location (Micah 5:2). But none of them make the journey to Bethlehem. It is left to these Gentile enquirers to go and pay homage to Israel's king.

### 3. Their reverence for the infant.

Worship – not power – was their aim. Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-11) was in a lower order altogether, through his exploits he wanted to be 'great' – and that is the approach of occultism. Not so, the Magi of Matthew 2. They were wise with the wisdom that seeks God, and were obedient to him.