James Tissot, Journey of the Magi, c. 1894, Oil on Canvas, Minneapolis Institute of Art.

THE CHRISTMAS MAGI

Light and Might from the Persian East

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Christmas today is a winter festival and religious celebration widely spread throughout the world. Its basic elements, with the birth of Jesus, "the anointed of the Lord," or *Khrystos* (Christ) as he is titled, at the centre, and with motifs like "no room at the inn," the manger, the angels, shepherds, Christmas Star, and the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, are widely recognized and commemorated. The Three Wise Men from the East or "Magi," who come to do homage to the newborn king, is one of these motifs. Most people, both Christians and others, think of this as a single harmonious story that is firmly grounded in Holy Scripture, especially the Gospels of the two Evangelists, Mathew and Luke. But the origins of the Christmas story as a whole are much more complicated than that.

Christmas as we know it today is a rather new phenomenon. The plump, white-haired, red-suited Santa Claus, the frenzy of Christmas shopping, and the widespread exchange of gifts, were, in fact, invented almost yesterday. And while Santa or Ole Saint Nick (or Father

Rembrandt van Rijn, "Adoration of the Magi," 17th century, Oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia. In this striking painting, Rembrandt's usual solemnity and depth are evident, though the darkness of the picture, with its variety of deep browns and controlled lighting, which are perhaps in part a result of the aging of the canvas, restrict the exultation that the birth of the saviour is supposed to have brought the world. Note the eldest of the Magi is kneeling and bowing with clasped hands before the infant, the central standing figure, another Magus, bears some resemblance to Rembrandt himself, there are camels and even a cross dimly seen in the background, and the white feather or strip of cloth on the turban of the Magus to the left of the Holy Family balances the light on the right. None of the Magi wear royal crowns, and Joseph, Mary's husband, stands humbly behind her holding a Dutch-style hat to his chest. Perhaps Rembrandt knew that in his time such crowns were a western and not an oriental custom. Credit: Wikipedia.

Christmas in England, or Saint Nicholas in eastern Europe) can be loosely traced back to an elderly Christian Holy Man in Asia Minor, who was said to have loved children, his present visage and bearing in North America have more to do with the Coca Cola Company's advertising campaign of the early twentieth century than with late antiquity or Christian origins.

In fact, much of the contemporary idea of Christmas is composed of unbiblical traditions that are, either very loosely grounded in, or completely unsupported by the Bible. And even the Christmas story itself as told by Mathew and Luke are at odds in certain respects. For example, both Mathew and Luke place the birth of Jesus in the little town of Bethlehem in Palestine, but Luke has Mary and Joseph only going to Bethlehem to register in a Roman census while Mathew says nothing about this.

The much beloved story of the Three Kings, who in an English carol written in 1865, were said to have joyously sung, "Oh, we Three Kings of Orient are, Bearing Gifts we travel so far," very much fits into this fold. The Bible does not say that they were kings, neither does it say that their number was three; nor does it give their nationality or the name of the land (or lands) from which they came. Moreover, their traditional names, Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar occur nowhere in the Gospels, or anywhere else in the New Testament.

These major details, which add so much to the Christmas story, are in fact late antique or early medieval inventions. And as early as the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe, several different kinds of Christians therefore rejected the celebration of Christmas as a "pagan" innovation, as once did the Puritans in New England, and still do a few modern Christian and quasi-Christian sects today. So what exactly does the Bible say about these revered and much-loved figures from the Orient?

Their story is told only by Mathew and not by Luke, nor by any other Biblical author. Mathew calls them Magi (sing. Greek: *Magos*) and says that they came from the east bearing gifts. But who were these Magi? In ancient times, the term referred to certain religious figures or priests in classical Persia (today Iran), which seems to have been their homeland. But by the time

of Jesus, the Levant, that is Palestine and adjacent areas, also knew them as coming from Babylonia in ancient Mesopotamia (today Iraq), and they were renowned as astronomers and astrologers. (Today we distinguish one from the other, the former being scientific and the latter superstitious, but in ancient times they were most definitely fused.) This explains why Mathew speaks of how they followed that unusual Christmas Star westward to Palestine.

There is also much mystery about the very name Magi (sing. Latin: *magus*). It is clearly a word that came into ancient and Biblical Greek from Persian. But its exact meaning remains unclear. The Greek historian Herodotus tells several stories about the Magi, and from his and other accounts they are thought to have originally been a kind of Median tribe or caste that held a special place in the ancient Zoroastrian religion. The Medes are thought by many to have been the ancestors of today's Kurds, and they were the close relatives of the Persians.

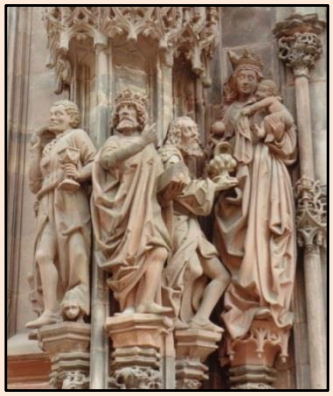
The Zoroastrian religion was a dualist faith with a monotheistic inclination and stressed the difference between light and darkness, good and evil, truth and the lie. The supreme deity was Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom. Modern adherents of Zoroastrianism, though very small in numbers, live in both Iran and India, and call it "the Good Religion," since its motto is: "Good thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds." It especially honours light and fire and its major places of worship are called Fire Temples, where a sacred flame is always kept burning.

"*Ateshgah*" (Fire Temple) Museum, near Baku, the capital city of independent Azerbaijan, 2010. The name "Azerbaijan" is thought to have originally meant "Land of the Holy Fire." The adjoining province of Iran is also called Azerbaijan. Although in antiquity, the country was inhabited by various Iranian-speaking peoples, Tats, Persians, and Medes, and the Persians and Tats dominated it throughout the early Middle Ages, the heirs of these peoples mostly converted to Islam in the centuries after the Arab conquest in the 600s. Then in the wake of the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, Central Asian nomads, Turks, who made up the bulk of the Mongol armies and were attracted to Azerbaijan by its luxuriant grasslands, settled in its valleys. At that time it was almost completely turkified, and today only a small minority still speak Tati or other Persian "dialects," and Zoroasterianism has almost completely disappeared. Credit: Wikipedia.

The American philologist, Joseph T. Shipley, derives the name Magi from the Old Persian *magu* and says that it comes originally from the pre-historic Indo-European word *magh*[*a*], meaning "might" or "power." He also says that as such it is related to the Greek *makhane* meaning "invention," and to more common English words such as "may," "dismay," "might," and "main." This very ancient sense of power conveyed by all these words, says Shipley, is even revealed in an old nonsense English nursery rhyme. It goes thus:

There was a man in our town, and he was wondrous wise,
He jumped into a bramble bush, and scratched out both his eyes.
And when he saw his eyes were out, with all his might and main,
He jumped into another bush, and scratched them in again.

As to the Persian "Magi," however, Shipley considers it a close cognate to the Sanskrit *matha* and *maharaja*, the latter meaning "Great ruler." (In modern India, "Mahatma" Gandhi is thought of as "the Great Soul.") Shipley also indicates that it is a cognate of the Greek *megas*, and of the Latin *magnus*, meaning large or great, with all their numerous derivations in the various modern European languages. The Slavonic languages too possess this same word: *mohuchy* (strong) in



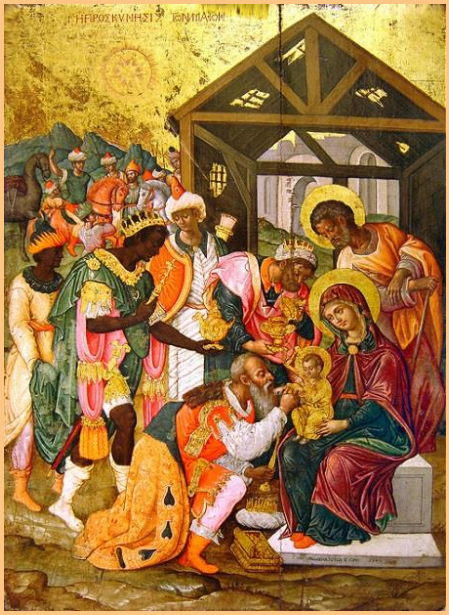
Jackques de Landshut, "The Adoration of the Magi," Cathedral of Notre Dame, Strasbourg, 1494-1505. In this depiction, the older king/magus is offering his gift to Mary and the Christ Child, a second king/magus, not quite so old, crowned and holding his gift follows, and the third king/magus, younger and with African features, is also holding his gift. Mary too seems to be crowned, though the Child is not. Credit: Wikipedia.

Ukrainian and *moch* (to be able to) in Church Slavonic. Terence Wade, who produced a *Russian Etymological Dictionary* (1996) thinks their closest cognate to be the German *Macht* (might or power).

As to Persian, however, the Iranian etymologist, Ali Nouri, agrees with Shipley, and adds that the etymological circle came completely around, when at the beginning of the twentieth century, the word "machine" was borrowed from French to name the new traveling contraption that in English we call a "car" or an "automobile," which, of course, as the original Greek language would indicate, is much more powerful and faster than even a team of horses. This sense of power even extends to Maya, the ancient Goddess of Growth "which became noticeable in May," says Shipley. For his part, Ali Nouri also indicates that the very name "Magi" is preserved in the word for a Zoroastrian priest in modern Persian. In ancient Iran, the word for a "high priest" was *magu-pad*, which yields the modern word for a Zoroastrian priest, which is *mobed* or *mobad*. So the Biblical Magi were indeed both "Men of Power" and "Men of Wisdom," for wisdom conveys power.

These Three Wise Men, known from Mathew as Magi, are simply called such in many countries. But in other lands they also have other labels attached to them. So in Ukraine and some other Slavonic lands, they are called the Three *Volkhvy*. This very old word, originally borrowed from Old Church Slavonic, or Old Bulgarian/Macedonian, and today considered to be archaic, is still to be found in Christmas art coming from Ukraine. The word itself, says Ukrainian etymologist, J. B. Rudnyckyj, conveys the meaning of a sage, a magician, or sorcerer. Its synonyms in Ukrainian are *charivnyk* and *chakun*, with the implication of foretelling future events. Although Rudnyckyj says that the word is of obscure origin, he cites the great Slovenian philologist, Franz von Miklosich, as suggesting that it is related to a similar Old Church Slavonic word meaning "mumbler" or "stammerer," as in one who would mumble magic formulae or spells. This somewhat spooky meaning may reflect older Babylonian traditions about the Magi being primarily seers or sorcerers (as in the tale of Simon Magus in the *Acts of the Apostles* 8. 9-25), but whose homage before the baby Jesus purified them. However, it also has some clear parallels in the West.

So the English words "magic" and "magician" also indirectly come from the Persian "Magi." The sequence of borrowing seems to run thus: Indo-European *magha* > Persian *magu*> Greek *magos*> Latin *magus, magia*, and *magicus*> French *magique* (first attested in 1275)> English *magic* (first attested in the fourteenth century). In English, the word was originally spelled "magick," and Samuel Johnson's famous *Dictionary* of 1755 cites a passage from Francis Bacon's *Natural History* as to its use in both science and superstition: "The writers of natural magick," writes Bacon, "do attribute much to the virtues that come from the parts of living creatures, as if they did infuse some immaterial virtue into the part severed." This strange



"Adoration of the Magi," undated, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens. This image contains most of the traditional elements of the story of the Magi. There are three of them, the eldest kneeling before the Christ Child, who sits on the lap of his mother Mary, with husband Joseph behind, a second Magus, crowned, leans above them, and a third, also crowned, and with a very dark complexion, is holding out a gift to offer the child. There are other turbaned figures in the background, a star above, and a barely visible camel to the left side. The inscription at the top is in Greek, but is barely discernable. Note that the Holy Mother's costume is a shade of burgundy, unlike the light blue that later became usual in the West. The entire picture with its sumptuous gold, orange, reds, and yellows evinces a wealth and confidence that is befitting of the Byzantine tradition. Credit: Wikipedia.

phenomenon continues even today among people who believe that pomegranate juice (very red) is good for the blood, and among Chinese, who grant special sexual potency to the male consumption of rhinoceros horns. The modern term for such thinking is "homeopathic medicine."

But let us return to the more congenial Three Wise Men who brought gifts to the Newborn King. Mathew listed these gifts as Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. This was no random selection. In the eyes of the Evangelist each of them had great symbolic powers. Firstly, Gold was always of considerable value and was a fit present for a king; Frankincense was used in royal ceremonies; and Myrrh was used in the ancient world for embalming dead bodies. In this way, Mathew stressed the royalty of Jesus, and as well, linked his birth to his death many years later; for theologically, it was his salutary death that was supposed to be the saving grace that redeemed humankind, and not so much his (till then) rather obscure and humble birth.

In fact, as the Catholic scholar Joseph F. Kelly points out in his book on the *Origins of Christmas* (2004) in very early Christian times, the followers of Jesus eschewed celebrating birthdays, which they associated with paganism; rather to them it was martyrdom that conferred sainthood. The Christmas stories, miraculous though they today seem, were inserted into the Gospels, he says, to prove that Jesus was an actual human being and not just a phantom, as some overly gullible "proto-Gnostics" may have thought, and at the same time, the stories affirmed the idea that Jesus had always been the Son of God, and had not just been "adopted" by the Father later on. The context of this argument was that many of the ancients believed that other saintly figures had been "adopted" by the Gods, and so become immortal, and even the Roman Emperors beginning with Augustus Caesar himself were "deified" and formally worshiped either during their reigns or after their deaths.

That the Magi were three in number is also somewhat non-Biblical. Rather this belief, says Kelly, was first inferred in Egypt, and then by the Greeks and Romans, from Mathew's statement that there were three gifts. Other Christians, however, never accepted this logic, and in the Syrian tradition, for example, it was thought that they numbered twelve, the number of the first Apostles, and also the number of the ancient tribes of Israel.

An early fourth century sarcophagus, Rome, depicting the Magi. In this relief, three Magi present their gifts to the baby Jesus. Inside the Christmas Star appears an early Christian symbol, the Greek letters *iota* and *chi,* the first letters of "Jesus," and "Christ "respectively. In the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine banned use of the cross as punishment in the Roman Empire, and thereafter, it too became a potent symbol of the religion. Credit: Richard C. Trexler, *Journey of the Magi* (Princeton UP, 1997), pp. 24-26.

Similarly, the tradition that the Magi were kings is post-Biblical, a belief originating in North Africa and Egypt. In the year 200, the African theologian Tertullian observed that "the east generally regarded the Magi as kings," and a century later, the Syrian poet Ephraem took up the same theme. By 500, a Gallic bishop, Caesarius of Arles, clearly stated that they were kings, and their royal status was thereafter taken for granted almost everywhere in Christendom.

As to the Christmas Star, for centuries there was much speculation about it. Some astronomers consider it to have been a comet, perhaps Haley's Comet, which appeared only about a decade or so apart from the traditional date for Christ's birth. Or perhaps it involved some other conjunction of the heavenly bodies. Chinese scientists suggest a "supernova." Still others think it merely a pious legend associated with Babylonian star-gazing. We recall that it is from most ancient Mesopotamia and Babylon that even today we get our way of counting days, hours, and minutes, especially the sixty minute cycle.

But did these Three Wise Men actually come from Babylonia, or rather did they come from the Iranian plateau to its east? This question is rather moot as the Persian dynasty of the Parthians (Ashkanians in modern Persian) was then the ruling power in both lands. Following in the tradition of the Achaemenian Shah, Cyrus the Great, who liberated the Jews from their Babylonian captivity, the Parthians were a religiously tolerant dynasty that does not seem to have persecuted any particular religion, at least not in the centuries before the Romans adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. For most of this period, although Zoroastrianism was present in the lands that the Parthians ruled, it was not yet the official and militant religion that it became under the Sasanians, who succeeded the Parthians. Saint Thomas of "doubting" fame was, of course, the Apostle to Parthia and India, and later on, a tradition developed that in Persia, he eventually met the Christmas Magi, whom he converted and baptized. These same Magi were said to have then evangelized the East.

When centuries later, the less tolerant Sasanians defeated the Byzantines and temporarily drove them out of the Levant, including Palestine, they destroyed as many Christian churches as they could. But as the twentieth century British historian, Steven Runciman, noted in the first volume of his *History of the Crusades*, they spared the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem because above its doors were depicted the Christmas Magi in Persian costume. In the late thirteenth century, Marco Polo claimed to have visited their graves in the Persian town of Saveh, not far from modern Tehran. This claim conflicted with the tale that about a century earlier the true bones of the Magi were discovered near Milan and then translated to Cologne in Germany, where across the centuries they rested in that city's great cathedral. Both cathedral and bones miraculously survived the Allied bombing of the Second World War, which flattened the rest of the city, and they remain in place to the present day.

In his time, Marco was also told the fabulous story that those particular Christmas Magi had brought with them part way back to Persia a gift from Bethlehem; that gift was a magic fire

"The Magi or Three Wise Men." Mosaic from the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy (here named Saints ("SCS" for Sanctus) Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar). Detail from: "Mary and Child, surrounded by Angels." This is the work of a Ravennate Italian-Byzantine workshop, completed before 526 AD by the so-called "Master of Sant'Apollinare." An elderly Magus, with white hair and beard, leads, followed by a younger man with no beard, and a third with dark hair. Each bears a different gift and all three wear Phrygian hats, which emphasize their eastern origin. The Christmas Star is clearly visible on the upper right. This seems to be the oldest surviving image to name the three Magi. Credit: Wikipedia.

producing stone, and that stone, he assures us, had something to do with how fire came to be worshiped in Iran. Of course, Marco most probably heard this story from local Iranian Christians, or perhaps even Muslims, and from not the Zoroastrians themselves. Recent visitors to Saveh, today famous for its pomegranates, have been unable to confirm Marco Polo's story.

The names traditionally given to the Magi are similarly unbiblical. They first appear in a document called in Latin the *Excerpta Latina Barbari* drawn up by an Alexandrian Christian in about the sixth century. This document gave them the names "Bithissarea," "Melchior," and "Gaspar." Belthazar, a clearly Semitic name (from the Akkadian *Bel-shar-usur*, "May Bel protect the king"), was a member of the ruling family of Babylon before its conquest by the Persian, Cyrus the Great, and Melchior itself is probably related to the Semitic word for king: *Melek*. (*Mamlakat* is the word for "kingdom" even in modern Arabic.)

But Gaspar, or Caspar as he became known in the Greek and Latin traditions, is almost certainly a form of the Persian Gondophares, a legendary "Indian" king, who appears in the *Acts of Thomas*. For centuries, this Gondophares was thought to have been merely a legend; but in the nineteenth century, coins bearing his name were discovered in north-west India. It was that part of India, the Punjab in fact, that the Parthians actually ruled, and Gondophares has a clearly Indo-European and Iranian etymology. A. D. H. Bivar, writing in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (2012) informs us that the Old Persian form was *Vindafarnah*, which meant "May he find

Glory," and his reign corresponded well with the data given in the *Acts of Thomas*. Echoes of his fame even turn up in the *Shahnameh* or Persian *Book of Kings* and other Iranian documents from Sistan in eastern Iran. So he was almost certainly a historical personage. It is unlikely, however, that King Gondophares was in fact one of Mathew's legendary Three Kings, and the *Acts of Thomas* does not make any such claims.

But throughout the late Middle Ages and into modern times, the name Caspar became common in Christendom, both east and west. It exists in French, German, and English, as well as in other languages. In French, it takes the form "Gaspard," and German and English add "Jasper" and, especially in English, the surname "Jaspers." Basil Cottle in his *Dictionary of Surnames* (1978) says that it became popular in English because of its resemblance to the precious stone "jasper" and is quite popular in Cornwall.

"The Adoration of the Magi." 18th century Ukrainian icon in a restrained Baroque style. Again, a white haired, bearded king kneels before the Christ Child, who is blessing him with fingers held in the Orthodox manner, while a second king presents a gift, and a third king, darker in complexion, looks on. The moustaches on two of the figures reflect a popular Ukrainian or Cossack influence. Note the unlikely crowns atop the turbans on two of the Magi. Credit: "The Many faces of Tradition," *Ukrainian Week*, Net.

Under the spellings Kacper, Gaspar, and Kasper, the name of this Magus also occurs in Polish. The Polish name specialists, William Hoffman and George Helon, state that it comes from the Persian *Kansbar*, meaning "Guardian of the Treasury," but this seems to be a garbled etymology. Some other name specialists think this form to be of Hebrew origin, though this too is unlikely. As to surnames, we have Kasperowski and Kasperowicz in Polish.

The Ukrainian form is *Kasper*, and it too has yielded many surnames. For example, the Canadian scholar, Forvyn Bohdan, who compiled an extensive *Dictionary of Ukrainian Surnames in Canada* (1974) informs us that the forms Kasper, Kasperovsky, Kasperuk, and Kasperyk all occur in Canada. So Gondophares, the Parthian king of Northern India, who was long thought to have been a mere legend, is well remembered even today, though almost certainly he was not one of Mathew's Three Wise Men from the East.

If the forms Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar became widely applied to the Magi in the Christian West (including Byzantium), other such naming traditions arose in the Christian East. Kelly cites a sixth century Syrian treatise that identifies the Magi as "Hormozad, King of Persia," "Yazdegerd, King of Sabha," and "Perozad, King of Sheba." The last two of the place names mentioned here, he explains, are taken from Psalm 72 in the Bible. But all three personal names are of clearly Persian origin, and are well-known to Persian scholars. "Hormos" (the Spirit of Goodness), was the name of various Persian rulers, and "Hormozad" means "Son of Hormos."

"Yazdgird," famously, was the last Shah of Iran before the Arab conquest, and "Perozad," in Persian, even today, literally means "Son of Victory" and was the name of other Persian kings.

Other traditions, sometimes subconsciously, associate the Magi with Persia. Kelly lists an Armenian apocryphal Infancy Gospel of the later Middle Ages that names them "Balthazar, King of Arabia," "Mellon, King of Persia," and "Gaspar, King of India." In this case, Balthazar for Arabia is quite apt since it is indeed of Semitic origin, and Gaspar, as we have already noted, is of demonstrable Iranian origin, though touching upon India. Only "Mellon," coming as it probably does from the old Semitic word for "king," does not quite fit as "King of Persia." Meanwhile in Persia itself, originally a Zoroastrian land, but later Shia Muslim, the Christmas Magi (so Kelly informs us) were eventually given the names "Amad," "Zud Amad" and "Drust Amad." Simply translated, these mean "he came," "he came soon," and "he truly came." Other traditions give still other names.

"The Three Kings," c. 1185, from the *Horus Deliciarum* (Garden of Delights) of Herrad of Landsberg (1130-1195), an abbess of Hohenburg Abbey in Alsace. This famous book was an illuminated encyclopedia with 336 illustrations that Herrad used to educate her nuns. She was a contemporary of the transfer of the Magi relics to Cologne, and to this day the Feast of the Epiphany is known in Germany as the *Dreikönigstag* (the Day of the Three Kings). In this miniature, the kings bear the names Patuar, Caspar, and Melchior, and Caspar (in this case the youngest of the three) is pointing to the Christmas Star (Stella). This illustration is from a reproduction by Christian Maurice Engelhardt (1818). The original perished in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War in the burning of the Library of Strasbourg, which had acquired the MS during the French Revolution. The preserved part of the text was copied and published by Straub and Keller in 1879-1899. Credit: Wikipedia.

In Mathew's account, the Three Wise Men, distinguished gentiles, who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, seem to be contrasted to those Jews, who did not. Later on, this theme was expanded to represent "the Nations" of the world as a whole. And since the known world as depicted by the ancient geographer Ptolemy was divided into three major parts, Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Three Kings were generally considered to represent these three known continents, and their traditional depiction in Christian art reflected this. In this way, one was an old man representing Asia, another a younger man representing Europe, and the third a darker haired man representing Africa.

This parallels the old Biblical belief that the races of mankind were divided into three major branches: the sons of Shem (Semites), the Sons of Ham (Africans) and the Sons of Japheth (the Indo-European peoples, listed as Gomer, Magog, the Medes, and others in Biblical sources). This too was eventually reflected in Christian art depicting the Magi. However, these geographical and ethnographic theories, long accepted across the Christian world, stand in obvious contradiction to the ostensibly first origins of the Magi in Persia or even in the Orient generally.

As to "the Orient," the connection with India deserves some further consideration. We have already mentioned that the Parthian King Gondophares ruled in northern India. But some people in antiquity believed that there was a link between the Magi and even the Indian Brahmins. So the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus thought that the Magi had received some of their wisdom from those Brahmins. And in the wake of the great European discoveries of early modern times, the Portuguese writer Camoës took this idea further and thought that the Magi actually were Brahmins. But this may have been nothing more than the traditional European conflation of various eastern countries and regions together as "the Orient."

Byzantine painting from the *Menologion of Basil II* (c. 1000 AD), Vatican Library, Rome. In this image, the Christmas Star takes the form of an angel, and the Magi Crowns take the form of small pill-box-like hats. In the Eastern Orthodox churches legend had it that Jesus was born in a cave, and the celebration of the Three Wise Men is held together with (and perhaps overshadowed by) commemoration of the adult baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, which, of course, occurred many years later. Credit: Wikipedia.

Finally, there is the story that the Magi came on camels to worship the baby Jesus. These animals have been widely used for travel in desert climates since very ancient times. But even so, Mathew does not say anything about camels in his account of the nativity. Kelly believes that the early Christians got this idea from reading the Prophet Isaiah, whom they thought had foretold the coming of the Messiah Jesus, who would be praised by a multitude on "the camels of Midian and Ephah." He continues: "All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and proclaim the praise of the Lord" (Isa. 60.6).

Isaiah also spoke of "the Nations" honouring the Messiah. In this way, many of the legends surrounding the story of the Magi probably had their origins in various books of the Old Testament like Isaiah. Early Christians assiduously read these books as they looked for hints that would support their disputed claims that Jesus was the true Messiah, the Anointed of the Lord.

We may conclude from all this that the much beloved legends of the Magi, though not all confirmed by a close reading of Mathew, do have some support in the life and lore of the ancient Middle East. If they indeed existed, the Magi did, in fact, come from the east, most probably from Iran itself, which even today is known in the Persian language as the *Mashreek Zameen*, "the Eastern Land." If they did not come from the Iranian plateau itself, then they probably came from Babylonia, which was then ruled by the Persians, and for centuries had influenced Persian culture, as the Persians influenced it.

The Three Wise Men were also most probably Zoroastrian priests of some sort. And though the great influence of Zoroastrianism upon early Jewish and Christian ideas is still not very much discussed or accepted outside the revered halls of scholarship, and is not even known to the general public, it is in fact, an important theme in the story of the Christmas Magi, who are to this day widely depicted in Christmas pageants and are greatly esteemed across Christian communities throughout the entire world.

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I dedicate this article *to the memory of Mrs. Chartier, my Fifth Grade teacher at Saint Alphonsus Catholic Elementary School, then in the Municipality of East Kildonan, today a part of Winnipeg, and to the memory of my classmate, Rod Mason, with whom I worked in that class of 1958-59 on a Christmas project about the Three Kings. Given at Toronto, 14 December, 2019.*