

The magi and the Christmas gift givers

The Magi came and gave the baby Jesus gifts. How many Magi were there? Actually, the Bible does not say. It is thought to be three because the Bible mentions three types of gifts: gold, incense and myrrh. Eastern traditions favor twelve.

The wise men, the Magi, were astrologers and probably came from Persia or southern Arabia. They are believed to be linked with the priesthood of Zoroastrianism, who practiced astrology. The historian Herodotus (5th Century BC) attested to the astrological prowess of the priests of Persia.

Psalm 72 speaks of how the Gentiles will come to worship the Messiah: "The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts, the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay Him homage, all nations shall serve Him" (72:10-11). Isaiah also prophesied the gifts: "Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord" (Isaiah 60:6).



The names of the Magi

In 735 AD, St. Bede identified the magi in a work called the *Excerpta et Collectanea*: "The magi were the ones who gave gifts to the Lord. The first is said to have been **Melchior**, an old man with white hair and a long beard, who offered gold to the Lord as to a king. The second, **Gaspar** by name, young and beardless and ruddy complexioned, honored Him as God by his gift of incense, an oblation worthy of divinity. The third, black-skinned and heavily bearded, named **Balthasar**... by his gift of myrrh testified to the Son of Man who was to die." An excerpt from a Medieval saints calendar printed in Cologne reads: "Having undergone many trials and fatigues for the Gospel, the three wise men met at Sewa (Sebaste in Armenia) in 54 (AD) to celebrate the feast of Christmas. Thereupon, after the celebration of Mass, they died: St. Melchior on 1st of January, aged 116; St. Balthasar on 6th of January, aged 112; and St. Gaspar on 11th of January, aged 109." The Roman martyrology also lists these dates as the Magi's feast days. The 12 days of Christmas ends on 6 January with the Feast of Epiphany also called "The Adoration of the Magi" or the day of the Three Kings.