

“Selected Studies in the Gospels”

The Magi and the “Star”

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Matthew 2:1-2

¹After Yeshua was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his **star** in the east and have come to worship him.”

1. Herod the Great (73-4 BCE)

2. The Magi¹

- a. The “Magi” are not easily identified with precision.
- b. The term was originally used for a priestly caste of Medes who enjoyed special power to interpret dreams.
- c. In NT times, the term loosely covered a wide variety of men interested in dreams, astrology, magic and books thought to contain mysterious references to the future.
- d. They came from the “east” either from Babylon, Persia or from the Arabian desert.

Matthew 2:11

On coming to the **house** (הַבַּיִתָּה), they (i.e., the shepherds) saw the **child** (הַיֶּלֶד) with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh ...

הַבַּיִתָּה < בַּיִת —house

הַיֶּלֶד < יָלֵד —child, son, boy, youth

—παῖδ(ον) (*pahee-dee'-on*)—child, infant

Luke 2:15-16

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the **baby**, who was lying in the **manger** (הַיֶּלֶד שֹׁכֵב בְּאֵבוּס).

הַיֶּלֶד < יָלֵד —child, son, boy, youth

—βρέφος (*bref'-os*)—baby, infant

שֹׁכֵב < שָׁכַב —lie down

אֵבוּס < אָבוּס —feeding-trough

3. “We saw his **star** in the east ...”

a. The appearance of a star or of a phenomenon of light accompanying the birth of a hero or a worthy is commonplace in legend .. In late Jewish sources, too, one finds this motif.²

b. The star also symbolizes the Messiah.

1) The classic passage which is used to support this is Num. 24.17, *A star rises from Jacob, a meteor (shevet) comes forth from Israel.* This verse is frequently interpreted as referring to Simeon bar Koziba (Kokhba) ...³

2) MT/Numbers 24:17

I see him, but not now, I behold him, but not near: a star shall step forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall arise out of Israel, and shall crush the corners of Moab, and break down all the sons of Seth.

3) Targum Onkelos/Numbers 24:17⁴

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but he is not near; when a king shall arise out of Jacob and be anointed the Messiah of Israel. He shall slay the princes of Moab and reign over all mankind.

4) Targum Pseudo-Jonathan/Numbers 24:17

“I see him, but he is not at the present time, I behold him, but he is not near; but when a mighty king of the house of Jacob shall reign, and shall be anointed Messiah, wielding the mighty scepter of Israel. He shall slay the Moabite princes and shall bring to naught all the sons of Seth, the armies of Gog, destined to wage war against Israel, and their dead bodies shall fall before him.

5) Fragmentary Targum to the Pentateuch/Number 24:17

“I see him, but he is not here now, I behold him, but he is not near. A king is destined to arise from the house of Jacob, a redeemer and ruler from the house of Israel, who shall slay the mighty ones of the Moabites, who shall bring to naught all the sons of the East.

² Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament* (KTAV Publishing House/Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, 1987), p. 9.

³ Ibid., The assertion of R. Akiba is taken from Lamentations Rabba II § 4.

⁴ Citations from the Targums are taken from Levey, Samson H., *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation, The Messianic Exegesis of the Targum* (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion).

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, Gen. Ed., *The Expositors Bible Commentary, Volume 8, Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Regency Reference Library, 1984), p. 84-85.