

# What the Magi Knew

by Lynn Andrew

No doubt they were from Persia where Daniel half a millennium earlier would have left his writings with the Magi at Susa.<sup>1</sup> Daniel had been made chief of the order of the Magi in Babylon<sup>2</sup> because he was the only one of Nebuchadnezzar's<sup>3</sup> advisers whose dream interpretations were reliable. Babylon fell to the Persians, and Daniel ended his career in Persia.

If Sir Robert Anderson could show that the 69 x 7 years<sup>4</sup> mentioned in the book of Daniel predict precisely when "Messiah the Prince" would present himself to Israel in his "triumphal entry,"<sup>5</sup> the Magi in Daniel's order could have done the same when the "time of the end" approached.<sup>6</sup> Deducting thirty years or so to arrive at an approximate year of his birth, they looked to the stars for a confirming sign. The conjunction of Jupiter and Venus<sup>7</sup> that took place in the year 2 BC<sup>8</sup> was what they were looking for, and if they were prac-

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1. Though originally taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar II, Daniel later served under Darius and Cyrus of Persia. Susa (Shush in southern Iran) is the most likely site of Daniel's tomb. Several other cities in Iraq and Iran also claim him.

2. Daniel 4:9

3. One reason skeptics put the Bible's record of Daniel down as historical fiction is because its date of Daniel's deportation would be nine years earlier than the first invasion of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar according to Babylonian records. But the Jews counted dates a little differently, and the Bible is consistent within itself. For example, Nebuchadnezzar became viceroy four years before his father died, which effectively moves back the possible date of his first invasion of Jerusalem by four years. Secular historians generally give preference to non-biblical records as if only modern enemies of Yahweh have reason to suppress and distort facts.

4. Daniel 9:24-27. This information was given to Daniel by the messenger (angel) Gabriel.

5. Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (the premier interpretation of Daniel's 70 weeks, first published in Great Britain in 1894; several reprints are available: the Renaissance Classics edition has the calculation on p. 43). For a concise comparison of interpretations, see John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 1994), p. 106.

6. Daniel 12:9

7. June 17, 2 BC, Jupiter (the royal planet) and Venus (the mother planet) conjoined in Leo. That Herod died a year or two later, not in 4 BC as is commonly assumed, is quite possible.

8. If Jesus was born in 4 BC, as is widely believed, he would have been about two years old when his parents fled to Egypt (making good use of the gold the Magi had given them and thereby returning a token of what their ancestors had borrowed two millennia earlier).

tical men too, not just political astrologers, they would not only have predicted the conjunction, they would have planned their journey to arrive in Jerusalem at least a few days ahead of those two planets coming together and forming "his star."

Well, they might have.<sup>9</sup>

Isaiah's prophecies about the Messiah had been in existence for 700 years. He and later prophets had repeatedly foretold the establishment of a Kingdom that would rule the world from Jerusalem. But Isaiah had not given a date, nor had he provided such mysterious information as Gabriel had given Daniel by which the day of the King's first coming to Jerusalem could be known once the key events surrounding the return of Jewish captives (enabled by the Persian king Cyrus) were known.

Evidently the rabbis had not applied this information, because Jesus reprimanded them for not having anticipated the time of his appearance:<sup>10</sup> they possessed the Scripture but had not pursued its meaning with enough care. Consider this: if Gabriel had given Daniel a literal date, the Romans and King Herod might have destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple before Jesus arrived (instead of improving them) because even Isaiah's undated prophecies must have given emperors pause to consider what they would do if the Messiah should appear in their time. Emperors deified themselves, as if that would help them compete with the Messiah, and they strove to keep the Jews in subjection, destroying Jerusalem and the Temple when necessary. Wanting to be "King of the Jews" himself, Herod insinuated himself into his office and sponsored the enlarging and beautifying of the Temple. Every educated person must have heard of the Hebrew prophecies, and whether they believed them or not, they would have feared that the prophets might be right about the extreme punishment coming to nations that had been unkind to Jerusalem.

So the Romans must have known of the prophesied King of Israel. In fact the world knew then and knows now, and in one way or another it denies or tries to prevent the prophecies from coming to pass. (This may be the ultimate explanation behind Rome's attitude toward Jews then and now and the

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9. The theory that the Magi were Nabateans is relatively weak. Lacking the Daniel connection it fails to explain the Magi's accuracy, but it may appeal to those who interpret the 69 weeks differently.

10. Luke 19:44

world's opposition to Israel.) But the unusual political situation in Persia at that time was such that the Magi welcomed him<sup>11</sup> who would defeat Rome.

Many scholars believe that Daniel was not the author of Daniel and that the book which bears his name was written much later than the times in Babylon beginning about 604 BC of which it contemporaneously speaks, even putting it later than Antiochus IV (215-164 BC) of whose conquests and end of life it predicted (Dan. 8:9, 11:36-45). But the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) was written in the third century BC, and it includes Daniel. Also, quotations from Daniel appear in the *Sibylline Books* which were referenced as early as 399 BC in the Roman Lectisternium ceremony. Add to that the fact that it takes many years for writing to rise in reputation to the point where it is considered worthy of being included in the canon of inspired Scripture. Still, liberal scholars date the writing of Daniel at 164 BC in order to deny that it predicts events that occurred before then (which would prove that God shared his secrets with Jews uniquely, concepts they oppose).

If the skeptics are right, and there never was a Daniel who was chief of the magicians in Babylon and Persia, then how did the Wise Men from the East know when to expect the King of the Jews while his own people did not?

However, the Magi were unaware of the Bethlehem connection,<sup>12</sup> which is relatively obscure. Had they known, and had they gone directly to Bethlehem, all Jerusalem would not have been troubled by the surprise visit, and Herod would not have had innocents slaughtered as he tried to eliminate the future King. But then the Magi and their gifts would not have become famous, and the lucrative Christmas gift-giving custom would lack their moral support. We have not only St. Nicholas but also those Persians to thank for the noisy gift-giving custom in our annual celebration of the incarnation of God—which completely overwhelms and ignores critics of every stripe, including Daniel's<sup>13</sup> skeptics.

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11. Phraates IV, king of Persia (Parthia) was due to be replaced, and it is not unreasonable that the Persian Magi would have convinced their king-making nobles to sponsor a fact-finding delegation to see if the extraordinary King of the Jews had been born as their calculations had predicted.

12. Micah 5:2 is where Bethlehem is most explicitly connected with the Messiah.

13. The Orthodox Church somehow got it right: they commemorate the prophet Daniel on December 17 but generally celebrate Christmas in January when they can take advantage of the post-holiday sales.

There is another way to arrange the pieces of the Magi puzzle, which presents a much different picture. If you are one who is repulsed by the profane commercialism surrounding the Christmas holy day, or if you wonder how those astrologers—whose Babylonian arts are often condemned in Scripture—were given this privilege, you might like the following theory, which turns the traditional treatment of the Magi on its head.

The Magi were not kings, but they were close: they belonged to a priestly caste of kingmakers. Their king at the time was aged and incompetent, and their responsibility and hope was to find a replacement that would end the current dynasty. Their inspired calculations and the supernatural light in the sky (today it would be called a UFO and be suspected of being a demonic illusion) led them to visit the parents of the future King of the world.

Perhaps it was Satan's first choice that the kingmakers would unwittingly stir Herod to dispose of David's heir. But his second choice was to have the Messiah possessed by a foreign nation, thereby casting doubt on his claim to King David's throne. The Magi's gifts were a token of the bribe they would offer his parents, say five years later, when Jesus would be just old enough that they could present him to their constituents and his guardians.

But Satan's plans always backfire. Instead of defeating the divine will, he cannot keep himself from helping to accomplish what God intended.

The Magi's gifts enabled Jesus' parents to relocate and live in Egypt before Herod's secret order to kill the young boys in Bethlehem took effect. Then when Jesus was about seven years old, the Persians sent for him secretly. They could not find him in Bethlehem. No one knew where he was. Their earnest money had been spent to keep him out of their reach. When Jesus did return home it was to the obscurity of Nazareth.

The Magi were Satan's emissaries, and their mission failed.

When we look back to the origin of almost any Christmas custom, we find pagan influences. What Satan designed to advance his own kingdom has been wrested out of his hands by the church and remade to celebrate Christ.

It is enough to make one feel sorry for the poor devil.

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