

Answers to Puzzling Questions About Christ's Nativity

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When it comes to the subject of Christ's nativity, certain questions make it challenging to connect the dots in order to compose a single, consistent account. For instance, can we be sure that three wise men gave Him those three costly gifts? And if they visited the Babe in Bethlehem while He was still in a manger, why does the Bible also indicate that their visit took place when Jesus was somehow in a "house"? How can the timing of the wise men's visit be harmonized with that of the shepherds, who we know arrived at the scene just after Christ's birth?

Matthew 2:1, 2 informs us that "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa" . . . and that "there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, saying, Where is He That is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East, and are come to worship Him." Matthew does not say whether there were actually *three* wise men, though that is a persistent tradition. Ellen G. White does consider the wise men to be philosophers from the far East (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 59.2; *Review and Herald*, Nov. 13, 1894, para. 6).*

Is it merely an urban legend that there were exactly *three* wise men? In this case, tradition may very well be correct. The illustrations in the original 1898 edition of *The Desire of Ages* depict *three* (pages 59, 60, 61, 63), and we know that Sister White approved of the book's contents. Also, the original edition of *Christ Our Saviour* (1896) was Edson White's adaptation for children of his mother's materials prepared for her then forthcoming book. It depicts *three* men on pages 14, 15, 16, 34, 35, 36. (It is reasonable to assume that Mrs. White had no objection to the artwork in the case of either book.) Of course, that the Magi presented three gifts, as Mt. 2:11 relates, is well known.

Now on to the matter of where the wise men's visitation of the Christ Child took place. But first we need to fill in a little background information. They had followed a distant, lingering, luminous star, which unbeknownst to them was actually a cluster of shining angels (*Desire of Ages*, p. 60.1). When they finally reached Jerusalem, the star rested above the Temple, then faded from view (ibid. p. 60.3; cf. Mt. 2:1, 2).

This visit must have been subsequent to Jesus' dedication in the Temple at Jerusalem, as "thereafter Joseph and Mary would hardly have dared to visit Jerusalem" (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 701.5). The family had come to Jerusalem for dual reasons: As Lk. 2:22 indicates, Mary's 40-day time of ceremonial uncleanness had terminated in her purification ritual, according to Levitical law (Lev. 12:2–4, 6–8); and their Firstborn was to be presented (Ex. 13:2). Ellen White corroborates this chronology by stating that Jesus was now "about forty days" old (*Desire of Ages*, p. 50.1), cf. "six weeks old" (*Christ Our Saviour*, p. 32.1).

* Evidently from Aram, near the Euphrates in Mesopotamia (Num. 23:7; 22:5; Deut. 23:4), where Balaam's prophecies about Israel's prosperity and its coming Messiah (Num. 24:17) were still treasured (*Desire of Ages*, pp. 59.3–60.0).

It should also be borne in mind that the wise men found it “necessary to journey by night in order to keep the star in view” (*Desire of Ages*, p. 60.2). In the same paragraph, Ellen White indicates that their journey was “long,” which the term “far East” in the opening sentence of this article certainly implies. Though their exact starting point is unknown, their journey must have involved hundreds of miles and therefore many days, or even weeks.

By the time the wise men, or philosophers (ibid., p. 59.2), or Magi visited Jesus, He was in a *house* (Mt. 2:11) in Bethlehem. Though she quotes Mt. 2:11, which refers to the building as a house (see *Desire of Ages*, p. 63.2), Sister White also describes Christ’s birthplace as “a wretched hovel prepared for cattle” (*The Great Controversy*, p. 313.2), where “the Prince of Life . . . is surrounded with dumb beasts” (*Review and Herald*, Dec. 24, 1872, para. 12).

We do well to consider that many among poor people, nowadays as well as in Bible times, live in very close proximity to their livestock. Despite the fact that tradition places Jesus’ birth taking place in a cave (see *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 698.9), Ellen White offers a more exact location: “at the eastern extremity of the town” of Bethlehem, in “a rude building where the beasts are sheltered” (*Desire of Ages*, p. 44.2), or “a rude building where cattle were fed” (*Christ Our Saviour*, p. 25.3).

After Herod I (the Great) demanded from the chief priests and scribes where Christ should be born, and learned that it was in Bethlehem of Judæa, he called the wise men secretly to learn when they had seen the Babe’s star. He then sent them off in that direction to search out the Child and report back to him, whereupon the mysterious star reappeared and guided them to the very *house* (v. 11) where they “saw the young *Child* with Mary His mother . . . and worshipped Him,” offering Him their *three* treasures. They were warned in a dream, however, not to report to Herod as he had requested, but to return to their own country by another route.

The King James Version of Matthew’s account does not say (1) how old the Babe was when they offered Him worship and gifts; (2) exactly where He was, other than in a *house* (i.e., no mention of a stable or manger); (3) whether it was the day of His birth and of being laid in the *manger* or their visit some time thereafter in a *house*. Verses 16–18 of Matthew 2, incidentally, refer to Herod being furious at the Magi for outwitting him, and of his spiteful slaughter of the innocents.

All of these factors support the idea that Jesus was indeed in a *house* at the time of their visitation. What may come as a surprise to many is this: The wise men “brought precious gifts to the Saviour, and bowed in homage before Him when He was but a babe, and cradled in a manger” (*Desire of Ages*, p. 564.3; cf. pp. 621.3–622.0; 770.4–771.0). This means that Jesus was thus still rudely cradled in the house in Bethlehem. Further, wasn’t it a wonderful providence that the Magi’s expensive gifts enabled Joseph and Mary with their precious Infant to travel to and live in Egypt safely out of Herod’s reach until the wily Edomite was dead (ibid., p. 65.1)!

Let us attempt to unpack all this, keeping in mind that Luke's Gospel (2:7) is where we derive the fact that Mary laid her swaddled newborn Babe in a manger, there being no room in Bethlehem's inn. Also recall the angel Gabriel's announcement of the manger site to the shepherds (2:12, 16). The present challenge is to resolve an apparent conflict between Matthew's reference to a *house* and Luke's references to a *manger*.

How to harmonize the manger and the house, then? A good start would be to accept the probability that the wise men, or Magi, visited the Babe at the site of His nativity, where in just such a place He was lying in a real *manger*. Though the traditional Nativity setting correctly includes Christ's cradle as being indeed a lowly feeding trough or manger (Lk. 2:7; cf. *Review and Herald*, Nov. 13, 1894, para. 6), the depiction of groups of shepherds and of Magi as though they were concurrent visitors is both inaccurate and anachronistic.

With these additional facts in hand, it seems high time to abandon the stubborn idea of placing Magi in the same Nativity crèche along with shepherds. It is a pity that every year people gaze upon a fanciful setting depicted in many commercially produced crèche displays, their imaginations having been influenced perhaps more than they realize. To get a truer picture, it might be well to revisit the lyrics of Mrs. Cecil Frances Alexander's simple Christmas hymn for children, "Once in Royal David's City" (*Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* #149), where the plain words penned in 1848 quite accurately depict the truly humble scene: "Once in Royal David's city / Stood a lowly cattle shed, / Where a mother laid her Baby / In a manger for His bed; / Mary was that mother mild, / Jesus Christ her little Child." The hymn poet's artless description says it all: In this instance, the Bethlehem "house" (the Greek word *oikos* in Mt. 2:11 meaning, loosely, abode) here translates as freely to *cattle shed*, namely an animal "abode" where one might expect to see a manger.

I found this research to produce satisfying answers. We need to realize that there are many puzzling questions awaiting *God's* answers, yet many little challenges like this one will simply melt away as we bask in the glory of the divine Teacher's physical presence for eternity.