

The Visit of the Magi

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By the time the wise men, or philosophers (DA 59.2), or Magi from the far East (RH November 13, 1894) visited Jesus, He was in a *house* in Bethlehem, yet Ellen G. White deems it a “rude building where cattle were fed” (*Christ Our Saviour*, p. 25.3) in which He was born on the eastern extremity of that town (DA 44.2). It is also described as “a wretched hovel prepared for cattle” (GC 313.2), where “the Prince of Life . . . is surrounded with dumb beasts” (RH December 24, 1872). How do we know this? Consider the following facts.

They had followed a distant, lingering, luminous star, which unknown to them was actually a cluster of shining angels (DA 60.1). When they reached Jerusalem, the star rested above the Temple, then faded from view (DA 60.3; cf. Mt. 2:1, 2).

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 then sent the wise men off in that direction, whereupon the star reappeared and guided them to the *house* where “the young *Child*” was (Mt. 2:1–11). “By this time Jesus was at least 40 days old” (5BC 290). We comment further on Jesus’ approximate age below.

That the wise men were three in number cannot be known with certainty, although the original edition of *The Desire of Ages* (1898) depicts three men in illustrations appearing on pp. 59, 60, 61, 63. Also, the original edition of *Christ Our Saviour* in 1896 (i.e., two years earlier) was Edson White’s adaptation for children of his mother’s materials prepared for *The Desire of Ages*. It included similar illustrations on pp. 14, 15, 16, 34, 35, 36. (It is reasonable to assume that Ellen G. 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.

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” (5BC 701) afterward. 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 (DA 50.1), cf. “six weeks old” (*Christ Our Saviour*, p. 32.1).

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” (DA 60.2). In the same paragraph, Ellen White indicates that their journey was “long,” which the term “far East” in our opening sentence certainly implies. Though

· 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 (DA 59.3–60.0).

their exact starting point is unknown, their journey must have involved hundreds of miles and therefore many days, or even weeks.

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” (DA 564.3; cf. 621.3–622.0; 770.4–771.0). This means that Jesus was thus still rudely cradled in the house in Bethlehem. Wasn’t it a wonderful providence, further, 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 (DA 65.1)!

Though the traditional Nativity setting correctly includes Christ’s cradle as being indeed a lowly feeding trough or manger (Lk. 2:7; cf. RH November 13, 1894), the depiction of groups of shepherds and of Magi as though they were concurrent visitors is both inaccurate and anachronistic. With the real facts in hand, it is high time to abandon the stubborn idea of placing Magi in the same Nativity crèche with shepherds. It is a pity that every year people gaze upon the rather fanciful setting depicted in many commercially produced crèche displays, so their imaginations have 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” (#149), where the plain words 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.