

On the Exact Number of Magi and the Site of the Manger

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December 14, 2006

On December 13, 2006, a good friend sent me an e-mail message concerning the above subject. He had been trying to resolve the question to the satisfaction of some pastor friends, but a logical answer was proving elusive. What follows is the gist of my friend's problem as given in the Scripture account.

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 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.

Is it merely an urban legend that there were *three* wise men? In this case, tradition may very well be correct. Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy don't give us the exact number, but Ellen White does deem the wise men philosophers from the far East (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 59; *Review and Herald*, Nov. 13, 1894). The illustrations in the original edition of her *Desire of Ages* depict *three* (pages 59, 60, 61, 63), and we know that Sister White approved of the book's contents. Also, the illustrations in the original edition of her *Christ Our Savior* depict exactly *three* men on pages 14, 15, 16, 34, 35, 36.

So much for the number of magi; now on to the matter of where their visitation to the Christ Child took place. In verses 7–12 of Matthew 2, Herod calls the wise men secretly to learn when they had seen the Babe's star. He then sent them (plural) to Bethlehem to search out the Child and report back to him. The mysterious star directed them to the very *house* (vs. 11), where they "saw the young Child with Mary His mother . . . and worshipped Him" giving Him their *three* treasures. However, they were warned in a dream 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, incidentally, refer to Herod being furious at the magi for outwitting him, and of his infamous slaughter of the innocents.

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 the *house* and Luke's references to the *manger*.

Many among poor people, nowadays as well as in Bible times, live very close to their

livestock. Despite the fact that tradition places the nativity in a cave (see *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 698), Ellen White offers the following description: “at the eastern extremity of the town” of Bethlehem, in “a rude building where the beasts are sheltered” (*Desire of Ages*, p. 44), or “a rude building where cattle were fed” (*Christ Our Savior*, p. 25). Though she quotes Mt. 2:11, which calls it a house (see *Desire of Ages*, p. 63), she also calls Christ’s birthplace “a wretched hovel prepared for cattle” (*The Great Controversy*, p. 313), where “the Prince of Life . . . is surrounded with dumb beasts” (*Review and Herald*, Dec. 24, 1872).

How to harmonize the manger and the house, then? The wise men, or magi, visited the Babe at the site of His nativity, all right, and in just such a place was He lying in a real *manger*. I’m afraid that most of us have too often noticed the place depicted in commercially marketed, standalone crèche scenes, so our imaginations have been influenced more than we realize. Instead, maybe we should reread the lyrics of Cecil Frances Alexander’s beautiful Christmas hymn poem, “Once in Royal David’s City,” where the lyrics say: “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.” That says it all: The Bethlehem “house” translates to *cattle shed*, in which one would easily expect to see a manger.

Having reached some satisfactory conclusions, I invited my correspondent friend to share these findings with his friends who were “men of the cloth,” explaining that it had been a wonderful mental and spiritual exercise. While we still realize that there are many things awaiting *God’s* answers, yet many of our little “problems” will simply melt away as we bask in the glory of the sunshine of His physical presence for eternity.