

1. Primary Source: The Gospel of Matthew

The **only biblical account** of the Magi visiting the infant Jesus appears in Matthew 2:1–12

Matthew describes:

- “Magi from the east” arriving in Jerusalem,
- Seeking “the one born king of the Jews,”
- Following a star,
- Visiting Jesus in Bethlehem,
- Offering gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew does **not** specify:

- Their number,
- Their names,
- Their method of travel,
- That they were kings.

This is the earliest written source and the origin of the narrative.

2. Who Were the Magi? Historical Background

The word **mágoi** in Greek referred to:

- Priests or astrologer-scholars from **Persia, Babylonia, or Arabia**.
- Experts in astronomy, dream interpretation, and sacred knowledge.

In the ancient world, “Magi” were associated with:

- The **Zoroastrian priestly caste** in Persia,
- Babylonian and Mesopotamian star-readers,
- Those who advised kings based on celestial signs.

Thus, Matthew situates Jesus’s birth within a broader worldview in which **non-Jewish intellectual elites recognize Him as king**, fulfilling messianic expectations of Gentile nations seeking the God of Israel (cf. Isaiah 60, Psalm 72).

3. Old Testament Background and Allusions

Matthew’s narrative likely draws on several messianic motifs:

- **Isaiah 60:1–6** – Nations come to Israel’s light, bringing **gold** and **frankincense**.
- **Psalm 72:10–11** – Kings from distant lands bring tribute.
- **Numbers 24:17** – A “star” shall come out of Jacob (a prophecy later understood messianically).

These prophecies inform the imagery, though they are not direct historical sources.

4. Later Christian Tradition

Over the centuries, Christian imagination and liturgy expanded the story:

Number of Magi:

- Tradition fixed the number at **three**, based on the number of gifts.
- Some Eastern Christian traditions say **twelve**.

Names (Western Tradition):

- **Caspar (Gaspar)**
- **Melchior**
- **Balthazar**

These appear in Christian writings between the 6th and 9th centuries, not in Scripture.

Kingship:

- By the 3rd–6th centuries, the Magi were increasingly portrayed as **kings**, partly due to Psalm 72:10–11.

5. Apocryphal and Extra-biblical Sources

The story is elaborated in several later texts:

- **The Proto-evangelium of James** (2nd century) – Mentions events around Mary and Jesus but does not expand the Magi significantly.
- **The Armenian Infancy Gospel** (5th–6th century) – Provides names and backgrounds for the Magi.
- **The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary** and medieval legends – Add details such as:
 - Their kingdoms,
 - Their ages,
 - Symbolic meanings of their gifts.

These are **not historical sources**, but they shaped Christian imagination.

6. Historical Plausibility

Historically:

- It was common for delegations from the East (Persia, Arabia) to bring gifts to newborn or rising leaders.
- Astronomical events (conjunctions, comets) around 7–2 BCE have been proposed as triggers for such a journey, but none can be conclusively tied to the narrative.

Summary

The story of the Magi originates **directly and solely from Matthew 2:1–12**, the earliest Christian text to mention them.

It is enriched by:

- Old Testament imagery,
- The historical role of Eastern astrologer-priests,
- Later Christian tradition and apocryphal writings.