

Who were Magi ? By Malcolm Bhesania

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Were they ‘wise men’ or ‘kings’, ‘sorcerers’ or ‘priests’? The opinions are as many as there are writers. This article unravels the maze of diverse opinions on the subject.

Almost no one agrees on who came to that stable in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, how they came, where they came from, whether they were sages or kings and what they gave to that special child. Although early Christian artwork had pictured the magi accurately in priestly Persian attire, their appearance became transformed by later legend into opulently clad Kings. St. Matthew doesn't call them Kings; he calls them '*magi*.' Modern translations of the New Testament often use 'Wise Men [1].' The term 'Magi' has confounded even the best writer, and it has become a term of very wide application ever since its first use by Asho Zarathushtra himself in the Gatha (Ha 33.7). Based on references from the Gatha and other religious texts, this article attempts to understand the Magi, their connection with Asho Zarathushtra and the Zarathushti religion, and unravel the maze of diverse opinions on the subject.

Many opinions

Amongst the foreign writers there is complete chaos as to the origin and spiritual status of the Magi. Prof. R.C. Zaehner cites the opinions of a galaxy of writers on the subject:

About the origin of the Magians there is no agreement. For Moulton they were an aboriginal tribe, neither Aryan nor Semitic, Diviners, necromancers, and quacks; ...they were solely responsible for the degeneration of the religion of Zoroaster... For Messina the case was very different. He regards the Magians as being the original disciples of Zoroaster. They were his missionaries and were the first to bring his doctrines to the West; they formed a colony in Media and propagated the Good Religion there [2].

Referring to the classical writers, Zaehner says,

Among those who were in a position to know, they were respected and admired; for Plato... means the service of the gods and in this he is followed by Apuleius and Dio Chrysostom. They are said by Strabo to lead a holy life. Diogenes Laertius, on the authority of Sotion, says that they worship the gods with sacrifice and prayer and are alone heard; they reveal the nature, essence and genesis of the gods, discourse concerning justice, and condemn graven images... [2]

In spite of the above facts, Prof. Zaehner concludes rather disparagingly,

This does not however, alter the fact that the average Greek, who had no specialized knowledge of Oriental religions, regarded the Magians as sorcerers and nothing more. [2]

It is rather strange that Zaehner draws his conclusions on the topic of the Magians not from "those who were in a position to know" as Messina, Plato, Apuleius, Dio

Chrysostom, Strabo and others above have done, but from “the average Greek, who had no specialized knowledge of Oriental religions.”

Contrast the above classification of Magi “as sorcerers and nothing more” with Dr. Maneck Dhalla:

The verdict of the Greek writers regarding this is unanimous. Dino states in his *Persica* that the Magi abhorred divination by Magic, and Sotion on the authority of Aristotle and Dino says that sorcery was unknown among the Magi [3].

Edwin Yamaguchi in *Persia and the Bible* writes,

The relationship of the magi to Zoroaster and his teachings is a complex and controversial issue. The magi are strikingly absent from the Avesta with one possible exception. The Zoroastrians and magi were probably initially in conflict for two reasons: the magi appear to have been polytheistic whereas Zoroaster’s own teachings about Ahura Mazda were either monotheistic or dualistic; and Zoroaster was from the northeast and the magi were established in northwestern Iran [4].

Strangely though, Yamaguchi contradicts his own personal observations later,

The classical writers Plato, Pliny the Elder and Plutarch maintained that Zoroaster himself was a magos and that the magi were his followers [4].

The aspersions seem to be as numerous as there are writers. Consider this one:

The magi seem originally to have been a Median tribe of priests; later the word refers to the Zoroastrian priestly caste.... ‘Magi’ also denotes astrologers and magicians generally. The New Testament and the rabbis usually employ it in an evil sense (‘magicians’) but Matthew probably thinks of Babylonian astrologers [5].

Dr. Dhalla writes,

Porphyry mentions on the authority of Eubulus that the Magi are divided into three classes, the first and the most learned of which neither kill nor eat anything living. Diogenes Laertius states that vegetables, cheese and bread form their food, and they content themselves with the plain ground for their bed. Clement of Alexandria mentions a sect of the Magi that observed the life of celibacy [6].

Elsewhere he writes,

They were held in great esteem, and their exalted position at the court of the Kings insured them a considerable influence over the people. They were looked upon as the wise mediators between man and God. They officiated at the ceremonies, chanted the hymns, sacrificed at the altar, explained omens, practiced divinations, expounded dreams, and ministered to the various religious needs of the people [7].

Who is a Magavan?

What, then, are we to learn from this plethora of often contradictory opinions? Who are the Magi? What do the Avesta writings and other literature tell us about them?

The term *Magi* is the English or rather Latin plural of *Magus* derived from *Magnus* – great. It is the literal rendering of *Magus* in Persian which is a translation of the Avestic *Magavan* from *Maz*=greatness, meaning ‘sublime personage’ or a ‘person par excellence’ or more literally a ‘protector of moral and spiritual greatness.’

The Pahlavi renderings are sometimes *Magih* meaning spiritual and moral excellence or sublimity and sometimes *Magopat* i.e., master of divine exaltation, which has given the Persian word *mopat* or *mobed*.

Thus, the words *Magavan* or *Magopat* or *Maga* refer to the high class of priests who used to preserve their spiritual worth and greatness by a practical life of purity.

The Magavan or Magus has been referred to in the Gatha, the Yasna and the Vendidad. We know, on the authority of foreign writers, that the class of Magi was a very pious class of priests observing abstinence in food, drink and bed, and living a life of celibate chastity. It is also admitted that they had certain spiritual powers, - of divination and exposition of dreams, etc. -and this proves the degree of their spiritual greatness.

Sorcerers or spiritually advanced priests?

Every human being on this earth has a body which is the container of the immortal soul (*Av. Urvan*). At death the soul quits the body and enters the spiritual world, which lies beyond our usual world of experience.

The *Urvan* is a tiny fragment of Ahura himself. It has been separated from Him in a remote past (called *para* in Gatha 30.2), and has undergone a long journey from the divine world of Ahura’s light (*Hasti*) to the non-physical world (*Nisti*) and from there to the physical world, the earth (*Geti*). The *Urvan* was made to undergo this journey to alchemize an element of the evil attached to it. As the soul arrives in the non-physical and physical worlds, it is fragmented into smaller units. As the first step every soul is bifurcated into sexes. These two masculine and feminine counterpart souls are, in the language of the material world, each other’s *Khaetu* – own relative. Each male and female counterpart soul is further divided and sub-divided into the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms. The final goal of every human on the earth is spiritual evolution (*Av. Frasho-kereti*) which can be attained by following the path to God as prescribed by his/her religion. As a person advances on the path towards Ahura Mazda, the soul’s scattered fragments are attracted towards the individual and start merging with the soul. This gradual merging of the fragments takes place through the food one eats, the clothes one wears and several other things which enter our body. Every good thought, word and deed attracts the soul’s own fragments; while every evil thought, word and deed repulses them i.e. draws them away.

Before uniting with God, a human has to undergo this process of unification with his or her own fragments scattered in the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms, and thereafter with the counterpart soul of the opposite sex. When all the fragments are united, the human reaches the stage of Perfection (*Av. Haurvatat*). This act of blending together of the two counterpart souls into one is called *Khaetvadatha* (Yasna 12.9), and the perfected asexual whole soul so formed is called *Magavan* (Gatha 33.7). The term *Khaetvadatha* has been misinterpreted by many scholars who have rendered it incorrectly as consanguineous or incestuous marriage [8], kindred marriage [9] and next-of-kin marriages [10]. In the Avestan derivatives *Khaetu* (own relative) and *datha* (giving up) i.e. 'giving up to own relative' there is no indication, directly or indirectly, of human blood relatives (as in 'consanguineous') nor of unchaste-ness (as in 'incestuous'). Thus the 'own relative' is the counterpart soul and 'giving up,' is not material but spiritual. Hence *Khaetvadatha* means spiritual blending of two co-related counterpart souls, thereby forming one *Magavan*.

In this divine scheme, now enters the institution of marriage. In every religion, marriage has been declared as a solemn sacrament. Two aspects are involved. The first relates to the karmic bonds between individual males and females. The ultimate aim is *Khaetvadatha*, the union of the original male and female counterparts. But, before that stage arrives, the karmic bonds lead each of the two away from the other, and each has to evolve at a very high level of spirituality. The final marriage i.e. the final union is far away. It is preceded by births, where the karmic marriages take place. The marriages amongst ordinary humans like us are such karmic marriages. They are necessary to discharge the karmic bonds between husband and wife. The final union will come after all such bonds have been dissolved. Religion defines the rules of married life, which if followed, dissolve the bonds speedily. The intense love between the karmic husband and wife is the shadow of that coming event of *Khaetvadatha* although they may not be the original counterparts. Therefore, all the religions prescribe utmost faithfulness in marriage.

The second aspect involved in the karmic marriages is related to the powerful sexual urge a non-saintly human has. Sex is a mysterious force operating in the spiritual evolution of humans. Of all the faults of the flesh, sex is the strongest. It leads men and women to unimaginable extremes. Religion ordains that the sexual urge (through which the evil force, *druj*, operates) should be controlled with the institution of marriage. This is why marriage is a sacrament and is solemnized through *Manthra* - the words of God structured by the Prophets.

Magi were celibates

But the *Magavan* having attained the highest spiritual development by undergoing the *Khaetvadatha* (merging together the male and female soul counterparts), is now an asexual whole. He does not have any sexual urges to control nor does he have any karmic bonds to fulfill. Thus a *Magavan* does not have to observe the institution of marriage. That is why classical writers mention:

the Magi that observed the life of celibacy [6].

In the above light, let us now examine the reference to *Magavan* in the *Vendidad* which has perplexed many students of Avesta.

O Spitama Zarathushtra! Indeed, I (Ahura Mazda) thus recommend hereunto thee, a man with a wife above one who has been advanced as a Magava (i.e., an unmarried man), one having family above one without family, one with sons above one without sons... [Vend. 4.47]

The Pahlavi paraphrase of the above stanza makes the meaning of the Avesta *Magava* clear as “one having no wife.” In the above passage there is a contrast between a Magavan or one without a wife, without a family, without sons and without a social environment, and one who has a wife and social surroundings; and in this respect, both the Avesta and Pahlavi versions agree. An ordinary Zarathushti is enjoined to lead a married life rather than the unmarried life of a Magavan, who is a spiritually advanced asexual celibate.

Teachings of the Magi – conflict or concurrence?

Here too, we find diverse opinions on whether the teachings of Asho Zarathushtra and the Magi concurred or conflicted with one another.

They were solely responsible for the degeneration of the religion of Zoroaster... [2]

They were the teachers and preachers of the original Zoroastrian doctrines... [11]

The Zoroastrians and magi were probably initially in conflict for two reasons: the magi appear to have been polytheistic whereas Zoroaster’s own teachings about Ahura Mazda were either monotheistic or dualistic and Zoroaster was from the northeast and the magi were established in northwestern Iran [4].

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(Messina) regards the Magians as being the original disciples of Zoroaster. They were his missionaries and were the first to bring his doctrines to the West [2].

According to Adolf Rappe, Zoroaster himself was the chief of the Magi... [11]

In *Gatha Ahunavaiti*, Asho Zarathushtra says that he is one of the Magavans. Moreover, he states that the status of a Magavan is achieved by “holiness and Good Mind.”

O Mazda come unto me, and indicate the Best (Laws) to me who am known as Thine among the Magavans owing to holiness and Good Mind [Ys. 33.7].

This fact proves that the Magavan is the highest designation for a person advanced in purity and spiritual development.

In *Gatha Vohu Khshathra*, Asho Zarathushtra shows reverence for the advanced spiritual status of the Magavs by determining the abode of songs (*garo demana*) as their reward. The Magavs themselves have earned this reward because of their Good Mind and righteousness.

The reward which Zarathushtra has fixed primarily for the Magavs, viz. the abode of songs where Ahura Mazda first entered will be awarded unto you also with the blessings on account of good mind and righteousness. [Ys. 51.15]

Now if the Magi “were solely responsible for the degeneration of the religion,” and if “the Magi and Zoroastrians were probably initially in conflict”, why would Asho Zarathushtra himself determine the highest reward for the Magavs?

Also, since Asho Zarathushtra himself was one of the Magavs and if the Magavs were celibate, it follows that having alchemized all his evil into good and having merged his soul-counterpart into him, he was asexual and therefore did not need to marry as we humans do. Thus the story of the prophet’s three wives, three sons and three daughters is to be taken metaphorically rather than literally; but that is a topic of discussion for the future.

‘Magi’ incorrectly applied to all Zarathushti priests

The general designation for the Zarathushti priestly class is *Athravan*. There are 8 grades or degrees of Athravan or priest mentioned in the Vendidad (5.57, 58), Visperad (3.1, 2) and in the Uzerin Gah: *Fraberetar*, *Aberetar*, *Asnatar*, *Rathwishkar*, *Havanan*, *Atravaksha*, *Zaotar* and *Srasoshavereza*. The Sraosha Vereza is a co-worker of Sraosha on account of the spiritual development within him through his Good Mind and righteousness. In the Zarathushti sacerdotal order, he is of the highest Athravan or priestly grade, and falls under the class of Magavan.

Thus the term Magavan implies Athravan, but, every Athravan is not necessarily a Magavan.

In later times, Greek and foreign writers indiscriminately applied the term Magi to all the Zoroastrian priests [11].

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