



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Adoration of the Magi* (detail), ca. 1655-1660. Oil on canvas, Toledo Museum of Art
 Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey

WE THREE KINGS

The beautiful, and haunting carol “We Three Kings,” was written by the American clergyman John Henry Hopkins, Jr., in 1857. At the time the song was written, Hopkins was the rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The song tells the story of Gaspard, Melchior, and Balthazar, the Magi, or Three Kings, who travel to Bethlehem to bring gifts to the infant Jesus. In the verse, the kings identify themselves as being from the Orient, a term used in the 19th century to describe the Eastern World, which included most of Asia and parts of Africa.

The story of the Magi is recounted in the Gospel of Matthew. Although the number of kings is never mentioned, Matthew says that they came from the East bearing three gifts. Western Christianity today, accepts then that the Magi numbered three, however Eastern churches believe there were as many as twelve kings who visited Jesus at the time of his birth. In the West, the Three Kings, or Three Wise Men, are important figures in the celebration of the nativity. Traditional nativity scenes depict the Three Kings along with the shepherds, although historically, the visitation of the Magi would have come twelve days after the birth of Jesus.

The term *magi* comes from Latin, Greek, and Persian sources, and describes men of priestly origin who studied the stars. Since the Three Kings are believed to have followed a star to Bethlehem, the association makes sense. However, the word *magi* was removed from the King James Version of the Bible where it was replaced with “wise men.” As magic, astrology, and witchcraft were particularly frowned upon by the Church in the 17th century, the association between the Magi and the occult practices of magicians were deemed inappropriate for the Bible.



Adoration of the Magi, ca. 1507 or earlier
 The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Biblical account of the Magi does not give the names of the Three Kings. The oldest document identifying them by name is a chronicle dating to the 8th century. In art, from the Late Middle Ages onward, the Magi were frequently depicted as representing the Three Ages of Man: youth, adulthood, and old age. Balthazar was believed to be from Arabia or Ethiopia and was depicted as a Black man. He is also represented as the youngest of the Three Kings and represents youth. Gaspar, also sometimes Caspar, was believed to be an Indian scholar. Melchior has been traditionally identified as the King of Persia, and is frequently depicted as the oldest of the three Magi.