

Discernment Defined; Elymas Was an Imposter, a Magician not a Magi; Jewish Dispersions down to the Time of Christ: Assyrian at the Fall of the Northern Kingdom & the Chaldean at the Fall of the Southern Kingdom

The definition of discernment as understood by our Founding Fathers is instructive to the believer who must coexist in a Progressive environment in which the opposition is armed with the notion that their decisions, actions, and behaviors are insulated from criticism:

DISCERN. [L. *discerno*; to separate or distinguish.] To distinguish; to see the difference between two or more things; to discriminate. To discover; to see; to distinguish by the eye. “I *discerned* among the youths, a young man void of understanding.” Prov. 7:7. To discover by the intellect; to distinguish; hence, to have knowledge of. “(for as an angel of God,) so is my lord the king to *discern* good and bad.” 2 Sam. 14:17. To see and understand the difference; to make distinction; as, to *discern* between good and evil, truth and falsehood.

DISCERNER. That which distinguishes; or that which causes to understand. “The word of God is quick and powerful—a *discerner* of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” Heb. 4:12.

DISCERNIBLE. That may be seen distinctly; discoverable by the eye or the understanding. A star is *discernable* by the eye; the identity or difference of ideas is *discernable* by the understanding.

DISCERNMENT. The act of discerning; also, the power or faculty of the mind, by which it distinguishes one thing from another, as truth from falsehood, virtue from vice, acuteness of judgment; power of perceiving differences of things or ideas, and their relations and tendencies. The errors of youth often proceed from the want of *discernment*.¹

From these original definitions by Noah Webster it is obvious there is a distinct difference between the sin of judging others and discerning what they say and do.

The true Judge of the actions of all mankind is the Lord Jesus Christ to whom all judgment has been assigned, “For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22).

Let the Lord do the judging; our duty is to become so sophisticated in our spiritual growth that we can discern the mind-set of others. When we voice our biblically based opinions in response to the erroneous views and actions of our society, we have the strength to ignore the rhetorical squabash and sockdologers of the Progressives.

To squabash is to defeat with cutting criticism, crush a person's spirits by pointing out his or her faults. The sockdologer is the decisive blow or sizzling retort that settles the dispute.²

¹ Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828; repr., San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967, 1995), 1:62.

² Charles Harrington Elster, *There's a Word for It! A Grandiloquent Guide to Life* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 114.

Elymas was trying to squabash Paul's gospel in the eyes of Sergius Paulus. Before he could deliver the sockdologer, Paul's discernment motivates him to intervene with a searing critic of the magician's tactics—deceit and fraud, his mentor—Lucifer, and his function—the enemy of righteousness. Paul then delivers his assessment by asking Elymas, “Will you not stop making crooked the straight ways of the Lord?”

Elymas was not a member of the Magi tribe of Persia but of the imposters of Babylonia. As we study the Magi of Matthew 2, we must keep in mind that they are not of Babylonian but Persian origin.

The only appearance in Scripture for these “Magi from the east” is in Matthew 2. These men are officials of Parthia, an empire equal in power and prestige as Rome. These Magi are priests and experts in astronomy, astrology, and the natural sciences. They also were influenced by the Jews who were immigrated to Mesopotamia by the fifth cycles of discipline imposed by Assyria in 722 B.C. and Chaldea in 586 B.C.

This brief excerpt on the history of Iran gives us some insight into the involvement of the Persians with the Jewish people:

Iran, or Persia, has a long history, and was the centre of a number of ancient empires extending beyond the borders of the present kingdom.

The Median and Persian peoples appeared in the 9th century B.C.; in 550 Cyrus II established the first Persian Empire, then conquered Babylonia. His successors in the Achaemenid \ak-i-men'-id\ dynasty ruled a vast realm extending from Anatolia to the borders of India. The dynasty's last king was killed in 330 by Alexander the Great, who incorporated Iran into the Macedonian Empire. The Parthian kingdom arose in the 3rd century B.C. and in the next two centuries became an empire encompassing Iran and much additional territory. The Parthians came into conflict with the rising power of Rome, making peace in 20 B.C.³

This peace was established 15 years before the birth of Christ, yet the tension that existed between the two empires was still fresh in the minds of both when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem in the year 4 B.C.

VIII. Jewish Dispersions Down to the Time of Christ

As we progress in our study of the Magi in Matthew 2, it is imperative that the history of three major Jewish dispersions be examined in detail. This background will provide necessary recall to the subject as it develops which is that the Magi that visited Bethlehem were at least, in part, Jews, descendants of the three dispersions.

Those Matthew refers to as Magoi were among the high government officials of the Parthian Empire. The empire's government was bicameral, meaning it consisted of two legislative chambers. One chamber was that held by the Arsacids, the royal family that founded and ruled the Parthian Empire. The other chamber seated two categories: (1) The Magoi (Μάγοι) who formed the priesthood. They were known as the “powerful ones” but they were not royal family. The other category was called the Sophoi (Σόφοι) or “wise ones.” The two groups of this chamber were called the Megistanes (Μεγιστάνες).

³ “Iran, history of,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 5:418.

As we have noted, there was a distinct connection between the Persian and Parthian Empires and Israel. An understanding of that connection answers several questions: (1) What motivated the Magi to travel a thousand miles from their capital city of Hecatompylos \he-ka-täm'-pa-läs\ to Jerusalem? (2) Why would they have interest in the birth of a Jewish child? (3) Why did God inform these Parthians of the Lord's birth? (4) Why would the Magi take the chance of fomenting a war with Rome?

The answers to these questions make sense if these Magi were somehow personally related to the Messiah. God's plan included the assignment of a herald angel to inform the Magi of the Lord's birth and to advise them through a dream to return to Parthia.

The puzzle is solved provided we are able to establish that the Magi are the progeny of the Jews who were disbursed into the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian dynasties.

Tens of thousands of Jews became deportees following the fifth cycles of discipline to the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. and to the Southern Kingdom in 586 B.C., the former by the Assyrians and the latter by the Chaldeans.

The Assyrian Diaspora is documented by this brief account of the fall of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom:

The last king of the Northern Kingdom, Hoshea (730–722 B.C.), had the Assyrians to thank for his throne; but he did not keep his fidelity as a vassal very long. As soon as Tiglath-pileser was dead, he tried to throw off the Assyrian yoke. But his successor Shalmaneser IV (727–723 B.C.) soon compelled Hoshea to submit to his authority. Two years later Hoshea again joined a conspiracy with the Phoenicians against Assyria, in which they even counted on the help of the Egyptian king, who in the Bible is called So. Now the Assyrians lost all patience. They at once came with their armies. Hoshea seems to have voluntarily submitted to the power of the Great King, who then made him captive. The people, however, continued the struggle. Samaria, the capital city, was besieged, but did not fall until the 3d year (722 B.C.) into the hands of the enemy. Shalmaneser, in the meanwhile had died and Sargon II had become his successor.

The city was indeed not destroyed, but a large portion of the inhabitants, especially, the leaders, were deported and transplanted to Northern Mesopotamia and to Media. Sargon states that the number of deported Israelites was 27,290.⁴

The fifth cycle to the Southern Kingdom occurred at the hands of the Chaldean army under the command of Nebuchadnezzar II. This is an extended excerpt but it contains valuable information that contributes to building our case regarding the origin of the Parthian Magi.

In the year 607–606 B.C., the Assyrians were in process of disintegration, and Nineveh fell under the attacks of the Medes and the Persians. The heir of the Assyrian power was the Babylonian, or rather, more accurately, the Chaldaean dynasty of Nabopolassar, whose son Nebuchadnezzar had overpowered the Egyptians at Carchemish in 605 B.C. From this time on the Chaldeans and Nebuchadnezzar, who soon afterward became their king, (became) the agents to carry out the judgment on Jerusalem.

⁴ Conrad von Orelli, "Israel, History of," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 3:1523.

In the Battle of Migiddo⁵ (609 B.C.), Josiah was mortally wounded. No greater calamity could have befallen Judah than the death of this king, who was deeply mourned, and who was the last of the house of David that was a credit to it.

The Egyptian king selected Jehoiakim to be king in Jerusalem, a prince untrue to Jehovah, who through his perfidious policy, brought calamity upon the land.

Jehoiakim formed a conspiracy against Nebuchadnezzar, to whom he had begun to pay tribute in the 5th year of his reign, and in this way brought it about that the Syrians, the Moabites and the Ammonites, who had taken sides with the Assyrians, devastated the land of Judah, and that finally the king of Babylon himself came to Jerusalem to take revenge. It is not clear what was the end of this king. His son Jehoiachin did not experience a much better fate. After ruling three months he was taken to Babylon ... together with the best portion of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, about 10,000 men, especially the smith and builders, were deported.

The inhabitants of Judah, who had been deported by Nebuchadnezzar at different times, were settled by him in Babylonia at the river Chebar \kē'-bār\, near the city of Nippur \ni-pur\.⁶ Land was assigned to them here, and they were permitted to build houses for themselves, and could travel around the district without restraint. They were not prisoners in the narrow sense of the word. They soon, through diligence and skill in trade, attained to considerable wealth, so that most of them, after the lapse of half a century, were perfectly satisfied and felt no desire to return home. For the spiritual development of the people the exile proved to be a period of great importance.

The terrible judgment that had come over Jerusalem had proved that the prophets had been right, who had for a long time, but in vain, preached genuine repentance. This did not prove to be without fruit.⁷ While living in the heathen land, they naturally became acquainted with heathendom in a more crass form. But even if many of the Jews were defiled by it, in general the relations of the Israelites toward the idol-worshipping Babylonians were antagonistic, and they became all the more zealous in the observance of those religious rites which could be practiced in a foreign land, such as rest on the Sabbath day, the use of meats, circumcision, and others. But with marked zeal the people turned to the spiritual storehouse of their traditions, namely their sacred literature. They collected the laws, the history, the hymns, and treasured them. It was also a noteworthy progress that such prophets as Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Daniel received prophetic visions while on heathen soil. The people also learned that the heathen, in the midst of whom they lived, became receptive of the higher truths of Israel's religion. Especially does the 2d part of Isaiah, chapters 40–66, show that they began to understand the missionary calling of Israel among the nations of the world.

⁵ Fought between the forces of the Egyptian army, under the command of Pharaoh-necoh II, and Judah's led by King Josiah.

⁶ "Ancient Babylonian city; its ruins lie about 100 miles southeast of Babylon; was originally on the Euphrates River whose course later changed" (*Merriam-Webster's Geographical Dictionary*, 3d ed., s.v.: "Nippur.")

⁷ Zechariah was a prophet of the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple under the reign of Darius Hystaspes \da-rī'-us his-tas'-pēz\, king of Persia (521–486 B.C.). "Did not My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers? Then they repented and said, 'As the Lord of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.'" (Zechariah 1:6, NASB)



The Book of Daniel reports how a God-fearing and law-abiding Jew, through his prophecies, attained to prominent positions of influence at the courts of different rulers.⁸

⁸ Conrad von Orelli, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 3:1524–25.