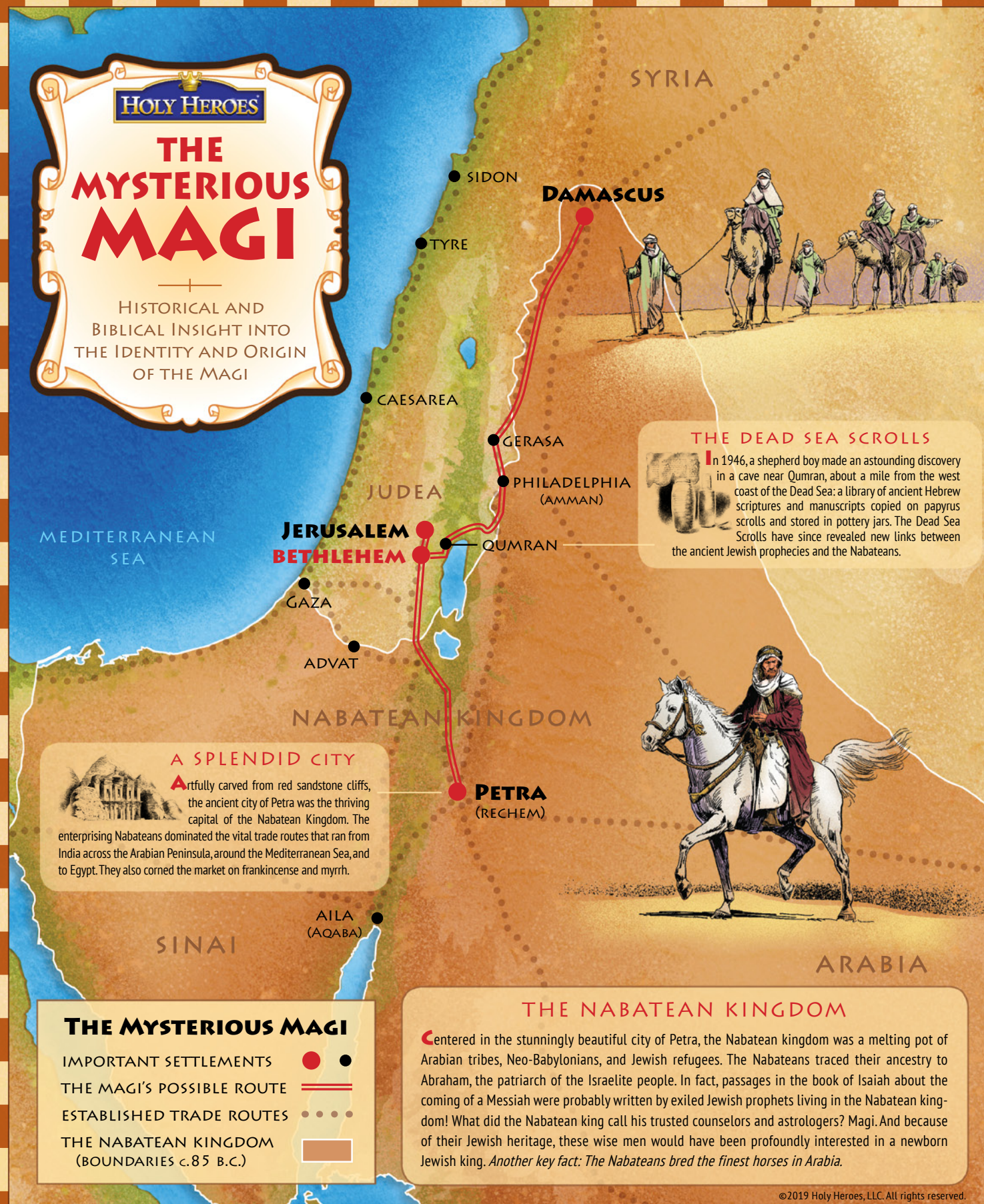


HOLY HEROES

THE MYSTERIOUS MAGI

HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL INSIGHT INTO THE IDENTITY AND ORIGIN OF THE MAGI



THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

In 1946, a shepherd boy made an astounding discovery in a cave near Qumran, about a mile from the west coast of the Dead Sea: a library of ancient Hebrew scriptures and manuscripts copied on papyrus scrolls and stored in pottery jars. The Dead Sea Scrolls have since revealed new links between the ancient Jewish prophecies and the Nabateans.

A SPLENDID CITY

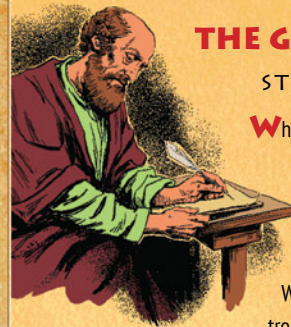
Artfully carved from red sandstone cliffs, the ancient city of Petra was the thriving capital of the Nabatean Kingdom. The enterprising Nabateans dominated the vital trade routes that ran from India across the Arabian Peninsula, around the Mediterranean Sea, and to Egypt. They also cornered the market on frankincense and myrrh.

THE MYSTERIOUS MAGI

IMPORTANT SETTLEMENTS ● ●
THE MAGI'S POSSIBLE ROUTE ———
ESTABLISHED TRADE ROUTES
THE NABATEAN KINGDOM (BOUNDARIES c.85 B.C.)

THE NABATEAN KINGDOM

Centered in the stunningly beautiful city of Petra, the Nabatean kingdom was a melting pot of Arabian tribes, Neo-Babylonians, and Jewish refugees. The Nabateans traced their ancestry to Abraham, the patriarch of the Israelite people. In fact, passages in the book of Isaiah about the coming of a Messiah were probably written by exiled Jewish prophets living in the Nabatean kingdom! What did the Nabatean king call his trusted counselors and astrologers? Magi. And because of their Jewish heritage, these wise men would have been profoundly interested in a newborn Jewish king. *Another key fact: The Nabateans bred the finest horses in Arabia.*



THE GOSPEL NARRATIVE

ST. MATTHEW 2:1-12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

REAL PEOPLE, REAL EVENTS

The Gospel of Matthew describes real events in simple terms which people of the time would easily understand — but which to us 2,000 years later often seem mysterious. Where were the "wise men from the East," the magi, actually from? What had they seen in the night skies that made them want to make such a journey? Where did they go after they found and paid tribute to the child who turned out to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God?

According to Father Dwight Longenecker, modern research and scholarship have shed new light on these wise men from the East. In his book *The Mystery of the Magi* he reveals that the magi were likely astrologers who advised the Nabatean king at Petra, where the prophecies of a coming Messiah were well known. Come travel back in time with us as we discover a forgotten kingdom and its spectacular capital city, explore ancient trade routes, take a ride on magnificent Arabian horses, and embark on an exciting quest to unravel the mystery of the magi.



THE MYSTERIOUS STAR

There were indeed signs in the night sky at the time of Christ's birth — exactly the kind of signs that the Nabatean magi were experts in interpreting. The magi looked to the movement of stars, planets, and constellations as signs from heaven. The "star" that inspired their journey was probably a particular alignment of the moon, the planet Jupiter, and the constellation Aries — confirmed by computer models today — which indicated to them the birth of a Jewish king. *Aries was associated with Judea, and Jupiter and the moon were associated with royalty.* Knowing the prophecies of the Messiah from Isaiah, the Nabatean magi would have likely predicted the birth of a new king of the Jews when they observed Jupiter's rising in Aries.

WISE MEN "FROM THE EAST"

Matthew was writing for the first Jewish Christians, who lived in Judea and Syria. "The East" in the Old Testament and among the Jews in Judea and Syria was understood to be the Nabatean territory of Arabia right next door to them, not Persia or some more distant land. The Nabateans had established trade routes criss-crossing the entire area for many years. Where would you go to look for a new king of the Jews? To Jerusalem, of course. The Nabatean kingdom's capital city of Petra is located about three hundred miles southeast of Jerusalem. So the magi would have journeyed to Jerusalem on their own well-traveled trade routes. And in all probability they traveled on horseback, not camels.

THEY PAID HIM HOMAGE

The Nabatean magi went to Jerusalem on behalf of their king, Aretas IV, who wanted an alliance with the current king of the Jews, Herod. Paying homage to a newborn prince with rich gifts like gold, frankincense, and myrrh was the traditional gesture from one royal court to another. It was also the perfect step to build goodwill with Herod. People of this time also believed that all kings were divine, and knowing the prophecies, the Nabatean magi were also intent on paying homage to the child who might be the divinely promised Messiah. See how it all comes together?

THEY DEPARTED TO THEIR OWN COUNTRY BY ANOTHER WAY

How would the magi have decided to escape Herod's murderous henchmen? They would want to avoid Jerusalem! There are intriguing clues that the magi sought refuge in Damascus, traveling east and around the Dead Sea to join a Nabatean trade route that ran north from Petra. Some historians think that they may have settled with the Essenes, a Jewish sect associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls, and established a school of wisdom with them in the years after Christ's birth. Remember how Saint Paul, before his miraculous conversion by Christ, had been persecuting the early Christians? He had been sent to root out the believers — in Damascus! Had that Christian community been established by the fugitive magi after their life-changing visit to Bethlehem?

And then after his conversion, Paul went to Arabia and he came back better informed about his new faith. Did Paul learn more about Christ from a school of Nabatean wise men? Was he taught by the magi themselves? Maybe the sleuth who uncovers more key clues and further unlocks the mystery of the magi will someday be ... you!

