

## **Wise Men and A Star**

Dr. Jay Zinn • River's Edge Church • 12/12/10

Throughout the centuries of Christmas tradition the nativity scene in songs, on cards and in plays have included Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, an angel, shepherds from the field, three camels, three wise men and a star. My wife and I just recently attended the live nativity play held in our community at our annual "Christmas in Davidson." Today, let's take a closer look at the Biblical account of this scene and enhance it with some additional thoughts.

### **Two Accounts**

The Christmas story, found in **Luke 2:1-20**, begins with Mary and Joseph who are required by Caesar to travel to Bethlehem to be registered for a census. The events in this story involve Mary giving birth to Jesus (wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger), an angel announcing the birth of the Savior to shepherds in a nearby field which is concluded with a chorus by a host of angels. The angels return to heaven and the shepherds go and find the Christ child, just as the angel described they would.

The other story, in **Matthew 2:1-18**, is traditionally placed in the same time and setting of the night of Christ's birth of Christ. The principal characters in Matthew's account included Herod the king, wise men from the East, Joseph, Mary and Jesus, and the children who died under Herod's orders. There is also a star that leads and points to the house where the wise men find Jesus. The wise men present three categories of gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are the only two gospel accounts surrounding the birth of Christ, each with their distinct and unique details. Let's take a look at both stories to uncover some things tradition has overlooked.

### **Two Different Signs, Two Different Classes of Men**

First, there were two *different* "signs" that led two *classes* of men to Christ (lower and upper class). For the shepherds, their *sign* was "a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." The shepherds had no star in the sky to lead them. Their sign was Jesus himself and the description of how they would find him—i.e. as a babe, in a humble place, without fanfare, and without angels hovering above the stable. So the scene in Luke's account revealed nothing more than the humble arrival of Christ, in an obscure place. Not much of a debut for the King of kings. But it was the exact representation of who Jesus was and grew up to be—God the Son, who *humbled* himself and took on the *form of a servant* in the likeness of men.

The *sign* for the wise men from the East, however, was completely different. The wise men saw a very unusual "star" in the East. A star the shepherds never witnessed in their open fields and sky. Actually, Matthew's account leaves us with the impression that the wise men were still in their homeland when the star first appeared; and it's probably safe to assume that it appeared to them the very night our Savior was born.

### **Two Different Settings, Two Different Times**

Second, the shepherds searched for a "manger" (i.e. a feeding trough for animals) holding a baby; we assume it had been found near the inn with no room (Lk. 2:7). The wise men, however, weren't led to a manger, they were led to a "house" (Mt. 2:11) in Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph were residing. It was at the house, not the stable, where the wise men presented their gifts.

In Matthew's account there is no mention of the presence of shepherds or angels because we are now in a different time and setting, long after the stable. The wise men found Jesus in a small town, in a humble home. By now, he had been through the rite of circumcision, officially named (Lk. 2:21), brought to Jerusalem to be presented before the Lord with the sacrifice of two young pigeons (Lk. 2:22-24), held and prophesied over by a

devout saint, Simeon, and worshiped by the prophetess, Anna. Much had already transpired by the time the wise men had arrived; possibly as much as *two years* later.

Matthew's account reveals this timing of two years. It says "after" Jesus was born, in the "days" of Herod, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem in search of the King of the Jews. It wasn't on *the* night of Christ's birth, but *after* his birth, in the *days* of Herod.

Herod was informed by the wise men about the *time* when the Star appeared. They had seen it *two years* before their arrival (compare Mt.2:1, 7, with 16). So Herod called his chief priests and scribes to find out where this King would be born. They discovered through the prophet, Micah (5:2), that a Ruler would come out of Bethlehem. After the wise men returned home, Herod ordered the execution of all the children in Bethlehem, *two years* old and under, according to the time he had determined from the wise men that Christ *had* been born (Mt. 2:16-17).

Concluding this point, the wise men were not present at the stable; they were present two years later at the home of Joseph and Mary who had remained in Bethlehem. The signs were given the same day of Christ's birth, but in different locations with different distances.

### **Who Were These Wise Men?**

The Greek word used for wise men is *magoi*. These men were not kings, as tradition indicates, but they were "king-makers." There is no mention in Matthew or Luke of how many Magoi (magi) came, only that they had brought three categories of gifts. These Magoi came from the east, from Persia and the Parthian Empire. They were astronomers, interpreters of dreams, and part of an aristocratic caste of priests. They were also powerful officials which formed the upper house of the "two-house" governing body known as the Megistanes. Their unpopular, aging, dying king—Phraates IV—was in need of a successor in the midst of internal dissension. And since the Magoi could trace their roots back to Abraham, perhaps they thought this Ruler born, this King of the Jews, might be a strong contender for that position. It is possible that they connected the appearance of the "star" with the prophecy of Balaam—*A Star shall rise out Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel* (Num. 24:17).

Their history was intertwined with the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon. Persia had inherited them when they overthrew Babylon. The Persian king, Cyrus, returned many Jews back to Jerusalem, while others remained grafted in to their society (i.e. Mordecai and Esther). Daniel's name and prophecies would have been known from the king's archives. The story of Esther and the Jew's deliverance from Haman would have been known by these Magoi. The prophecy of Daniel, regarding Messiah the Prince (Dan. 9:27), also gave them a time frame as to when Christ would be born. So these Gentile aristocrats would be extremely interested in the birth of Christ, enough to travel over a thousand miles to see him.

### **Camels or Horses?**

First, there is no mention of camels in Matthew or Luke's account surrounding the birth of Christ. For national governing officials to travel alone—on camels—and with all that gold, it would have been a suicide mission. It is more realistic to look at how the high officials of Persia would have traveled at that time. Historians say the Persians were equestrians and had the finest cavalry the world had ever known. Whenever government officials made trips to foreign countries, these cavalry units were with them. Camels, on the other hand, were only used by the Persians to carry the baggage—not officials.

### **Herod and All Jerusalem Were Troubled**

In Herod's day, the Parthian Dynasty was equal in power and land mass to the Roman Empire. Herod had actually had a run-in with them in his earlier years in contending for the land of Palestine. So with the Magoi descending on Jerusalem with their equestrian army, in search of the Messiah and King of the Jews—it is little

wonder that Herod and all Jerusalem would be troubled. So he goes along with the search, discovers the location through prophecy, and cunningly sends them on their way to find the child he says he'll worship, as well.

### **The Star that Moved Through Streets?**

Perhaps the biggest mystery for me among all the traditions surrounding Christmas is the star. First, it says they saw the star "in the East" and not "from" the East. If this were a star (as we think of a star) leading them to Christ, they would have seen it over the western horizon. So the indication is that they saw a luminary object in the East where they lived. Not "from" the East over the western horizon.

Now, tradition has it that this was a planetary alignment or comet with a tail. Ever notice how many Christmas pictures of the wise men show a star with a tail pointing to earth. But I contend that this was neither a planet or planets aligning, or stars, or a comet. Have you ever followed a star that took you precisely to the address of a person you were trying to locate? I seriously doubt it. But someone leading you with a lantern to the address of the person you're looking for makes more sense.

In the days of Christ, the ancients used the term, "star," very loosely to apply to *any* and *all* luminaries observed in the atmosphere above. Matthew said the star appeared "in" the East, where they were, but there is no indication of the star leading them from Persia to Jerusalem. Perhaps the prophecies about Christ did that for them. The prophecies they might have been familiar with that had been passed down by Daniel and the Jews populating Persia. But after the Magoi left Herod's palace, the star appeared again and they rejoiced when they saw it. It says that the star "went before them" until it "came and stood over" the house where the "young child" was with Mary his mother. Do you see it? The star or luminary object actually led them through the streets of Jerusalem, out of the city gate, six to seven miles south to Bethlehem, and to the exact home of Joseph and Mary. The luminary object then stopped and remained suspended over the house, which the Magoi then entered. Come on, now how complicated and how hard is it to figure out that a planet, star, or comet could not do what this luminary object did? Or do we need to submit this to the "Myth Busters" show and have them demonstrate it to us?

### **Shekinah Glory**

The only solution to the mystery of the "GPS" star is to look back in scripture to where another "luminous object" led people through winding roads and paths, stopped and remained suspended in air, and hovered over a tent pointing to an important object in the tent below—the *ark* of The Presence of God.

#### **Ex 13:21-22** (NIV)

By day the Lord **went ahead of them** in a pillar of cloud **to guide them on their way** and by night **in a pillar of fire to give them light**, so that they could travel by day or night.

#### **Num 14:14-15** (NIV)

And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, O Lord, are with these people and that you, O Lord, have been seen face to face, that your cloud **stays over them**, and that you **go before them** in a pillar of cloud by day and **a pillar of fire by night**.



What I suggest is that God sent this sign of “fire by night” as the luminous object the ancients threw into the category of a “star.” This pillar might have been shaped like a star (with a tail) when it first appeared to the Magoi “in the East,” on the night that Christ was born. They pondered the significance of it, researched it, went back into their historical records to possibly preserved copies of the scriptures they had received, passed down from Daniel, and the meticulous record keeping of the Jews. They certainly considered the historical value of this sign...counted the cost, and then took off accompanied by an equestrian army to go see this King of the Jews they were related to through their forefather, Abraham.

After they left Herod for Bethlehem, the pillar (or star) reappeared and *went before them* to take them to the home of Joseph and Mary. In the same way the pillar of fire (above) hovered directly over the “Ark of the Covenant”—where God’s presence rested—so does the star with a tail, hover directly over the house of the young Child—God *with us*, Emmanuel.

What the Ark of the Covenant was to Israel in the Old Testament (God’s presence among them), Jesus became to the Jews in the New Testament (God’s presence among them). There is something to be said about God having this thing about using fire to point people to him—i.e. Moses and the burning bush, Elijah and the fire of God consuming the sacrifice, and... you get the idea.

#### **December 25th?**

Though this is the traditional day we celebrate the birth of Christ, it is more likely his birthday landed in September or October. First, the shepherds would not have been out in the fields with their sheep in December. They would go out in the spring and the fall, but not in the winter. Second, Jesus was about 30 years of age when he began his ministry of three and a half years. He died in the spring (when we celebrate Resurrection Sunday) which would have placed his birth date six months prior to his death in the fall (somewhere in September through October) and not the winter.

#### **Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh?**

Why these objects? What is their significance? **Gold** represents his *Deity* and status as *King*, **Frankincense** represents his *humanity* and status as *High Priest*, and **Myrrh** for his *Death*. The Magoi had tremendous prophetic insight. How ironic that the Gentile wise men got it, and the Jews did not (“He came unto his own, but his own did not receive him”). It is all about those who have ears to hear and eyes to see who Jesus really is.

The gold, by the way, probably helped finance Joseph and Mary’s travels to Egypt where they had remained until Herod died, and the Father called them back to Israel to live in Nazareth of Galilee. Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord our Provider—who provided not only *for* his Son, but he provided his Son *for us* as the Lamb who would take away the sins of the world.

MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE!!!