

# WISE MEN MEET JESUS THE KING

(Matthew 2:1-12)

HOPE CHURCH CAROL SERVICE, 18 December 2016

## INTRODUCTION

Isn't it great to sing the old familiar Christmas carols? We all have our favourites, but some of them contain more fable than fact. One example is this one, "We Three Kings", which is full of myths, myth-takes and myth-understandings. I thought it might be interesting to find out where we have truth and where it's fiction.

## WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW (BUT WE DON'T)

Let's start with things we think we know, based on the carol, but which almost certainly aren't true:

- **Three?** Who said there were three wise men? Yes, three gifts, but the Bible just says "Wise men came from the east". We don't know how many – more than one, but...
- **Kings?** Where did that come from? We know they were "wise men", but...
- **Following yonder star?** How do you follow a star? Was it really a star, or something else?

Then there's the question of where they met Jesus. If you've got a nativity scene like this, you've probably got wise men (three of course) alongside the shepherds and angels in the stable with the baby in the manger. Really?

- The Bible says "Going into the **house** they saw the **child** with his mother Mary..." The Greek words used here are different from stable and baby, and usually just mean a house and a small child.
- When the wise men visited Herod, he asked them when the star appeared, then sent them to Bethlehem to find Jesus, and asked them to let him know when they'd found him. When they didn't return, he arranged to kill all male children under the age of two, based on what the wise men had told him (Matthew 2:16). Why two?

It seems likely that the wise men came later, and weren't at the stable. (Maybe you might need to move them away from the nativity scene to the other side of the room?)

We're fairly sure they were wise **men** of course, but if they'd been wise women things would have been quite different... [joke]

## WHAT WE MIGHT KNOW [BUT WE'RE NOT SURE]

Let's move on to things that could possibly be true about the wise men's visit to the young Jesus, but we're not certain of. All these things are based on other things written in the Bible, but some are slightly speculative. See what you think...

Firstly, our English Bibles use the phrase "wise men", but the Greek has a specific title: **magi**. This means something particular, a role that people knew about at the time. Who were the magi?

- A caste of priests and philosophers who arose in the Middle East about 600BC, believed in one god, made sacrifices to a holy fire, studied sciences, maths, nature, explored the stars through astronomy and astrology.
- During the Babylonian and Persian empires, they became advisors to the king, highly trusted and respected. No decisions made without referring to them – their wisdom was embodied in "The law of the Medes and Persians". Established as the state religion by Darius the Great, later developed into Zoroastrianism (still exists today in Iran).
- As advisers to the king, they were responsible for teaching each new king their wisdom, and no king could be crowned without their approval.

The magi are mentioned in the Bible, a couple of times in the NT, but more in the OT in the sections dealing with the Babylonian and Persian empires, particularly in the book of Daniel.

Daniel was taken to Babylon as a teenager in exile, and came to prominence when the king Nebuchadnezzar had troubling dreams. He asked his magi to interpret but they couldn't, so he decided to kill them all. Someone suggested Daniel might help, because he was able to interpret dreams, and he did – with God's help. Nebuchadnezzar was so pleased that he made Daniel ruler over a whole province, and also put him in charge of all the magi in the whole country.

That much we know, but here's a question: What did Daniel tell the magi about God's plan?? Surely he must have told them about God's dealings with Israel, their history and faith, and their promises for the future. Don't you think he shared his own visions and prophecies with them?

Daniel stayed in charge of the magi for a very long time, through the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar and Darius, up to the time of Cyrus. He must have been very influential in their thinking and practice. So... how much did they remember after Daniel was gone? Was there any echo of God's purposes in what they believed afterwards? Is it possible that the wise men who visited Jesus might have been looking out and expecting God to come to earth? Hmm... It's speculation, but quite possible I think.

[BRIEFLY!!] As an aside, I was in Iran last February, and I saw this life-size stone carving from Persepolis in the National Museum in Tehran. It shows King Darius in the middle, with his son the crown prince Xerxes behind. The royal guard are at the edges, with the chief bodyguard. The prime minister is presenting a petition, bowing and blowing a kiss – the typical form of worship for a high-ranking person. Ordinary people had to lay on the ground in the presence of the king, important people could kneel, and the most important just had to bow. Only the magi didn't have to bow down and worship the king, they were allowed to stand in his presence.

You can also see incense burners in front of the king, used in worship because they believed the king was a god.

But who is the man standing behind the king and the crown prince? This is the chief of the magi – if this is Darius, then it must be Daniel!

Back to things that we might know but aren't sure about. We know who the magi were, and it's possible that Daniel had told them about the God of Israel when he was in charge of them. But what about this mysterious star the wise men followed?

Firstly, who says they followed it?

- When they arrive in Jerusalem, they use the past tense: *"We have seen his star in the east, and we have come"*
- After they met Herod, *"Behold, the star which they had seen went before them till it came to rest over the place where the child was."*

Sounds more like they saw the "star" appear, then came to the obvious place which was Jerusalem, but that was the wrong place, so the "star" reappeared and led them to Jesus.

And surely this can't be an ordinary star? Stars don't appear and disappear, or move, or rest over a specific house. Various theories on what it might have been (Jupiter, conjunction of planets, comet, meteor...? Maybe a miraculously created special star??) [Maybe something else? Cartoon]

Here's another idea for you to consider. Remember what the shepherds saw in the fields outside Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born? They saw an angel who told them about Jesus, and *"the glory of the Lord shone around them."* Then there were a huge number of angels all together, filling the sky with light.

Is it possible that the wise men in Persia saw the glory of God shining over the fields of Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born? When they said *"We have seen his star..."* it could be translated *"We have seen the brightness of his glory..."*. There are plenty of other places in the Bible when the presence of God appears like a bright light. Wouldn't it be reasonable to expect the light of God's glory to appear when his son came to earth?

And if they saw this light when Jesus was born, it would have taken some time for them to work out what to do, arrange a trip and travel to Israel, so they would have arrived some time after the birth. Hmm... It's speculation, but it's an intriguing possibility. [SHORT VIDEO CLIP]

## WHAT WE KNOW FOR SURE

We've looked at things we thought we knew, but which turn out to be fiction:

- Three kings visiting the baby in the stable, or
- Unknown number of wise men (magi) visiting the child at the house

We've considered some things that we might know but we're not sure about:

- What might Daniel have told the magi 500 years previously when he was in charge of them, and were they expecting God to come to earth?
- Was the so-called "star" actually the glory of God shining over the fields of Bethlehem?

Now let's think about what we know for sure. Is there anything in this story of the wise men that we know to be true? I think there are three things we can be sure of:

1. Firstly, we know that **they saw something**. Star, comet, glory of God... there was definitely something in the sky that they saw in Persia that prompted them to travel to Israel to look for a new-born king.
2. Second, having seen, **they came**. They responded to what they saw and got up out of their current situation to make a journey. It may have taken some time, perhaps months or years, but they got there eventually. They took a few detours and wrong turns, for example to Herod's palace in Jerusalem, but in the end, they found Jesus in Bethlehem.
3. When they got there, **they worshipped Jesus**.

But why did they come, and why did they worship??

The wise men worshipped Jesus because they knew he was a king. And it was their job to approve and crown all new kings.

Their response to finding Jesus was to "*fall down and worship him*". They made him their own king.

- "*fell down*" – remember that the magi were allowed to stand in the presence of the king, only ordinary people had to lie down. These magi didn't stand, they didn't even kneel, they lay flat on the ground to worship Jesus their king.
- "*worshipped*" – the Greek is literally "*to blow kisses*", which was what people had done for hundreds of years in Babylon and Persia to worship the king.

They were worshipping Jesus as king in the way magi had worshipped kings for centuries.

They expressed their worship with royal gifts fit for a king, which any child can tell you were: gold, myrrh and ... [cartoon]

- **Gold** as a tribute to a great king, recognising his royalty
- **Frankincense** for worshipping God, recognising his deity
- **Myrrh**, used during the burial ceremony to mourn a death, recognising his humanity

Jesus is the royal king of heaven, to be honoured...

...but he is also God come to earth, to be worshipped...

...and he came to give his life as a sacrifice for others, for us.

## CONCLUSION

What does this have to do with us this Christmas?

Here's the challenge for each one of us: Will we be wise men and women?

The wise men saw, they came and they worshipped.

- Have you **seen something of the presence of God**, a sign that he is in the world, something to make you wonder, something pointing the way you should go? Maybe you've seen it in the life of a Christian friend, or in the beautiful world around you, or in the Bible, or in your dreams. If not, are you looking? The wise men saw the "star" because they were looking for it. Look around you this Christmas and see if you can spot any signs that God is here.
- If you've seen something, are you prepared to **get up and come**? Will you make the journey to discover more about who God is, what he's doing in the world, how you fit in? It might take a while to arrive at your destination, but don't give up. Maybe you're already on the journey, so don't stop until you find what you're looking for.
- When you meet Jesus, will you **worship him as your king**? Like the wise men, will you forget your position and reputation, and fall down before him? Will you give him everything, as they did?

For each one of us this Christmas, the message of the wise men is the same. The wise men say to us, "*Do what we did*":

- We saw
- We came
- We worshipped

[PRAYER]