

Arrival of the Magi

It seems that so much of what we believe about the Bible stories is based on the hymns we sing and not on what the Bible actually says. How often we have song the old Christmas carol, “*We Three Kings of Orient Are*,” when that is not what the Bible teaches at all.

Nowhere do the Scriptures say that there were *three* wise men that came to Bethlehem from the east, and nowhere are they ever called “*kings*.” In fact, it is highly unlikely that only three men would take such a trip. If they were only three astronomers (and there may have been a dozen), they would have had many servants, because these men, while not in any sense “*kings*” as the carol would have it, were men of great importance. Moreover, they were transporting an exceedingly valuable cargo, and armed guards as well as servants would be likely, if not necessary. So it must have been quite a caravan that headed off northwest toward the headwaters of the Euphrates at Haran before turning off southwest again following the fertile crescent and the trade routes, more than 1000 miles. Actually, the straight line that daybreak takes from Sippar to Judea is only 500 miles, but it was across the empty section, and no one attempted passage that way. It is still a life and death matter to cross that desert with the best equipment, and the most recent maps still show no roads.

The Astronomical Expedition

When this caravan arrived in Roman Jerusalem, they would have been one of many. One of Jerusalem’s great values to the ancient empires was that it sits astride the land bridge between Europe, Africa, and Asia. It was the stopover for many caravans. The procedure would have been for the caravan to locate an inn or khan with accommodations for the whole crowd and the pack animals or wagons they were traveling with. (The Scriptures mention no camels, by the way, but it is a reasonable guess that camels were used although horses, or donkeys and wagons often were used for such long trips.) As soon as they were settled, they began to inquire of the local folk about the Great King -- [which they evidently deciphered from the planet Jupiter] -- born to the Jews -- [which they made out from the planet Saturn] -- in the land of Judea -- [understood from the Zodiacal sign of Pisces].

*“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, **behold** -- [this world always introduces an astonishing thing] -- there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem -- [Sippar is due east of Bethlehem] -- Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? -- [That is all they could deduce from the stars] -- for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things -- [their arrival and extraordinary request were reported to Herod immediately] -- he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:1-3).*

There was no small stir that day in the city. Remember that this Herod is the murderous old man who lives in daily fear that someone will take his kingdom and throne away from him. You can imagine how he would react to such news. He was insane, but cunning still. He called in the scribes privately (he had no intention of letting them meet the delegation of astronomers) and inquired of them where the

Hebrew Scriptures prophesied that the Messiah-king would be born. That was an easy one to answer. For five centuries it had plainly said in Micah:

“And thou, Bethlehem in Judea, although you are a small town among the thousand of villages, nevertheless, out of you will come He whose goings-forth have been from eternity. He will be ruler over Israel” (Micah 5:2) [paraphrased].

The Time and Place

So *that* was where -- **Bethlehem!** Herod dismissed the scribes. He sent a messenger to the astronomers that he would grant them an interview. How did he, the King, explain to these men that he had known nothing about it? At any rate, he spent much time, probably with interpreters trying to get an exact date for the appearance of the phenomenon that had sent them on their journey. It probably was well over a year since they had begun their watch on the narrowing conjunction.

[There was no star like a searchlight standing over Bethlehem. Herod had seen nothing, nor any anyone else in Palestine.]

Only the astronomers realized that something special had happened in the sky. Herod’s problem was further complicated by the fact that Persia (that is what it was called then) had a different calendar than Israel and both would have to be reconciled to the Roman calendar.

In return for their information about the celestial message he told them that the Child was in Bethlehem just five and a half miles away. After coming so far the men decided that there is still time before dark to go such a little way and finally, after all these months of uncertain anticipation, actually see the Child. As they went out the south gate of Jerusalem where the road drops away down a long winding valley southwest to Bethlehem, like all good astronomers, they were watching the sunset sky. Suddenly in the sunset glow and apparently right over the town they were headed for, they saw the evening star. It was their conjunction!

When they [the Wise Men] had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy” (Matthew 2:9-10).

Not only their conjunction, but also Saturn and Jupiter had been joined by a great blazing light that could point out the very house where the “*young Child*” was.

If these Wise Men had been following something all the way, they would not have been surprised and delighted to find it again. In less than an hour they could have been in Bethlehem, and there was no problem about where to find the Child.

The word used for “*the Child*” (in Matthew 2) is not the word used in the account of when the shepherds came on the night of His birth. Then it was “*brephos*,” meaning, “*newly born*” (compare 1 Peter 2:2 where this same word is used). Now it is “*paidion*,” meaning “*little boy*.”

Our theology must come from God’s Word -- not from Christmas cards

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11).

What did Jesus look like? Do you suppose that God kept a “baby book” for us to see some day in eternity? It must have been quite a scene -- the house crowded with these distinguished visitors and all of them on their knees in wonder and awe before the Toddler. When they saw Him they knew that the whole trip had been worthwhile. Again, Mary listened quietly while they explained about seeing the stars come together, and she carefully put away in her treasure chest of memory every word. It was full of glowing jewels -- and also now, the one like a heavy black stone that spoke of “A sword.”

After much talk, and because it was now late, the astronomers went to the Inn of Bethlehem that now had plenty of room. But their night’s sleep was not to be very long. About midnight they woke up from nightmares they could hardly believe. Scripture makes it sound as though more than one of them had the same dream sent by God, a terrible nightmare in which they saw Herod as he really was, trying to kill the Young Prince.

“And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way” (Matthew 2:12).

Immediately, they got up, had the animals loaded, and the whole caravan started out by night which was most unusual but astronomers are not afraid of the dark. They made a wide circle to avoid Jerusalem, by going up the coast road, through Caesarea, and eastward across Galilee to the King’s Highway.

As soon as the astronomers were safely out of town, God sent another dream to Joseph. He saw Gabriel again and Gabriel said:“

“And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the Young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the Young Child to destroy Him” (Matthew 2:13).

Joseph was always instantly obedient to God. It is one of his many admirable traits and one that made him worthy of the great trust. He arose immediately, dressed, woke Mary, and together they packed only the most immediate necessities and the gifts of the Magi that could be sold in Egypt for a great sum and support the family for many months. The embalmers of Egypt were the world’s host market for myrrh.

Wrapping the Sleeping Baby, they also went quietly out of town before dawn. If anyone was sleepless that night in Bethlehem, and listening, they must have been puzzled about all the commotion in the wee hours of the morning. When the sun arose that day, Joseph and Mary and the little Lord Jesus were well on their way to Beer-sheba and the Via Maris that goes to Egypt.

Did Mary hear from travelers about the terrible atrocity in Bethlehem? Her Child was safe from Herod, but by now she must have known about all the other young mothers and their little ones. *All the young ones under two years of age!* Herod had given his paranoia and fears plenty of leeway. Did Mary wonder, “*Is this the sword?*” It would be more than 30 years before she understood what “*the sword*” was to be.

Herod’s Death

Very soon Joseph and Mary had word that Herod had died. This was 4 B.C. He died horribly and in agony. Before his death he ordered that the eldest sons of all the leading families be locked in the hippodrome -- [a arena for equestrian] -- and when his death was announced they were to be slaughtered so that Jerusalem would mourn on the day of his death. Fortunately, once he was dead, there was no madman with authority to carry out his demonic plan and the young men were released. Herod was buried in the Herodium that is -- of all places -- close to Bethlehem.

“But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life” (Matthew 2:19-20).

We assume it was not long after the flight of Mary and Joseph to Egypt because Gabriel uses the same word for a very young Child as he did in the warning previously. Again, Joseph immediately responds.

“And he arose, and took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel” (Matthew 2:21).

He headed straight home to the house in Bethlehem he had left. He had no intention of returning to Nazareth.

“But when he heard -- [while on the road] -- that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither” (Matthew 2:22).

He was afraid to go into Palestine at all, and was probably much distressed about where to go. He had good grounds for being distressed and afraid. Bethlehem is too close to Jerusalem for safety. Herod Archelaus was so bad, in fact, that the Jewish rulers, who had put up with his father, sent a delegation all the way to Rome to ask to have him deposed. Rome obliged, and then there was no king in Judea. So Rome then sent Pontius Pilate as Procurator, a “*place keeper*,” who simply held Judea for Rome for the next 35 years. That is how he happened to be there and how Rome became involved in the death of Bethlehem’s son of David the King.

Home To Nazareth

Notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream -- [Joseph’s 4th set of directions] -- he turned aside -- [from his plan to return to Bethlehem] -- into the parts of Galilee: and he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth” (Matthew 2:22-23).

Can you hear the gossips down at the well of the big news? Joseph and Mary and the Baby had come back to Nazareth. It may have gone something like, “*Well, whoever His father is, He certainly is a beautiful smart little body!*”

“And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.” (Luke 2:40) *“And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man”* (verse 52). Sums us the beautiful, silent years of maturing in Nazareth.