

The X-Mas Files

Week Three

Of Gifts And Men

Strange Lights In The Sky ... Again

Last week we had shepherds seeing strange lights in the sky which turned out to be a lot of angels. This week the strange light in the sky was meant for others and it led to the same child born in Bethlehem. However, they were quite different. They had to travel a long way for one: *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matt 2:1-2, NIV)*

We have to look at the Christmas Story in **Matthew** to read about these wise men or Magi. The word *Magi* is defined as *"the name given by the Babylonians (Chaldeans), Medes, Persians, and others, to the wise men, teachers, priests, physicians, astrologers, seers, interpreters of dreams, augers, soothsayers, sorcerers etc."* If you look at a map just about everything is East of Bethlehem so it's not hard to identify these Magi as coming from there. But what country did they trek from? How far was the journey and when did they arrive to see the baby Jesus? So many theories abound, though. One would think that they came from Persia since the term seems to have come from there, but it's not that simple. At the time of Jesus, the Medes had long since been out of power since these Magi were big around the 6th Century B.C. Also, in **Acts** we see the term used to describe Simon Magus and he was not a Persian. The term *Magi* could easily have been a generic one.

Could They Have Come From The Arabian Peninsula?

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matt 2:11, NIV)

There is a theory they came from the same place as the Queen of Sheba lived. One of the reasons is the gifts they brought. According to some, these gifts were indigenous to that part of the world at that time. The kingdom was known firstly for its vast wealth from the gold mines of Africa, secondly, the Boswellia tree - from which the gum that is used to make frankincense is tapped - is native only to the Arabian Peninsula and Somalia. Thirdly, the commiphora tree - from which the resin to make myrrh is derived - also grows only in the Arabian Peninsula. And honoring a king this way wasn't a foreign concept, either. The Queen of Sheba brought rich gifts of gold and spices when she came to pay homage to Solomon (**I Kings 10:2**) and Jesus refers to her in **Matthew 12:42** saying that she brought gifts to Solomon, but *"one greater than Solomon is here"* which could be implying that kings from the same country had come to pay homage to him as their ancestor had to Solomon. Finally, the prophecy from **Isaiah 60:6** says that caravans from Midian and Ephah and Sheba would be coming bearing great gifts of gold and frankincense. To get to Palestine from Sheba (Yemen) the route passed through the ancient Arabian kingdoms of Midianites and Ephah.

They Could Have Known About the Messianic Prophecies

Another component of the story is why they even knew about the messiah in the first place. They would already have had long standing knowledge of the history of the Jews from Solomon's time forward. References to Midian, Ephah and Sheba abound in the Old Testament and the Arabian Peninsula was much more the region of the Hebrews and their ancient neighbors than Persia. Furthermore, the kings from Sheba would have had long standing relationships with the Jewish

people. That they would have felt comfortable going to Herod's court to ask directions would make total sense. But not so fast. While these are all compelling arguments, if you look at a map the trip from Sheba to Bethlehem is more North than East. And it is entirely possible that the gifts could have been just from Sheba and purchased in Persia by the Magi. The country of origin is not conclusive evidence they came from there. Perhaps we can get more information from another source, one that could fill in more of the gaps.

The Revelation Of The Magi

There is a book called *The Revelation of the Magi*, an [apocryphal account](#) of the traditional Christmas story that purports to have been written by the magi themselves. The account is preserved in an eighth-century A.D. Syriac manuscript held in the Vatican Library, although some believe the earliest versions of the text may have been written as early as the mid-second century, less than a hundred years after Matthew's gospel was composed. Written in the first person, *The Revelation of the Magi* narrates the mystical origins of the magi, their miraculous encounter with the luminous star and their equally miraculous journey to Bethlehem to worship the child. The magi then return home and preach the Christian faith to their brethren, ultimately being baptized by the apostle Thomas. The writing does give us a lot more details and it provides a dramatic account that not only answers the question "Who were the magi?" but also provides details about how many they were, where they came from (India or China) and their mysterious encounter with the star that led them to Bethlehem. It seems like we all just assume it was three mainly because that is the number of gifts given to the baby Jesus. But as we have seen above, that too is just speculation. How many were there? If we put any credence to *The Revelation of the Magi* they were a group-numbering as few as 12 and as many as several scores of monk-like mystics from a far-off, mythical land called Shir, possibly China. They were descendants of Seth, the righteous third son of Adam, and the guardians of an age-old prophecy that a star of indescribable brightness would someday appear "heralding the birth of God in human form."

It Gets A Little Weird

Like many accounts that didn't make it into the Bible, this one gets a little out there. When the long-phenesied star finally appears, the star is not simply sighted at its rising, as described in *Matthew*, but rather descends to earth, ultimately transforming into a luminous "star-child" that instructs the magi to travel to Bethlehem to witness its birth in human form. The star then guides the magi along their journey, miraculously clearing their path of all obstacles and providing them with unlimited stamina and provisions. Finally, inside a cave on the outskirts of Bethlehem, the star reappears to the magi as a luminous human child - the Christ child - and commissions them to become witnesses to Christ in the lands of the east.

Persians After All?

The Bible states that they were from "the East," which would be in the direction of Babylon and ancient Persia. And of all the peoples of "the East," the Babylonians had many opportunities to learn of the Jewish Scriptures, which contain multiple promises of the coming Messiah. Daniel was an influential government official in Babylon about 600 years earlier, and he foretold the coming of the Messiah (*Daniel 9:24-26.*) Also, tens of thousands of Jews lived in Babylon during the time of the Exile (605-536 BC), and they maintained a large presence there for the following centuries. So how did they learn about the messiah? Since the magi presumably had access to the Hebrew Scriptures, they could have known about the promises of the coming Messiah. Some scholars believe that the book of *Numbers* informed the magi of the child who would be preceded by a star:

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. (Numbers 24:17, NIV)

Perhaps they were told in a dream about the Messiah's birth. After all, God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod after they had seen the baby Jesus and presented their gifts to Him (*Matthew 2:12.*) This is speculation, though.

When Did They Come?

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem... (Matt 2:1, NIV)

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matt 2:11, NIV)

There is no evidence they were present when the shepherds arrived although that would make a lot of nativity makers upset as well as a lot of church Christmas plays. In fact, **Matthew** writes that they came after Jesus was born and met with Herod first. So the earliest they could have come is the next night and some say later because it was a house the star led them to, not a manger. Also, they didn't see a baby. Jesus is called a "young child" (*paidion*) instead of babe (*brephos*, *Luke 2:16*) at the time that the magi arrived. *Brephos* specifically refers to a baby, whether born or unborn, while *paidion* refers to an immature child, possibly an infant. Plus, Herod decided to kill all children two years or younger after his people searched the scriptures to figure out when the child was born. So whether it was within the first or second year, it definitely wasn't the same night.

Why The Gifts?

The most obvious answer is to honor the King of Kings since they were very expensive gifts. But there are deeper meanings to them.

□ Gold

Gold is often associated with two things in the Bible: Divinity and Kingship. Therefore, the gift of gold from the wise men symbolized the deity of Christ. Not only did the gold represent Christ's deity, it also represented his kingship. Gold is often associated with kingship and ruling authority in the scripture.

□ Frankincense

In the book of **Revelation**, incense is a representation of the prayers of the saints, flowing up to God as a pleasing aroma (*Revelation 5:8*). This indicates that the Old Testament usage of frankincense was a symbolic representation of the priest offering up prayers for the forgiveness of the people. The frankincense that the wise men gave to Christ symbolized His priesthood. The Bible plainly teaches that Christ is our High Priest. He makes intercession for our sins, and He is the eternal sacrifice for our sins.

□ Myrrh

It is most frequently associated with suffering and death. Myrrh was often used as an embalming fluid since the potent aroma would help mask the stench of a decaying body. The gift of myrrh symbolized the suffering and death that our Messiah would face. Before suffering on the cross, the soldiers offered Jesus strong drink mixed with myrrh (*Mark 15:23*). Christ rejected this drink, refusing to dull the agony He was about to experience while paying the full penalty for our sins. The Bible also reveals that

Nicodemus brought myrrh for the burial of Jesus after His death on the cross (*John 19:39*).

Was There Another Reason For The Gifts?

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” (Matt 2:13-15, NIV)

Herod was so paranoid that he ordered all of these children killed just to make sure that his rule wouldn't end. But such a journey to Egypt for poor parents like Joseph and Mary would have been expensive. Where would the money come from?

God Pays For What He Plans

Obviously, these gifts would have had a very practical purpose; these items were valuable. A gold brick in today's time is worth about \$325,000. In the time of Christ, it would have probably been even more valuable. The spices (frankincense and myrrh) were also very valuable, and at this time, may have even been as costly as gold in terms of weight. We don't know how much gold or spices the wise men gave Jesus, but it would have been of great value even in small quantities. Therefore, by giving Jesus these gifts, it would have helped Mary and Joseph care for their newborn King. It also would have aided them in their journey to Egypt, and then subsequently, back to Israel.

And About That Star

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. (Matt 2:9,10, NIV)

We must note that in the account, the magi did not follow the star anywhere. They saw it twice, once to alert them of the birth of Jesus and the other time to know where to see Him. And the word in the Greek simply means a star. So what could it be? Probably a supernova timed perfectly both times. The miracle is not that the star moved, but that it happened twice when the magi, who were astronomers of the first class, would see it and respond. And that the second one was right over the home where Jesus lived so that is God's timing as well. I like how an [article](#) from [answersingenesis.org](#) addresses the various theories:

Whatever the exact mechanism, the fact that the star led the magi to Christ is evidence that the star was uniquely designed, made by God for a very special purpose. God can use extraordinary means for extraordinary purposes. Certainly the birth of our Lord was deserving of honor in the heavens. It is fitting that God used a celestial object to announce the birth of Christ since “the heavens declare the glory of God...” (Psalm 19:1).

The Lessons To The Story

We can learn many things from this story in the Bible. God is constantly speaking to us if we are looking for the signs He gives us. And when He does speak, whether through a dream or a sign we can see when we are awake, we need to be obedient and respond in kind. We need to trust that God will provide for what He plans even if the sources are not what we expect. And when we give in joy, God will finance a miracle in other's lives, often keeping their dreams alive. Satan will try to abort His plan for us, but God will alert us to his schemes and direct us to a place of safety. God also protects His plans for us. So just remember:

- God is precise in His plans

- God prepares for what He plans
- God pays for what He plans
- God protects what He plans