

The Wise Men

They probably knew of the birth of the baby, earlier than the shepherds, because they had a lot further to travel. God invited three kings according to the popular Christmas carol or an unknown number of wise men, according to Matthew 2: 1-12. These were astronomers cum-astrologers, there was a lot of crossover in those days. The Bible says they came from the East. Immediately east of Israel is Jordan and Syria, then Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

God disapproved of those who tried to predict the future based upon communication with spirits and through the movement of stars and planets Isaiah 47:13-14. Is astrology and reading your stars in the newspaper a bit of fun, or is it more sinister? Seeking insight into the future, without involving God, has to be at odds with the Christian life. This is what King Saul found out, 1 Samuel 28. Why did God choose men of such a dodgy profession to come and worship the King? We don't know the answer to that

They must have been close neighbours because this was before social media or telephones, but they decided to collaborate and follow when they saw a star. It was a brand new, previously undiscovered star, and for some reason, they had associated this new star with the birth of the King of the Jews. We don't know upon what basis they made that conclusion but there was no doubt in their minds that this star heralded the birth of a baby who was King of the Jews. I can find no Old Testament prophecy about the star. Again, we don't know the answer.

Something else we're told is that these wise men were fully aware that -

1. This was a king and not a prince. A prince is a king in waiting but this baby was actually born a king, which is a bit of an oxymoron, He didn't have to wait for a parent to die to succeed as the new King; He was born a king.

2. There was a Heavenly connection with this baby that prompted them to up sticks, find Him and worship Him. They were clearly aware that this King of the Jews wasn't like ancient kings like David and Hezekiah. No, this king had a deity that needed a visit for the purpose of worshipping Him. They didn't come just to see and coo over the baby. No they wanted to worship Him.

They knew He was a baby. Were these wise men from the east familiar with Old Testament prophecies that predicted that the King of the Jews would be born as a baby? Prophecies such as Isaiah 7:14 and Micah 5:3. They must have been, they knew they were looking for a baby, and not a man.

In this passage, there are more questions than answers. Can you find any more unanswered questions?

Where were they from?

Were they Jewish believers? Maybe part of a remnant, left over from the days of the Jewish forced exile to Babylon.

How did they make the connection between the star and the baby King?

This is the only time in the Bible that God courts the rich and powerful to worship Him.

Why?

Anyway they followed this star that moved independently of the rotation of the earth. It took them south through Jerusalem towards Bethlehem. It seems likely the wise men's journey took them via Jerusalem. Mistakenly they assumed that Jerusalem, the capital city, was the obvious place where you would expect to find a king so prematurely, they ditched the star.

V1. They make their way to the palace, bang on the front door and were ushered in for an audience with King Herod. That tells us these guys were people of importance and stature. Maybe they were kings, but definitely high up in their government to be able to do that.

V2. The wise men explain the nature of their mission. What they told Herod was deeply troubling or worrying to him, but not only Herod but all of Jerusalem. It's easy to see why Herod was stressed. These bigwigs from abroad had turned up out of the blue to worship a new king that wasn't him. He was flapping. Who and where was this usurper?

But why was all of Jerusalem worried? Maybe they'd become accustomed and too comfortable in Roman occupied Israel. Herod had just refurbished and extended the Temple quite apart from roads, a legal system, security and prosperity. Do we sometimes get too comfortable in a world occupied by sin and so resist change? For the Jews, now was not a good time for the Messiah to come crashing onto the scene.

V3-6. Well, Herod holds the equivalent of a Cobra meeting. The two chief priests and Scribes who seem more than willing to fill him in as to the likely whereabouts of this new King. This gives us an insight into the cosy relationship between the religious bigwigs and Herod. It was Herod who had been instrumental in a recent refurb of the Temple. Strange really, when you think that the Romans had been the occupying force for the previous 200 years. This gives an insight into the guile of Herod. He convinced the wise men, the Scribes and the Pharisees of his innocent intentions.

V7-8. Then Herod despatches the wise men with a request to find and report back the location of the new King so he could visit and worship Him. Off the wise men troop to Bethlehem. Fortunately, Herod didn't order that the wise men be followed. God planned this in meticulous detail thousands of years earlier, Numbers 24:17, that's a prophecy from an enemy of God. There was never going to be any spanner in the works.

V9-10. Off the wise men trot, reconnect with the star and eventually arrive in Bethlehem. Notice, not at a stable but at a house. Somebody must have taken pity on the mother and baby and somehow found them a room in a house until all the formalities of the Roman census had been completed. But that in no way detracts from what a weird and strange place to give birth to your first born, that was promised so much.

V11. What's the first thing the wise men do? They see Jesus and Mary, and immediately, these important, rich, highly intelligent men fall to the floor and worship this little baby. This was just a little baby a few days old that could only feed, cry and sleep and these guys were on their knees, worshipping him like He was a God. These probably weren't Jewish, had no schooling in Jewish theology and culture, but they knew exactly who this baby was and how He was going to change the whole trajectory of humankind. To worship and praise him: anything else would have been so inappropriate. Imagine they'd come in, congratulated the parents and cooed over the baby? Errr... no.

Then it's gifts time. Out come 3 gifts, which is probably why we assume there were 3 wise men for which there is some logic and three is a special number for God, it represents the Holy Trinity. Look at these gifts; what do they represent?

Gold is treasure. Jesus was to emphasise building up treasure in Heaven, Matthew 6:19-21, 13:44-46 and Revelation 3:18.

Frankincense is an incense used in the Old Testament worship in the Temple. It was used widely in most of the ceremonies Exodus 30:34, Leviticus 2:1 and 24:7, but specifically not sin offerings, Leviticus 5:11-12.

Myrrh was originally used as holy anointing oil, Exodus 30:23. If you want to anoint a king, you'll need myrrh. Later, it was used as an embalming ointment. John 19:39. Who would give embalming ointment as a baby shower gift? Well, this gift is prophetic; this baby was to die and afterwards, He would be anointed King. Hebrews 1:8-9.

On practical level, these gifts would have funded the family's needs for the next 30 years, including the flight to Egypt. Much more practical than a cot, a pram or baby grows.

8 days after His birth, the baby needs to be circumcised, probably done at the local synagogue. For 41 days following Jesus's birth, Mary was ritually unclean. Leviticus 12:1-8. It must have been sometime during this period that the wise men arrived. Once that period was completed, the family went to the Temple to offer a sacrifice to God. Look at their chosen sacrifice, two measly turtle doves.

Look up - If she cannot afford a lamb then she shall take two turtle doves or young pigeons, one as a burnt offering, the other as a sin offering; the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean.” Leviticus 12:8 AMP.

Using the gold given by the wise men, they could surely have afforded a lamb but instead the family chose to align themselves with the poor and offered two turtle doves.

V12. All the wise men have the same dream, so they know for sure that this is not just one guy's overactive imagination, this is from on High. We're not told what the dream was but the men were left in no doubt that a return visit to Herod in Jerusalem was off the cards, and so they headed back home east, via a scenic route.

In many ways, these wise men were a bit of an enigma. They were from an alien, Gentile and Pagan country, without synagogues or any Biblical background and yet these guys somehow figured out that God's own Son, was about to be born. Something that the Chief Priests and the religious authorities completely missed.

What other examples are there in the Bible of 'enigmas' that were able to make contact with God and form a relationship with Him from outside of the 'Israel bubble'? (Melchizedek Genesis 14:18-20.

Jethro Exodus 2:18

The Queen of Sheba 1 King's 10:1-12.

The woman of Canaan Matthew 15:23-28.

The Jews liked to believe, they had exclusive rights to God, and whilst the Jews were His chosen people, they were not exclusive. Read Luke 4:24-26.

So what do we learn from the wise men?

God was pronouncing the coming into play of His eagerly awaited plan of redemption that would have a profound effect on Israel and the Gentile world beyond. It was a plan of sharp contrasts, set in a stable next to an inn, visited by powerful intelligentsia and shepherds, pronounced by angelic hosts and a specifically created star that disappeared as quickly as it appeared.

The wise men were focussed on their mission, they stuck together throughout their journey, and God was with them, leading them.