

THE ARRIVAL OF THE WISE MEN

Matthew emphasized that the Christ Child was to be called **Jesus** because He would “**save His people from their sins.**” (Mt. 1:21). Jesus literally means “**God-Savior**”. Jesus is the God-Man Who saves. He is the Savior! In addition, Matt. 1:23 says, “**they shall call His name Immanuel**” which literally means “**God with us.**” This prepares us for chapter two in which the wise men come to worship Him. All true believers are true worshipers!

Matthew 2:1 (NKJV)

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

Note, it says this happened AFTER Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. Judea is the Greek form of the Hebrew “Judah”, corresponding to a Roman Province in the days of Christ.

How long after Jesus was born, this happened, we are not specifically told, but it says it was in the days of Herod the king.

This statement is the only clue we have in Matthew as to the timing when Christ was born. It happened in the days of Herod the king.

This intersects with a historical reality. Herod was a real king in history who ruled over the Jews. The Christian faith is uniquely a prophetic faith – based on the fulfillment of prophecy. There is no other faith that can claim such a thing. There is only one truly prophetic faith, and that is the faith anchored to the God of the Bible.

The other thing that is unique to the faith of the Bible – the Christian faith, is that it is uniquely a historical faith in a way that no other world religion can claim. It is anchored to history – both OT and NT.

Years ago a man by the name of Huston Smith wrote a book titled, “**The World’s Religions**”. It is still used in many colleges today. Smith, while well educated, was not particularly religious. He claimed to just be neutral on everything. In the book he wrote:

“Christianity is basically a historical religion. That is to say, it is founded not on abstract principles but in concrete events, actual historical happenings.”
– **Huston Smith**

There is an interesting story about Sir William Ramsay who is considered to be one of the foremost archaeologists in history. He was very wealthy and educated, and he was also an atheist. He went to the Holy Land with the intention of undermining the validity of the Bible – and in particular, he sought to discredit the historical book of Acts, which is an inspired history of the early Church as recorded by Luke.

After 30 years of intense study Ramsay had a change of mind. He wrote: ***“Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect to its trustworthiness.”*** After analyzing hundreds of historical artifacts confirming the history of the New Testament record, Sir William Ramsay shocked the archaeological world by announcing that he had become a Christian.

Herod is a real historical figure who is found not only in the Bible but also in secular literature. He is often called ***“Herod the Great,”*** but he really should be called ***“Herod the Terrible”***. He was power crazy! Power was his god!

Herod was named ***“king of the Jews”*** by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. and he reigned until his death in 4 B.C. Because Herod went on to order all the Jewish children 2 years old and under in Bethlehem to be killed this indicates that Jesus may have been as old as 2 before Herod’s death in 4 B.C. Therefore, scholars believe that Jesus was evidently born somewhere between 6 and 4 B.C. – probably 6-5 B.C. This shows that our calendars are off by at least 4 years – but probably more like 5 or 6 years.

Herod was a descendant of Esau, not Jacob. He was an Edomite and therefore had no biblical right to the throne. He was a usurper and the Jews saw him that way. He was cunning and cruel.

“No man or woman was safe while Herod reigned. One by one he murdered every rival claimant to the throne. ...he murdered his wife’s brother, a lad of seventeen, because he was popular with the Jews; he murdered Mariamne, [pronounced ma-riam-ne] the beautiful Maccabean princesses he had married [his favorite wife of which he had 10], because he was suspicious of her, and he murdered both her sons; five days before his death he murdered his son and heir. Herod hacked and hewed his way through life, slaughtering six to eight thousand of the best people in his realm. Caesar Augustus is reported to have cynically said, ‘I’d sooner be Herod’s swine than Herod’s son.’” – ***John Phillips***

This is why I say, Herod should be called, “Herod the Terrible”. He was guilty of tremendous atrocities, and Rome didn’t care as long as he kept the Holy Land in check. Herod was really a “puppet king” for Rome.

Herod was an extremely paranoid person, suspecting everyone and killing anyone and everyone that he considered a threat.

But he was also GREAT in the sense of being a builder. He built palaces, theaters, amphitheaters, monuments, fortresses, and cities. However, his greatest project was the remodeling and enlarging of the Jewish temple which began in 20 B.C. and was not completed until after his death in 63 A.D. – only 7 years before it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D (cf. Jn. 2:20). As the supposed “**king of the Jews**” he did this to try and curry favor with the Jewish people, but the Jews hated him anyway. He outwardly professed the religion of Judaism, but it seems it was purely for political reasons. The Jews didn’t accept him as one of them – that is for sure.

In the days of this king Herod wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. “**Wise men**” in the Greek is a word (“magos”) commonly translated “Magi” (Latin). This term Magi was a fairly broad term related to a category of men that in the East studied astrology, astronomy, dreams, and various forms of magic. When Daniel was in Babylon, he was lumped in with this category of wise men who advised the king (cf. Dan. 1:20; 2:2, 13, 24; 4:7; 5:7).

“These wise men could be either fraudulent sorcerers or a more honorable class of astrologers. Here they are the latter.”

– **Stanley Toussaint**

They were probably a combination of scholar, scientist, and astrologist. They are not said to be kings as tradition often claims.

Many think that from the “East” refers to Babylon or the region of Mesopotamia (which is the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) because many Jews still lived in exile there. There are other suggestions, such as Arabia, but we are not specifically told. However, the region of Babylon is a very good guess.

We don’t really know how many Magi there were. Tradition says three, but that is speculation, probably because of the three different types of gifts listed in verse 11. However many Magi there were, they likely were accompanied by a fairly large entourage of assistants and associates, making for an impressive scene as they descended upon Jerusalem. It undoubtedly would have caused quite a stir in the entire town.

These wise men went straight to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel, probably thinking it would be the most natural place to expect where the King of the Jews would be born.