

INVITED TO THE PARTY

Matthew 2v1-12.

This is the season for parties. It's always good to be invited to a party! This morning I want to look at some unusual guests invited to the birth party of God's Son. We usually call them the "*wise men*". Victorian carols refer to them as "*kings*". I want to ask *who* they were, and *why* and *how* they were invited. The answers are important for us today. Let's look at the biblical text:

1. Who was being invited to the party?

Talking of "kings" is misleading; "wise men" is nearer the mark. The word in the text is **Magi** (*lit. magoi / magous*). The Greek historian Herodotus (writing in the 5th century BC) says the Magi were a tribe of priests with a reputation for holiness and wisdom; they were skilled in philosophy, medicine, the natural sciences, the interpretation of dreams and the movement and conjunctions of the stars. They were wise men.

Later the term "Magi" developed the lower meaning of fortune teller, sorcerer and magician; the word "magic" is derived from their name. In Acts, Elymas the sorcerer (13v6) and Simon Magus (8v9,11) were magi in this lower sense. There is no hint that the Magi in Matthew 2 were like this.

The Magi came **from the east (v1)**. But "east of where?" If you live in Hexham then visitors from Ponteland are "from the east"; but if you live in Ashington they are from the west! In this case the Magi **came to Jerusalem** from the east. This points us over the Jordan into Arabia. Even today those living in Jerusalem speak of peoples over the River Jordan as "from the east". In the 2nd century AD, one of the Early Church Fathers, Justin, maintained that the Magi who visited Jesus were from Arabia.

A British scholar, E.F. Bishop, visited a Bedouin tribe in Jordan in the 1920's bearing the Arabic name *al-Kokabani*. The word *kokab* means "planet" and *al-Kokabani* means "those who study/follow the planets". Asked why they were so called the elders of this Muslim tribe said it was because their ancestors followed the planets and travelled west to Palestine to show honour at the birth of "*the great prophet Jesus*".

What does this all mean? Why were these Magi from the east so high on God's invitation list to the birth party? The answer is "*good news of great joy*" for us. Yes, we are invited to the party too! Jesus is more than King of the Jews – He is King of the nations. The invitation to the Magi was the first of many invitations to people like you and me. Their coming to worship anticipated the day when men and women of every nation will worship Jesus. Jesus said He will not return until every people group has received an invitation. And in this case, more specifically, *Arabs* were invited to the birth; the offspring of Ishmael as well as of Isaac and Jacob. This is a gospel of grace for *everyone*.

2. Why was the invitation to the party posted in the heavens?

The Magi tell Herod: **We saw his star in the east (v2)** The invitation to these men was spelled out in the heavens. But there is a puzzle here. Surely if the wise men came from the east and followed a star in the east they would end up in India! But the Hebrew word can mean “east” or “rising”, thus the NRSV “We saw his star at its rising”; the NIV has an alternative reading in the margin “We saw his star when it rose”, and v9; “the star they had seen when it rose”.

Later in the narrative Herod called the Magi and **found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. (v7)** So, what are we to make of this star? Is there any evidence for it, or is it myth? And what was this star – a meteor, a nova or a conjunction of stars? In fact modern astronomers have taken the story very seriously. The most popular natural theory is that the Magi saw a conjunction of planets involving Jupiter. But the bigger question is: even if there was something unusual happening in the sky, why would that lead the Magi to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem? So many questions!

One approach is to understand the star as a one-off “special” in the heavens: a unique celestial firecracker announcing and celebrating Christ’s birth. Why not? God made all the stars and planets. Surely a momentous event like God the Son becoming man was worth celebrating with some rare display in the heavens. If this was the explanation then the Magi must have had some special revelation from God – enough to set them on their journey. This is possible, but there is no hint of it in the biblical text.

The alternative is that God arranged for something natural - but rare, in the night sky to announce the birth of the Messiah to these men. Something unusual was happening in the sky, and for some reason this had meaning for the Magi. They took it as a sign pointing them in the direction of Judea and announcing the birth of a king. This is the approach of modern astronomers who have puzzled over this for years. The most celebrated scientific contribution to the debate was made in 1999 when the astronomer Michael R. Molnar’s published a book called *‘The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi’*. Even cynical fellow astronomers went on record saying that he may have solved the mystery.

First some background: modern astronomers are at pains to disassociate themselves from astrology but they acknowledge that the ancients like the Magi combined astronomy with astrology. The ancients believed the movement of the planets in the night sky to have some message for planet earth. This is why stargazers centuries ago (the Chinese for example) kept detailed records of the movement of the stars and what they meant, and these records are still available today to astronomers.

So, what about Michael Molnar’s discovery? He explains that he found his first clue on an ancient Roman coin he bought for \$50. It turned out to have been struck in the Roman city of Antioch to mark Rome’s annexation of Judea in AD6. On one side was the Roman god Jupiter, but on the reverse was a sign of the zodiac, Aries the Ram looking up at a star. Molnar’s subsequent

research indicated that, in the 1st century, Aries was considered the sign of the Jews. So, believing that this would have been where ancient stargazers would watch for such a star, Molner searched for anything in the constellation of Aries which might have signified the birth of the King Messiah.

He ran a computer programme to simulate the movements in the sky around the time of Christ's birth and says he found evidence that:

- On April 17th 6 BC, two years before the death of King Herod, Jupiter emerged in the east as a morning star in the Jewish constellation. Jupiter was thought of as the regal planet, so this was understood as the most powerful time to confer kingships.
- Jupiter then underwent two eclipses by the Moon, the second precisely when Jupiter was "in the east", as mentioned twice in the biblical account.
- In August of the same year Jupiter became stationary and then went through Aries where it became stationary again on December 19th. This would have been when the regal planet "stood over" Bethlehem.
- Molner adds that there is confirmation from Roman documentation that the conditions of April 17th, 6 BC were believed to herald the birth of a divine, immortal, omnipotent person born under "the sign of the Jews".

Could this explain the Magi's search? We, of course, are uncomfortable with this because astrology is forbidden in the Hebrew Scriptures. If Molner's theory is correct it raises a big question for us. Why would God send His invitation to the Magi through the planets when we know that astrology was forbidden to God's people? (Isaiah 47v13-15) Let me suggest two answers:

The first is to understand it as *God speaking to these men in a language they understood*. God has always had to do that – whether it be in an earthly language or by signs. He does so still today. He speaks to some Muslims through dreams during Ramadan. He speaks to others through miracles and demonstrations of power. One Indian evangelist in Madras reckons that around 80% of Indians who come to Christ do so as a result of the miraculous. (i.e. this is the language God uses regularly!) In the UK God has used Alpha to speak in a language people over here understand – the context of a meal (relational / real life), not always in a religious building (e.g. a home), with questions and discussion welcomed (not simply listening to an expert) – but most of all *exposure to the Holy Spirit* (encountering God Himself, for example, on Alpha Weekends). And now, one of the latest ways God is speaking to people, is via the worldwide web (e.g. blogs and social networking sites)

The second way to make sense of God speaking to the Magi through a star, is to see it as *God invading their culture* - in order to lead them higher. Revelation came through a light in the sky to lead them to the true Light; it came through a star to lead them to the real star. (Luke 1v78) God was invading their world and their field of knowledge. But hasn't He always invaded human culture to challenge and purify it and fill it with His holy presence? In 2003 a book was published called 'Invading Secular Space'. This is what God did in the incarnation. It is what He is still doing. And the

primary way He does this today is through His church and through manifestations of the kingdom of God. Many Christians just don't get this. Either they see their faith in very individualistic terms, or they regard church as sacred space that must be protected from the invading secular world. We are to be world changers – invading the culture around us with the grace of God. This is our mission today.

3. What did those invited bring to the party?

Not a bottle or 'After Eights'; they brought worship and expensive gifts: **v11: On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.** What a strange sight this must have been. But what might it say to us today? Just this: the Magi's search for Jesus and their worship of Him - tells us *something* about true wisdom. In the Hebrew Scriptures Daniel (in exile) was schooled in the wisdom of Babylon. He became an expert in the best that man could offer – all the latest discoveries and knowledge. But he would only give his devotion to God, and he put revelation above human knowledge. This is true wisdom. This is worth remembering today. For example, science and faith are often put in opposition to one another so that to be a believer you have to by-pass your brain. No! It is possible to be an expert in any one of the many branches of scientific research but still reserve heart devotion for Jesus. As the snappy billboard says, 'Wise men worshipped Jesus; they still do'.

v11: They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. Indirectly these gifts confirm their country of origin. Gold was mined in Arabia, while frankincense and myrrh are harvested from trees that only grow in southern Arabia. These were the very gifts any wealthy visitor from Arabia would bring. And this points to something else that is so significant about this invitation. The gospel is for the rich as well as the poor. The shepherds were poor but the Magi were wealthy – hence their gifts.

What has that to do with us, you might ask? We look at texts like Mark 10v23: ("How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God") and think of millionaires, not ourselves. Think again! They are the mega-rich; it is you and me who are the rich. Most of us here are wealthy by 1st and 21st century global standards. Randy Alcorn writes: *"Statistically, if you have sufficient food, decent clothes, live in a house that keeps the weather out, and own a reasonable reliable means of transportation, you are among the top 15% of the world's wealthy. If you have any money saved, a hobby that requires some equipment or supplies, a variety of clothes in your wardrobe, two cars (in any condition), and live in your own home, you are in the top 5% of the world's wealthy."* ('Money, Possessions and Eternity' Tyndale House)

Around the world the gospel is received eagerly by the poor while in rich countries it is sidelined and ridiculed. How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. But not impossible! Jesus said *"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."* *The disciples were amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not*

with God; all things are possible with God." (Mark 10v25-27) Yes, the gospel invitation is for us too, the wealthy - another expression of grace to the undeserving.

We are invited to the party! But the question is – what do we bring? The wise men worshipped – not something we can do just for an hour a week. They laid the symbols of their wealth at the feet of Jesus. Not something we can do by contributing to a collection plate. This is serious. For us it is about a total life change – and one which must affect our attitude to our “wealth”. Why? Is God after your money? Well, yes – but more, He is after your heart.

John Wilthew. December 2008.