



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

22nd December, 2023

...they bowed down and worshipped him.

Matthew 2:11

Those 'magi' in the Christmas story: they weren't kings, we don't know how many there were, and we don't know their names! So understandably a lot of tradition has built up around this mystical part of the nativity story. School stages and church platforms are crowded with the magi's royal finery, along with Mary, Joseph, baby, shepherds, sheep, angels and more. I plead guilty; I love it! We did a whole 'Bethlehem experience' thing in Brentford, and in Devon an open-air drama round farm and field, with adults playing the parts and families following.

Amidst it all is a well-evidenced scenario, -put simply: *the magi hold water!*

There was a school of astrology (tantamount to astronomy then) north of the city of Babylon. In its ancient records it has been found -and it can be verified by 'winding the astronomical clock back'- that Jupiter and Saturn came together in 'conjunction', appearing as one bright 'star', three times over an 8-month period around Jesus' birth. (There's a dating issue which is explicable, but we don't have space for it here!)

To ancient astrologers, each 'star' (they didn't know about planets) stood for different things: Jupiter was seen as a 'royal' star, and Saturn had particular significance for Israel. So the obvious place to go for further enquiry and a diplomatic goodwill visit was Jerusalem. Having seen this conjunction "*when it rose*" ('in the east', Matthew 2:2), the magi planned their journey, expecting the second appearance. They came to Jerusalem asking the obvious question: "*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?*" No wonder Herod was alarmed. On the third and final conjunction the 'star' would have appeared towards the south; and Bethlehem was a few miles south of Jerusalem.

This background adds credibility to Matthew's account. Other details he gives fit in, like the fact that when the magi arrived the Holy Family was in 'the house' (Matthew 2:11); the census crowds were gone and they may have stayed beyond Mary's 40-day confinement. Matthew also tells us that Herod slaughtered all boys aged two and under "*...in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi*", -of the first appearance of the 'star' (2:7,16). (Bethlehem was a small place, the number of 'Holy Innocents' may have been few, not that that makes it better!)

I feel all this matters because:

- 1) It supports the truth of the Gospel at a time when our culture resists a Christ-centred Christmas; it helps us when people ask "*the reason for the hope we have*" (1 Peter 3:15);
- 2) The gifts represent the truth that (as the carol says) Jesus is "*King and God and Sacrifice*";
- 3) It deepens the wonder, *and* our faith; -part of the "*evidence of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1);
- 4) It reminds us that God uses non-believers, and even secular media, to show His truth. The 'wise men' returned, but I believe (after Eliot's poem 'The Journey of the Magi') that they were never the same thereafter. Christmas will soon be swept aside, but in a culture that seeks to discredit our Lord, evidence to draw the wise back to Jesus, is valuable.

(A longer version of this article is available on request; it is based on a chapter of 'The Bible as History', by Werner Keller [1956]. DB)