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## The 3 wise men: Finding the right question

This is written in the season of Epiphany 2021, just after Christmas 2020.

Epiphany is the time when we hear the story of the three wise men. The image by John Thorpe is shown here and is representative of many of the pictures we see of the wise men on their camels, examining the stars.

The gospels in the Bible have an Introduction to each one of them. These introductions are written in the style of the time. Probably the most famous is the introduction to John's gospel with the opening line of "*in the beginning was the word...*"



A careful look at John's gospel shows that twice John's gospel talks about God in the beginning and the world's response and also about John the Baptist not being the One. Once in the greek language it talks about the Word being in the world and making the world, and yet the world itself rejecting the light, and the second time about Moses and the prophets and the actual words of John the Baptist which Jewish hearers would have known.

When you realise there is that repetition in the introduction to John's gospel happening, you then find that there is an introduction for non-Jews and then words with effectively the same meaning for Jews. It is then that you discover that you are left with these words:

*"But to all who received Him, who believed in His name,  
He gave power to become children of God, who were born not of  
blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."*

*John chapter 1 verse 12*

... and there you have it. Hidden in the introduction is the message of the entire gospel of John:

*"To all who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God"*

... which is John's gospel summarised perfectly.

Mark's gospel uses the baptism of Jesus to introduce the gospel to talk about God who became man in full, (complete with all our difficulties) and was even baptised.

In Luke's gospel at chapter 4 we have Jesus reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue and when he rolls it up and says "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" we then see that for Luke's gospel the passage from Isaiah is what Jesus is going

to do throughout the gospel. Exactly as the quote from Isaiah said, Luke's gospel is about good news for the poor, release for captives, letting the oppressed go free and so on.

In Matthew chapter 2 we have the visit of the Magi, which is often called the story of the three wise men. It is the time of year when we often hear questioning about what is true in the story. For example, the passage does not tell us there were three wise men. In fact it doesn't say how many wise men there were. The story actually tells us there were three gifts. Therefore the projection from 3 gifts to there being 3 wise men is not factual, it is just an assumption.



However, that assumption goes back in history a very long time indeed. The picture here is an ancient Roman mosaic that shows three wise men with the three gifts. That ancient Roman mosaic even gives the wise men names. So even the tradition of the names is very old even if the names are not in the gospel text itself. The tradition of the names is so ancient that it really is possible that those were their names.

The Mosaic is in Ravenna and dates from around 550 AD, so it is 1<sup>st</sup> century.

It may surprise you to know that the introduction to Matthew's gospel is actually the story of the visit of the wise men.

The story is Matthew's real introduction to the gospel. Therefore, any questions about precise timing and the number of wise men have no relevance to understanding the introduction to the whole gospel. The story of the visit of the Magi is to tell the hearer what is going to happen in the gospel using parallels and contrasts.

We tend to think of the wise men appearing in Bethlehem at Jesus' birth. But if we read carefully we discover that they didn't – they appeared later, and not just 12 days later but a lot later.

From Matthew chapter 2 we know they appeared after the birth when Jesus was a child. In the passage that follows, Joseph takes Mary and the child Jesus to Egypt and they stay there until Herod dies.

Now Herod died in 4 AD and if Jesus was born sometime between 3 and 4 BC then what that tells us is that the wise men are visiting after the time when Jesus was a child and before Jesus is around 7 years old. So the wise men are actually arriving around about the child's age of a toddler when today we might think about baptism or thanksgiving services for a child.

When there is a baptism service and you're invited as a guest. Do you ever struggle to think about what you might give as a gift for a baby ?

For many of us the gifts that we think of for a baby look to the future rather than necessarily being of any use in the present. It's that kind of thinking behind the three gifts that the wise men brought. But if all we ever think about is just the three gifts then we miss

the point. The gifts look to the future. In fact this whole story looks to the future of what we're going to hear in the gospel and it contains both parallels and contrasts as it does so.

Have you ever noticed that the wise men, representing the gentile world, i.e. the world as a whole, announce Jesus as King. At the end of Matthew's gospel the Roman gentile world again announce Jesus as King at his crucifixion.

It is in the story of the wise men that the Jewish leaders gather against Jesus – they're going to do so again at the end of Matthew's gospel.

The plans the Jewish leaders make are made in secret when they talk with the wise men. At the end of the gospel they are going to once again make plans in secret. And here, as there, it's Jesus' death that they actually want.

Herod, the ruler, was not actually Jewish, and he was complicit completely in killing innocents (horrendously, the killing of the infants). At the end of the gospel, Pontius Pilate, the ruler, was not Jewish either and was complicit completely in killing an innocent – Jesus Christ himself.

This is not just a story of wise men – this is a story that foreshadows Matthew's gospel.

And just as it contains parallels that we can see between the story of the wise men and the end of the gospel – this story of the wise men also contains some helpful contrasts.

In this story a great light at night-time announces his birth ... but at the crucifixion it is a great darkness in the day time that announces the death of Jesus Christ.

Here, in this story, Jesus is worshipped ... but on the cross he is mocked.

Here the prophesy is that Jesus Christ is the shepherd of the people of Israel and at the crucifixion the prophesy is that the shepherd will be struck and the sheep scattered.

This is not just a story of wise men – this is a story of parallels and contrasts that foreshadows the essence of Matthew's gospel.

There is a silk tie you can get for Epiphany which is rather beautiful. The tie it says on it that wise men seek him still ..... it is actually a message for everyone.

.... Because wise people who seek him still will find him and just as the wise men are more than just a story – when you find him he will give you more than just something to do on Sundays – he'll give you a new life.

Wise men seek him still.

January 2021