

## 1. Prediction by the prophet Isaiah

"A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house."<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah was a prophet in Judea who lived at the time of king Ahaz and his son Hezekiah. This was a turbulent time, in which the Assyrians conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel and took the Israelites into captivity.

In the midst of all the turmoil, Isaiah received an encouraging message from God for his people (Isaiah 60). During a time of darkness, God will appear in His glory (v.1-2), and people will gather as a result of the light that shines in Israel (v.3). Whoever has been exiled, will return (v.4), and the Israelites will rejoice in the riches of the nations (v.5).

Isaiah continues by naming several people groups in the vicinity of Israel. They will be the first to worship God in Jerusalem. Midian and Ephah are descendants of Abraham through Keturah and Nebaioth and Kedar through Ishmael. Sheba is the nation whose queen came to search the wisdom of king Solomon. After them, the other nations will come to worship God (v.10-12).

The visit of the wise men from the east to Jesus can be seen as a first fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. What can we learn from their act of worship? First the wise men are identified, then we consider what message Gospel writer Matthew wanted to communicate and finally, we reflect on God's plan with the Arabs in the future.

## 2. Who were the wise men?

Little is known about the group of men who came to visit Jesus. Interpretations abound, with some claiming there were three: one from Africa, one from Europe and one from Asia, even though all proof is lacking. Others believe they were from Babylon or Persia. Still others state they must have been Arabs.<sup>2</sup>

The description by Matthew tells us that: a) they were wise men, b) they came from the east, c) they were rich, and d) they had seen a star and knew that meant a special king had been born.

### a) wise men

The Greek word for *wise* is *μάγος* *magos* (Strong's G3097). It was used by the Babylonians, Persians and Medes to denote people with special insights, such as teachers, priests, doctors, astrologers, seers, fortune tellers and magicians. The wise men who came to visit Jesus had seen a remarkable star, so they were likely astrologers, with a firm knowledge of the planets. They may also have been from remote desert areas and able to determine their exact location by the position of the stars.

## Wise men from the east

Based on the Babylonian background of the word *magos*, many conclude that the wise men came from that region. However, the exile into Babylon must have influenced the language of the Jews. New words are often adopted and it could well be that this word was found to be the most suitable to describe the visitors.

b) from the east

Matthew wrote the story in Israel and from the Jewish perspective. To them, everything east of the Jordan river was "the east," whether today's Jordan or China. How was the term used elsewhere in the Bible?

At the end of his life, Abraham sent the sons of his concubines to the east.<sup>3</sup> Thus he avoided quarrels between them and his son Isaac over land and wells. They settled on the east of the Jordan.

In Genesis 29:1 the men of the east are mentioned for the first time. It literally says, "sons of the east." This is a well-known term for a tribe or tribal confederation. For instance, *bani assad* (sons of the lion) is a well-known and influential tribe in Iraq today.<sup>4</sup>

The men of the east differed from the Midianites (Judges 6-8) and in Jeremiah 49:28 the Kedarites are called the men of the east. The prophet Isaiah pronounced a judgment on Arabia (Isaiah 21:13-17) and specifically mentioned the Kedarites as the recipients. The Kedarites being Arabs and being called the men of the east, means that the men of the east were Arabs.<sup>5</sup> Also, Ezekiel prophesied that the sons of the east would inherit the land of the Moabites and Ammonites (Ezekiel 25:4,10).<sup>6</sup>

Many Bible interpreters believe that the wise men came from Iraq or Iran; regions geographically located east of Israel. However, in several Bible books the Babylonians are described consistently as a people from the north.<sup>7</sup> Their armies didn't follow the way to the west through the desert, even though it was the shortest, because there they could easily get lost, die for lack of water and be exhausted from the sheer heat. They moved north-west along the Euphrates river and then turned south. They attacked Israel from the north and therefore were described as a nation from the north.

The natural conclusion is that the wise men were descendants of Ishmael and known as Arabs at the time of the Romans. This is confirmed by the oldest extant commentary of Matthew, dating from 160 A.D. by Justin Martyr.<sup>8</sup>



### c) The gifts

The wise men brought frankincense, gold and myrrh, three treasures that were transported via caravan routes from southern Arabia to the north. In his book *Quranic Geography* Dan Gibson describes the trade in these products and cites several reasons why the Nabataeans had a monopoly on supplies. The Nabataeans were descendants of Ishmael's firstborn son Nebajoth. At the time of the patriarch Jacob the Ishmaelites already traded myrrh and frankincense with Egypt (Genesis 37:25). This makes it plausible that the wise men came from Nabataea, east of Israel.

### d) The star in the east

There can be confusion about the expression of the wise men seeing the star in the east (Matthew 2: 2, 9). Linguistically, this can be read in two ways:

- 1) the wise men looked toward the eastern hemisphere and noticed the special star.
- 2) While in the east, the wise men saw the special star in the west, above Israel.

The second way of reading fits perfectly with what we have learned about them so far and should be regarded as correct. Still, the other way of reading is not in conflict with the text, because it is also possible that the wise men saw a special star in the eastern sky, in fulfillment of Numbers 24.

Incidentally, the late Dr. Eric Bishop in Jordan once met a Bedouin tribe in Jordan, named Kawkabaani, which literally means "of the planets". When he asked these dedicated Muslims about this name, they said that their ancestors had followed a planet to honor the birth of the great prophet Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Context in Matthew

The story of the wise men only appears in the gospel of Matthew, written to the Jews to show Jesus was the promised Messiah. It begins with a genealogy of Jesus, which for Westerners can be a boring piece, but for the Jews a strong proof of who Jesus was!

Matthew begins with Abraham, who received the promise of God that all people on earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). This was fulfilled in the Messiah, who descended from him. Also, Jesus was from the line of Judah, of whom Jacob had foretold his reign would be forever (Genesis 49:10). And God promised David that someone from his family would always be on the throne (2 Samuel 7:16). Joseph, the husband of Mary, was a descendant of David and the legal father of Jesus (Matthew 1:16).

After the genealogy, Matthew shows how the events in and around Jesus' life were all fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies.

In chapter 1:22-23 Matthew points out that the pregnancy of the unmarried Mary was a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. In chapter 2:15 he explains that the flight and stay in Egypt were foretold by Hosea and the killing of the baby boys by Jeremiah.

## Wise men from the east

After the death of king Herod, Joseph returned to Israel. However, he didn't go back to Bethlehem, but to Nazareth, in fulfillment of Isaiah 11:1 and 60:21 and Zechariah 6:12. Finally, in Matthew 3:3 another prophecy of Isaiah is quoted, showing it was fulfilled.

Fulfillment	Prediction	Event
Matthew 1:1-17	Genesis 12:3; 49:10; 2 Samuel 7:16	an eternal ruler from the line of David, to be a blessing for the whole earth
Matthew 1:18-25	Isaiah 7:14	son to be born of a virgin and named Jesus
Matthew 2:1-12		
Matthew 2:13-15	Hosea 11:1	God's son will come out of Egypt
Matthew 2:16-18	Jeremiah 31:15	sorrow in Bethlehem over children who died
Matthew 2:19-23	Isaiah 11:1 <sup>10</sup>	a shoot (Hebrew <i>netzer</i> ) will come forth from Jesse
Matthew 3:1-12	Isaiah 40:3	someone in the desert, preparing the way of the Lord

So the narrative of the wise men is surrounded by recordings of fulfilled prophecies. Naturally then, this visit follows the same pattern. Incidentally, two of the three products brought by the wise men are also mentioned in Isaiah 60; gold and frankincense.

When the Israelites moved from Egypt to the promised land, the heathen Balaam foretold, "a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." <sup>11</sup> Stars give light and scepters were used by kings to give orders. This prophecy points clearly to Jesus, as king and as the light of the world. No other text or inscription provides a similar foundation to expect the birth of a unique king based on the appearance of a special star.

Perhaps Matthew didn't quote any prophecies in the passage about the wise men, because the promises in Isaiah and Numbers were so well-known.

The complete table looks as follows:

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Matthew 1:1-17	Genesis 12:3; 49:10; 2 Samuel 7:16	an eternal ruler from the line of David, to be a blessing for the whole earth
Matthew 1:18-25	Isaiah 7:14	son to be born of a virgin and named Jesus
Matthew 2:1-12	Numbers 24:17; Isaiah 60:6-7	gold and frankincense brought to a king, whose birth was announced by a special star
Matthew 2:13-15	Hosea 11:1	God's son will come out of Egypt
Matthew 2:16-18	Jeremiah 31:15	sorrow in Bethlehem over children who died
Matthew 2:19-23	Isaiah 11:1	a shoot (Hebrew <i>netzer</i> ) will come forth from Jesse
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## 4. Conclusion

In the Bible the east usually points to the region directly east of the Jordan river, where the Ishmaelites dwelled. For centuries they had already been trading the products brought by the wise men. Through their trade with the surrounding nations, they collected much knowledge. Their common ancestry in Abraham would have given them a special interest in the prophecy

about the star. Although the word *magus* has Babylonian roots, it is only natural for Matthew to use it to describe learned men from other nations. Therefore the conclusion is that the wise men were descendants of Ishmael.

According to Isaiah, the people of Sheba would bring frankincense and gold, and not the Ishmaelites. This can be explained in that a future fulfillment is yet to come whereby the people of Yemen will worship God with their riches. Kenneth Bailey writes, "Wealthy dwellers of those desert regions would naturally have gold, frankincense and myrrh. The early church was aware of this."<sup>12</sup> So the visit of the wise men can indeed be seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 60.

However, the visit of a handful of Arabs stands in stark contrast with the promise that all will come from Sheba and that all the flocks of Kedar will be gathered for worship. Therefore, we may expect a much greater fulfillment of Isaiah 60. Not only descendants of Ishmael, also many of Midian, Ephah and Sheba of the Arabian Peninsula will worship the Lord Jesus Christ. At one time the wise men voluntarily kneeled before him, in response to the revelation of a special star. One day many Arabs in the Middle East and elsewhere will, when their eyes have been opened, bow before the anointed King of kings, Jesus the Messiah.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 60:6-7 *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles

<sup>2</sup> *Arabs in the shadow of Israel*, Tony Maalouf, p.196-204 en John Wesley's Explanatory Notes on Matthew 2:1, accessed in *e-Sword*, version 10.1.0, Rick Myers

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 25:6

<sup>4</sup> For example, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bani\\_Assad](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bani_Assad)

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth study about the Arabs, see Study Origin of Arabs

<sup>6</sup> This was in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham concerning land for his descendants. See also Study Land for the Arabs

<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah 4:6, 6:1, 22, 46:6; Ezekiel 23:23-24; Zephaniah 2:13; Zechariah 2:6-7

<sup>8</sup> "The wise men from Arabia came to Bethlehem and worshiped the child and offered to him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." *Jesus through Middle Eastern eyes*, Bailey, Kenneth E., Intersivarsity Press, U.S.A., 2008, p.53

<sup>9</sup> Article *Scholar's research strengthens claims for accuracy of Christmas story*, Published on the internet on December 25th, 2002. <http://old.post-gazette.com>

<sup>10</sup> Matthew doesn't mention a specific prophet so it's not clear which prophecy he had in mind. Many see a reference to Isaiah 11:1, with Nazarene possibly referring to *netzer*, the Hebrew word for "shoot" or "twig." It may also refer to being set apart for God, like Samson who was called a Nazarene (Judges 13:5)

<sup>11</sup> Numbers 24:17 ESV

<sup>12</sup> Bailey p.52