

The Epiphany - Matthew chapter 2, verses 1 – 23:-

Although the 'Nativity Plays' are a familiar and loved feature of Christmas it is necessary to return to what the Bible does actually say about events that happened at the time of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember that although there might well be a worldly explanation for the star etc. the Lord God was in control of the events. Remember also that the timing of the birth was God's timing! See Galatians chapter 4, verse 4. The ease of travel and communication within the Roman Empire enabled the rapid spread of the Christian message. Throughout the birth narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, evil in the shape of King Herod, is shown to be in opposition to the foreordained plans of God.

King Herod:- He was granted the title 'King of Judea' by the Roman senate and as such was a vassal of the Roman Empire. It has been suggested that Herod used secret police to monitor any threats against him. He certainly was notorious for the way he executed those he regarded as a threat to his rule. This included several members of his own family including his wife Mariamne I. He died in the year 4 A.D.

Timing:- King Herod enquired about the time of the star's appearance. This gives an approximate time for the birth of the child. Finding that the Magi had "*departed to their own country by another way*" Herod tried to make sure of the child's death by killing all the children in the area "*who were two years old or under*". The arrival of the Magi could then have been when the child Jesus was rising two. They were certainly not there at the same time as the shepherds!

The 'wise men':- They were persons of some importance because they had immediate access to the court of King Herod. The Greek word 'Magi' points to them being members of the priestly caste of the Parthian empire (of which Persia was a part). If so they would have travelled with an escort and with full 'diplomatic immunity'. They were not 'kings' but high ranking advisers to the court of Parthia. Although the word 'magi' carries some negative implications – e.g. Simon in Acts chapter 8, verses 9 – 24, remember that Daniel was appointed to a leadership role "*over all the wise men of Babylon.*" Daniel chapter 2, verse 48. He was recognised as "*chief of the magicians,*". Daniel chapter 4, verse 9. The 'wise men' in the Gospel of Matthew would be successors in the same tradition.

The 'Star':- Certainly some celestial phenomena appeared around the time of the birth of the Lord Jesus. At that time it was not uncommon for astronomical events to be interpreted through astrology and significant portents such as comets or conjunctions of stars could signify a shift in the order of events on earth. This is what has alerted the Magi in Matthew's story and they go seeking the new King of the Jews as it is in their interest to honour him. Future good relations with this new King will stand them (the Parthians) in good stead. Herod (as may be expected) sees this as a threat and seeks to eliminate the new King. The Magi are warned in a dream to return by another route – and as we know from Daniel, dreams were a recognised means of foretelling the future for the Magi.

Remember that this chapter at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew was written to show how the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled some of the prophecies of the Old Testament. As 'homework' look up Micah chapter 5, verse 2; Isaiah chapter 60, verses 1 – 6; Hosea chapter 11, verse 1; Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 15 and Isaiah chapter 11, verse 1.

*Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness and lend us thine aid;
Star of the East, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.*

Reginald Heber 1811