

## The Journey of the Wise Men



Journeys are always difficult. Oh, not just the moving from one place to another, I mean the whole thing. Take, for example, the decision whether to go or not. For us, that was probably the most difficult part of the journey. We have spent a lifetime looking at the stars, interpreting what their movements mean. We have advised Kings and Princes, and the beggar man at the corner of the street, but we had never before been confronted with an interpretation we felt was for us. Should we have taken the first sighting of the new bright star to the elders of the city? What would they have said and done?

“We have seen a star, a new and bright star. If we read it correctly it means that a new king has been born.”

“A new king for us?”

“No, for another people.”

“Why are you telling us then? What is it to do with us?”

They would have been right, what was it to do with them. Why did we think it was to do with us? In the end it came down to this. We have spent a lifetime waiting for a sign like this. The sign has come. We think we know what it means. We needed to go and prove that our lifetime of study and experience had not been in vain. And maybe we needed to see what a powerful king, whose arrival has been foretold in the stars, looks like.

So we made the decision to go. Then we had to summon our steward and issue some orders. We needed to get beasts together, camels, as we thought we would most likely be crossing deserts. We needed food and water. We needed to have armed men to protect us, and servants to assist us with food, shelter and the camels. We needed to have a guide who knew the trade routes, and ways of surviving in the hot, dry deserts with the cold, cold nights. It took time to get everything settled, to put our lives in order in case we never returned. Still the journey didn't seem real,

until sitting on the camel walking away from our palace, I looked back, just once, to imprint the place on my mind and to wonder whether I would ever see it again.

Travelling on a camel is like travelling on a ship, at sea in a storm. They have such a rolling gait. But they keep going, solidly, steadily, grumpily and if they are in a really bad mood they will bite or spit. You can never take them for granted. On the many days crossing the desert the hump in front of you goes from being solid to floppy as their internal water supplies are used up, alongside ours in our external water bottles.

Did we have adventures? Yes, we had enough to write a book about. First we crossed mountains and saw tips of the peaks covered in snow. There were small streams of melted snow, and dry wadis, where, when the rains come, the water will pound down filling the wadi to overflowing. Coming down out of the mountains we arrived at the desert. One day we were plodding over dune after dune after dune, when we saw a small group of men on horses, dressed in long flowing white robes, with their heads swathed in turbans, so that just their eyes were showing. Our servants got out their weapons, spears and bows and arrows, and would have attacked first and asked questions later. We stayed their hands and stopped to let the men come up to us. They surrounded us, sitting lightly on the beautiful white local horses, which blend into the light coloured sand. They pointed their weapons at us and demanded that we get down off our camels. They got rather agitated when we refused, and pointed out that we were more in number than they, and that our servants were pointing weapons at them, so we were in a bit of a stalemate situation. There was a tense silence for a while, then their leader threw back his head and laughed, breaking the tension.

Then we all got off our beasts. We talked for a while with the Arabians, then we all mounted again, and they led us to their oasis, where we watered our camels and they fed us royally. In exchange we told them stories from our land, and then explained about our quest to find the king, whose arrival had been announced by the new star. We pointed out the star to them, and told them the stories that had been passed down from generation to generation in our land. They were very impressed, and before we left they presented us with a gift of incense, which they get from their sacred trees. They asked us to present it to the king with their compliments.

Once we had crossed the desert, we found ourselves on the 'Route of the Sea' an ancient trade route following the coast from Egypt to Damascus. There we met with caravans of camels loaded with goods from the far known corners of the world. We

would spend nights sitting around the remains of cooking fires in Caravanserais, talking with the merchants, sharing stories of our adventures. Our servants would be talking with their servants and they would keep us enlivened with bawdy stories from their new friends to pass the time on the road. Sometimes the merchants on hearing our story of the star, would give us a gift to give to the new king.

After we had been travelling for quite a long time, and after several attempts to rob or attack us had not succeeded, we began to wonder. It began to seem as if our journey was less and less about just ourselves, but more and more about everyone we met. We began to wonder if the journey we were making was blessed, whether the gods were protecting us, so that we could complete our journey. No matter what happened, we all always emerged unscathed. If our water ran out, then we would soon find ourselves near to a source of water. If we were traversing difficult mountain paths, our camels would tread lightly so that we didn't cause any rock falls. However badly the camels behaved, or baulked at what we asked them to do, they never lay down on strike, or ran away, or bit the camel boys. They would still regularly spit at us though. We just waited for our luck to turn.

Turn it did when we began to ask the way to the king of the Israelites. The star was obviously over the land of Israel, so we assumed that the king would be born in the king's palace. People told us where the king lived, so that is where we headed, ignoring the star which was no longer going before us. We thought we knew better. We arrived at the palace of King Herod in Jerusalem. It was not like our palaces; a place of leisure and beauty. It was a fortress designed to keep its occupants safe. We wondered who might be causing the king to feel unsafe. We entered with a degree of trepidation.

We sent messages via his servants to Herod, but he would not receive us, until we said we had come to see the new king who had been born. When the message went in to him, even we, waiting in an anteroom in the courtyard could hear a great rumpus with lots of shouting and running of feet. We remained in our anteroom, watched over by some solemn eyed soldiers, who looked at us as if we were enemies, not seers coming in peace to greet a new king. Eventually what was obviously a senior soldier came, and with our guard escorted us into the presence of King Herod.

We had been told many stories about him, as we had travelled closer to his kingdom. We knew that he had spent a lifetime building new grand structures in what was a new Kingdom for his family. We knew that he would stop at nothing to

protect his position even going to the extent of executing his wife and sons if he felt threatened by them. We could see that in his prime he would have been a fine powerful figure of a man, a dangerous man. Now he looked shrunk, and was obviously in a lot of pain. We had been told that he had a disease of the joints and spent most of his time swimming or lying in water as this was the only time he could get relief from the pain. However much he might have been in pain when he greeted us, we were made very welcome, and ordered to sit on the fine cushioned seats he had had brought in, and partake of some choice food and drink he had set before us.

Sitting behind him, nervously playing with rolls of parchment were a number of men whom Herod vaguely waved at and announced as his scholars. It appeared that no baby had been born in the palace for years, so Herod had sent for the scholars to find out whether a new king was foretold, and if so where it would be born. He told us that it had been foretold that the Messiah, the saviour of the Israelite people, would be born in Bethlehem, in Judea, the birth place of their most celebrated king, King David. The town was about half a day's journey from Jerusalem. While we sat and ate, King Herod questioned us closely about when the star had been seen, he finished by giving us his blessing to go to find the king, and requested that we send him word when we found him, so that he too could go and pay homage.

We left the palace and headed out of the city heading south along the road to Bethlehem, and there in the evening sky before us was the star shining brightly and going before us once again. When you are travelling following a star, a lot of your journey is taken when it is dark. If you travel during the day, you have to wait to reorientate yourself and make sure you have not strayed from your allotted path. That night we did not waver. The star shone brightly enough to illuminate our way, so with the camels having been rested and fed at Herod's palace, we travelled all night and arrived before dawn at the door of a cave cut into the hillside above the town of Bethlehem. This was not where we had thought we would end up when we left home. It seemed completely inappropriate that the Israelites expected Messiah, who was going to save them from the hated Romans, should be a baby found lying in a manger, surrounded by cattle and sheep, and protected only by his father and mother.

And the end of the journey? Well, this is the end of the journey. We are safely back home in our own country in our own homes. We have stories to tell, friends to see and we must write down for posterity what we have done. How do we feel right now? I feel tired. At my age, all that expenditure of energy has taken it out of me. Was it worth it? What did we learn? I learned that sometimes you have to follow what you know is true, even if everyone else is uncertain. Most people didn't want

us to go, they didn't want us to prove, if only to ourselves, that what we had been saying all our lives, is correct, that is that you can read life in the stars. They had listened to us for years, had taken notice of what we said, but, so it appeared, did not believe in their heart of hearts that it was true. Now after our journey, I believe even more in what we have spent our lives doing, and our naysayers are having to rethink their doubts.

What of the baby? He was a baby, small, sleepy, crying when he was hungry and wanting to be fed, but the stars tell us that he is a beginning, a chance for the people of Israel, and for people like us who have been led to him. What will he become? The Israelites believe that he will become a great military leader. Who is to know. What we saw in the stars was that he would be a teacher. We gave him gifts. The gold that we gave was from our own stores, gold for a king. His father was utterly bewildered by the gold, he had never seen so much before!

We also gave them gifts from the strangers we had told our story too, Frankincense from the bandits in the Arabian desert, which when burnt symbolises the prayers of the people arising to the gods. Although listening to the Israelites, there was just one thing that they all agreed on and that is that there is just one God, their God, Yahweh. The final gift we gave him was Myrrh. In our country it has many uses, but the when it is mixed with other herbs and spices it can be used to dull pain. Perhaps the gift foretells of a painful illness or death.

What became of the baby? When we left the cave outside of Bethlehem in Judea, we took the family with us. We travelled with them along the 'Route of the Sea', as I had been warned in a dream that we should not go back to Herod. After a lot of discussion between us and the parents, Mary and Joseph, and knowing Herod's reputation, they agreed to leave Israel for the sake of the baby, who they had named Jesus. He had undergone all of the initiation rites of his people before we had arrived, and they had been preparing to return to Nazareth, their home town, but that now seemed too dangerous. Our arrival at Herod's palace, headstrong as we had been, had put the tiny Messiah in danger. We knew we had to protect him, so they became part of our caravan. We spent many hours around fires at night talking and learning of the story of the birth. We return home as believers in him, and what the prophecies about him say. We will not live long enough to see them fulfilled, but we know that they will be, Yahweh willing.