

A Great Sign in Heaven

It was a long journey, and not without its dangers. Hundreds of miles we travelled, through many towns and villages and strange lands with strange customs. But on that journey I made the greatest discovery of my life. And it all happened because of my study of the stars.

I have always been fascinated by the stars. Even as a little boy, whenever I got the chance, I would go outside at night and gaze up at them. They always seemed so beautiful. Compared with all the filth and evil of this world, they seemed so pure and untouched. Sometimes they seemed so bright that you could almost reach up and touch them, but at other times they seemed very remote—high above all the sorrows and troubles of the earth. I would lie on my back and gaze up at them for hours, if I could.

Many people didn't understand the stars. They were a little bit afraid of them I think, because they believed they controlled their destiny. And because they had already made up their minds about them, they didn't really look at them. To me the stars were my friends. I looked at them carefully and I noticed things that others didn't seem to notice, or if they did, they didn't think were important—like the fact that the stars all moved round in the sky, and not just randomly, but together. And then there were wandering stars that didn't keep their places in the sky and they would appear and disappear at certain times in the year. They were very bright and had different colours. How

I wished I knew more about them! I was always asking people about the stars, but no one in our village knew anything more than me.

The other children in our village would laugh at me and call me “the Stargazer”. It was their little joke, because Stargazers in our country were very important people. They worked for the king. They were part of the royal court. This was because they knew how to understand the stars—how to interpret their meaning for the affairs of this world. From the time our country was conquered by Alexander the Great, they were called *Magoi* in Greek, which sounded like their name in our language. And they were experts in many things apart from stargazing.

I wanted to understand the stars, and I secretly hoped that one day I could become a stargazer, but it seemed impossible, because my family were not rich and powerful and were not part of the royal court, although my father did help to look after the king’s horses. King Phraates was a powerful king. He ruled over the Parthian Empire for 35 years and he even defeated the great Roman general Marcus Antonius. The Parthian armies were so successful because of their horses and the great horsemanship of their cavalry. The light cavalry were armed with bows and they could even turn and shoot backwards with great accuracy while galloping at full speed! That’s the real origin of the expression “a Parthian shot”, which has been misunderstood in some languages as “a parting shot”.

I suppose after stars my other great love was for horses. Sometimes when I was older I helped my father look after these magnificent creatures. They were so powerful (and even fierce when needed) but generally they were so gentle and obedient. It was because of those horses that my dreams were fulfilled. The King used to travel round the various cities of his Empire, but especially he wintered in Susa and spent the summers in our city, Ktesiphon, on the river Tigris—the greatest city in the world. I say “our city” because the village where we lived was just one of the outlying districts of the great city.

Anyway, one day I went with my father to help at the King’s Stables and we had to stay quite late in the evening, as the King was returning from some special event. It must have been a good day because he was in a very good mood (he wasn’t always). He praised my father for looking after his horses so well. And then he saw me and asked my father, “Is this your son?” Then he turned to me and asked me, “Do you love horses too? Would you like to look after my horses too when you grow up?” I was very nervous, but I blurted out the truth. “Sire, I love horses dearly, but there is something I love even more!” He laughed, “What? More than horses? What can that be?” “Well, Sire, it’s the stars. I’d like to be a stargazer!”

For a moment there was a silence and I saw my father’s face go white and his hands tremble. Then the King gave a great laugh, and all his courtiers joined in. He said, “Don’t you know, boy, that stargazers belong to ancient

families of stargazers, and they must be trained from an early age, and they are very important counsellors to the King? In fact, some of them in the past got so powerful that Kings had to have them put to death!" Then one of his nobles said jokingly, "Ah but, Sire, you forget about one of the greatest of the Magoi, who was a foreigner from the land of Judah on the coasts of the West—one Daniel, who served the last Kings of Babylon and the early Kings of the Medes and Persians and, if the tales are to be believed, was thrown into a den of lions and not only survived, but became chief counsellor to King Darius!"

The King laughed again, and turning to me, said, "Do you still want to be a stargazer, even if you risk being thrown into a den of lions?" Without a moment's hesitation, I said "Yes, Sire!" "Then," he exclaimed, "A stargazer you shall be!"

From that moment, my life was changed. I left my home and lived in the Royal court in the School of the Magoi, although I was able to go and visit my family. At first the teachers, who were mainly old men, didn't know what to make of me. There was much shaking of heads and tugging of grey beards, but the King's word was law and anyway I proved to be a quick learner. At first the other students made fun of me, because of the way I spoke and my lack of good manners, but I was just so glad to be there that I treated it all good-naturedly and soon I made friends and was accepted at least by most of them.

I had many things to learn—reading and writing, understanding different languages, the interpretation of dreams and the study of laws and government. I learned all these as quickly as I could, so that I could spend more time on what I loved best—the stars. I learned all about the constellations, the signs of the Zodiac, the phases of the moon and movement of the planets. I learned that the heavenly bodies operated according to unchanging laws and I learned how to predict each heavenly event and how it related to events on the earth. But I learned that the main task of the Magoi in studying the stars was to give guidance to the King as to when were the best times to act—to go to war or to make peace; to build or not to build; to promote or not to promote.

I enjoyed all of this of course, especially as I became good at it and was involved with the King, but it did not really satisfy me. I wanted to know more about the stars: What were they? What was their purpose? How exactly did they control our destiny? When I raised these types of questions, the older Magoi would shake their heads and say that there were different beliefs. Those who held to the ancient religion of Babylon believed that the stars were actually the gods in visible form; while those who followed the teachings of Zarathustra believed that they were the creations of the One God. I delved into all those beliefs, but I still wasn't satisfied, although on the whole, I thought that the belief in One God who designed and created the universe made more sense of the order and beauty of the

heavens. It seemed to be on earth among men that things had become evil and confused. I had learned that the King could be ruthless and cruel—after all he had come to power by killing his own father and thirty of his brothers. No one in the Court trusted anyone else.

But this idea of One God led me eventually back to the one mentioned that first day—the day the King chose me as a stargazer—one they said was among the greatest of the Magoi—Daniel. I discovered that there were people of Daniel’s nation still living in our country and one of their kings and priests, a man called Hyrcanus, had actually been exiled amongst us for four years about the time our King had come to power.

I studied all I could about Daniel and his nation of Judah and discovered that they had a distinct religion with a belief in One God, whom they called the One Who Is. I also learned that Daniel, in interpreting a dream of the great King Nebuchadnezzar, had predicted that there would be four kingdoms, of gold, silver, bronze and iron, and in the time of the fourth kingdom the One God would set up a kingdom that would never be destroyed. There would come a king who would smash the kingdoms of this world even as a rock smashed the clay feet of the idol in the king’s dream. The experts disagreed as to the interpretation of this prophecy, but I thought it was clear that the Kingdom of Gold was Babylon, that of Silver, Persia, that of Bronze, Greece and the Kingdom of Iron was Rome. I also learned that there was a prophecy even more ancient made by

Balaam, who came from our own area, that there would be a star that would rise in connection with this new King of the Jews.

I became obsessed with this and discussed it with my closest friends who were also Magoi. We argued about it, but we were all excited about it and kept looking to see if a star would appear in that section of the heavens which was associated with the land of Judah. One day the King came amongst us as we were discussing these things and poring over maps and charts. We thought he might be angry, but he was most interested and told us about some of the political developments involving the emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus, and the present king of the Jews, King Herod, who was a friend of Rome, but his long reign must soon come to an end, and King Phraates wanted to establish a strong coalition against Rome. So it was of great interest to him that there might be a new King of the Jews who would destroy the Roman Empire. He left us with strict instructions to observe the sky carefully and report to him any unusual sightings.

This made us even more excited, but it was nothing like the excitement when, a few months later, low down in the west, in that section of the sky we associated with the land of the Jews there rose a star brighter than three wandering stars. We reported it immediately to the King, and almost before we knew what was happening, he had sent us on the long and difficult journey into the western lands to greet this new King of the Jews. He warned us to be

extremely careful. This newborn King might be a member of Herod's family, but he might not. King Phraates was sending us Magoi rather than any other officials, to avoid any suspicion of political interference. Particularly, we were to be very wary of Herod. But notwithstanding, when we found the child, we were to make known the desire of the king of Parthia to honour the child and to have friendly relations between their two kingdoms.

We were to travel swiftly and secretly, so instead of using our beloved horses, which would have caused us to ride far to the north around the desert, the King equipped us with the finest camels and desert guides and instructed us to make as direct a route as possible through the desert. He didn't want the Romans in Syria in particular knowing anything about our mission. He also gave us gifts for the new King—precious, but not bulky, as we had to travel fast—gold and expensive perfumes and spices, frankincense and myrrh.

The first part of our journey lay to the north-west in the richly cultivated Mesopotamia, the area between and around the two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, but then we had to strike directly west into the desert. That was the hardest part of the journey. Camels aren't the most comfortable of animals to ride at the best of times, but with the intense heat in the daytime and the cold at night, it was almost unbearable. The one good thing about camels is that they can travel very far and very fast without a lot of water. They have been known to travel 100 miles in a day, but

what with carrying enough equipment for our journey and travelling over rough terrain, we were able to make around 30 miles a day. Even so it took us nearly a month to complete the journey.

Often at nights around the campfire we would gaze at the star burning low in the West, and we would discuss the information I had been able to glean from the Jews I had met. Seemingly there were many other references to this promised King in their Scriptures. He was to be a king like David and Solomon (whom even we had heard about) but much more than a king—a prophet and a priest as well, and some texts hinted at something greater still. He was to be God-with-us. But if there was only One God, how could that be? I couldn't understand it all, but as the journey went on, the feeling grew that something amazing was happening.

Eventually we came to more populated hilly and wooded regions and we came down out of the hills to the River Jordan. From there we got directions to the capital city of Judah—Jerusalem—away up in the hills on the western side. After two days we arrived, and were rather at a loss as to what to do. Of course we admired the beautiful buildings, especially the Temple built high on a hill shining like a great white and gold jewel. It was a very different city from ours which was all built on the plain.

At first we made some discreet inquiries about births in the Palace, but no one knew anything. In the end we had to explain that we studied the stars and we had predicted

the birth of the King of the Jews, but we might be mistaken. The mention of the King of the Jews fairly set the cat among the pigeons. Very quickly King Herod found out, and we were called before him.

Now, King Phraates was scary, but he was nothing compared to Herod. He was very nice to us, but every so often he would rage about something his servants had done or not done. I had a very bad feeling about that man. But he seemed very interested in our quest and called in some of his religious advisors, and he asked them where the Anointed One was to be born (that's what they called this promised King). They had a very ready answer. They quoted one of their prophets, a man called Micah, who had lived over 700 years before, who said the King was to come from Bethlehem. They read out the exact passage from a scroll: "You, Bethlehem, though little in Judah, from you will come a king who will shepherd the people of Israel."

Then King Herod had everyone put out and spoke privately with us. I had an even worse feeling about that. He explained that this Anointed One was not a King in the ordinary sense—not a political king—more of a holy man, and he too wanted to go and worship this child. He said he didn't want crowds making a fuss, as there was a lot of political unrest, so we could do him a great favour if we found out secretly where this newborn King was, and then report back to him, so he could go quietly to pay his respects. He also asked us in great detail about the exact

time the star had appeared. He had an eager look in his eyes as he questioned us about that.

But everything seemed to go well. He made arrangements for us to be let out of the city secretly that night and gave us directions to Bethlehem. But in the afternoon as we rested, a strange thing happened. We all dreamed, and we all dreamed the same dream. We all heard a voice warning us not to return to Herod. This made us even more frightened as we left the city that night, but also more excited, as there was definitely something unique happening.

We had been talking amongst ourselves as to how we would know where the child was when we got to Bethlehem, but as we travelled south we saw that the Star was going down in front of us and it seemed to be glowing even brighter. We were delighted and our spirits lifted, because recently the sky had been overcast, and what with the hills and the buildings of the city, we hadn't seen it for some days. When we reached Bethlehem, the Star was setting, and as we stood in the main street it was setting behind a particular house on a slight hill. Just as we reached the house, the star set behind the hill. And it suddenly seemed very dark.

But just then the door opened and light seemed to pour out. In the doorway stood a man who named himself Joseph, and when we asked if he was a father and if there was a child in the house, he said it would take too long to answer those questions, but he asked us who we were and

why we were asking. We explained as best we could, although he did not seem to understand, or perhaps wholly approve when we explained about the Star, and he seemed very afraid when we mentioned King Herod. But when we told him about our dreams and that we were not going to go back to Jerusalem, he relaxed (he seemed more at ease with dreams than with stars!) and he invited us in.

It was an ordinary house, and in the room there was an ordinary young mother and an ordinary child in her arms. But something extraordinary happened there. All of us Magoi, grown men, experts in all the sciences of the East, questioning, sceptical, cynical in varying degrees, we all fell down before this child and said, "Praise be to the One God. Praise and honour and glory!" Then we took out our gifts—the gold, frankincense and myrrh and presented them to him. Somehow they seemed of less worth in that house than in the palace of King Phraates in the great city of Ktesiphon, but they were graciously received nonetheless.

We tried then to explain to Joseph and his wife Mary about King Phraates and the Romans and King Herod, but somehow it all seemed an utter irrelevance in that house. They gave us food and wine and we talked into the night. They told us all they knew about their child, and the more they told us the more amazed we became. One thing always has stuck in my mind. Joseph said they had both separately been instructed by God to call the baby Jesus, which meant saviour, because he would save his people from their sins.

On all the long way home (by a roundabout route) these words kept resonating in my mind and I have never forgotten them. It seems to me that these are the words this world needs to hear.

By the time we got back King Phraates had other things on his mind. He had married a Roman woman, Musa, whom Augustus had given him, and he seemed completely enthralled by her. They had a son, and she even had persuaded the King to send his other sons to Rome as hostages as part of a treaty with Augustus. Not very long after we got back, his Roman wife poisoned the King, and her son became King Phraates V. So much for all his plans.

King Herod, we have heard fared no better, he died in terrible agony not long after we had returned, but not before executing one of his wives and her two sons, and murdering all the male infants in Bethlehem. I was glad that we had warned Joseph and that he was going to leave that night for Egypt.

So all the great schemes of these kings came to nothing, but the Kingdom of God is established. And one day, no doubt, the iron kingdom with the feet of clay will crumble too before the One born in Bethlehem of Judah.

I went west following a Star, but I returned believing in a Saviour.

Matthew 2
(Daniel 1 – 6)