

Christmas for the Unexpected

One of the most amazing things about the first Christmas was that the Jews, who supposedly were eagerly awaiting their Messiah, largely missed the event. Only a handful of Jewish shepherds had a glimpse of the Baby Jesus. Ironically, it was the *Gentile* magi who sought long and hard to give this baby the worship he deserved. But who were these magi?

Most believers think these wise men came from Mesopotamia (Babylon, Assyria, or Persia). This makes sense since the magi came “from the east” (Matt. 2:1), and these nations were geographically *northeast* of Israel. Also, Babylonians are known to be stargazers, and the magi saw the star “in the east” (Matt. 2:2).

However, three lines of evidence not often considered may indicate that the magi were, in fact, Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula *southeast* of Israel.¹

Their Location

Biblically speaking, the “east” was not Mesopotamia but land just east of Israel. Job lived in Uz and was deemed “the greatest of the people of the east” (Job 1:3). Some sources place Uz in the northeast near Syria,² while others place the region southeast of Israel in the land of the Edomites near Arabia.³ Perhaps both of these are true, but descendants of the son of Ishmael named Kedar (Gen. 25:13) became the Arabian tribe living south and southeast of Israel (Ezek. 27:21). Interestingly, these Arabs were called “people of the east” (Jer 49:28)!

In any event, magi from “the east” could not have come from Mesopotamia since Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia were always called lands of the north (Jer. 1:13-15; 6:22; 25:9).

Their Gifts

The gifts the magi gave (Matt. 2:11) came from the Spice Trade route southeast of Israel. Isaiah wrote, “And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense” (Isa. 60:6; cf. Ps. 72:10). Sheba was the land of present-day southern Saudi Arabia. Also, frankincense came only from South Arabia, although it was sold throughout the Middle East. Further, the primary source of gold in antiquity was not Mesopotamia but far south on the Arabian Peninsula in the land of Ophir, present-day Yemen.⁴

¹ Much of the information in this study can be found in Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Descendants* (Grand Rapids: Trade Paperback, Kregel, 2003).

² See Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 78-79. Here he follows the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, who placed Uz in Trachonitus northeast of the Sea of Galilee. A man named Uz descended from Aram in this region (Gen. 10:23; 1 Chron. 1:17; cf. son of Nahor in Gen. 22:21).

³ An Edomite named Uz lived in Seir southeast of Israel near Arabia (Gen. 36:28; cf. 1 Chron. 1:42), and Jeremiah listed Uz with nations of the south (Jer. 25:20). Lamentations 4:21 is the clearest verse of all: “Rejoice and be glad, O Daughter of Edom, you who live in the land of Uz.” Carl G. Rasmussen supports Uz being east Edom in *The NIV Atlas of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 255.

⁴ See 1 Kings 9:28; 10:11; 22:48; 1 Chron. 29:4; 2 Chron. 8:18; Job 22:24; 28:16; Ps. 45:9; Isa. 13:12.

Their Role

One final indicator of Arab magi is the biblical pattern of threats against God's redeemer from the covenant community itself, which finds deliverance by Arabia! Joseph was threatened by his own brothers but then saved from death by the Ishmaelites of Arabia, who brought him to Egypt (Gen. 37:27-28; Acts 7:9-10). He went on to become a redeemer of the nation.

Also, God later called Moses to be a deliverer, and Pharaoh tried to kill him after his murder of an Egyptian (Exod. 2:5). But opposition from Israel's elders also contributed to forcing Moses to seek refuge in Midian of Arabia (Exod. 2:13-15; 5:21; Acts 7:25-29). God, therefore, used this area of Arabia to preserve the very deliverer of the Exodus. Even in the future tribulation, Israel will find refuge in the desert (Rev. 12:14), presumably in Arabia.

In other words, Scripture often notes how God raised Arabs for his purposes—even to save the people of God from death by their countrymen! Such are the wonderful ways of our mighty God.

Conclusion

Arabs seeking the Jewish Messiah should cause us to ponder the wonder of Christmas again. The Jewish community largely missed their Messiah born right in their midst—only six kilometers south of Jerusalem—a short walk reached by horseback in but a few minutes. Do we also neglect to see that the *unlikely* people often respond most readily to Jesus during this time of the year? Who is *your* unlikely Gentile that God wants you to direct to the Saviour this Christmas?