

"I Wonder" by David Lloyd



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Some people refer to us as wise men, but we are not any wiser than others the same age, older or younger. Some Greeks call us "magi" as if we were sorcerers. But we are merely priests of Zarathustra, the Golden Light, studying the hymns he wrote that are in the Avesta and reveal to us the Light. And performing the prescribed rituals to honor Ahura Mazda, the one God who created all things and will judge us all at the end of time. And studying the stars, of course, to understand the course of human events.

The stars made my destiny to be a priest. From childhood I had loved to study the stars over Babylon, from the first star in the evening to the last star of the morning. I can remember my father holding me in his arms, pointing out the constellations until I was old enough to find them for myself. I talked to traders from Egypt, Parthia, Greece, and Saba, asking if there were any among them who studied the night sky and who was willing to talk to me, telling me their names for the constellations, and how they used the stars' patterns to tell

time and future events. When I was old enough my father committed me to the priests of Zarathustra.

And then one day there was a new morning star, a star where none had ever been before. We studied this new star for a few days. It seemed to be over a land west of us. We sent messengers to priests in Persia, Greece and Egypt, but none of them had ever seen it before, either. The traders from the deserts had never seen it, either. We all knew that the new star indicated the coming of a new king. But where? No one in the palace had heard of any new king, neither in Egypt nor Nabatea nor Syria. One of the merchants remembered that there was a king named Herod in the land of Judea, which was a small kingdom somewhere between Egypt and Syria, Nabatea and the Eastern Desert.

This land of Judea was home to the people called Jews, some of whom lived among us in Babylon since their ancestors had been captured and brought to Babylon some five hundred years earlier. They were a peculiar people, claiming to be chosen by their God, whose name they were forbidden to pronounce, and circumcising their male infants. They kept a different calendar than we did, and had their own festivals and rituals. But they keep the peace and so we don't bother them.

I went into the Jewish Quarter and asked if they knew anything about a new king in Judea because we had seen his star. They didn't, but my question excited them. One of them said, "At last the prophecies have come true. 'A star shall arise out of Jacob, and a man shall rise up out of Israel.' The Messiah will restore the kingdom of Israel to what it was under King David." I had never heard of the kingdom of Israel, and he explained that it combined Judea and the land of Galilee to its north, had been ruled by their greatest king, David, and was later divided and then conquered by Assyria and Babylon. He explained that the Messiah was a man appointed by God as king, general, priest, and prophet, who would drive out the

Romans, restore the kingdom of Israel, end worship of false gods, and lead the people back to faith in the one true God, the Holy One of Israel. I asked where Herod's palace was, and he said that all kings of Judea ruled in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion, near the Temple.

I shared this information with my fellow priests. Perhaps this new king would usher in the end times and Ahura Mazda would be coming to judge us all. After much discussion, we decided that a delegation should go to Judea. It would not be a short journey. Up the Euphrates River to Mari, then west to Tadmor and southwest to Damascus, then down the King's Highway to Heshbon, then west down into the valley of the Jordan River and back up from Jericho to Jerusalem. It would take nearly two months.

There were five of us who set out – Jasper, Larvandad, Gushnasaph, Hormazda, and me. They were easy to get along with, especially Gushnasaph, who had a lot of outgoing energy to match his name.

We had carefully selected the gifts to take to this new king of Judea. Gold, of course, and when Gushnasaph said that Jasper should have the responsibility of carrying it, we all laughed, since Jasper's name means "Master of the Treasure." We took some silk cloths, and cooking spices, and olibanum for incense, which was appropriate if this star symbolized a king who would be a priest. Besides, Jews mixed it with oil to anoint newborn infants, so even if he would not be a priest, it would still be a customary gift. I suggested myrrh, which they thought strange because it is mostly for embalming. Larvandad asked if we were going to give it to the baby's mother, since myrrh is good for female problems, and a new mother might need to improve her blood. When I noted out that myrrh is also used in perfumes and incense they agreed. Privately, I thought a king who planned to drive out the Romans would need all the myrrh he could get for the many funerals after the battles.

We left as quickly as we could and the travel was as long and as difficult as we had been told. We used the light of the moon and of the star that doesn't move for guidance, as well as the light of the constellations. And every morning at dawn we could see the new star, low on the horizon.

Finally we came to Jerusalem. This King Herod had a reputation for creating large building projects, including restoration of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It was quite beautiful – it glistened in the late afternoon horizon. We found a translator and when we asked several people where the new king of Judea was living, each one showed a mixture of reactions. They disliked King Herod, but their excitement at the thought of a new king was tempered by their expectation of the Romans' brutality when a rebellion began. None of them knew of this new king.

This left us in a predicament. How could we ask a king if he knew about his successor? King Herod's reaction was likely to be extreme. We were told that he had had his second wife – his niece – and his sons by her, her mother, his own brother and numerous political rivals executed over the years. On the other hand, the best astrologers, the best prophets, and the priests would be with the king. So we decided to request an audience from King Herod.

When we arrived at the palace gates it was nearly dark and a guard demanded our business. When we said we were there to find the location of the new King of the Jews, the guard summoned a superior officer and a dozen guards, who took us to the palace, leaving our pack animals and servants to wait. We entered a ceremonial hall, where Herod was enthroned. We bowed and waited for him to speak. He considered a moment, gestured for us to rise, and then asked us in a seemingly casual manner, "Why have you come?" Larvandad said, "We seek the one who has been born King of the Jews. We have seen his star, and have come to pay homage to the child."

At this Herod stiffened, and the room rushed. He considered a moment, told the officer to bring the chief priests and the scribes to him at once, and then dismissed us. I asked the guard who spoke Greek, "What did we say that got the king and everyone so upset?" He considered a moment and then said, "The Roman Senate named Herod as 'King of the Jews' and then later Caesar Augustus Octavian confirmed it. Herod is afraid that he is being replaced, and he will do anything to keep his position." After a while we were surprised when Herod came to us, all alone, without a single guard or servant. He said, "The child you seek should be in a village called Bethlehem, about two hours from here. When you find him, send word back to me that I may pay homage to him, also." Then he left us and we went down to our pack animals and looked for an inn to spend the night.

Before dawn the next morning we headed for Bethlehem and as we arrived the star was still there, almost beckoning us. We arrived and laughed with great joy that our journey was completed, but I was also laughing at the thought a king or a general, or a priest or a prophet could come from this flyspeck of a village. It didn't take long to find the child. The village was so small that there were only about twenty children under the age of two, and of these there was one whose parents were not villagers. A villager who spoke a little Greek pointed out the house and came with us to translate.

We entered the house we saw his mother Miriam holding him. We asked the name of the child, and she beamed as she said through the translator, "Yeshua. God is my salvation." Then we asked where his father was, and she gave a strange smile and said, "His earthly father Yusuf will be back soon." How odd! We prostrated ourselves to honor him, then presented our gifts: Larvandad gave the silk and Gushnasaph gave the spices first, but when Jasper showed her the gold, Hormazda the olibanum, and I the myrrh she began chanting something. The

translator whispered to me, "She is quoting scripture, I think the prophet Isaiah:"

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of God has risen upon you...*

and the glory of God will be seen upon you.

And nations shall come to your light,

and rulers to the brightness of your rising,...

...the wealth of the nations shall come to you...

They shall bring gold and incense,

and proclaim the praise of God.

Miriam was silent for a moment, and then resumed chanting scripture from the Psalms of King David:

*The kings of Tarshish and the islands shall bring gifts,
the kings of Sheba and Seba shall present their tribute,
and all kinds shall pay him homage,
and all nations shall serve him.*

*For he shall rescue the needy from their rich oppressors,
the distressed who have no protector.*

*May he have pity on the needy and the poor,
deliver the poor from death;*

*may he redeem them from oppression and violence
and may their blood be precious in their eyes.*

Gudnasaph shook his head at this, and said indiscreetly, "What manner of king is this? Every king is rich and oppresses the poor." But Hormazda said, "Maybe the Jewish kings are different."

I said nothing, but I was thinking about the prophecy. How could this be his fate? His only light so far was the star; the house was no better and no brighter than any other in the village. His mother Miriam glowed radiantly, but it was only the glow of a young mother holding her first child or possibly the glow of some private vindication. How could he ever grow up to be a leader? Who would follow a man whose fate was to help the poor and the oppressed?

We spent the day there and then the night. I dreamed that King Herod was coming with soldiers to kill the child and us, and in my dream we all agreed to find another way home. When I awoke to my surprise we all had had the same dream. So instead of going back to Jerusalem and retracing our steps, we went west to the Coastal Road north to Damascus and then back to Babylon.

After another month or so, the star disappeared. The child may not have survived if Herod had Bethlehem's children killed. When Herod died his kingdom was divided between his three sons. The one was so bad a king that the Jews complained to Caesar, who banished him and made Judea a Roman province. The other two were typical kings – rich and oppressive. I have asked travelers about events in Judea and it is clear that there has been no King of Glory in Judea. If he lived, the child never became a priest great enough to be known as a Light to the World, the way Zarathustra is revered as the Golden Light. I suppose he could have become a prophet; I have been told that every generation of Jews has its prophets. The five of us have discussed our journey to Bethlehem many times in the 30 years since. His destiny did not seem to be the one set by the star. How could this be so? We checked our calculations and charts, but found no error in our

interpretation.

The Jewish quarter is all abuzz. Men have come saying that they are apostles of a great teacher and prophet, who cured the sick and healed the lame, who redeemed the poor with hope and forgiveness for their sins, and who taught everyone a new way to live with one another. His teachings upset both the priests and the Pharisees and his popularity risked an insurrection, so he was denounced to the Romans, and executed in Judea. These men claim that God brought him back to life again, and he ascended to heaven. They say that he is the Son of God. Using the power of his name they themselves are able to cure the sick and heal the lame, they share his teachings with everyone, and they invite us all to believe. Those who do believe seem to be changed and are living a new life of deeper spirituality. The whole Jewish Quarter is divided between those who think that this prophet was the Messiah and those who think he was just another false prophet.

I asked one of these men the prophet's name. He replied, "Yeshua." Hmm. I am told it is not an uncommon name among Jews. "Where was he born?" "Bethlehem." Is it possible he was the same Yeshua I saw as a child? "How did the Romans execute him?" "By crucifixion, of course, with a sign on the cross that read, 'King of the Jews.'" Did the child become a king as the star foretold, but of a different kind? Was he the Jewish Messiah, the Light of the World? I wonder.