

WISE MEN VISIT Matthew 2:1-12

“Well, that doorframe seems to fit close enough. Now let’s see if we got it straight and even.” The carpenter I was working for, while Mary and the baby recovered enough for us to go back to Nazareth, took a stick and measured the top, and then measured the opening at the bottom. “Not yet,” he said, “hit this side a little.” I took the stone hammer and tapped firmly where he pointed his toe. “Just a little more.” And I tapped it again. “Good,” he grunted. Then he picked up the leather cord with the weight at the end and squinted at the frame, both sides, and front and back. “That’s all right. Now we’ll see how the door fits.” We picked it up from where it had been leaning against the wall, and put it in. “Just a little off the side and we can hang it. You hold it, will you?” We put the door on the ground on one long side, and I held it straight up while he used a draw knife to peel off some long curls. The smell of the fresh cut cedar wood was very nice.

I was looking one way, and he the other, while we were doing this, so I didn’t see what he saw when he suddenly stopped, straightened up, and looked past me, up the track from Jerusalem. I turned to look, too, and was amazed at the sight. Plodding along was a line of camels! There were seven camels coming our way. We looked at each other in surprise; what were they doing here? This wasn’t even close to the usual caravan route to Egypt. They must be lost. There were three riding, and a couple of others leading the rest, hooked in a line. Those were carrying large bundles of tents and rugs and probably food, stuff needed for a long trip. But where were the camels with the goods to trade?

When they came to an open spot, they turned aside and stopped. The three riders kneeled their camels and climbed down. They spoke to the other two, who began unloading the camels, hobbling them, and staking them out. Then they huddled for a bit, the three, before taking a small bundle each from their camels, and starting into the village. They came to us, and asked in

a strange accent, if there were any recently born children here. "Yes," the carpenter said, "there were four born with the last three moons. One of them is his," nodding at me. "Will you take us to them," they asked. "Go ahead" my employer said to me, "You know where they all are. I'll finish up here." These three were dressed for traveling, but their ones were good quality traveling robes. "Rich" I thought. They seemed serious men, accustomed to having their way, but not arrogant about it. "Important," I thought. "We mean no harm," they told me, "but we have to see them. We've come a long way."

I said nothing, just gestured for them to follow. I went to each house in turn, talking with the women in the house first to get permission and to reassure them, and then motioned them inside. The three had an eager, excited look as they enter to see the child. They took a while to see whatever it was that they saw. Then I could hear them congratulate the mother, and come back out. They spoke briefly in some sort of language I had never heard before, shook their heads disappointedly, and asked to see the next child. So I took them to the next, and the next, following the same pattern. Each time they looked a little more excited when they went in...and a little more discouraged when they came back out. After the second, they just said a couple of words to each other, after the third they just shook their heads. "And the last one," they asked, "Yours?" I nodded. I had left Mary and Jesus for the last, hoping that they would find whatever it was they were looking for in some other child, even though I knew they probably wouldn't

"This child," I thought, "this god baby. What have we got to deal with here?" So I took them to the carpenter's house where we were staying. My work was just enough to get us a corner in an already crowded house, and about enough to eat. I went in to tell Mary and the other women that we were to have company. Mary was nervous, I could tell, and so was I. What did these people want? The other women set out a bench for Mary, and a rug on the dirt floor. They had peeked at the men waiting in the yard by the oven and knew they weren't just anybody. The other women retreated into a far corner and watched. About all we could see of them were their

eyes reflecting the flame of the oil lamp they put by Mary. Mary settled Jesus on her lap, gave a deep sigh, and nodded. I went to the doorway, and waved them in.

I hadn't gone into the other houses with them, but this time I stood by Mary's side as they came near. Their excited look was still there, not quite so strong. They drew close, looking at Jesus intently in turn, and then they each gave a sigh of satisfaction, spoke quickly to each other in that language of theirs, and backed away a step. And then they knelt before Jesus. Mary, and me, too, but it was Jesus they were looking at. They drew their bundles forward and set them down, opening them up. Mary's eyes went wide, and mine did, too. Then I pulled off my cloak, knelt down and spread it over the gifts, covering them up. In a low voice I said "Say nothing! Tell no one!" They were startled by my reaction, and looked at each other. One of them said something to the others, and I heard the word Herod in it...and they nodded to me with a respectful look. They stayed on their knees, blocking the sight of the other women, while I got the gifts back out of sight in our bed rolls and carrying sacks. Then they stood and backed away, bowing several times before they got outside. While they were still in the yard, my employer came back with the tools. They thanked him for his help and went off up the street, back to their camels, I guessed.

He looked at me and asked, "What was that all about? Who were they?" "I don't know," I replied, "they never told me their names or where they had come from, or why." He looked at me like he didn't believe me, but I didn't say any more. It was near dark, then, and the evening meal was being set out, so we ate and the others talked over all the excitement for a while and then we went to bed in the darkness. Mary whispered to me, "Go talk to them in the morning." I whispered back, "I will."

Everyone slept...but me. I worried this visit and these gifts one way and another all night. What should we do with these gifts? Who were these men and why had they come?

How much did Herod know? We could buy a house and hire servants to work for us, but then people would want to know how we got so rich and when and why. No, that wasn't a good idea. I had not been told, but I could guess that Jesus had to stay out of most people's notice or he'd never grow to be a man. How much time can we wait, do we have to wait, before we could leave?

Eventually the light of dawn began to grow, and even before the birds started, I was up and out the door and up the path to where the caravan had stopped! But it wasn't there! Now I was really frightened...until I looked more closely. Their tracks did not go toward Jerusalem; they went off cross-country, heading toward the south end of the Dead Sea. I breathed a huge sigh of relief as I thought about it. It would be hard dry going, but they weren't likely to meet Herod again.

"Wise," I thought.

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