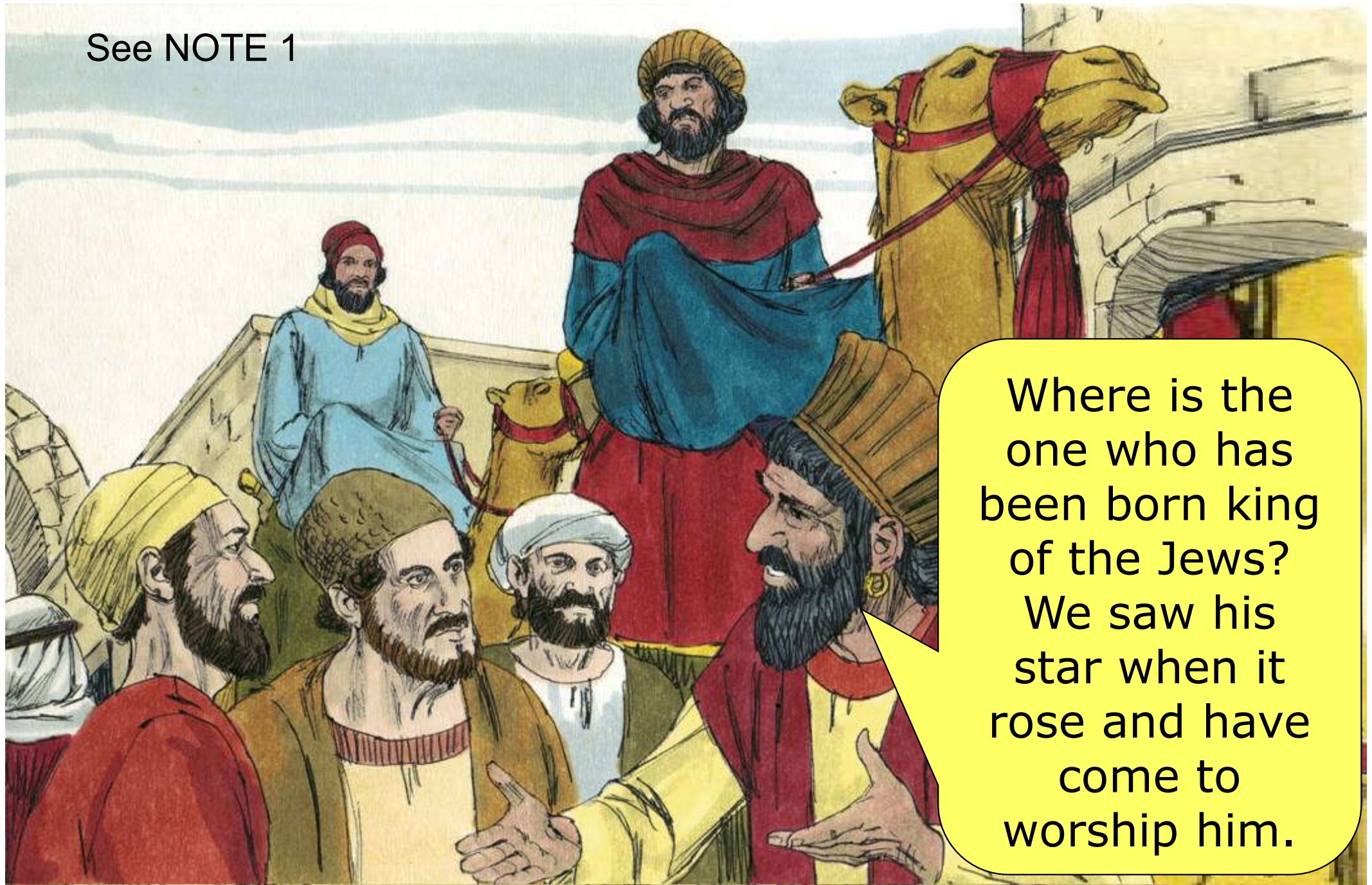


MATTHEW'S ACCOUNT OF THE NATIVITY



Matthew 2:1-23

See NOTE 1



Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.

THE RISING

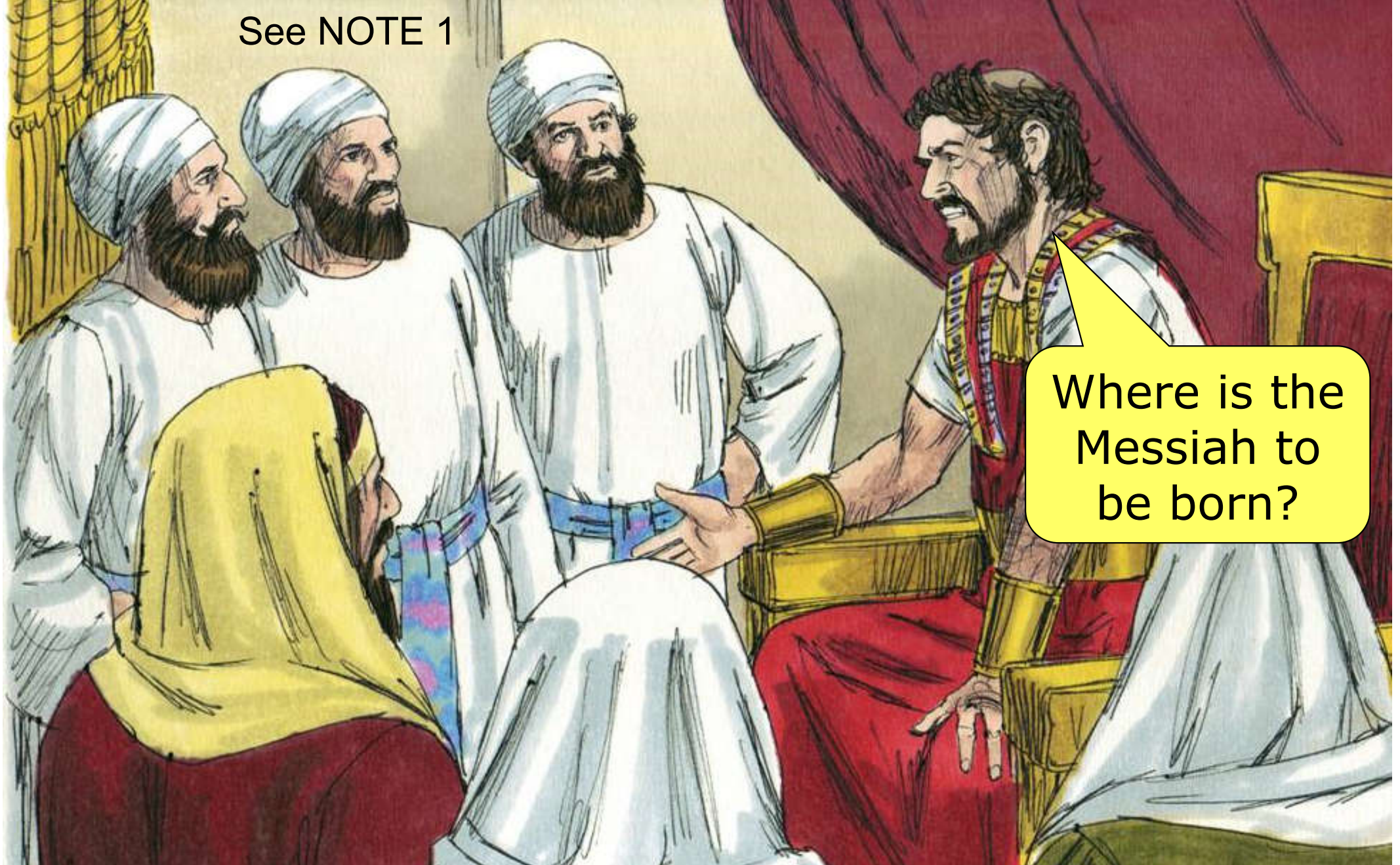
- ❑ Matt 2:1-2 (NASB) Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."
- In verse 2, "the East" is "te anatole", which is literally "the rising". It could mean either that the Magi saw the star from their vantage point East of Jerusalem, the direction in which the sun rises - or that they saw it when it first appeared (at its rising).
- Although "the east" is often rendered the same for verse 1 and 2 in English versions, in the Greek verse 1 is "apo anatolōn" while verse 2 is "te anatolē".

THE RISING

- ❑ The magi told Herod that they saw the star "in the East," "at its rising", which may imply the routine appearance of a constellation, asterism, or heliacal rising. The Greek word for "east" used in this passage is singular, yet plural in those passages where it refers to the magi's homelands.¹
- ❑ As such the NIV renders Matt 2:1-2:
 - After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi **from the east** came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star **when it rose** and have come to worship him."

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_of_Bethlehem

See NOTE 1



Where is the
Messiah to
be born?

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. He called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law.

In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'

See
NOTE 1



BETHLEHEM

- ❑ The chief priests and teachers of the Law correctly understood the passage in Micah 5:2 to be a Messianic prophecy indicating the town where the Messiah would be born: ¹
- “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, ² Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.” (NKJV)

¹ This too was the understanding of those during the period of Jesus' ministry. Note John 7:42 where they say, “Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?” ² Note that the chief priests and teachers of the Law paraphrase “Bethlehem Ephrathah” as “Bethlehem, in the land of Judah”. This was possibly because there was a second Bethlehem near Nazareth, in the territory of Zebulun - and they meant to explicitly differentiate between the two.

An illustration depicting King Herod, a man with a beard wearing a red robe and a gold crown, standing in a room with a yellow wall and a doorway. He is gesturing with his right hand towards three Magi. The Magi are men with long beards, wearing blue and red robes and gold crowns. One Magi is on the left, looking towards Herod. Another is in the center, looking at Herod. The third is on the right, partially visible, looking at Herod. A yellow speech bubble is positioned in the lower right, containing text. A small lamp is visible on the wall in the background.

See NOTE 1

Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem.



See
NOTE 1

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

See NOTE 1

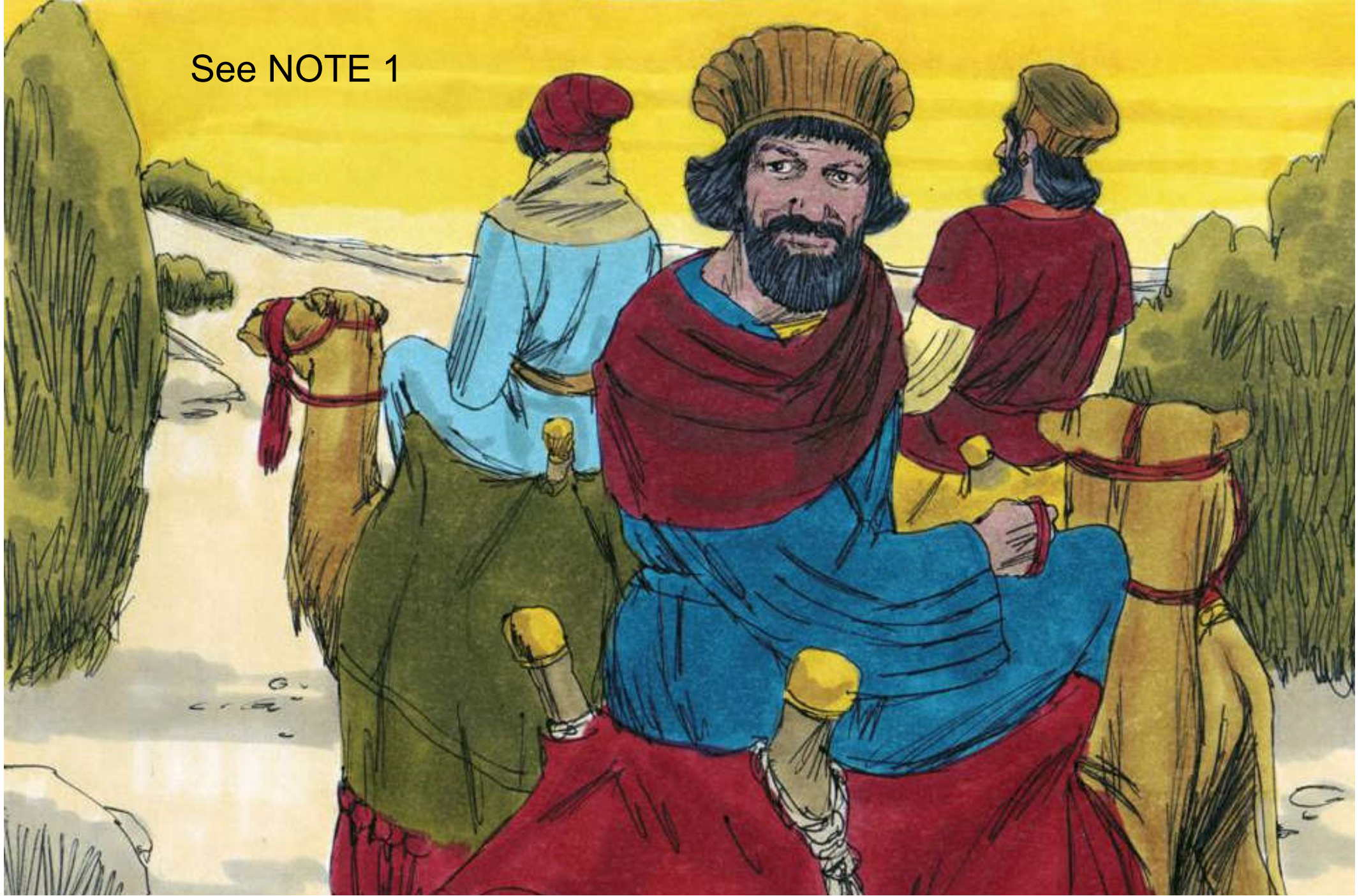


On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

THE GIFTS

- ❑ So when the King of the Jews is born, it is not only the Jews (like the shepherds, Simeon and Anna) who worship him, but the Gentiles too.
 - Simeon prays in Luke 2:30-32, "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, **a light for revelation to the Gentiles** and for glory to your people Israel."
- ❑ So their worship of the Messiah symbolises the fact that the Gospel was to be proclaimed to the Gentiles too as part of God's plan.
 - Jesus said in John 10:16, "**I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen.** I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

See NOTE 1



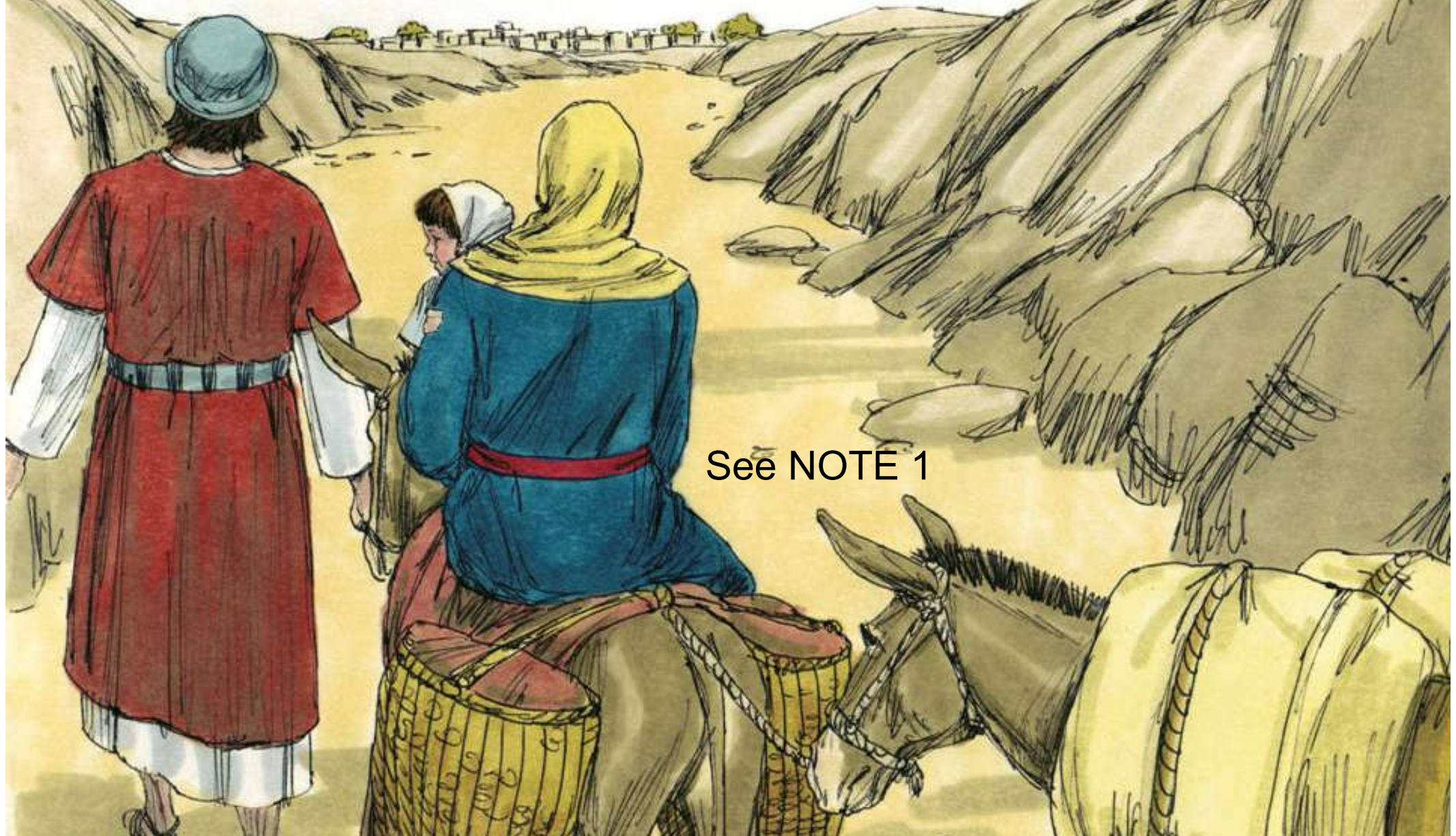
And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.



See NOTE 1

Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.



See NOTE 1

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

OUT OF EGYPT

- ❑ Hosea 11:1 "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."
- ❑ The passage in Hosea is a reference to Israel being called out of Egypt by God, so it is not a Messianic prophecy as such. Rather in quoting this verse and applying it to Jesus, Matthew is using typology - and showing that Israel was a type of Jesus.
 - Hosea 11:2 goes on to say about God's son Israel, "But the more they were called, the more **they went away from me**. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images."
 - In contrast God says of his Son Jesus "This is my Son, whom I love; **with him I am well pleased**." (Matt 3:17)



See
NOTE 1

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

FULFILLING PROPHECIES

- Matthew always goes to great lengths to show that Jesus' fulfilled the OT prophecies.

1:22	born of a virgin	(Isa 7:14)
2:5-6	born in Bethlehem	(Mic 5:1-2)
2:15	called out of Egypt	(Hos 1:1)
2:17-18	sought out to be killed by Herod	(Jer 31:15)
2:23	called a Nazarene	(Isa 11:1)
3:3	John preparing the way	(Isa 40:3)
4:12-16	ministry in Galilee	(Isa 9:1-2)
8:17	healed diseases	(Isa 53:4)
12:17-21	God's chosen servant	(Isa 42:1-4)
13:13	speaks through parables	(Isa 6:9-10)
& 13:33		& Ps 78:2)
21:4	come to Jerusalem on a donkey	(Zech 9:9)
27:9	sold for thirty silver coins	(Jer 19:1-13)

MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

- ❑ Matt 2:18 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, **Rachel weeping for her children** and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."
- ❑ It seems that Rachel died near Ramah ¹ (in the territory of Benjamin) ² on the way to Bethlehem, ³ after giving birth to Benjamin.

¹ Friederich Strickert, *Rachel Weeping*, pp.61-2: "one must conclude that Rachel's tomb was located near Ramah."; "During the time of the monarchy, from the anointing of Saul to the beginning of exile (1040-596 BC), Rachel's tomb was understood to be located in the north near Ramah."

² 1 Sam 10:2 "When you go from me today, then you will find two men close to Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah..." (NASB)

³ Gen 35:19-21 So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb.

MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

- Although Bethlehem was in the territory of the tribe of Judah (descendants of Leah), Rachel is spoken of as their figurative 'mother' because her tomb was associated with the area.¹
- This is possibly why Matthew refers to the passage in Jeremiah 31:15 about "Rachel weeping for her children" in reference to the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem.

¹ Leah was buried in Hebron in the cave of Machpelah (Gen 49:31)

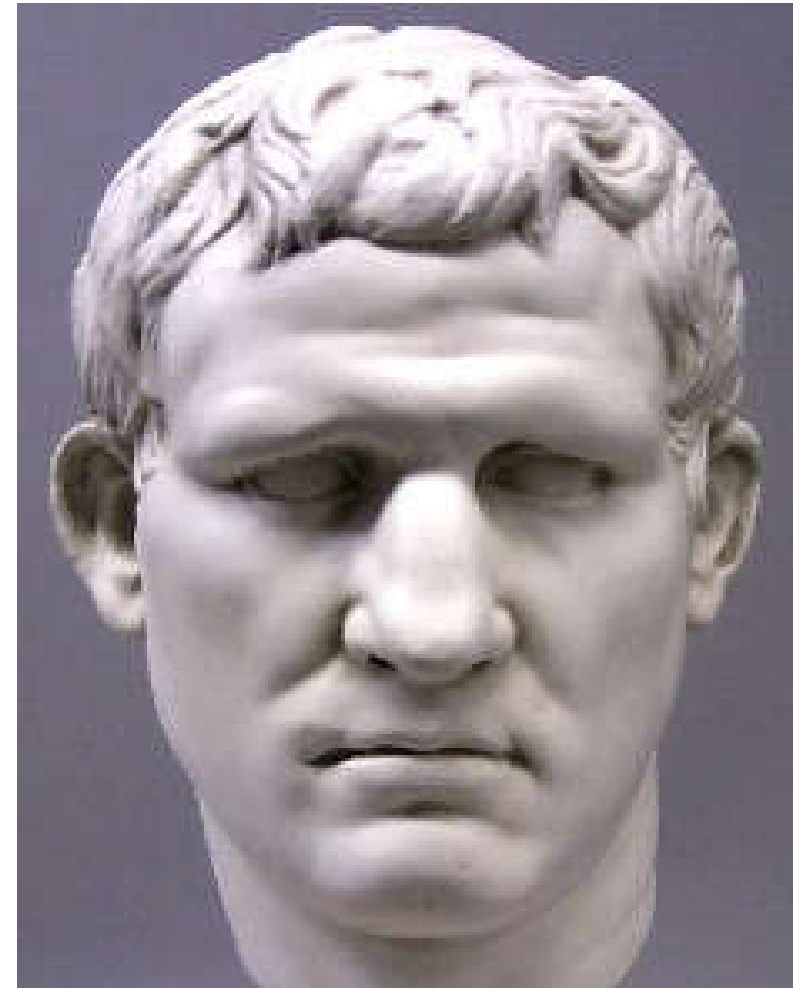


MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

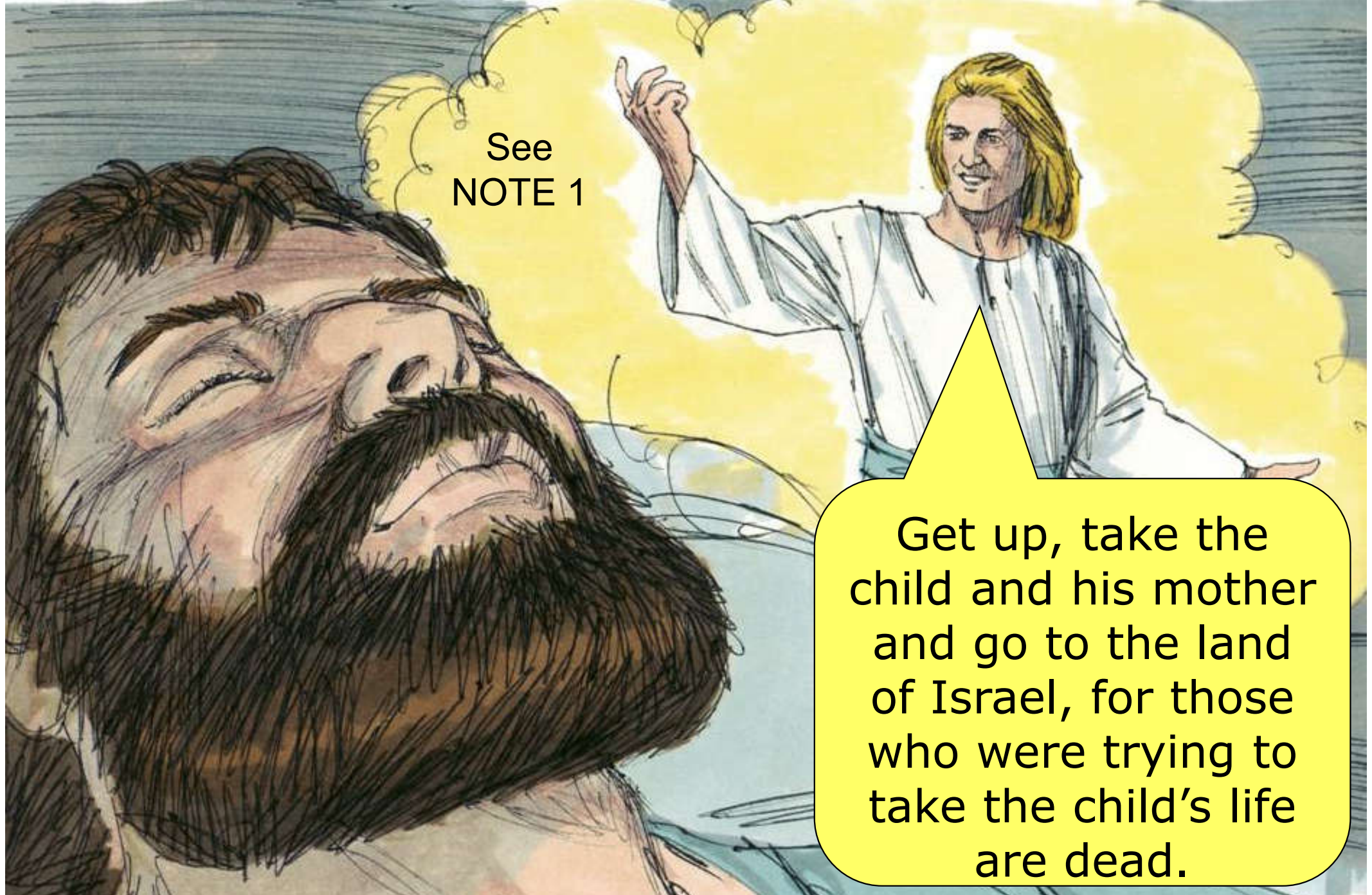
- We don't find a record of this massacre of the innocents in secular history, but the action is totally consistent with other documented actions of the paranoid King Herod (the Great) who had a reputation for killing anyone he perceived as a threat to his throne. In 40 BC a rebellion had deposed Herod as ruler of Galilee. Herod fled to Rome to plead his case with the Romans. There he was elected "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate. On returning to Palestine, the usurper Antigonus was executed by Mark Antony and Herod took back his throne. In 36 BC Herod made his 17-year-old brother-in-law, Aristobulus III, high priest, fearing that the Jews would appoint him as "King of the Jews" in his place. But the following year Aristobulus was drowned at a party on Herod's orders. In 29 BC he had his wife Mariamne executed on charges of adultery.

MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

- When his ex-Mother-in-Law Alexandra declared herself queen, stating that Herod was mentally unfit to serve, he had her eliminated without a trial. In 28 BC Herod had his other ex-brother-in-law Kostobar executed for conspiracy. Herod accused his sons Alexander and Aristobulus of high treason and executed them in 7 BC. In 4 BC, charged with the intended murder of Herod, his son Antipater was executed. Knowing the Jewish aversion to pork, it is reported that the Emperor Augustus quipped that he would rather be Herod's pig (Greek: ὕς) than Herod's son (ὕιος).



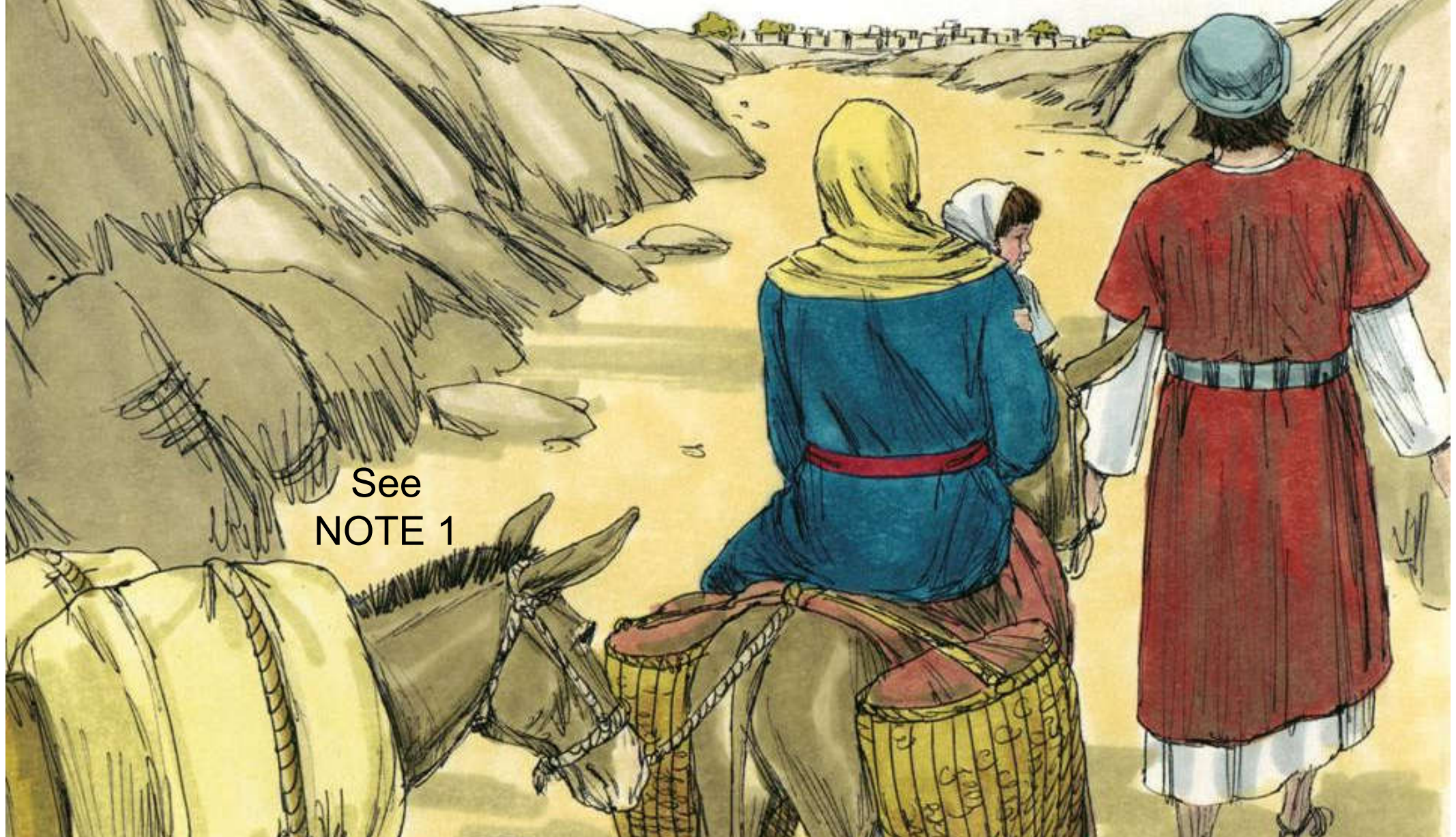
**Herod the Great
(73 BC – 4 BC)**



See
NOTE 1

Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt

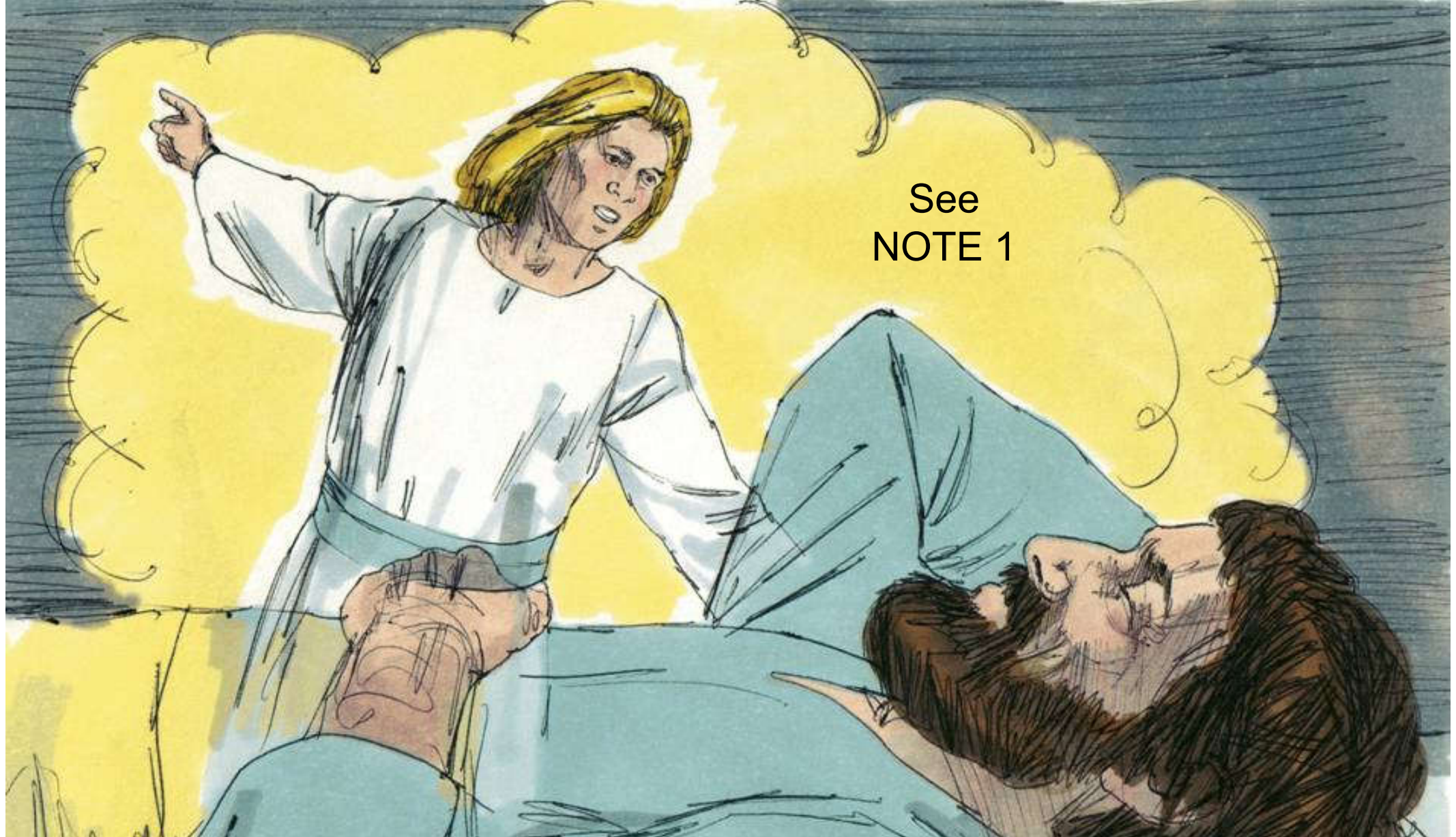


So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

ARCHELAUS

- Upon Herod's death his kingdom was divided in three. Judea went to his son Archelaus, who was as great a tyrant as his father. Most notably he killed some 3000 rebels soon after ascending the throne. His cruelty aroused such popular anger that in 6 AD Archelaus was deposed by the Romans in response to complaints from his subjects. As a result the Romans began directly appointing a governor for the area, with Pontius Pilate being a notable example. The concern Joseph expresses in this verse thus fits with what is known from the history of the period. The decision to go to Galilee was also a reasonable one. That region was ruled by Herod's far more even-tempered son Herod Antipas and there is evidence that the region had become a refuge to others fleeing the rule of Archelaus or the Romans.¹

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_2:22



Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

A NAZARENE

- ❑ Some have questioned which OT prophecy Matthew is referring to here. Jerome says that Isaiah 11:1 is the prophecy: "Once more it is written in the pages of the same evangelist, 'And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.' Let these word fanciers and nice critics of all composition tell us where they have read the words; and if they cannot, let me tell them that they are in Isaiah. For in the place where we read and translate, 'There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots,' in the Hebrew idiom it is written thus, 'There shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse and a **Nazarene shall grow from his root.**'" (Jerome, Letter 47:7)

THE WISE MEN



HOW MANY?

- ❑ The Magi (traditionally the Wise Men) form a part of many Nativity scenes at Christmas time and are well known to Christians worldwide.

Q: HOW MANY WERE THERE?

- ❑ Matthew doesn't mention how many Magi there were, but because there were three gifts, from early years some in the Western church have assumed that there were three men¹ and from the 6th century even assigned them names (Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar)
- ❑ An apocryphal 8th century Syriac manuscript known as "The Revelation of the Magi" claims that there were twelve Magi in total.

¹ Origen (185-253 AD) seems to be the first Christian writer who specifically says that they were 3 - based on the 3 gifts. Some early Christian art in Rome shows 2 or 4 Magi.

WERE THEY KINGS?

Q: WERE THEY KINGS?

- ❑ Not necessarily, although some have used Psalm 72:1-10 as evidence that they were kings.
 - Psalm 72:1-10 Endow the king with your justice, O God, **the royal son** with your righteousness. **He will judge your people in righteousness**, your afflicted ones with justice... He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth... **the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts.**¹
- ❑ Early in the 3rd century, Tertullian called them "Fere Reges" i.e. 'well-nigh kings' or 'almost kings'.²

¹ Solomon is praying about himself as the son of David, but some see this as a Messianic prophecy about the future "Son of David". ² Adv. Marcion", III, xiii

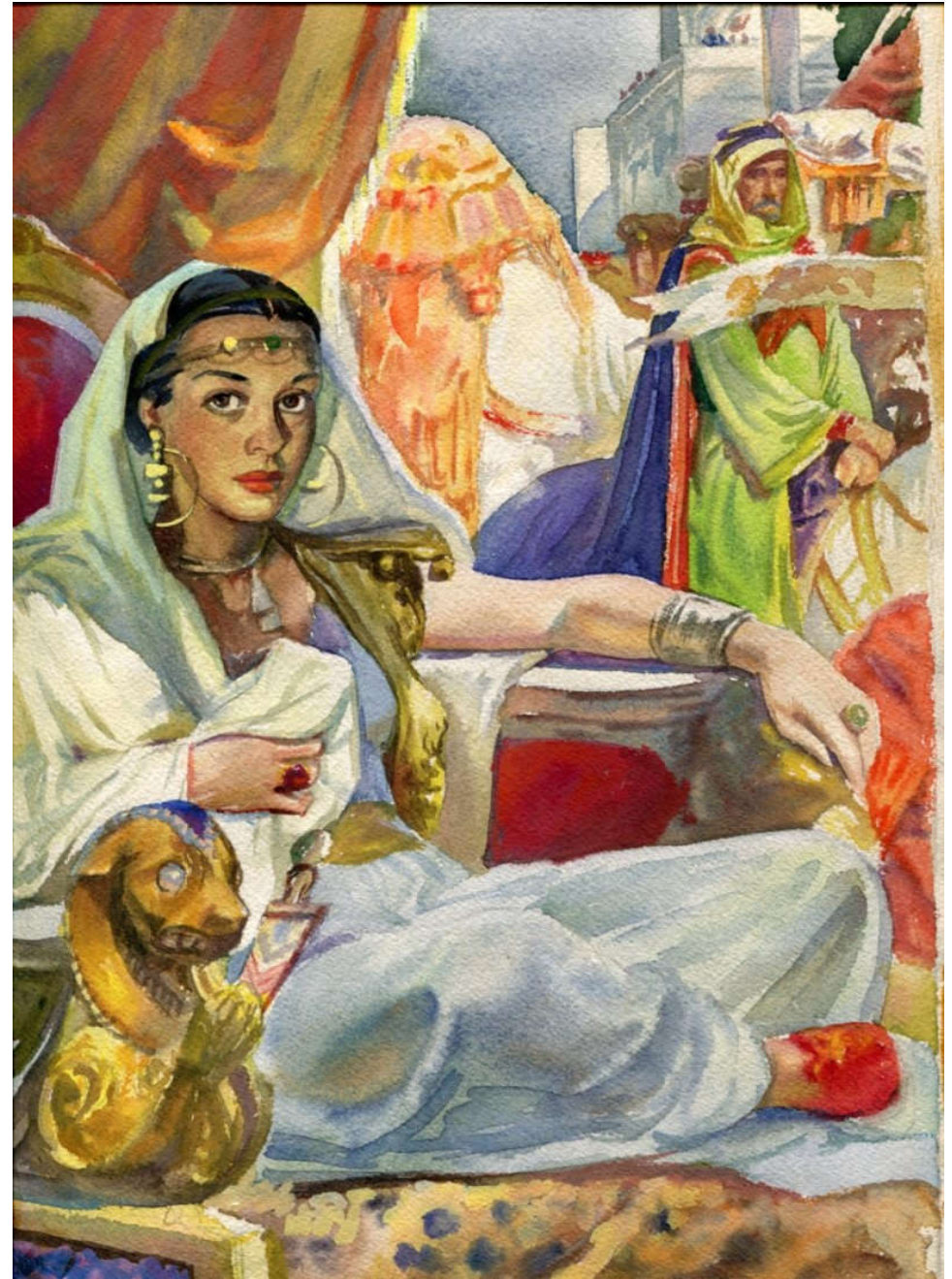
WHERE WERE THEY FROM?

Q: WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

- ❑ The predominant (and earliest) views are:
 - Persia (Iran)
 - Babylonia (Iraq)
 - Sheba (Saudi Arabia / Yemen)
- ❑ The apocryphal 6th century Armenian "Infancy Gospel" claims that they came from three different countries namely Persia, India and Arabia (representatives of the three different races descended from the sons of Noah).
- ❑ Based on an 8th century Syriac manuscript "The Revelation of the Magi" some allege that the Magi were from a faraway land called Shir (which they claim is China).

1) YEMEN?

- ❑ Sheba features in the Hebrew scriptures and traditions and amongst other things was the country of the famed "Queen of Sheba".
- ❑ Modern archaeological studies support the view that the biblical kingdom of Sheba was the ancient Semitic civilization of **Saba in Southern Arabia, in Yemen**, between 1200 BC until 275 AD with its capital Marib. ¹



¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheba>



1) YEMEN?

- ❑ Justin Martyr (c. 100 - 165 AD) believed the Magi were from Arabia:
 - "Accordingly the Magi from Arabia came to Bethlehem and worshipped the Child, and presented Him with gifts, gold and frankincense, and myrrh..."¹
- ❑ And some believe the Magi came from Arabia or Yemen (in Southern Arabia) based on 2 main arguments:
 1. Isaiah 60:6 and Psalm 72:15 refer to kings coming from Sheba bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

¹ Dialogue with Trypho - Chapter LXXVIII

1) YEMEN?

- ❑ Some see Psalm 72 by Solomon as being a messianic prophecy which refers also to the Magi:
 - Psalm 72:1-10 Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice... He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations... In his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more. He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth... **the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts.**

1) YEMEN?

- ❑ Isa 60:1-6 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and **kings to the brightness of your dawn**. Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And **all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense** and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

1) YEMEN?

2. These areas were well-known for the 3 gifts presented to Jesus namely gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- ❑ Among the chief countries mentioned in the Bible as producing **gold** are **Arabia** and **Sheba**.¹
 - ❑ Frankincense and myrrh are incenses derived from tree sap, or gum resin and both are still found on the Arabian Peninsula.

¹ Sources definitely mentioned in the OT are: Havilah (Gen 2:11,12); Ophir (1 Ki 9:28; 10:11; 22:48; 1 Chron 29:4; 2 Chron 8:18; 9:10; Job 22:24; 28:16; Ps 45:9; Isa 13:12); **Sheba** (1 Ki 10:2,10; 2 Chron 9:1,9; Ps 72:15; Isa 60:6; Ezek 27:22; 38:13); **Arabia** (2 Chron 9:14).



Frankincense from Yemen

1) YEMEN?

- ❑ **Frankincense** is a milky white resin extracted from species of the genus *Boswellia*, which thrive in arid, cool areas of the **Arabian Peninsula**, East Africa and India. The finest and most aromatic of this species is *Boswellia sacra*, a small tree that grows in Somalia, **Oman and Yemen**.¹
- ❑ **Myrrh** is a reddish resin that comes from species of the genus *Commiphora*, which are native to northeast Africa and the adjacent areas of the **Arabian Peninsula**. *Commiphora myrrha*, a tree commonly used in the production of myrrh, can be found in the shallow, rocky soils of Ethiopia, Kenya, **Oman, Saudi Arabia** and Somalia.¹

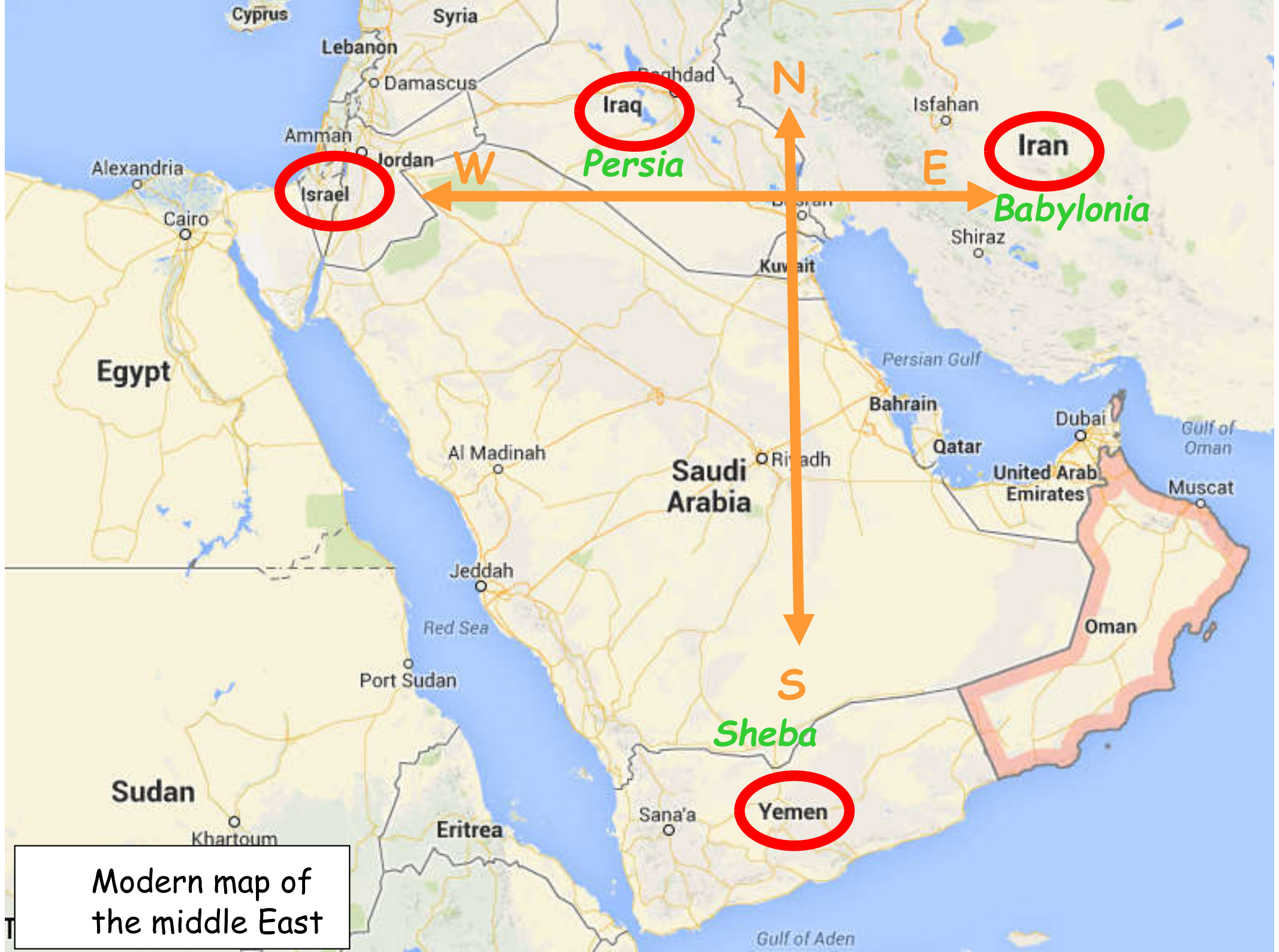


Myrrh from Yemen

¹ <http://science.howstuffworks.com/life/botany/question283.htm>

EAST OR SOUTH?

- ❑ But the Magi came from the East:
 - Matt 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, **Magi from the east** came to Jerusalem
- ❑ Though we know Sheba is both east and south of Palestine, common expression of the time considered Sheba to be in the south, not the east e.g. Jesus refers to the Queen of Sheba as "the Queen of the South":
 - Matt 12:42 The **Queen of the South** will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.



Modern map of
the middle East

WHO WERE THE MAGI?

- ❑ The term used of the men in Matthew is "Magi" and the Magi were from Persia or Babylonia, not Arabia or Sheba.
- The word magi is the plural of Latin magus, borrowed from Greek μάγος magos, as used in the original Greek text of the Gospel of Matthew. Greek magos itself is derived from Old Persian maguš from the Avestan magâunô, i.e. the religious caste into which Zoroaster was born, (see Yasna 33.7: "ýâ srüyê parê magâunô" = "so I can be heard beyond Magi"). The term refers to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism. As part of their religion, **these priests paid particular attention to the stars**, and gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science.¹

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi

WHO WERE THE MAGI?

- ❑ But there were also Magi in Babylonia (Iraq). Nergal-sar-ezer the Rab-mag (head of the Magi) is mentioned as a chief Babylonian official in Jeremiah 39:3.
 - Jer 39:3 (NASB) Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came in and sat down at the Middle Gate: Nergal-sar-ezer, Samgar-nebu, Sar-sekim the Rab-saris, Nergal-sar-ezer **the Rab-mag**, and all the rest of the officials of the king of Babylon.
- ❑ Some believe that Daniel (who was a Jewish exile in Babylonia) himself is called the head of the Magi, although the exact same title of 'Rab-mag' is not used in the Book of Daniel. ¹

¹ He is called "chief of the magicians (ḥartumayyā)" in Dan 4:9 (NASB), "chief of the magicians (ḥartummîn)" in Dan 5:11 and "chief prefect over all the wise men (ḥakkîmê)" in Dan 2:48.

BABYLONIANS?

- ❑ Did the Wise Men come from Babylon? The Babylonians were noted astronomers, well ahead of their time, and studied the night sky intensely, and would have almost immediately noticed the appearance of the Christmas Star. There was a strong Jewish influence in Babylon due to their capture, and the fact that a number of Jews stayed in Babylon after the Exile in the 6th Century, BC. ¹
- ❑ Ancient papers located in 1925 in the School of Astrology in Babylon contain a **clearly marked reference to a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces** which was visible for five months in the year **7 BC**. Some think this is what God used for the Christmas Star. ¹

¹ <http://www.main.nc.us/graham/mcclung/Wise%20Men.html>

BABYLONIANS?

- ❑ In Revelation 18, speaking of the destruction of Babylon, the cargoes mentioned include gold, myrrh and frankincense:
- Rev 18:10-13 Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry: "Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come! The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more—cargoes of **gold**, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, **myrrh and frankincense**..."

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

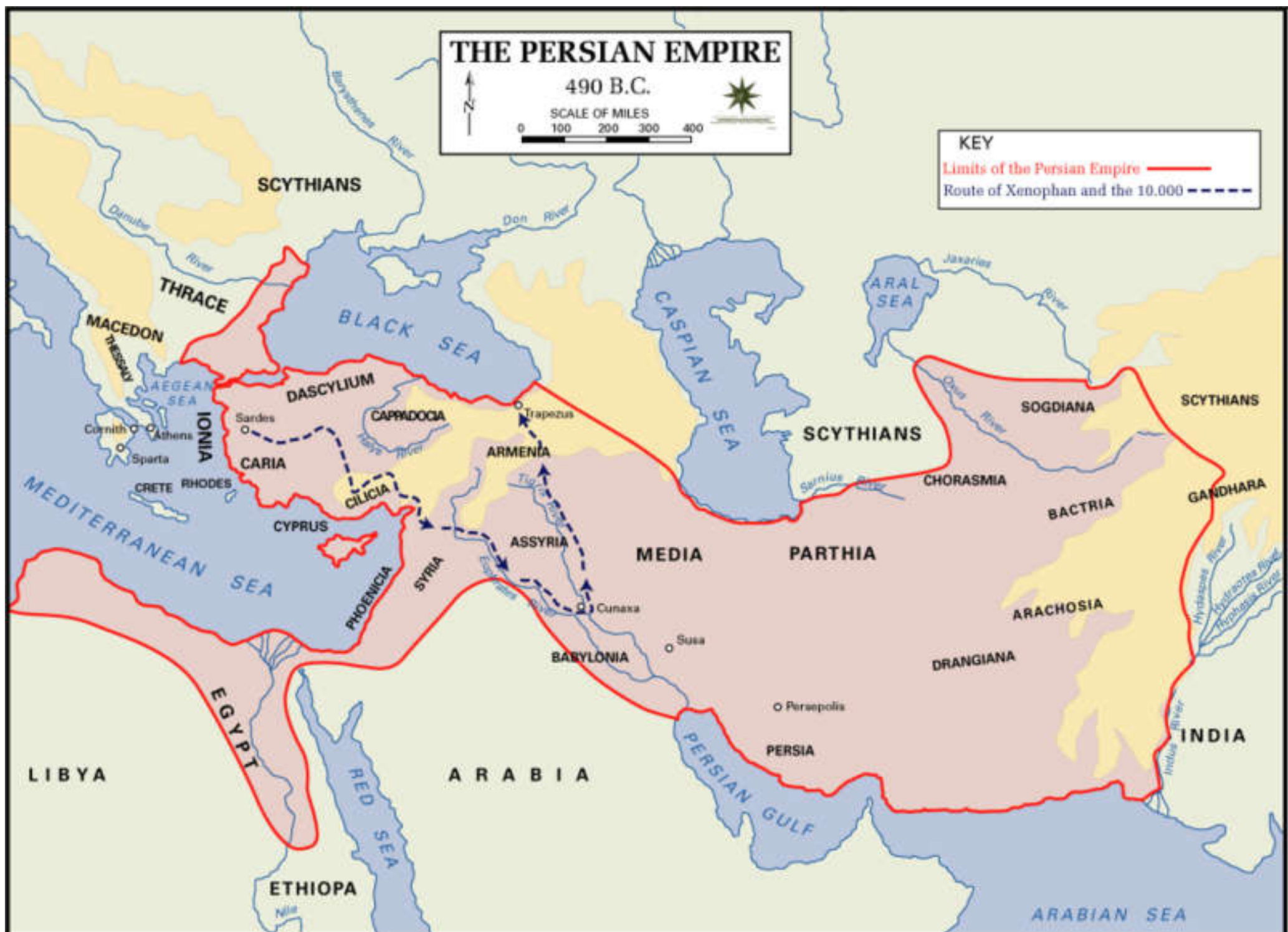
490 B.C.

SCALE OF MILES
0 100 200 300 400

KEY

Limits of the Persian Empire ———

Route of Xenophon and the 10,000 - - - -



PERSIANS?

- ❑ But the common belief among the Church Fathers is that the Magi were from Persia, which was then part of the Parthian Empire, an enemy of Rome.
- ❑ John Chrysostom, a 4th century bishop of Constantinople, writes the following in his homily on the Gospel of Matthew: "The Incarnate Word on coming to the world gave to Persia, in the persons of the Magi, the first manifestation of His mercy and light... so that the Jews themselves learn from the mouths of Persians of the birth of their Messiah."
- ❑ In the earliest depictions, the Magi are shown wearing Persian dress of trousers and Phrygian caps, usually in profile, advancing in step with their gifts held out before them.¹

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoration_of_the_Magi

PERSIANS?



- ❑ Primitive Christian art in the second-century Roman Catacombs of Priscilla ... outside of Rome, dresses them in Persian garments, and a majority of early church fathers interpret them as Persians.¹

¹ <http://billpetro.com/history-of-the-wise-men>

PERSIANS?

- ❑ Did the Wise Men come from Persia, now modern day Iran? It was a belief prevalent in the early Christian Church. A letter written by the Synod of Jerusalem in AD 836 contains a story about an incident that occurred in AD 614 when the Persian army invaded the Holy Land destroying Christian Churches. When they came to the Basilica in Bethlehem, they refused to destroy it because of a mosaic depicting the Magi, which were dressed like them - Persians. In Persian writings in the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy, 7:1, there is a reference to the Magi (Wise Men), coming to Jerusalem to worship an infant born to a virgin, the son having power to raise the dead, and defeat the forces of evil.¹

¹ <http://www.main.nc.us/graham/mcclung/Wise%20Men.html>

PERSIANS?

- ❑ In his 1298 book "The Travels; The Description of the world" the famous merchant-traveller Marco Polo claimed to have come across the tombs of the Magi. In Chapter 11 (Of the province of Persia) he writes, "In Persia there is a city which is called Saba, from whence were the three magi who came to adore Christ in Bethlehem; and the three are buried in that city in a fair sepulchre..."



Marco Polo (c.1254-1324)

PERSIANS?

- ❑ If the Magi were Persians, why would they be looking for the king of the Jews?
- ❑ Remember that the Jewess Esther was married to the king of Persia and we also read in Esther 8:17.
 - ... And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.
- ❑ So the Persian Magi may even have been Jewish in religion, if not in ethnicity and as religious leaders were probably exposed to the Jewish Scriptures. The prophet Daniel had also prophesied that the Messiah would come 483 years after the Persian king gave the command for Jerusalem to be rebuilt (Daniel 9).

WHY A JUDEAN KING?

- ❑ The Roman writer Suetonius wrote, "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated for men coming from Judaea to rule the world." ¹
- ❑ Tacitus, another Roman historian, states that "The majority [of the Jews] were convinced that the ancient scriptures of their priests alluded to the present as the very time when the Orient would triumph and from Judaea would go forth men destined to rule the world." ²
- ❑ Josephus likewise speaks of the Jews as having "an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth." ³

¹ Suetonius, Vespasian 4.5 ² Tacitus, Histories 5.13 ³ Jewish War 6.312-313.
All the above 3 claimed that this oracle was actually fulfilled in Vespasian or Titus because of their presence in Judea prior to being made Emperor.

WHAT WAS THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM?

Comet C/2006 P1 (McNaught) taken from Victoria, Australia 2007

- ❑ Suggestions as to what the star was include:
 - an angel or a supernatural star specially created by God for the occasion.
 - a conjunction (of planets or other celestial bodies)
 - a nova or supernova
 - a comet



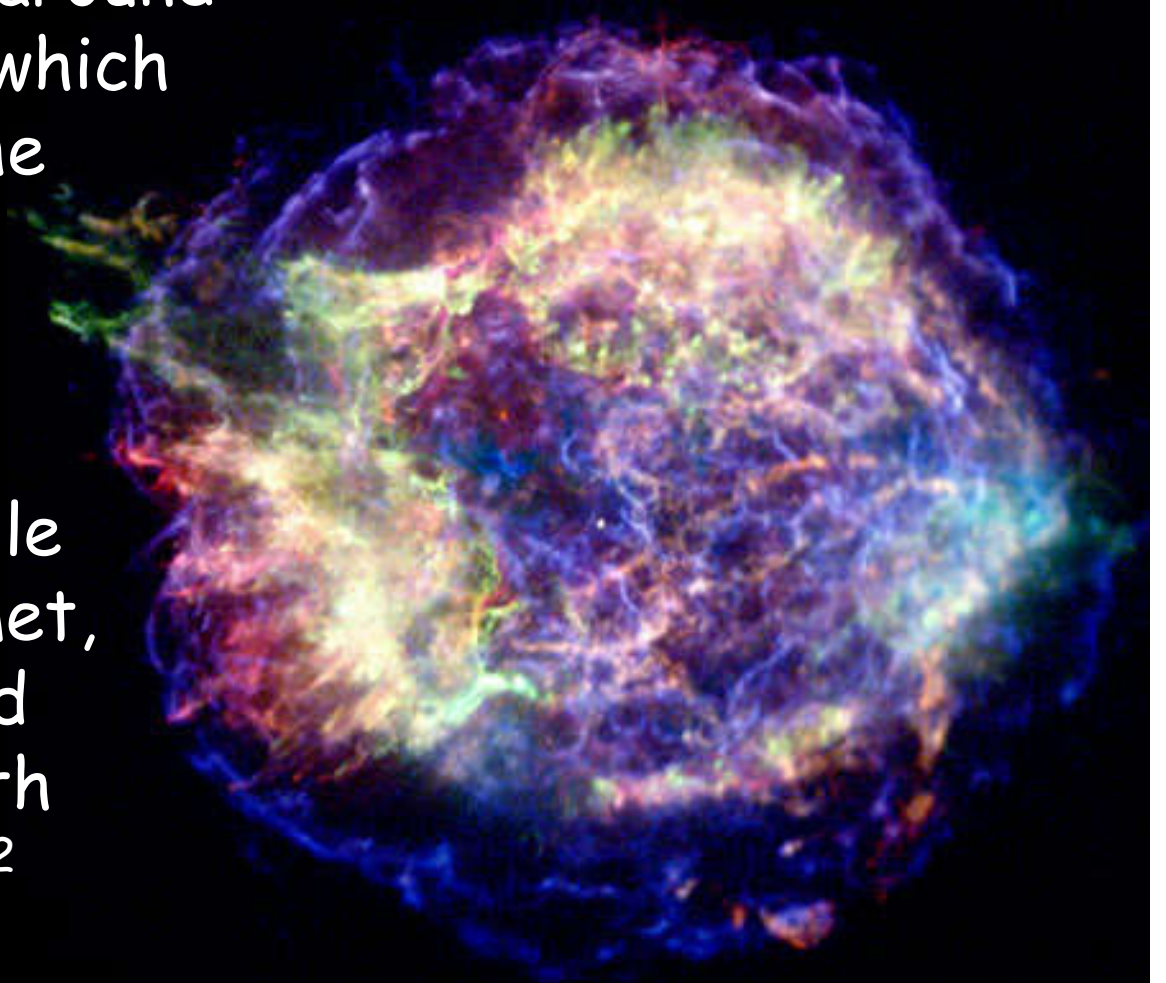
SUPERNOVA?

□ Some cosmic phenomena around the time of Jesus' birth which have been proposed as the star of Bethlehem are:

1. 5 BC - a supernova ¹ recorded by Chinese and Korean astronomers. While this may have been a comet, "this object was observed for over seventy days with no movement recorded." ²

¹ A supernova is an explosion of a massive supergiant star.

² Mark, Kidger "Chinese and Babylonian Observations"



A Chandra X-ray photograph of Cassiopeia A, the youngest supernova remnant in the Milky Way.

COMET?

2. Was it perhaps a comet? A comet can disappear as it moves behind the sun and reappear as it comes out from behind the sun. The passage in Matthew seems to indicate that the 'star' disappeared and only re-appeared when the Magi left Herod in Jerusalem. Their joy seems to be attributed to the reappearance of the star.
 - Matt 2:2 "We saw his star when it rose..."
 - Matt 2:9-10 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
- ❑ Motion is also implied in the above passage and the movement of comets is visible to the human eye.

COMET?

- ❑ Ancient writers described comets as “hanging over” specific cities, just as the Star of Bethlehem was said to have “stood over” the “place” where Jesus was (the town of Bethlehem).¹
- ❑ Halley's Comet was visible in 12 BC which is too early for Christ's birth, but the object seen in about 5 BC by Chinese and Korean stargazers may have been either a comet or a nova.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_of_Bethlehem



Halley's Comet 1986 (NASA)

COMET?

- ❑ In 248 AD, Origen first proposed that the Bethlehem Star might have been a comet. He suggested the sui-hsing ('broom star') recorded by Chinese astronomers in 5 BC. He cites a book by Chaeremon, Nero's stoic teacher, called "On the comets", noting that it was common to understand that a comet or a new star was associated with the birth of important persons. (On the contrary the Chinese at the time considered comets to be bad omens.)



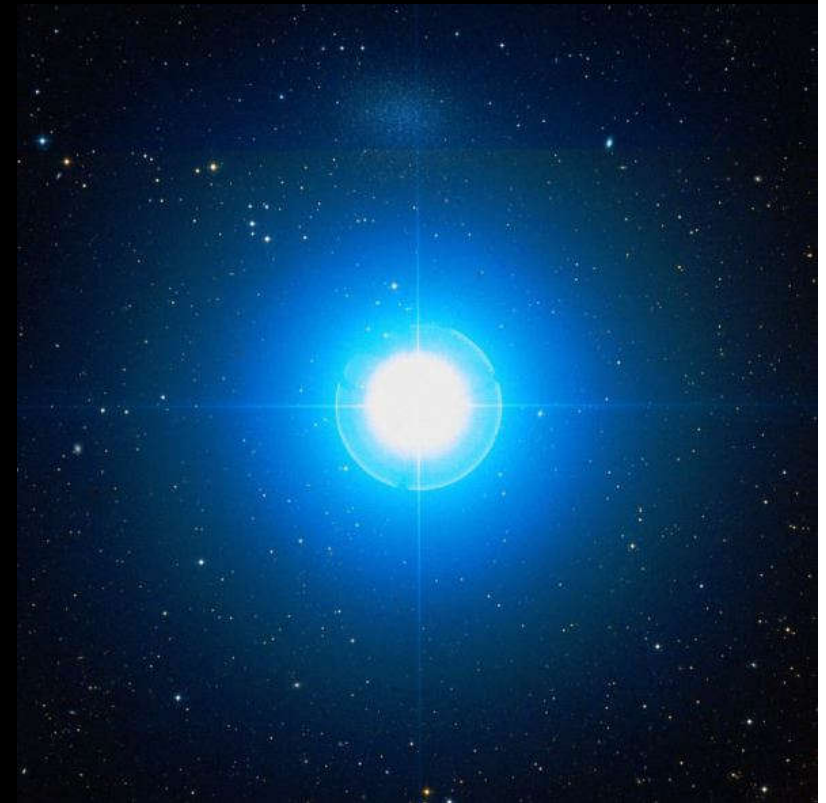
A broom star (comet)

CONJUNCTION?

3. A conjunction of Jupiter, Venus, and the star Regulus.¹ occurred in 3 BC.² 'Regulus' is Latin for 'prince' or 'little king'. Regulus was the leader of the Four Royal Stars of the ancient Persian monarchy.³

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regulus> Regulus is the brightest star in the constellation Leo and one of the brightest stars in the night sky, lying approximately 79 light years from Earth. Regulus is a multiple star system composed of four stars that are organized into two pairs.

² This is considered too late by many because Herod the Great, who tried to kill Jesus actually, died in 4 BC. This is due to some miscalculation problems with our calendar. See Appendix 1 for more details. ³ In Arabia it was Malikiyy, Kingly; in Greece, basiliskos aster (Little King star). To the Babylonians, Regulus was listed as LUGAL, meaning "the star that stands in the breast of the Lion: the King."



Regulus

CONJUNCTION?

4. In 1605 German astronomer Johannes Kepler calculated that there had been a conjunction ¹ of three planets (Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars) in 7 BC. While Kepler did not believe this to be the actual Star of Bethlehem, he thought it may have alerted the Magi to the coming star, which he believed to be a nova.²

¹ A conjunction is an alignment of two planets or other celestial objects so that they appear to be in the same, or nearly the same, place in the sky. (Oxford dictionary). ² A cataclysmic nuclear explosion in a white dwarf, which causes a sudden brightening of the star.



A 1610 portrait of Johannes Kepler (1571 –1630)

CONJUNCTION?

- ❑ The planetary conjunctions at this time are particularly interesting: ¹
 1. December 7 BC - Babylonian records, verified by modern calculations, indicate a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces - occurs once every 125 years.
 2. February 6 BC - Conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars - occurs only once every 805 years.
 3. Spring of 6 BC - Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn form an unusually close grouping.

¹ See Appendix 2 for more detail.

CONJUNCTION



stardate.org

**May 26
30 minutes
after sunset**

WEST

- ❑ Above: Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury Meet in Western Twilight May 25-28, 2013

STAR OR ANGEL?

- ❑ Some have suggested that the star of Bethlehem was an angel or the "pillar of fire" from the OT. In the OT angels are sometimes referred to as stars.¹ In the NT sometimes the Greek word for star (astera) is used of angels:²

¹ Job 38:7 while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

Isa 14:12 How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! ...

² In Revelation 1:16, 2:1, and 3:1 John speaks of seven stars in the right hand of Jesus. The meaning of this is explained in Rev 1:20, "The mystery of the seven stars (asterōn) that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, is this: the seven stars (asteres) are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Rev 9:1 clearly refers to an angelic being: "The fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star (astera) fallen from the sky to the earth; and he was given the key to the shaft of the abyss."

Rev 12:4 is normally viewed as being a reference to one third of the angels following Satan: "His tail swept away a third of the stars (asterōn) of heaven and hurled them to the earth."

STAR OR ANGEL?

- ❑ But in the same book where we have the account of the Magi (Matthew), the Greek word 'astera' is used later in clear reference to stars. ¹ There are also many scriptures where stars simply means 'stars'. ²

¹ Matt 24:29 "Immediately after the suffering of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars (asteres) will fall from the sky and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

² 1 Cor 15:41 The sun has one kind of glory, the moon another kind of glory, the stars (asterōn) another kind of glory; and star (astēr) differs from star (asteros) in glory.

Jude 1:13 wild waves of the sea, casting up their shameful deeds like foam; wandering stars (asteres) for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

Rev 6:13 and the stars (asteres) of the sky fell to the earth as a fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a fierce wind.

Rev 8:12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars (asterōn), so that a third of them were darkened; for a third of the day there was no light, and for a third of the night as well.

- ❑ Those who believe the star was an angel point out that normal stars cannot stop over a specific location as was the case with the Bethlehem star:



- Matt 2:9 ... and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

CAN A STAR STOP?

- ❑ But the Magi were not led by the star initially.
 1. **The star didn't lead them to Israel.** They saw a star which they understood to signify a king of Israel, so they went to the logical place - Jerusalem the capital of Israel. If the star was leading them, why did they have to stop and ask for directions?
 2. **The star didn't lead them to Bethlehem.** It was because Herod, on the advice of the religious leaders indicated that Bethlehem was the place to look, that they set out for the town.



- ❑ The passage in Matthew 2 seems to indicate that the star reappeared only after they set out for Bethlehem. Bethlehem was about 7 miles (10 km) from Jerusalem. So they saw the star again only once they knew the location of the town and were in the vicinity. It's quite feasible for a normal star (or planetary conjunction) to appear to be above a particular location once you have identified the town.

- Matthew records that the star “stopped over the place where the child was”. That seems to indicate that, when the star reached its zenith position, it was over Bethlehem.
- The zenith is an imaginary point directly ‘above’ a particular location, on the imaginary celestial sphere. ‘Above’ means in the vertical direction opposite to the apparent gravitational force at that location.” ¹

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zenith>

CAN A STAR STOP?

- ❑ If the star was an angel, the “pillar of fire” or a star specially created by God for the occasion as some have suggested:
 - Why would God send such a special messenger to Persia, and not to those in Israel itself who were also longing for the coming Messiah?
 - Why would the angel lead them to Jerusalem (introducing the threat of Herod) instead of directly to Bethlehem?



***WHY WERE THE MAGI
LOOKING FOR A STAR?***



THE STAR

Q: WHY WERE THE MAGI LOOKING FOR A STAR?

- ❑ Jacob had prophesied in Gen 49:10 "The **sceptre** will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, **until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.**"
 - The sceptre is a royal symbol and this was seen as being evidence that the Messiah King would come from the tribe of Judah.
- ❑ But the Gentile prophet Balaam had prophesied in Numbers 24:17 "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. **A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.**"

THE STAR

- ❑ In the 2nd century Irenaeus (Adversus Haereses, III, 9:2) links this prophecy by Balaam to the Magi:
 - Therefore there is one and the same God, who was proclaimed by the prophets and announced by the Gospel; and His Son, who was of the fruit of David's body, that is, of the virgin of [the house of] David, and Emmanuel; whose star also Balaam thus prophesied: "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a leader shall rise in Israel." But Matthew says that the Magi, coming from the east, exclaimed "For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him;" and that, having been led by the star into the house of Jacob to Emmanuel, they showed, by these gifts which they offered, who it was that was worshipped...

THE STAR

- ❑ The conjunctions of the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars in 7 and 6 BC occurred in the constellation of Pisces. Ancient astrologers believed that the area of the sky designated as Pisces contained signs pertinent to the Hebrew nation. ¹
- ❑ It is possible that the Magi, ² blending their heavenly observations with a knowledge of OT prophecies about a Messiah, saw this as the sign of the Messiah's birth:

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_astrology states "Jesus was born on the cusp of the Age of Aries and the Age of Pisces according to astrological divisions." ² Origen suggested that the Magi were descendants of Balaam who had predicted that "a star shall rise out of Jacob".

See
NOTE 1



WHEN DID THEY COME?

TIMING

Q: WHEN DID THEY COME?

- ❑ Matthew records that "Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared (Matt 2:7). The implication is that Herod believed the appearance of the star coincided with the child's birth because he later "gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (Matt 2:16).
- ❑ According to Ezra it took at least 4 months to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem ¹ although we do not know what mode of transport he used.

¹ Ezra 7:9 He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month...

❑ The Magi would most likely have travelled on camels. A camel can walk 25 to 30 miles (30 to 40 km) a day, day after day, while carrying 300 pounds (136 kg) of cargo.



❑ The distance from the ancient city of Susa in Persia to Jerusalem is about 766 miles (1233 km). Travelling in a straight line would make the journey in about 31 to 41 days. Assuming a less direct route the journey could be around 2 to 3 months.

TIMING

- ❑ So it's not likely that the Magi were at the Nativity scene along with the shepherds, as is often depicted in modern Christmas pictures.
- ❑ In fact, "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary" (Matt 2:11) while the shepherds "find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:11) "because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

TIMING

- ❑ The fact that Herod later kills all boys two years old and under, based on the information he received from the Magi, indicates that they saw Jesus some time after his birth. Jesus was perhaps 12 to 18 months old at the time of their visit.



***WISE MEN
STILL SEEK HIM***



WISE MEN

- ❑ In modern English Bible versions like the NIV and NASB, the Greek "magoi" is rendered by the transliterated Latin form - "Magi". In the KJV, the translators rendered 'magoi' as "wise men".
- ❑ These Magi were indeed wise men as indicated by their actions. But what can we learn today from their story?



UNDERSTAND THE TIMES

1. Wise men look for and seek to understand the signs of the times. These Wise Men were aware of the imminent coming Messiah and were looking diligently for the signs that had been prophesied by the ancient prophet.
- ❑ We too should be aware of the imminent return of that same Messiah to rule and reign on earth. We have been given many signs of his return to look for.
 - Dan 12:9-10 He replied, "Go your way, Daniel, because **the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end**. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but **those who are wise will understand.**"

UNDERSTAND THE TIMES

- ❑ Wise people will be ready and prepared for Jesus' return:
 - Matt 25:6-12 "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. **The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'** 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. **The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.** Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'"

UNDERSTAND THE TIMES

- ❑ Wise men are occupied with the master's business when he returns:
- Matt 24:44-46 "So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Who then is the faithful and **wise servant**, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? **It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.**"

UNDERSTAND THE TIMES

- ❑ But it's not just prophetic signs we need to be aware of. We should be like the men of Issachar, of whom it was said that they "understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chron 12:32). These men were useful to their generation because of their wisdom regarding the times they lived in.
- ❑ Circumstances were changing in Israel. Saul had died and his son Ish-bosheth had been made ruler of most of Israel, while David ruled the tribe of Judah. But now Ish-bosheth had been killed and these other tribes were in favour of making David overall king. As such, they had gathered in Hebron to turn the kingdom of Saul over to him. These were troubled times in Israel, and there was a need for wisdom to discern those times and to know which course of action was best.

UNDERSTAND THE TIMES

- ❑ At that point, two hundred leaders of the tribe of Issachar are highlighted as men who understood what was happening, and knew exactly what to do. The word understanding is the Hebrew word binah, which means "to have insight or to act with prudence." According to Strong's Concordance, it comes from a root verb that means to separate something mentally, and distinguish its parts. The word reflects the presence of intelligence and wisdom, even cunning and skill, in the process. In other words, this is not just an understanding of the facts, but a skilful analysis of what something truly means. The sons of Issachar had analyzed their times and had perceived correctly what those times were all about. They knew what to do because they understood what was happening. ¹

¹ Dr. Dan Hayden <http://www.awordfromtheword.org/understanding>

UNDERSTAND THE TIMES

- ❑ The ability to correctly analyze contemporary situations is what leadership is all about... Every generation needs leaders who can understand the times and know what to do in light of them. So that needs to be our prayer in our own generation—"Lord, help us to understand the times, and to know what to do." This is not a matter of simply understanding the Bible, as crucial as that is. Rather, it is knowing how to apply the truths of God's Word to the issues of our day. Where is the culture going? Why do people think the way they do? What are the real needs of people, as contrasted to their merely felt needs? How can we be effective with the Gospel by correctly perceiving the uniqueness of our times? How can we apply the truth of Scripture in a meaningful way to our generation? ¹

¹ Ibid

UNDERSTAND THE TIMES

- ❑ Understanding the times is without question one of the keys to effective leadership. The Word of God has always been the answer to every culture and to each generation. But understanding the current wars against the truth, and discerning the best contemporary means of presenting the truth has always been the important challenge for every age. The need for understanding and discernment is no different in our day. Oh, that we might be like the sons of Issachar, “who had understanding of the times.” ¹

¹ Ibid

EFFORT TO FIND TRUTH

2. The Wise Men were looking for God's promised redeemer. Like these Magi, wise men still look for God's way of redemption.
- ☐ It has been said that "Wise men still seek him". The wise man Solomon wrote:
 - "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." (Prov 9:10)
 - Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them". (Eccl 12:1)

EFFORT TO FIND TRUTH

3. The Wise Men made an effort to find the truth. They went a great distance to a foreign country incurring considerable expense. When necessary, they made enquiries in order to reach their goal.
- ❑ Isn't it sad that the religious leaders who pointed the Magi to Bethlehem don't appear to have made any effort to go there themselves.
 - ❑ There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom.
 - Knowledge is what you know.
 - Wisdom is who you are in the light of what you know.
 - ❑ The religious leaders in Jerusalem had knowledge, but when the Wise Men discovered that same knowledge - it changed their lives.

EFFORT TO FIND TRUTH

- ❑ In fact Herod, the religious leaders in Jerusalem and the Magi all had the same knowledge - A KING HAS BEEN BORN IN BETHLEHEM. But what they do with that knowledge is what differentiates them.
 - a) Herod uses his knowledge to try and silence the voice of the King forever (antagonism).
 - b) The religious leaders appear to ignore what has happened (indifference).
 - c) The "Wise Men" seek out the king, pay him tribute in worship and gifts and then refuse to assist Herod in silencing him.

WORSHIP

4. And upon finding Jesus, the Wise Men worship him and present him with gifts:

- Matt 2:10-11 ... On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.



WORSHIP

- ❑ Irenaeus was the first to see the gold, frankincense and myrrh as representing King, God and Suffering Redeemer respectively:
 - But Matthew says that the Magi, coming from the east, exclaimed "For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him;" and that, having been led by the star into the house of Jacob to Emmanuel, they showed, by these gifts which they offered, who it was that was worshipped; **myrrh, because it was He who should die** and be buried for the mortal human met; **gold, because He was a King**, "of whose kingdom is no end;" and **frankincense, because He was God**, who also "was made known in Judea," and was "declared to those who sought Him not." ¹

¹ Irenaeus Against Heresies, Book 3 Ch 9.2

WORSHIP

a) KING:

- ❑ Gold because of its great value has always been associated with royalty.¹

¹ 2 Sam 12:30 He took the crown from the head of their king—its weight was a talent of gold, and it was set with precious stones—and it was placed on David's head



WORSHIP

b) GOD:

- ❑ Frankincense is highly fragrant when burned, and was used in worship, where it was burned as a pleasant offering to God. ²

² Exodus 30:7,34 "Aaron must burn fragrant **incense** on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps"... Then the LORD said to Moses, "Take fragrant spices--gum resin, onycha and galbanum--and **pure frankincense**, all in equal amounts..."

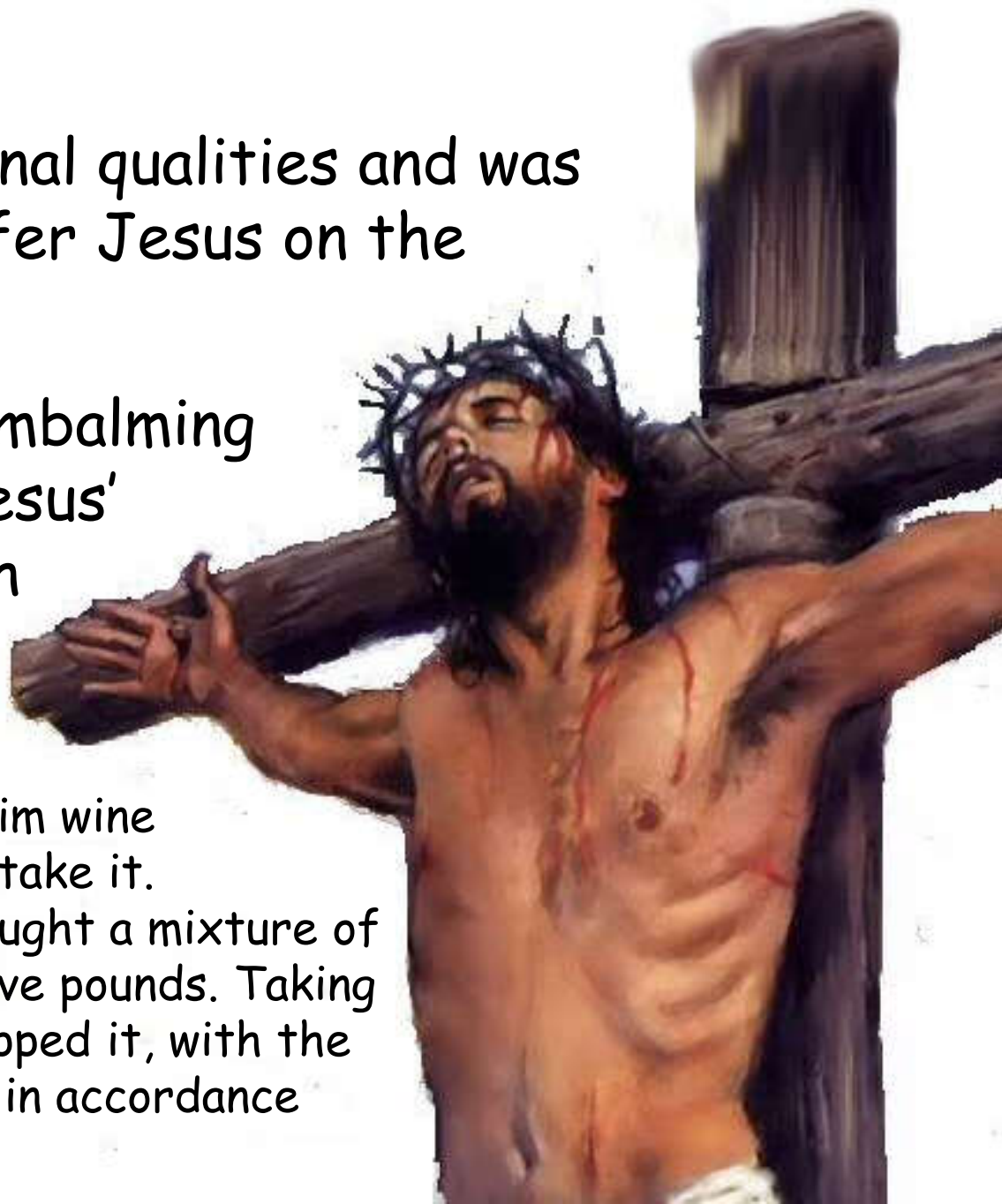
WORSHIP

c) SUFFERING REDEEMER:

- ❑ Myrrh also had medicinal qualities and was mixed with wine to offer Jesus on the cross. ¹
- ❑ It was also used for embalming and after his death Jesus' body was wrapped with a mixture of myrrh and aloes. ²

¹ Mark 15:23 Then they offered him wine mixed with **myrrh**, but he did not take it.

² John 19:39-40 ... Nicodemus brought a mixture of **myrrh** and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.



WORSHIP

As the words of the carol go:

- Born a king on Bethlehem's plain
Gold I bring to crown him again,
King for ever, ceasing never - over us all to reign

Frankincense to offer have I - incense owns a deity nigh
Prayer and praising, all men raising
Worship him God on high

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume
Breathes a lift of gathering gloom
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb

Glorious now behold him arise
King and God and Sacrifice
Alleluia, Alleluia - Peals through the earth and skies

WORSHIP

❑ So too, wise men today will worship the king once they have found him and give him what is most valuable to them.

1. We bring gold to honour him as King.
2. We bring frankincense to worship him as God in flesh.
3. We bring myrrh to remember that he identified with us in our pain and sorrow - and specifically for his suffering on the cross to bring about our salvation.



WISE MEN

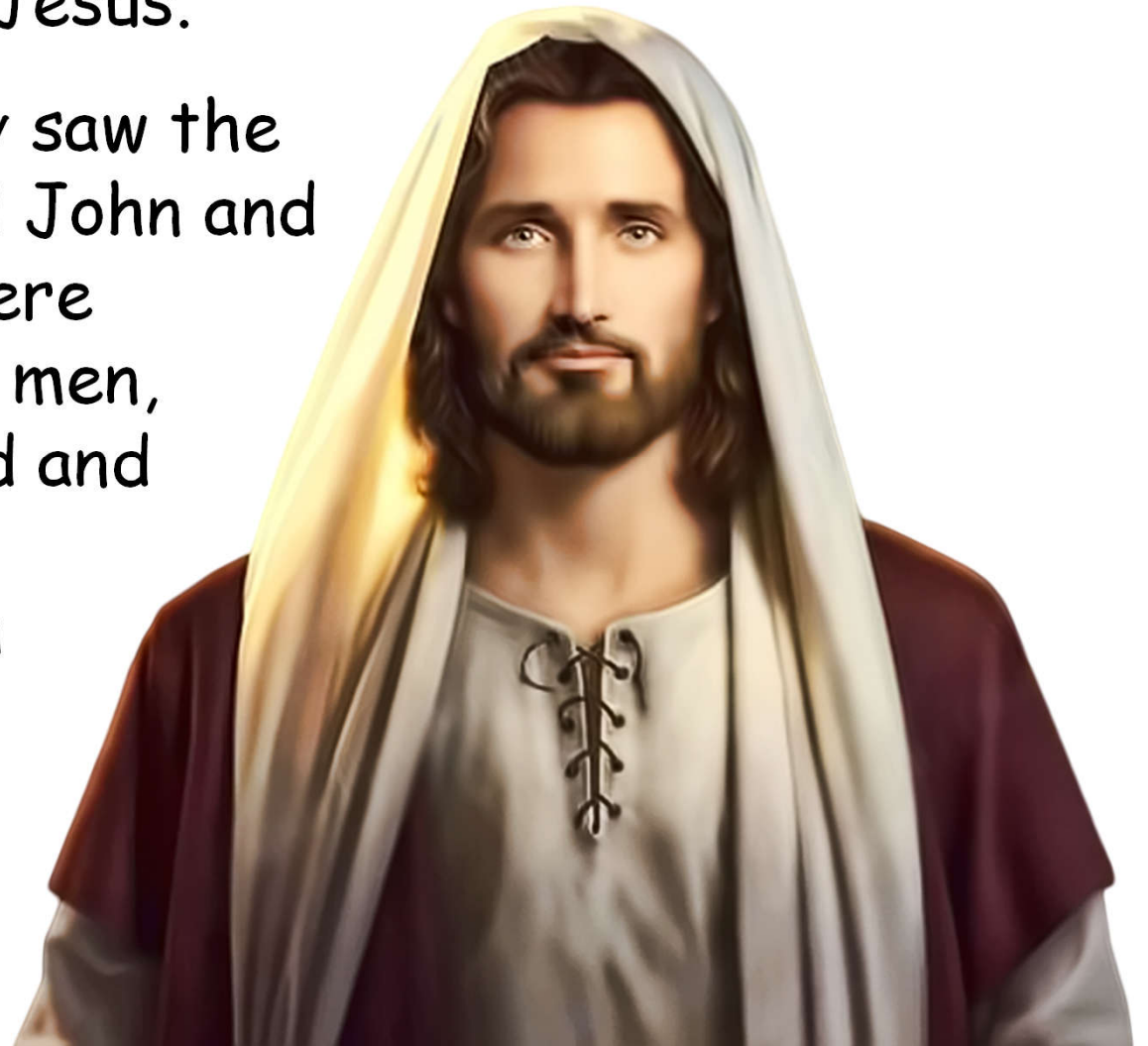
5. After seeing Jesus, the Wise Men don't go back the way they came.



- Matt 2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

WISE MEN

- ❑ After their encounter with Jesus, the direction of their lives was changed; he set them on a new road. Similarly wise people today are impacted and changed when they have an encounter with Jesus.
- Acts 4:13 When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.



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APPENDIX 1

❑ SOURCE: Dr. Ray Bohlin

http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4220725/k.FCE3/The_Star_of_Bethlehem_from_a_Christian_View.htm

In 1991, Ernest Martin published a book titled, *The Star That Astonished the World*. His major thesis is that Herod died in 1 BC and not 4 BC. If 4 BC is the wrong date for Herod's death, then everything must be re-evaluated.

While there are many lines of evidence that Martin uses to make his point, a critical issue is a lunar eclipse that occurred just prior to Herod's death. According to the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, on the night of a lunar eclipse, Herod executed two rabbis. Herod himself died soon afterwards, just before Passover. Martin points out that the lunar eclipse of March 13, 4 BC, was only a 40% partial eclipse and barely visible. Also he reconstructs the events between the eclipse and Herod's death, about 4 weeks, and determines there was not enough time for all these things to take place. However, Martin has located a total lunar eclipse on January 10, 1 BC, twelve and a half weeks prior to Passover.

APPENDIX 1

- ❑ If we assume that Martin's date for the death of Herod is correct, then the years 3 and 2 BC can be added to the search parameters for the Star of Bethlehem. Martin points out that the planet Jupiter passes through a series of conjunctions over the course of these two years indicating that Jupiter is the star of Bethlehem.

Remember that Jupiter is considered the royal star. Well, in 3 BC, Jupiter came into conjunction with Regulus, the star of kingship, the brightest star in the constellation of Leo, the first of several such conjunctions over the next year. Leo was the constellation of kings, and it was also closely associated by some with the Lion of Judah. This is beginning to look interesting. "The royal planet approached the royal star in the royal constellation representing Israel." In addition, on September 11, 3 BC, Jupiter was not only very close to Regulus, but the sun was in the constellation Virgo. Hmmm, the royal planet in conjunction with the royal star while the sun is in a virgin. September 11, 3 BC, is also the beginning of the Jewish New Year. There seems to be an awful lot coming together here.

APPENDIX 1

- ❑ But what about the star appearing to stop over Bethlehem? Planets will actually appear to do just that as they reach the opposite point in the sky from the sun as they travel east across the sky. They will stop, reverse directions for a few weeks, stop again, and head east once again. It's called a retrograde loop. Jupiter performed a retrograde loop in 2 BC and was stationary on December 25, during Hanukkah, the season of giving presents.

Just in case you are ready to proclaim the mystery of the Star of Bethlehem solved, remember that this whole scenario rests on Herod dying in 1 BC rather than in 4 BC. The majority of historians and biblical historians can't accept this critical revision. If Herod indeed died in 4 BC, all of these coincidences I just reviewed are just that, coincidences.

APPENDIX 2

❑ SOURCE: Dr. Ray Bohlin

http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4220725/k.FCE3/The_Star_of_Bethlehem_from_a_Christian_View.htm

Did the Star of Bethlehem Result from a Triple Conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter?

The bright star usually seen hovering over Nativity scenes depicted on numerous Christmas cards actually dominates nearly every nighttime Christmas panorama. As I stated earlier, the Star of Bethlehem is just about the only ubiquitous biblical symbol associated with Christmas.

The reason probably has to do with the mystery surrounding what this star was. Earlier, I showed the unreasonableness of the star being a comet or supernova explosion. If you were to attend a planetarium show concerning the star of Bethlehem, they would most likely present the idea that the star was a triple conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the year 7 BC followed by a massing of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in 6 BC. Realizing that planetarium shows view Scripture as something less than historically accurate, it is still necessary to ask if this indeed could have been the Star of Bethlehem.

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- ❑ In the early 17th century the great astronomer and Christian, Johannes Kepler, calculated that a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn had occurred in 7 BC. While Kepler did not believe this to be the actual Star of Bethlehem, it may have alerted the magi to the coming star. 7-4 BC have become the usual dates for fixing the birth of Christ since Herod the Great's death, the Herod mentioned by both Matthew and Luke in their birth narratives, is well established in 4 BC. Therefore, Jesus had to have been born in the few years prior to 4 BC since He started his three-year public ministry around the age of 30 (Luke 3:23) and His death is usually fixed between 27-30 AD.

So just what is a triple conjunction, and why would it be significant to the birth of a King in Israel? A planetary conjunction is what happens when two planets come in close proximity to one another. A triple conjunction refers to when three separate conjunctions of the same two planets occur within a one year period. Triple conjunctions can be predicted, but they do not occur with regularity. There have been only 11 such triple conjunctions since 7 BC and the interval between them varies between 40 and 338 years.

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- ❑ The triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC was seen in the constellation Pisces in the months of May, September, and December. This provides sufficient time for the magi to see the first conjunction, begin their trip west to Judea, visit Herod by the second conjunction or at least soon afterwards, and perhaps not reach Bethlehem until the third conjunction when it is said to have appeared in the southern sky, and Bethlehem is just south of Jerusalem. Remember how the magi rejoiced to see the star again as they departed Jerusalem for Bethlehem. Ancient astrologers associated Jupiter with royalty or even a ruler of the universe. Saturn was associated with Palestine or even with the deity who protected Israel. And Pisces was associated with the nation of Israel. Later a massing of Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn occurred again in Pisces in 6 BC. It seems feasible then that this triple conjunction followed by the massing of the three planets in Pisces could indicate to the magi that a King of Israel and a Ruler of the Universe was about to be born in Israel.

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- While this seems to wrap things up rather nicely, there are significant problems. First, Jupiter and Saturn never were close enough to be confused as a single object.¹ Matthew definitely describes a singular star. Perhaps more importantly, the use of astrology is necessary to interpret these astronomical signs properly. The Old Testament, particularly, mocks astrologers in Isaiah 47:13-15 and several times in Daniel (1:20, 2:27, 4:7, and 5:7). Jeremiah 10:1-2 seems to forbid astrology outright. The use of astrology is clearly outside the worldview of Matthew as he penned his gospel. It seems woefully inconsistent for the Lord to use astrology to herald the incarnation and birth of His Son into the world.

¹ Modern calculations show that there was a gap of nearly a degree between the planets, so these conjunctions were not visually impressive. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_of_Bethlehem