

Here's a joke that was sent to me in an email:

Do you know what would have happened if it had been Three Wise Women instead of Three Wise Men?

1. They would have asked for directions.
2. They would have arrived on time.
3. They would have helped deliver the baby.
4. They would have cleaned the stable.
5. They would have made a casserole.
6. They would have brought practical gifts.

Okay, it's cute. Made me chuckle.

But then I got to thinking about it. And actually, there's something off about each of these 6 statements. And it really has nothing to do with wise men versus wise women—at least I don't think it does.

I think it's more about misconceptions of who the Wisemen are and why they were in Bethlehem. So I want to look at each of these 6 statements. Today, on this 2nd Sunday after Christmas, this Twelfth Day of Christmas, this Eve of the Epiphany, let's look for a moment at the 6 parts in this joke.

1. They would have asked for directions.

This one is actually a myth anyway. The people on the TV show *Mythbusters* tested this one, and found not only did the same numbers of their male and female test subjects ask for directions, the men did it 20% sooner. So men not asking for directions is nothing but an urban legend, with the possible exceptions of me and my father in law.

But we're really not talking about gender stereotypes here. We're talking the story of the Wisemen. And if you look at the story, the very first thing they do is ask for directions.

It's right there at the beginning of ch2, v1:

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'

I preached a year or two ago about who these Wisemen were and what the star might have been. To summarize, the Wisemen or Magi in English, or *Magoi* in Greek, were Zoroastrian astrologers, probably from Persia, modern day Iran.

As to the star—it's interesting that around the time of Jesus' birth there were several conjunctions in an 8 month period of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces, with Mars also involved at times. To us that means some planets happened to line up in a certain part of the western sky. To ancient astrologers, it just so happens that that arrangement of

planets and stars could be interpreted as a sign that a new king was born in the region of Roman Palestine. In Jesus' time, the only king in that region happened to be Herod the Great in Jerusalem.

So it would be perfectly natural for Iranian Magi to show up in Herod's palace asking for directions to where the new baby was. And even Herod asks for directions from his priest and scribes, who find the answer in the Prophet Micah: The Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem.

So they did ask for directions. So much for #1.

2. They would have arrived on time.

I'm not sure that men arrive late and women on time, but that's another question. The larger question here is, what time were the Wisemen supposed to arrive?

It's a long trip when you walk from Iran to Israel. And it's long even if you're riding on a camel. It would have taken a while. In fact, in v7 Herod asks the Wisemen when they first saw the star. And they tell him. And Herod later gives his soldiers orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem, 2 years old and under. Sounds like quite a bit of time has passed.

Even if the Magi left at the instant of Jesus' birth, even if they hopped on the camels that moment, it would have taken months to travel. So they probably arrived as quickly as they could.

That means then next joke is probably a moot point:

3. They would have helped deliver the baby.

Unless the Wisemen had a jet fueled and standing by, there's no way they could have arrived in time to help deliver the baby. And I'm not sure I'd want several Persian Astrologers in the birth room anyway, thank you very much.

4. They would have cleaned the stable.

Actually, Matthew never mentions a stable. For that matter Luke doesn't mention a stable either. Luke says Jesus was put in the feed trough, but there's no mention of a stable. It could have been a manger, a feed trough in a freestanding stable like we picture it. Could have been in a cave stable. Could actually have been in the downstairs room of a house where animals were often kept. And it could be in an open courtyard. And we also need to remember, Luke is telling us about the events the night Jesus was born.

In Matthew's version, he uses the word "house" in v11. If there had been months or even more than a year's delay between Jesus' birth and the coming of the Magi, there'd be no reason for Mary and Joseph to stay in the temporary emergency shelter they had the night Jesus was born. House makes sense. So no stable for Wisemen to clean.

5. They would have made a casserole.

With no refrigeration, a casserole being carried by camel back for well over 1,000 miles would probably be pretty ripe. If they had brought a casserole, I sure wouldn't want to eat it.

6. They would have brought practical gifts.

Ah-ha, the famous gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Or as many children might hear it, gold, FRANKENSTEIN, and myrrh.

What kind of Christmas gifts are those? We know what gold is. What exactly are frankincense and myrrh?

Frankincense is a kind of natural incense made from the dried sap of certain middle-eastern trees. It's used today for church incense and in perfumes. It's a rare and expensive substance.

Myrrh is a gummy tree sap from a different kind of middle-eastern tree. It has medicinal properties and was also used for embalming. It is also rare and expensive.

So the Wisemen were definitely not bringing practical gifts. Mary and Joseph were not wealthy. We would probably describe them as blue-collar, lower-middle class folks. They could have probably used something more practical, even a gift card to Wal-Mart.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Why would the Magi bring these gifts? Why not something practical?

Well, it just so happens that gold, frankincense, and myrrh were gifts fit for a king. They were often given to earthly kings.

What's more, they were also widely offered in worship. Gifts fit for a god.

Matthew says in v11 the Magi bowed down and prostrated themselves in a posture of worship before the infant Jesus. Did they think they were worshipping a human king or a divine king? Who knows.

But these Iranian astrologers traveled well over 1,000 miles to come and worship him. King Herod and his religious advisors did not travel the 6 miles between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

God's own chosen people did not recognize or worship the new born king. But these strange foreign pagan Wisemen did. And they devoted an enormous amount of time and left some pretty pricy gifts behind.

Which leaves the big question:

How wise are we? What will we give in the way of time each week to worship Jesus? And will we give any of our talents and/or treasure to his work? Over 1,000 miles by camel is a big commitment to go to worship. How committed are we?

It's a good question to ponder. In 2014, how will you worship, how will you serve your Lord?

As the bumper sticker says, "WISE men and wise women seek him still." Do we have that kind of wisdom? Can we show that kind of commitment?

After all, God has given us the greatest gift of all. It is for us to respond with thanksgiving and worship. In 2014, let's keep the feast.