

'Star of Wonder' – Shadrack's story

Once upon a time, long, long ago and far, far away, was the great, ancient city of Babylon. These days it is just a bunch of old rocks covered in the shifting sands of the desert, but back then, 2000 years ago, it was a place of wonder, with graceful archways and tinkling fountains, brilliant coloured mosaic floors and curtains that floated in the warm breeze. Trees and gardens lined the banks of the mighty Euphrates river.

Babylon was a place of trade, where caravans of camels came and went, with spices, silks, wood, wine. It was a place of war and politics. It had once been itself the centre of a great empire, but it had fallen to the Persians from the East, then to the Greeks from the West. Now the Romans were pushing closer fighting for control of the trade routes.

But most importantly of all, for our story tonight, Babylon was a place of learning. For centuries scholars from many countries had come, some by choice, some captured in war. And they learned from each other, competed with each other, and studied many things.

One school studied the stars, and there lived a boy. Shadrack. aged 10. Servant to 3 particularly old, particularly odd, and particularly wise men. It was his job to clean their telescopes, bring them fresh ink and paper when they filled yet another page with tiny numbers and dots, top up their lamps with oil and their cups with fresh coffee as night after night they worked late, late, peering into the night sky until the first glimmers of dawn made the stars fade. Then Shadrack would rush to the market for fresh bread, feed the astrologers, and they all went to bed for the day. It was a strange life, but Shadrack liked it.

He knew something was up. For weeks the three Wise Men had been even more intense, muttering, arguing, excited. Then, one morning, they told him that they had discovered something amazing, truly earth shattering, a new star, a moving star, that could only mean one thing – it was a sign!

A sign of what? Shadrack wondered?

A sign of a great king – and they argued some more – a king about to be born!

What, just a baby? A star for a baby? He couldn't believe it!

More arguing, more excitement, and then, suddenly, a decision.

We're going. WHAT? WHERE?

Well, no one got much sleep after that. There was a frenzy of packing and shopping and last minute measuring, and they were off. Shadrack who had never left the comforts of Bablyon – into weeks of sand and wind, heat and cold, the rolling hump and bump on camel back, strange people and food, mountains, stories. Each night the star grew brighter. Their star. The Sign. It really was moving, and they were following it!

Pointing to a new King. How wonderful. Shadrack couldn't wait to see his palace! He was sure they'd stay for ages enjoying the royal life as guests of honour.

The star lead them into Roman territory, and Shadrack jumped every time he saw their plumed helmets and sharp swords.

Well, what happened next is kind of a long story, which I don't have time to tell, but it involves a scared, power-hungry guy called King Herod, who tried to trick them, meetings behind closed doors, secret spies and it had a terrible ending for the people of Bethlehem, but that's not tonight's story.

Tonight I want to tell you about two things. One is the strange, amazing sense of joy that filled Shadrack and his three old companions, that grew in their hearts every evening as they saw that Sign Star shining ever brighter. They themselves felt that they glowed with its light.

The second thing is how Right it was when they found him, the baby, even though it was so, so the opposite of anything Shadrack had expected. How they just knew it was him, even in a cattle shed, in a little nowhere town, with no servants, just some smelly shepherds to honour him. It was just one of those utterly heart-stopping moments, which Shadrack never forgot his whole life long.

Actually, there is one other thing I'd like to tell you. When Shadrack was an old man, himself a great scientist, he heard some people speaking in the Babylon town square, passionate about someone called the Christ, who's name was Jesus, who had died on a Roman cross and had been raised to life by God to be King for eternity. Shadrack was again filled with that same joy, that same wonder, only this time it stayed with him, as he learned more about the man Jesus, whom he had met as a baby so long ago. And each week the rapidly growing church of Jesus Christ met in his house, and the same glory shone around.

Sing: We three kings