

JESUS' INFANCY IN BETHLEHEM

Matthew 2:1-12 / Yeshua §14

Next Week: Matt. 2:13-23, Luke 2:39 / Yeshua §§15-16

How many of us put up a nativity set at Christmas?

I can picture clearly the nativity set of my childhood. It was made out of a heavy paper-like material that folded out to form a barn. The figurines for Mary & Joseph and baby Jesus were put in the center; Jesus lying in a wooden feeding trough stuffed with hay. There was a cow or two laying down kind of arranged like couches. On one side were shepherds with their long, crooked staffs; one holding a lamb. On the other side were kneeling camels and the wise men decked out in robes and turbans holding their gifts. Stuck in the roof was a star.

That nativity set is very special to me as I'm sure your nativity set is special to you. My purpose is not to bash nativity sets. But to be honest, they're not historically accurate.

First, archeology indicates that in first century Israel, animals were sheltered either in caves or on the ground floor of human dwellings. Barns or stables in first century Israel were probably unknown. Indications are that Jesus was born in a cave.

Second, the Jewish shepherds and the Gentile wise men never met; their visits to Jesus were separated in time by two years. As we studied a few weeks ago, the shepherds visited Jesus in the cave perhaps within hours of his birth. The wise men, on the other hand, visited Jesus in a house when he was about two years old.

Third, the star guided the wise men to Joseph & Mary's house in Bethlehem where they were living with two-year-old Jesus. The star was not there on the night Jesus was born.

As we pick up Jesus' story, it's about two years since his birth in a cave in Bethlehem. He was circumcised and named on the eighth day (Luke 2:21). When he was 41-days-old Jesus was taken to the Temple for Mary's purification (Luke 2:22-24). While there, the prophet Simeon prophesied Jesus would bring salvation to both Gentiles and Jews. But he also revealed Jesus will bring division within Israel and great pain to Mary (Luke 2:25-35).

Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Bethlehem. About two years later a most unexpected thing happened.

THE WISE MEN FIRST COME TO JERUSALEM (MATTHEW 2:1-6)

MATTHEW 2:1-6 (ESV)

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Jesus was born between the years of 7 and 6 B.C.¹ When he was around two years of age, he received a visit from some very interesting people – *magi*, or as the ESV translates it, *wise men*, from the east.

¹ King Herod died in 4B.C., but he was alive at the time of Jesus' birth. Quirinius' decree occurred in 8 or 7B.C. Jesus had to be born between 8 and 4B.C. King Herod left Jerusalem for Jericho in 5B.C., which is where he spent the last year of his life until his death in 4B.C. King Herod was still in Jerusalem when the Magi arrived. The Magi must have arrived in or before the year 5B.C. The fact

Since they were looking for the newly born King of the Jews, it was logical the wise men first came to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel.

Who were these *wise men*?

The term translated *wise men* is *magoi* from the word *magos*. These wise men were gentile scholars specializing in astrology, astronomy, science and superstition. Their schools date from the days of the Babylonians. The Book of Daniel refers to them as enchanters and magicians (Dan. 1:20; 2:2, 27; 5:7). The prophet Daniel was trained as a Babylonian wise man.

One of our Christmas carols reads, "We three kings of Orient are..." As we just discovered, the wise men were scholars, not kings. Contrary to this carol, we don't know how many wise men came, but there were enough to cause a stir in the city of Jerusalem.

The wise men came to Jerusalem in 5 B.C. about two years after Jesus' birth.

But why did these gentile scholars come at all?

How did they know anything about the birth of a Jewish King?

And why did they care?

Balaam and the Star (Numbers 24:17)

There are two connections between these gentile astrologers and the birth of the Jewish Messiah. The first connection is a man named Balaam.

Balaam was a Babylonian astrologer (Deut. 23:4) who lived at the same time as Moses. Barak, the king of Moab, felt threatened by the Israelites as they passed through his kingdom. He hired Balaam to come from Babylon to curse the Jews because Balaam had the reputation that *those whom he cursed were cursed and those whom he blessed were blessed* (Num. 22:4-6).

Long story short, Balaam accepted the invitation and four times tried to curse the Israelites, but each time God took control of his mouth. Instead of cursing, Balaam blessed Israel four times. In the course of these blessings, Balaam gave this key messianic prophecy:

NUMBERS 24:17 ESV

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

A star shall come forth from Jacob, that is, Israel; coupled with this star is a scepter which represents kingship. He who has the scepter has the right to rule. The message of this prophecy is that when Messiah comes, He will be a King. The coming of the Messiah would be signaled by the appearance of a star.

Numbers 24 tells us that after Balaam finished his work, he returned to "the East" taking with him the prophecy of the star. The "East" is the same territory from which the wise men came.

Obviously, the wise men of 5 B.C. knew Balaam's prophecy.

There was a second connection confirming their interpretation of the star.

This connection was the great Hebrew prophet Daniel.

Daniel and the Timing (Daniel 9:24-27)

As a young man, Daniel was captured and deported to Babylon. He was trained to be a Babylonian *magos*, a *wise man*. Daniel studied astrology, astronomy, science and superstition in the Babylonian school of astrology. A time came when Daniel saved the lives of all the Babylonian wise men throughout the empire. The Babylonian king, King Nebuchadnezzar, had a disturbing dream which he could not remember. He demanded his wise men tell him not only the *interpretation*, but the *content* of his dream.

that King Herod had all the baby boys two years and younger slaughtered in the vicinity of Bethlehem indicates Jesus was about two years old at the time of the Magi's arrival. Therefore, Jesus must have been born between the years of 7 and 6B.C.

When his wise men failed, Nebuchadnezzar sentenced every one to death. That included Daniel. Ultimately, Daniel, enabled by God, revealed and interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel not only saved the lives of all his fellow wise men, but he was promoted to be head of the Babylonian school of astrology by the king (Dan. 2:48).

It's very likely many of Daniel's colleagues turned from worshipping stars to worshipping Daniel's God. It's also likely they became students of the Hebrew Scriptures through which they encountered Balaam's prophecy. Not only that, Daniel himself was inspired by the Holy Spirit and wrote the Book of Daniel while in Babylon.

The curriculum of the Babylonian school of astrology must have included the Book of Daniel. Daniel 9 gave the wise men the timing of the Jewish Messiah's coming which they correlated with Balaam's star. Daniel 9:25-26 revealed:

DANIEL 9:25-26 ESV

25 Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks (sevens). Then for sixty-two weeks (sevens) it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. 26 And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing.

The prophecy reveals the Messiah will come 483 years after a decree is made to rebuild Jerusalem (from its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.). There is debate about the who and when of the decree, but suffice it to say that 5 B.C. was in the time frame given by Daniel.

The wise men came to Jerusalem in 5 B.C. looking for the baby Jewish King because of Balaam's prophecy of the star and Daniel's prophecy of the timing.

Herod and his religious counselors provided the location.

Micah and the Location (Micah 5:2)

The wise men were uncertain as to the baby's location and asked King Herod. The chief priest and scribes came back with Micah's prophecy that the Messiah King would be born in Bethlehem.

MICAH 5:2 (ESV)

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

King Herod encouraged the wise men to go to Bethlehem and find the baby boy and report back. There is no record of the chief priests or the scribes going to Bethlehem to seek their Messiah King even though they too had Balaam's star, Daniel's timing and Micah's location.

THE WISE MEN COME TO BETHLEHEM (MATTHEW 2:7-12)

MATTHEW 2:7-12 (ESV)

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

The star they saw in Babylon appeared again and guided them to the very house in Bethlehem where Jesus and his family were now living. Remember, Jesus is now about two years old.

Many have wondered about the star. You'll read extensive, scientific explanations that this was an actual star like our sun. But this is probably not the case when we consider its unique characteristics. First, it is

called *his* star indicating it was uniquely associated with Jesus. Second, the star appeared in the east, Babylon, disappeared and appeared again on their trek to Bethlehem. Third, the star moved from east to west, that is, from Babylon to Israel. Fourth, the star moved north to south, that is, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Finally, the star literally came down and hovered over a specific house in Bethlehem. An ordinary star doing this would destroy the planet.

This was not an ordinary star. Most likely it was the Shechinah Glory of God once again present and active in Israel.

The wise men were thrilled to arrive at their destination. In an amazing display of faith, they fell on their faces and worshipped the baby Jesus. These are the first Gentiles to come to faith. Just as Zechariah and Simeon prophesied, the Messiah King brings salvation to Gentiles as well as to Jews (Luke 1:78-79; Matt. 2:32). The wise men gifted Jesus with gold – the symbol of kingship; frankincense² – the symbol of deity and myrrh³ which is the symbol of death and sacrifice.

An angel once again intervenes and the wise men take a different route home avoiding Herod altogether.

We realize in this story God's intent to announce the coming of the Messiah King to the Gentile world. The star rose *in the east*, in *Babylon* not in east Jerusalem. Zechariah prophesied that Messiah's coming would be like a new day dawning upon the Gentiles. Simeon prophesied Joseph & Mary's son will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." Even as a toddler, Jesus our Messiah King was busting down the walls of Jewish elitism bringing salvation to the Gentile world.

This story is thick with irony. These gentile wise men travel weeks if not months in response to prophecies contained in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the chief priests of the Jewish faith and the experts in the Jewish scriptures, the scribes, couldn't be bothered. They had the same Scriptures, the same prophecies, but completely different hearts. The wise men responded in faith to God's Word and left Bethlehem rejoicing. King Herod, the chief priests, scribes and people of Jerusalem responded in apathy and remained troubled. What is your attitude towards God's Word and particularly prophecy?

Finally, the story of the wise men speaks to us of legacy. It speaks to us of the potential long-term impact of a life well lived. These men's hearts and minds were influenced to receive God's Word by the godly character and the inspired writings of Daniel. What will be the impact of your life upon your spouse, children, family, friends, co-workers, acquaintances? If your mind is saturated with the Word of Christ and your heart is overflowing with the love of Christ, you, too, will have a lasting, spiritual legacy.

² Frankincense is the dried sap of trees in the *Boswellia* genus, particularly *Boswellia sacra*. These trees grow in Oman, Yemen and the Horn of Africa, including Somalia and Ethiopia. When dried, the sap is burned as incense and thought to have several medicinal properties.

³ Myrrh is a fragrant spice derived from the sap of a tree native to the Near East. Like frankincense, it can be used as incense, but in the ancient world it also had wider usage as a perfume, anointing oil, and was even imbibed as a medicinal tonic. Most notable with regard to Jesus' life, myrrh was a key ingredient in the mixture of spices that were used to prepare bodies for burial.