

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Sundays @ 10:00 a.m. Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: January 6, 2008

The Visit of the Magi

by Dan Trygg

“Now Jesus being 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 the King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him?’”

Matt. 2:1,2

This is an amazing story of Jesus’ early childhood recounted by Matthew to further emphasize that Jesus is the Christ, the long-expected, prophetically-promised King of Israel. Unlike many Christmas traditions, **it is clear that the magi did not arrive on the night of Jesus’ birth.** The Greek text begins with “Jesus, being born in Bethlehem of Judea...”, and since the magi arrived in Jerusalem *after* this time, they could not have been on hand for His birth. Other information to support that a period of time had elapsed would include verse 11, “and entering into the house, they saw the Child”. Joseph and his family were no longer in a stable, but in a house. This implies that they had decided to settle in Bethlehem, at least long enough for Joseph to establish enough regular income to be able to rent a house. (Also, in verse 16, when Herod commands his soldiers to annihilate those children two years and younger, he based this decision on the information given by the magi concerning when they had seen the star in the sky which had prompted them to come.) Note that there are no bystanders reported to witness the visit of these men. By this, can we conclude that Joseph and his family were alone in this house? It would seem so. It also may reveal that the house was located on the outer edges of the village, not squarely in the center. How else could a caravan of notable foreigners come and attract no significant attention?

Note the selectivity of Matthew’s account. We have no record of the couple’s journey to Bethlehem, nor of the census which prompted the trip. Furthermore, we have no actual account of the birth itself. No crowded village, no stable, no shepherds, ...none of the details we normally associate with Jesus’ birth. All of these come from Luke’s account. Matthew sees no value in repeating, or even alluding to any of this information. The only point which he mentions that agrees with Luke’s account is that Herod was king of Judea.

Herod the Great lived from 37-4 B.C. He was an Idumean, descended from the Edomites. Nearly 100 years before, His family and countrymen were forced to embrace Judaism by John Hyrcanus, the Maccabean prince and Hasmonean high priest who defeated them. Faith by compulsion (instead of conviction) often produces only outward conformity. **In the case of the Herod family, religious convictions were mostly for show,** to appease their more powerful patrons, or the populace over which they ruled. It is quite evident that the worldly power which they had come to wield was more tantalizing than friendship, family or principle. They plotted, schemed and betrayed both the Hasmonean family, which had originally lifted them to a position of prestige and leadership, as well as the members of their own household. Being gentiles at heart, they had little self-discipline over their passions. Pagan religions generally had to do with *indulging* fleshly appetites, not limiting or restraining them. The pagan gods were themselves models of sensuality, lust, infighting, betrayal and the abusive use of power. It should not surprise us that those who honored them would take on their traits. Thus, **outwardly Herod the Great kept up a modicum of “appearances”, but the day-to-day lifestyle that he lived was filled with luxury, sensuality and self-absorption.** By the time of Jesus’ birth, he was an old man who had become a pathetic monster, a man who had come to reap the fruits of his sins. His multiple marriages had produced unending squabbles, schemes and slander, as each sub-family plotted to protect or advance their own interests. Eventually Herod had executed his father-in-law, mother-in-law, several wives and brothers-in-law, one of his brothers, and at least three of his sons. These were only those who were “close to him”, ...only a sliver of the *scores* of attendants and house servants who were tortured to death for information regarding the schemes of their masters, or were implicated as being party to their plots. Nor does it reflect the *hundreds* cruelly executed for relatively minor offenses. **Herod was like the majority of rulers of his day. Most held control by fear and oppression.** Severe punishment served as a warning to dissenters.

The fact that Matthew gave no explanatory note regarding the “magoi” indicates that most people of that time would have known immediately who they were. They originated from a tribe of Medes in the Medio-Persian empire. Followers of Zoroaster (or Zarathustra), they believed in a single God, whom they called Ahura-mazda. Much of the origins of this religion are shrouded in obscurity, since later conquerors have taken great pains to eradicate the faith. What we do know is that Zoroastrians were monotheists, and held to high moral teachings similar to our OT. The *magoi* had become the priestly caste within this group. They were highly dedicated to their god, and devoted themselves to the study of astronomy, astrology, natural sciences, magic and divination. Their skills in these areas

were widely acclaimed, and would have been known in the Roman empire of that day. There are similarities between magic and miracle, and divination versus prophetic revelation. What is different is the source. We do not really know much about where these *magoi* were at in this continuum. **What we do know is that they were gentiles who believed they had seen a significant “star in the east”, which indicated to them that a king was born among the Jews.** How they knew that is not explained to us. Perhaps they were even aware of the OT writings, since settlements of Jews had been deported by the Assyrian king, Sargon II, and had been resettled in Median cities (II Kg. 17:6). Later, Jews came to have a very influential role within the Persian empire (Dan. 6:1-28; Esther; Ezra-Nehemiah). Thus, the *magoi* may have been exposed to the prophesy of Balaam (Num. 24:17) that “a star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel, and shall crush through the forehead of Moab, and tear down all the sons of Sheth.” [We know that there was even a widespread expectation among the Jews that the Messiah’s birth would be heralded by a star.]

The impact of visit of the *magoi*, and their inquiry, was significant. First, we see that “Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” This is to be expected, since these men would have been accompanied by an entire caravan, probably including an armed guard. Furthermore, they were notable personages from the Parthian empire. The Parthians were outside of Roman control, and only thirty years before had been driven out of Jerusalem by Herod himself, in his bid to obtain his throne. Thus, a visit to Jerusalem was a very risky business for them, and ill treatment by Herod could have provoked an international incident. **Herod wisely gave them an audience, carefully pumped them for information, and sent them on their way, arranging to have them report to him on their return home.**

Having left Herod, they were surprised and delighted to see the same star in the heavens as they had seen in Persia. It “went on before them” and “stood over” where the Child was. This was no ordinary star. Rather, God was leading these men to their destination.

They had told Herod that they had come to “worship Him”. It is important for us to recognize that so-called “worship” in Greek (or Aramaic, for that matter) was offered to both God and persons of high station. **The word in Greek simply means to “do obeisance to”** (Note that the heart of that word is “obey”. *Offering obedience is what worship is about.*), so we cannot be certain what these *magoi* had in mind when they used this word. **Certainly, Herod would have heard it as a statement of political respect, allegiance and deference.** When they came into the house (note that it was *not* the stable) and saw the Child, they fell down and did obeisance to Him. Opening their treasure caskets they offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (No explanation of any special significance is made in the text, though people have assigned special meaning to them over the centuries. Suffice it to say that they were very precious, expensive gifts, fit and honoring to the Child-King. We know from Lk. 2:22-24 that when Jesus was 40 days old, his parents could only afford to offer two birds as a sacrifice of cleansing, meaning that they were dirt poor. Could it be that the gifts of the magi provided the cash needed for Joseph’s family to make the trip to Egypt.)

The next several verses describe God’s ability to communicate to receptive people through dreams. These are significant turning points in the story. **First, the *magoi* are warned not to return to Herod.** This means they slept that first night after seeing Jesus, at least long enough to have a dream, then obediently departed and went back to their home land another way. **Second, Joseph had a dream probably the next night, though it may have been later the same night, if the *magoi* left immediately. In any case, the Greek says that Joseph’s dream came *after* they had departed.** Note that an angel appeared to him in his dream, the same kind of experience he had had in 1:20, when the angel told him to marry Mary. Again, **his response was immediate.** The angel said, “Rising up, take the Child and His mother and go to Egypt...” Joseph did not wait until morning, but arose from sleep, bundled up his family and left immediately. Note that Matthew comments on how this event fulfilled a word spoken by the Lord through the prophet. (This is one of 12 times [a symbolic number of completion] he refers to OT passages being fulfilled by Jesus’ life [1:22; 2:15,23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14,35; 21:4; 27:9].) “Out of Egypt I called My Son.” This passage is originally a quote from Hos. 11:1, and refers to Israel. In this case, Jesus’ life is paralleling Israel’s own experience.

When Herod realized he had been tricked by the *magoi*, he gave orders to slay all the male children two years old and under, according to the time when the *magoi* reported to him that they had first seen the star. As horrendous an act as this was, it certainly was well within Herod’s capability. It is estimated that the number of children affected would have been possibly 20, since the described area was limited and sparsely populated. To date, we have found no archaeological confirmation of this, but then again, would it have been recorded at all? Brutal, senseless attacks on peasant families were all too common in those days.

Upon Herod’s death, the angel again came to Joseph in a third dream, instructing him to return to Israel. Note that again his obedience was instant. Recognizing the danger of a despot like Archelaus, Herod’s son, he was afraid to go back to Judea. **Yet once more, a fourth time, he received revelation through a dream, and they returned home to Nazareth,** where they had family. Unbeknownst to them this also fulfilled a Scripture, “He shall be called a Nazarene” (a reference to Isa. 11:1 where “shoot” = *netzer* in Heb.). **God wants us to pay attention to our dreams.**