

December 17, 2011 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
John 5:37-40 Christmas Stories: The Smart People's Story by
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No Christmas pageant is complete without them.

You must have shepherds, I mean what would a Christmas pageant be without shepherds.

There must be angels even if portrayed by non-angelic children

Central to any pageant would be Joseph, Mary and the Baby Jesus in a manger..

In a low budget performance you might have cut outs of sheep and a donkey maybe some goats, and if the budget is a bit more maybe costumed humans as those stable animals.

But with all that in place the story isn't complete without those participants we've come to call wise men.

Dressed in the fanciest robes of the play

Outfits topped off with turbans

Each of the three bearing little chests with gifts in them for Jesus

And in the big production scene these guys come in riding or at least leading real camels.

But in the actual story, not in some Christmas play, who were these famed guests of the newborn king? Where did they come from? When did they arrive? What they bring with them? Why did they show up? And what can we learn from their story?

Their introduction into the story is abrupt, sort of thrown at us in the second chapter of Matthew.

Matthew the first of the gospels.

Matthew's gospel especially written with a Jewish reader in mind

Matthew surprisingly therefore including foreigners, these wise men

Matthew just puts it out there for us in the second chapter of his gospel verse 1:

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking.

We will get to the ask in a moment but first I want you to notice what we've already got and what we don't have from Matthew's recounting.

We have a location—Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem literally means “House of Bread”. The region around Bethlehem was the bread basket of Judea. It was just six miles down the road south of Jerusalem. To give you context from where we sit up I4 to the exit for 436 is 6.4 miles!

Bethlehem was quite a little village. It sits on a grey limestone ridge more than 2500 feet in height and sort of like a saddle with a peak at each end.

It was here near Bethlehem that Jacob buried his beloved Rachel. It was here in Bethlehem that the romance of Ruth and Boaz occurred. It was in this Bethlehem vicinity where David served as the shepherd boy of his father's flocks. It was to Bethlehem that Samuel came to anoint David king.

Matthew not only gives us the place but he gives us timing. It was during the reign of King Herod. Historically we have good information that Herod was born around 74-73 BC and died in 4 BC. Best Biblical scholarship today places Jesus birth in 5 or 6 BC.

If this were the first time we'd read this story just this one verse would be so helpful. We have place, we have time and then Matthew introduces us to wise men arriving from eastern lands.

But notice what is missing—specificity on the number—it is simply plural—men not man—so we know there were at least two. Some legends make it 12. The predominant story is of three maybe because later three gifts are mentioned so we need three wise men to present the three gifts one each. The idea of three has stuck. Every Christmas we sing or hear sung, “We three kings orient are...” legends of the wise men that give them the names of Gaspar, Balthazar, and Melchoir, might be based in truth might only be legend.

It is interesting that the star they have followed brings them not to Bethlehem but to Jerusalem. They aren’t far off, but maybe this was divine detour to draw notice to Jesus’ birth.

So they arrive in Jerusalem asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We have seen his star as it arose, and we have come to worship him.”

The word we translate “wise men” is really “magoi” the plural of “magi”. These were an ancient priestly class among the Medes and Persians. When the Medes failed in their take over of Persia this class of “magi” lost all ambition for power or prestige and became a priestly class who became teachers and counselors for the Persian kings.

These really were wise men. They may have been of noble birth but certainly they were educated, they were men of means, influential, skilled in philosophy, medicine, and the natural sciences. Like most of those ancient times they were likely believers in some aspects of astrology, believing that, to greater or lesser degrees, a man’s fate was destined by the star under which he was born.

Balaam’s story, in the book of Numbers, the fourth book in the Bible, is most famous for having his conversation with his donkey, but Balaam was from Media and his prophecy in Numbers 24:17 may have been well known to these wise men. “A star will rise from Jacob.”

Not only might they have known about Balaam but by this time, due to the captivities, and scattering of the Jewish people through all the then known civilized world there were significant Jewish centers and some Jewish influence in almost all the major cities of the Roman empire.

One of the areas less than 100 miles north west of Babylon, only 69 miles due west of Baghdad today know as Al-Fallujah was the ancient sight of Nehardea where Jehoichin when taken captive had been allowed to settle, building a synagogue there with stones and earth from Jerusalem. It was where a major rabbinic school developed. Here in the heart of the land of the Medes, the likely place from which these wise men came, it is not hard to imagine a familiarity with the prophecy of Daniel and the coming Messiah.

What sacred writing would we have to read to up and follow a star? Seriously this would be like one of our Hospital College professors, hooking up with a VP from the hospital and maybe a local successful studios successful business man in the community taking off on a wild goose chase by night following a star! Would we have faith to follow a star? And if so what authority would have bolstered such action of faith? What would it take to start what would be a more than 1600 mile round trip?

Matthew tells us that “Herod was deeply disturbed by their question, as was all of Jerusalem.”

Apparently word of the arrival of these visitors from the east must have quickly circulated among the people of Jerusalem.

Two different parties “deeply disturbed”. First there was Herod. One of Herod’s greatest downfalls was his paranoia. He was quick to kill anyone, family, friends, enemies, just so he protects his throne. These guests are asking about a “newborn king>”

Barclay points out in his commentary that “just about the time Jesus was born there was in the world a strange feeling of expectation of the

coming of a king. Numbers of Roman historians document this growing expectation of some king, even coming from Judea!!

Herod was aware of these expectations. At all costs this mad man wishes to maintain his throne. To get a picture of his savage ways listen to this. He instructed that when death was nearing for him, that a collection of the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem should be arrested on trumped-up charges and imprisoned. And he gave orders that the moment he died they were to be executed. He knew no one would mourn his death but he was determined that some tears should be shed when he died.” (Barclay Matt pl 29)

So Herod was deeply disturbed and also all Jerusalem with him. The civic leaders, the people, the religious leaders knew the demonic nature and practices of Herod. Hearing about a “new born king” could craze the unstable king and people could die.

It isn't hard to imagine that by now the rumors have traveled the whopping six miles up the road from Bethlehem. Stories have been circulating about shepherds being visited by singing angels. How they had followed the angels instruction and found a baby wrapped in strips of cloth lying in a manger.

But pride and positions of power had frozen the religious leaders from checking it out.

There's this general cultural expectation that new king is coming

There were all the sacred writings that predicted Bethlehem

There were the stories about the shepherds.

Now these incredible guests from the east and talk of a star.

Herod calls a meeting with the leading priests and teachers of the religious law. “Where did the prophets say the Messiah would be born?”he asked them.

“In Bethlehem,” they answered, “for this is what the prophet wrote:

“O Bethlehem of Judah, you are not just a lowly village in Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.”

Why weren't they rushing off for Bethlehem? Why aren't those people who have been given custody of the oracles of God, His word to humanity through the prophets, why aren't they racing these foreigners to Bethlehem?

They are not looking for Messiah because of their prideful doubt.

They are the people of God

They are the chosen people

They have the writings of the prophets

And God won't by pass them! All the authority of God's word, and all the authority of God's work in their national history and in their personal lives they have used all their God connection to bolster their own power and position. The authority of God's directives they have read or heard and it has moved them toward doubt of God—WHY because they want their own way. They are not willing to subordinate their wants, their craving for independence and, autonomy, self – direction and power so that which should have been for their benefit becomes their condemnation.

Herod meets with the wise men privately. He asks them when they first saw the star, he tells them, “Go search Bethlehem for the child and when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him too!”

That evening as they left Jerusalem the star appeared to them guiding them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star they were filled with joy! They entered the house where the child and his mother Mary were, they fell down before him and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And

when it was time to leave they went home another way, because God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.”

Joseph is warned in a dream to go to Egypt to escape Herod.

When Herod realized that the wise men had wisely outwitted him he was furious. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under. This was horrible but it wasn't massive. Historians estimate that the population of the region around Bethlehem was around 2000 which means that there would be around 50-60 babies approximately half of which would have been male so likely 25-30 babies died horrible but less horrible than 1000's.

Why do we call them wise men? And while Herod and the religious leaders in Jerusalem aren't branded with the word's un-wise men, why would we give them that title?

The wise men aren't like the leaders in Jerusalem—they aren't the chosen people of God. They aren't the keepers of the law, the repository of the sacred scrolls. Yet we call them wise. While those with every advantage—heritage, history, selection, favor, revelation make choices that would earn them foolish men or unwise men titles.

It seems to be about one's source of authority and how we relate to it.

We all have doubts and questions. It isn't a stretch to imagine in comfortable homes with prestigious jobs that those wise men had some doubts and questions about going on a quest to follow a star.

But these wise men let their questions and doubts move them toward faith in their source of authority. They doubted themselves, they doubted their understanding, maybe they even doubted their senses, were they really seeing the star, but they humbled themselves under the source of their authority and let their doubts move them toward faith because they were willing to follow their authority!!

In Jerusalem there were doubts and questions but it was about evidence. And it was questioned and doubted because there had become a habit of using the source of authority to support getting their own way. And the new evidence had to be questioned and doubted because if they accepted it as valid it would mean losing independence, and power and prestige so their questioning moved them toward doubt because they supremely wanted their own way.

Do we read the story do we tell the story to validate us and the church and our place, position or power,

Or do we read the story and tell the story to validate scripture and increase faith that we might wisely follow where he leads.

John Stott writes, “By nature we hate authority and love independence. We think it is a great thing to have an independent judgment and manifest an independent spirit, and that is true if by this we mean that we do not wish to be sheep who follow the crowd or reeds shaken by the winds of public opinion. But independence of Jesus Christ is not a virtue; it is a sin, and indeed a grievous sin in one who professes to be a Christian. The Christian is not at liberty to disagree with Christ or to disobey Christ. On the contrary, our great concern is to conform both the mind and the life to Christ’s teaching.”

Who is your authority? You your own authority or do you look to a higher wiser authority?

Through most of the book of Job, Job seems to be his own authority. He loses his herds, flocks, his children, his wealth, his comfort (as he gets boils) but he doesn’t lose his nagging wife. Job challenges God, argues with friends, questions God some more, mourns the day of his birth, he defends himself and challenges God. Then finally near the end of the book the Lord challenges Job.

It is like God seeks to offer Job a higher authority.

Who is it that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself, because I have some questions for you and you must answer them.

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying? What supports its foundations and who laid its cornerstone? And who defined the boundaries of the sea as it bubbles from the womb?

Job responds after a couple of chapters of questions, "I was talking about things I did not understand, things far too wonderful for me."

Job accepted a new authority. The wise men were faithful to their authority and God calls us to a baby born in the stable and invites us to surrender to his authority to conform to both our minds and our lives to the teachings of Christ even when it is beyond our understanding.

True wise men know the limit of their wisdom.

Too often we are our own authority. We may even be like the Pharisees and Sadducees and diligently search the scriptures believing that holding more truth will bring us answers and eternal life. But just like Jesus said to them he says to us, "you search the scriptures because you believe that in them you have eternal life, but they are they which testify of me."

If we make the word, the written word of God and the living word of Christ our authority then we too can gain the title, wise people.