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WHERE IS HE? Part One

Jeffery D. Woodhams

I hope you all had a merry Christmas this year. Since today is the day after Christmas, I thought we should take a last opportunity this year to sing and praise God with our Christmas songs.

I don't necessarily advocate keeping every tradition for the sake of tradition, but in case you're wondering, tradition holds that you can maintain the Christmas decorations until January 6. Why January 6? Because that is a day known to some as Epiphany, the day the wise men's visit is commemorated. I do not observe Epiphany, nor do I endorse it; however, it does make a convenient excuse for leaving the decorations up a little longer than the week after Christmas! However, most of us here don't know this tradition because when we see a nativity set, we invariably see the wise men right there at the stable! The wise men came later, possibly almost two years later.

I also should point out that the Bible does not give us the names of the wise men or even their number. Tradition tells us there were three of them, named Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar; but this information is entirely outside of Scripture.

I will also point out that they are not known as kings in scripture. We sing the song of the three kings but even as we do we must keep in mind that, as with any tradition, "your mileage may vary."

Am I sucking all the fun out of your Christmas traditions? I didn't come here to spoil anything, but I feel we should take a fresh look at what the Bible *does* say about the wise men. This week, I'd like to sort of go through the story verse by verse and see what it has to say. Next week I particularly want to discuss their question and the answers they received because they are just as consequential in our generation as they were back then.

Let's read, if you will, Matthew 2:1-2:

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

When we read this passage with fresh eyes, we see that an unknown number of wise men came from the east to Jerusalem. They are sometimes called "magi" which is in fact very close to the word Matthew used here, *magoi*. The word itself is not originally Greek, though; it comes from an Old Persian word, *magus*. Our English word *magic* is derived from these early roots. Having said all of that, a *magus* was a person born into a priestly caste in Persia. You may have heard of Brahmin priests in Hindu lands, who are simply born into that part of society. The Persian magus, then, was a person born into a particular caste in that society, and with that position came certain privileges and responsibilities. The caste of magi wielded considerable influence in the royal court.

The magi, then, were educated. Part of their learning included astronomy, which was undoubtedly used by some for the occultic purposes of astrology (using the positions of heavenly bodies to predict and interpret the future). Some commentators have come to the conclusion that the magi were astrologers,

and have even invented elaborate systems of so-called Christian astrology, claiming that God set the gospel in the stars and constellations, and those signs were later corrupted by various forms of paganism. The theory goes, then, that these wise men knew the true meaning of the stars, and they saw an astrological sign such as the planet Jupiter (representing God) in the constellation of the virgin and then moving to the Lion (representing Israel) or some such nonsense. The Bible is very clear about astrology, folks: God tells us in no uncertain terms to stay away from it at all times and for all reasons. God doesn't dabble in the occult, and He forbids us from doing so.

I believe there is a much more likely scenario: these wise men were educated. Two very important prophets had a home in that part of the world. The first was Balaam, who was hired by the king of Moab to curse the children of Israel. Do you remember this story from Numbers 22-24? Basically a certain king had sent gifts to a Persian prophet named Balaam, begging him to come to Moab and curse the Israelites. Balaam was enticed by the money, even though he knew that God's blessing was on the Israelites. Balaam agreed, for a price, to attempt to put a curse on the Israelites, but when he opened his mouth, a blessing came out. The king was furious, but wanted Balaam to try again. Balaam tried a second time and gave a second blessing. Hoping to be successful on the third attempt, the king commissioned Balaam to speak one last time. Balaam's third blessing included a prophecy about a star arising from Jacob (Numbers 24:17). We should not be surprised to find that wise men from Balaam's own home area would know about this prophecy.

Another prophet, Daniel, had also lived in that part of the world. He had prophesied the the number of years that would pass before the Messiah would be revealed. I won't explain the whole prophecy right now, but basically Daniel prophesied that from the time of the expedition to rebuild Jerusalem a period of sixty nine weeks would pass. Ancient Jews were familiar with the concept with weeks of years as well as weeks of days. (Remember that every seventh Jewish year was a sabbath year.) So from the time of Nehemiah's expedition to the time of the Messiah's ministry sixty nine weeks of years, or 483 years, would pass. It is not at all unlikely that the wise men knew this Scripture. I can say that with confidence because they knew how to interpret what they saw in the skies.

Just what did they see? Look at verse 2, please:

2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

They saw a star and recognized it as a sign of something they had knowledge of: the fact that a king, a very special King, had been born as promised. They already knew the promise! Because they knew the promise and believed it, they recognized the sign when it was given. They had seen His star.

Have you ever wondered about that star? Like I said, I don't believe that it was some sort of astrological sign. Nor do I believe it was an astronomical phenomenon such as a supernova or a comet. (By the way, if you ever hear someone spout off about NASA rewinding the astronomical clock with computer models and finding Jesus' star or Joshua's long day, just let it go. There's no truth in it.) No, this star had a behavior that does not fit with normal astronomical phenomenon. I'll come back to the star after we share a few more verses.

The word of these wealthy, educated foreigners—and of their unusual question—quickly spreads throughout the whole city. Surely these wise men had expected the city to be full of news; instead, they

meet questioning gazes and troubled faces. Either there is no information, or the people are too afraid to share what they know. Perhaps the wise men began to doubt themselves.

Let's peek at verse 3 now:

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Why would Herod be troubled? Why would all of Jerusalem be troubled? First of all, Herod was not really a Jew at all. He was an Edomite (Idumean) whose family had converted to Judaism a few generations before. The Romans had installed him as king of Judea. Although he professed to be converted to Judaism, he lived a very immoral lifestyle. He was also cruel to the point of having his own wife and children killed. At the end of his life, when he knew he was dying, he ordered 20,000 Jews for all over his territory to come to Jericho where they were to be locked in a building. When news came that Herod had died, the building was to be burned so that no one in his territory would rejoice. Fortunately, his successor canceled the plan; but that is representative of the evil nature of Herod the Great.

That is why we find Herod troubled: he knew he was in his position only because he had the backing of the Roman military. He was governing a people who distrusted and despised him. If a new king, a legitimate heir to David's throne, should appear, Herod's subjects might rebel.

We also can see why the news would disturb all of Jerusalem as well: how would this cruel king respond to a challenge to his throne? Where might his wrath fall? Who would suffer because a baby had been born?

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

Did you notice that the wise men had asked where the *king of the Jews* had been born, but Herod asked his scholars where *the Christ* should be born? Messianic hope was alive in Israel, and even Herod knew about the coming King. This is no slip of the tongue! Herod identified the question of the wise men with the truth of Scripture. He knew that the King was the One promised in Scripture.

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor; that shall rule my people Israel.

The scholars responded to Herod's question with Scripture—Micah 5:2. The scholars knew where the Messiah was to be born; but their education and their knowledge of Scripture would not help them accept the fact that the scriptural promise had been fulfilled. They answered Herod's question, and as far as we know, that was the end of the matter for them. There is no record that any of them went to see for himself.

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and

when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

You can almost imagine Herod putting on the charm, pretending to be interested in the wise men's tale out of religious fervor. It's easy to act like we love the story of Jesus, isn't it? You've been around long enough to know some people will talk and talk about God, but it's all for show. Herod begins talking about this wonderful news, sharing with the wise men what Micah had prophesied, and then trying to discretely squeeze information out of them. "When exactly did you see the star? How many months ago? How does your Persian calendar compare to ours?" He's gleaning information, not out of devotion, but out of his own agenda. He continues the charade by asking them to return to him with the child's precise location so that he can "worship" him. Worship, though, is the farthest thing from his true mind. He's trying to determine two important points of reference: an exact time of birth and an exact location for the young king whose very existence threatens Herod.

This child—even though he be the Messiah—constitutes a threat to Herod, not because of anything the child has done, but because of the evil choices Herod has made up to this point of his life. What's worse is that Herod has no concept of changing his choices to greet the Messiah. No, there is murder in his heart for the innocent, precious Son of God.

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

When the wise men had been in the east, in their homeland, they had seen the star. At some point that star had disappeared. As they leave Jerusalem, they see and recognize that same star. If this were an actual star or some kind of normal astronomical occurrence, then the description we have up to this point doesn't seem to fit anything we know; but here in verse 9, we find this star in absolute violation of known astronomical principles because the star moved, it stopped moving when it was clearly above Jesus' residence, and it moved from north to south. It moved from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, five miles south. No known physical phenomenon can do those things; but the star fits something else we know about much better. I believe this was a manifestation of God's glory, which theologians sometimes call "the shekinah glory." God's shining glory has been recorded for us as both moving and as settling upon a certain location. It appears and disappears. It appeared in the wilderness during the Exodus:

Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-35).

It appeared at the dedication of Solomon's Temple.

And the priests could not enter into the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD's house. And when all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the LORD upon the house, they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and worshipped, and praised the LORD, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever (II Chron. 7:2-3).

In short, I believe that what the wise men called a star was God's manifested glory, which led them first

to leave their homeland so that they could encounter Herod, and afterward led them to the exact house where they would find the promised Savior. It may even be that what they saw from a great distance as a “star” was God’s glory revealed when the angels appeared to the shepherds.

We’ll finish this narrative next week, but for now let’s consider the following:

First, the wise men acted upon the truth they knew. They followed a star because they believed what they already knew. The great thing about God is that He reveals more truth to those who act upon the truth they already have. This is true universally for every man and woman ever born, as Romans chapter one tells us. The wise men did not have the whole truth, but this passage shows that God revealed more to them as they acted upon what they did know.

Second, the wise men persisted in following the truth, and the truth led them to Christ. Truth, when properly understood and followed, will always lead us to Christ. All truth is God’s truth.

Third, following the truth cost them something. They sacrificed their time and energy in pursuit of the truth. Was it worth it? I believe we know the answer even before we ask.

Someone much wiser than I has already summed up this sermon in one simple statement: “Wise men still seek Him.” Friend, have you sought and found the Messiah? Are you willing today to follow the truth to wherever it may lead? I urge you today to follow God’s revealed truth and find the Christ child.