

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christmas Series 2016: The Wise Men and Herod's Fury

"Have you heard the news? In the last few days, alarms have been ringing in Jerusalem. A number of highly distinguished men arrived in the city asking where the King of Jews had been born. They claimed to have seen His star in the east.

"It was reported that upon hearing this news, King Herod was extremely anxious because no prince had been born in the palace. He definitely thought that this birth was that of the Messiah for he immediately gathered all the religious leaders together. He demanded of them where the Messiah was to be born. The chief priests and scribes informed him that it had been prophesied He was to be born in Bethlehem of Judaea. They quoted the prophet Micah in order to substantiate this: *'But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting'* (Micah 5:2).

"Having gained this knowledge, Herod secretly called the wise men to him. He specifically enquired as to the exact time the star had appeared. They told him. Herod then directed the wise men towards Bethlehem, asking them to search carefully for the young child and then report back to him so he could go and worship Him also.

"Investigations have determined that the wise men had been intent on going to Bethlehem but, shortly after leaving the palace, their plans were changed because the star they had seen in the east reappeared and led them on to the house where the young Messiah was to be found. Upon entering this house, they saw the child with Mary his mother. They immediately fell down and worshipped Him. They then opened their treasures and they presented gifts to Him. These included gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Amazing! It begs the question: "Is this child truly the Messiah predicted so abundantly throughout the Scriptures?"

This news report sets out the first part of today's talk which is entitled "The Wise Men and Herod's Fury".

In this first section we will consider:

- Who were the wise men?
- How did they finally find the Christ?
- What was the significance of the presents given?
- Who was Herod? and
- Who was the Messiah?

Who were the wise men?

We know a few things about these visitors. Firstly, they were some kind of scientists whose studies included the observation of heavenly bodies. In Genesis 1:14 we read: *"And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years."* The knowledge of the heavens has provided signs for travellers by land or sea for hundreds, if not, thousands of years and the movements among them have indicated times and seasons throughout the generations. Therefore, we can determine that these men were very learned. Hence, to call them "wise men" is very appropriate.

Secondly, they were from the east. How far east we do not know. However, Babylon of old had men of rank who were called "learned". The Old Testament character of Daniel is an example. We read in Daniel 1:20 that he and his companions were described as being ten times better in wisdom and understanding than the magicians and astrologers in the realm of Babylon. In fact, some Jewish legends say that Daniel himself had founded an order of wise men or magi and instructed them to watch for the Messiah through the generations.

Thirdly, they had some knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. They said, *"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"* (Matthew 2:2). They knew that a star would rise

that represented the birth of the Jewish Messiah. Balaam had predicted this in Numbers 24:17: "...*there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel.*"

Finally, we also know that they were rich. In order to make immediate arrangements for such a long journey required wealth. Furthermore, the high value of the gifts they had brought with them also supports this reasoning.

As to their number, we don't know exactly. The noun in the term "wise men" is plural representing more than one. It would seem that they would have travelled in a caravan of camels for protection from thieves and beasts of the day. As they were distinguished men, it was likely they would have been accompanied by a retinue of servants also. However, we are given no details of these things. Tradition supposes there were three of them and the three different gifts may indicate this, but it is important to note that the Bible does not give a number and it certainly does not give the names these wise men.

How did they finally find the Christ?

Regarding their search for the Christ, it is clear from the passage that they had seen the star-sign while in the east. They realised it spoke of the King of the Jews. Hence, they set off for Jerusalem no doubt expecting the prince to be in the palace. There they were informed by Herod that Christ would be born in Bethlehem and started off for the town. However, the star they had seen in the east reappeared and actually led them to the house in which Jesus was dwelling at the time. We are not told in the Bible that the final destination was Bethlehem. It may well have been Nazareth. We say this because Mary may well have stayed to make an offering for her purification at Jerusalem's temple before returning home. Jesus would have been just over forty days old at the time (see Leviticus 12:3-4 and Luke 2:21-24).

What was the significance of the presents given?

Besides being of great value, the gifts that were presented to the child have symbolic significance in the scriptures. For example, gold is so called from its "shining" and speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ as the "brightness of God's glory". Frankincense is so called from its "whiteness" and expresses the "purity" of the sinless Christ to God. It also has a "sweet fragrance" expressing the "delight" that God has in His Son. Frankincense in scripture often accompanied the offerings (typical of Christ) showing they were acceptable to God. Myrrh, on the other hand, is known for both its "bitter taste" as well as its "sweet fragrance". The bitter taste pre-empts the sufferings of Christ; while the sweet fragrance speaks of the blessings of the new covenant that result from His agony.

Who was Herod?

The Herod mentioned in the passage is most likely Herod the Great. "Most likely" is used because the dates for his rule in secular history are uncertain. Nevertheless, it seems He was appointed king of Judaea by the Roman Senate in BC 37 (and in Matthew 2:1 he is specifically called Herod "the king"). By the time of Jesus' birth, his body was diseased and he was tormented mentally. His anxieties were heightened by the visit of the Magi to Jerusalem. Yet, he was wary enough to use them to find the child who was to be the King of the Jews. His intention was to slay Him.

Who was the Messiah?

As to the Messiah, He was the "Chosen" or "Anointed One" of God as listed in the Hebrew scriptures. This word is the equivalent to "Christ" in the Greek of the New Testament. The Old Testament is full of prophecies concerning Him. Over 360 were fulfilled at His first advent. Many, many more apply to His second advent. Jesus Himself, following His resurrection, met two of His disciples on the Emmaus Road and said to them: "*O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?*" (Luke 24:25). Then, "*beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself*" (Luke 24:27).

Among other prophecies, it was predicted that the Christ would be a prophet, priest and king. For example, in Deuteronomy 18:15 we read these words of Moses: "*The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.*" Again, in Jeremiah 23:5 we read: "*Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.*" Furthermore, in Zechariah 6:12-13 we read: "*And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.*" This is further supported by Psalm 110:4 which states: "*The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.*"

The words of Simon Peter to Jesus make it clear that this disciple believed He was also the expected Son of God - *"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:16). Jesus Himself claimed to be the Son of God. For instance, as He stood before the Sanhedrin, the high priest asked Him: *"Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven."*

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God and in Hebrews 1:8 God Himself calls His Son, God: *"But unto the Son he [God] saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom."*

A little further down the same chapter we discover that He is the Creator for God says to Him *"Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: they shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail"* (Hebrews 1:10-12). Colossians 1:16-17 confirms this: *"For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist."*

So the Messiah is God the Son who became man. Among other things, He came into the world:

- to preach the coming Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43);
- to manifest the true purpose of life (John 10:10);
- to reveal and declare God as Father (John 1:18 and 17:6);
- to demonstrate God's love (1 John 4:10);
- to call sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:13);
- to save sinful people (1 Timothy 1:15);
- to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Hebrews 9:26); and
- to destroy the devil and his works (Hebrews 2:14-15).

This leads us to the second section of our talk where we see:

- the message of God to the wise men;
- the message from God to Joseph, Jesus' stepfather;
- the fury of Herod; and
- the weeping of Rachel.

The message of God to the wise men

In Matthew 2:12 we read of God's message to the wise men. It states: *"And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way."*

This shows us another quality of the wise men, namely, they had faith. They accepted the warning that God gave them in the dream and, more importantly, obeyed the message and left for home by another route.

The message from God to Joseph, Jesus' stepfather

We then read: *"And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him."*

Joseph had experienced this messenger before. It was the angel who had told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because the baby conceived in her was by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he had no problem believing and acting upon this new message. We read: *"When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: and was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son"* (Matthew 2:14-15). We often think of the hardship experienced by Joseph and Mary in their previous journey to Bethlehem before Christ was born; but now we see them facing another long journey to Egypt. Their faith drove them forward.

The statement, *"Out of Egypt have I called my son"* comes from Hosea 11:1 where it is linked with Israel. However, it is applied here to show that the true "Prince with God" (the meaning of "Israel") was God's own Son who would also be called out from Egypt. So, under the direction of God, the Christ-Child was to remain in Egypt with His mother and stepfather until Herod died.

The fury of Herod

We then come to see the fury of Herod unleashed. We read in Matthew 2:16-18: *"Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not."*

We are not told how or when Herod realised that the wise men had mocked him. The fact that they had departed without informing him as to the whereabouts of the Christ-Child infuriated him. He should have realised that God was protecting His Son; but he didn't! He ordered that all the children in Bethlehem and its coasts should be slain. Although his focus was upon Bethlehem, he extended the area of slaughter to its surrounding regions also. Here, the word used for "children" may refer to those male or female; but in the context it is generally thought that it was little boys who were slain.

Herod knew the exact time of the appearance of the star in the east from his conversation with the wise men (Matthew 2:7). Just as he had extended the area of slaughter, no doubt he extended the time relating to the birth of Christ. He slew the children who were aged two years and under. He was taking no chances. The Child Prince would not escape the net he cast! It therefore seems reasonable to say that the Christ-Child may have been a little over one year old when the wise men visited Jerusalem.

The weeping of Rachel

The fact that Herod had previously had to ask where Christ was to be born showed that his knowledge of Holy Scripture was greatly limited. So little did he realise that his actions were to fulfil another scripture, namely, that found in Jeremiah 31:15: *"Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not."*

In Jeremiah 31 we find great rejoicing in the restoration and blessing of Israel. The nation that had previously been led away captive with great weeping, would one day return with an abundance of joy.

Ramah was a town of the tribe of Benjamin in ancient Israel. It was located about eight kilometres north of Jerusalem. This shows that the whole of Israel would lament the loss of their children. Rachel, more specifically, represents the Jewish mothers mourning their slaughtered infants. Just as the child Moses had previously escaped the fury of pharaoh to rise up as a prince and a saviour of Israel relative to Egypt (see Exodus 2:1-10), so the Christ-Child who escaped the fury of Herod would rise up to be the King of the Jews and the Saviour of the world.

These events, which happened after the birth of Christ, should challenge each and every one of us with the question: "Whose part will you take?" The Apostle John wrote of two kinds of people on earth in this day of grace, namely, *"children of God"* (1 John 3:10, 1 John 5:2) and *"children of the devil"* (1 John 3:10). Children of God are those who have implicitly trusted God and His way of salvation through the Person and work of His Son. The children of the devil are those who have not yet trusted in God and have thus refused the Person and work of Christ for their salvation.

The ultimate destination of the children of God is eternal glory, joy and peace with Christ; but that of the devil's children is the lake of fire where the devil shall be. Eternal torment is suffered there. Where will you spend eternity?

*Wise men travelled from the east
The Christ of God to see.
They'd spied His star high in the sky
And left immediately.*

*They found the child a house within
And bowed in worship true.
They offered Him, with faithful hearts,
Three gifts of high value.*

*They'd seen the face of Christ the King!
Their lives were changed for e'er!
His suffering and His glory known
They recognised God's Heir!*

*Will you trust in the Christ who died
To take away your sin?
Will you now bring your heart to Him
And find new life within?*

*He's glorified in heaven above
And seeks your presence there.
In faith now take Him as your Lord
And know His love and care.*

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