

The Coming of King-Makers

The Myths, Messengers and Mystery of Christmas – Part I

Selected Scripture

Introduction

Without a doubt, one of the things I love about the Christmas season is the music. Certainly, the music about Christ's incarnation could be sung year round, but there is nothing wrong with reserving it for special times. What makes it special is that it is reserved for this season.

It is not a bad idea to save things for special seasons.

Think about it, if you had candlelight at every meal, you would be excited about eating by light bulb. Your kids would say, "Wow, isn't this great?! We can see what we're eating!"

If you drank eggnog in the evenings, year round, you would be thrilled with finally having a cup of coffee or a glass of iced tea instead, right?

My father, who grew up on a farm, told me of his excitement when he finally had the opportunity to eat store bought bread. No more of that crummy hand kneaded, slow baking, homemade bread. Who wants that?! Sunbeam was special.

Things can become special just because they are different.

Now, there are well-meaning believers who think we should not celebrate Christmas at all, given the pagan origins of many of the things related to Christmas. It is certainly true that there are many pagan roots to our Christmas celebrations.

The Romans decorated their temples and their pagan altars with greenery and candles. In fact, when the Romans conquered the British Isles, they found Druids who were using mistletoe in their pagan

worship ceremonies. They also found pagan worshipers using holly and ivy for decor in their pagan ceremonies. By the fifth century, all of these trappings had become a part of the church's celebration of Christmas.

The Puritans tried to stamp out any observance of Christmas. They passed a law in England in 1644 that made Christmas Day an official working day. In fact, for a while in England, it was literally illegal to cook special desserts like plum pudding and mince pie in December.

In early American history, the Puritans deliberately worked on December 25th to show their disdain for such observances.¹

The apostle Paul, however, made it clear in Romans, chapter 14, verses 5 through 6a,

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord . . .

In other words, no day is any more special than another. But if you choose to make one day, or one season special, make the most of it for the glory of God.

When you make one day special, give it redemptive meaning. Do you want holly and ivy and a Christmas tree? Can you make them reflect the message of Christmas?

This would be like the example of Martin Luther, the reformer. Many believe that he was the first to come up with the idea of taking lighted globes and

attaching them to a Christmas tree to signify the birth of the Light of the World. He took something that had pagan beginnings and gave it redemptive purpose.

The fact that we observe Christmas is not the issue. *How* we observe it and *why* we observe it is!

Now, by the way, if you decide not to observe something because it has worldly associations or even origins, you had better not study too much history or too many ancient civilizations.

In a few weeks, in fact, do not refer to the new year or write out the month of January. If you do, you will be associating your schedule with and writing out the name of the Roman god with two faces – one in front, looking ahead to the new year, and one in back, reflecting on the old year which is now in the past.

Do not drive a car or truck manufactured by Mazda either. That company name came from the conquering god of the ancient Persians. The name of their supreme god was Mazda.

While you are at it, you might as well take the fish symbol off of your bumper. That symbol was in use long before the church adapted it to their own purpose. It was the symbol associated with several pagan goddesses. The symbol could be a fish when drawn sideways, or vertically to represent the womb of the goddess.

In China, the great mother goddess Kwan-yin was often portrayed in the likeness of a fish.

In Egypt, Isis, the mother goddess, was called the Great Fish of the Abyss.

In Greece, the fish goddess, Aphrodite Salacia, was worshipped by her followers on Friday. On that day, the faithful followers ate fish in her honor.

So there is another one – do not eat fish on Friday because that is when the pagan worshiper's of Aphrodite ate fish in honor of their fish goddess.

In fact, do not even say the name "Friday" – it is a transliteration of the name of another goddess named Freya. Friday became a day designated for worship and feasting.

The early Christians borrowed this pagan symbol of the fish and gave it a new meaning – as well as used it as a symbol to mark their meeting places. Because the symbol was so common, no one took any notice.

The point is, if you do not want any association to pagan icons or symbols of ancient ungodly

practices, you might want to move to a cave somewhere to live.

Then again, however, living in a cave to escape evil has pagan origins too.

Imagine – you are in your Mazda, with a new fish symbol stuck on your bumper; it is Friday and you are at the drive through window of Burger King to pick up your fish sandwich combo, heading home to hang the lights on your tree. You are in deep trouble!

Or maybe we have simply missed the point. *Why* we observe this season and *what* the symbols mean to us are the distinguishing marks of the believer.

I happen to believe that Christmas time is a fantastic opportunity for us to exalt Jesus Christ in our community. I recommend that we take full advantage of it.

There will be hundreds of people at this church in two weeks that we will not see again until Easter. We will take advantage of what is, to them, simply a holiday. They are coming to check us out; they want to know if it is more than symbols!

That is why we will make sure the music is timely and the message is clear so that they know why we celebrate and why they should too. Let us make sure we separate the myth from the message.

There are indeed, plenty of myths, even within the church, as it relates to what we call the Christmas story. So much is lost on the church because of the watered down, trivialized message that is pawned off on the church during this season.

The Christmas story is actually a brutal scene; a lonely, desperate set of circumstances that takes the reader on an emotional roller coaster. The story begins with intrigue and ends with murder.

I want to spend the next few Sundays uncovering this scene by delivering three messages along the theme: the Myths, Messengers and Mystery of Christmas.

Christmas Messengers

I invite your attention to the gospel by Matthew and to some of the most mythologized participants in the usual Christmas play – that would be the wise men. Turn to Matthew, chapter 2. We will look at several scenes today.

1. First, we will look at the arrival of the magi. Notice verses 1 through 3 of Matthew, chapter 2.

Now after Jesus was 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 King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

I’ll bet they were!

These were not three old guys carrying a few gift boxes; these were Babylonian king makers.

Now of all the things they could have said to upset Herod and the Jewish people, for different reasons, it would have been this question,

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” . . .

They did not say, “will be born one day . . .,” but, “has been born . . .”. In other words, “It has already happened and there is nothing you can do about it!”

Then they add this shocking title to the newborn – “King of the Jews”.

Let me hit the pause button and shift the camera behind the scenes for a moment, and focus on Herod.

2. The second scene could be called, the apprehension of Herod

If you could re-enter this scene and watch Herod, you would probably see his face flush crimson . . . and him biting his tongue to keep from saying what he wanted to say.

This was Herod, the Great! He was appointed by his father to rule the prefect of Galilee. His father had been appointed by none other than Julius Caesar to rule Judea. Everyone knew he was king.

By the time we meet Herod, in Matthew, chapter 2, he is seventy years old. He has also become insanely jealous concerning his power and his throne.

One of Herod’s ten wives, Miriamne, had a brother, Aristobulus, who was the Jewish high priest. Herod became so fearful of the popularity of Aristobulus that he had him drowned, after which he financed a huge funeral where he pretended to weep. Then Herod killed Miriamne and her mother.

In his final two years of life, Herod’s paranoia became so great that he murdered his two oldest sons. Five days before his death, he executed his next eldest son, determined that he would have no rival to his throne.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, wrote this about Herod and his rule,

He did not permit the citizens, either to meet together, or to walk, or to eat together, but

watched everything they did, exhorting them to always be at work. He had spies everywhere . . . he would often put on the clothing of an ordinary citizen and mix among the multitude at night, asking them what they thought about Herod and his government. When they answered with criticism, they were punished severely, or even brought to the citadel Hyrcania, both openly and secretly and were there put to death.ⁱⁱ

One of the last things Herod did before he died was imprison many distinguished Jews on trumped up charges. He gave the order that these men and women were to be executed the very moment he died, in order to ensure that there would be weeping in Jerusalem. Even if they were not weeping for him, the days following his death would be filled with mourning.

This man was a cold-hearted, vain, corrupt, paranoid killer.

I want you to know something else about Herod. As an older man, having gained the favor of the Roman emperor, the Roman senate granted his wish and gave him the title, “King of the Jews”. *He* was the King of the Jews. That was his title and his throne!

Now it was during these last two years when Herod was killing every threat to his throne that a group of Babylonian dignitaries showed up and said, in verse 2,

Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? . . .

Verse 3 then tells us,

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled . . .

The word “troubled” means, “agitated; visibly shaken”. Herod is thinking, “Someone has dared to take my throne and my title.”

Ladies and gentlemen, our world is filled with “Herods”. Not that they are all going around murdering people, but they are claiming the right to be king. They alone will inhabit the throne room of their life and heart.

Nobody has the right to interfere with their career, their position, their power, their ambition, their plans, their lifestyle.ⁱⁱⁱ

They are not about to let anyone else be king of their lives.

Tell someone that Jesus Christ deserves to be their master and king and watch as they become

visibly shaken. Tell them they must bow and surrender to Christ's reign and watch as they turn red with anger and bite their tongue to keep from saying what they are thinking. Or maybe they will say it.

"I don't need saving . . . I alone am king . . . I am the master of my fate!"

Now do not misunderstand; Christ is okay for a little Christmas caroling once a year, but He is best left in the manger . . . or on the cross, right? Our religious world likes Him there too. They prefer Him only at His birth or at His death.

Do not talk about the sovereign ascended Lord, however. Do not talk about surrendered priorities and plans and morals and lifestyle. You are ruining my Christmas spirit!

Ladies and gentlemen, this season our world will once again say, "Jesus works for me at the Christmas Eve party, but I'd rather not have Him at my New Years Eve party."

"Ah, let's just leave Him in the manger, shall we?"

Herod will have nothing of that thought either. He has just discovered his worst nightmare. Somebody else has a claim on the title, "King of the Jews."

Now it is not just anybody who has delivered the news either. Go back to verse 1b,

. . . magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem . . .

"Magi" comes from the Greek word "magoi". It gives us our word "magic," from which we get the words, "magician and magistrate".

This verse tells us that these men were "from the east". Literally translated, they came from "the rising" – a reference to the rising of the sun. They were from the kingdom of the Medes and Persians.

Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, informs us that these men were a special caste of men, highly trained in the arts and sciences. They were the high priests, university professors, and political movers and shakers all rolled up into one.

They were the leaders of the Persian religion, which was still in full force when Jesus was born. The religion was called Zoroastrianism. I know, it sounds like the worship of Zoro. Everyone wore black masks and carried swords. Actually, the priests wore white robes and tall hats.

The principle element in their worship was fire. They had an altar with fire which they kept burning.

They believed it had originally been given to them from heaven. They practiced animal sacrifice, and believed in only one god whose name was Mazda. There is that automobile thing again.

Historians also tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king without mastering the scientific and religious disciplines of the magi. Only then was the heir to the throne approved and crowned by magi.^{iv}

The magi were known as king makers, and Herod knew it! In fact, all of Jerusalem knew it too, and they were just as troubled, although for different reasons.

Matthew, by the way, does not tell us how many magi arrived. Early church tradition said there were twelve, but the number was later reduced to three. That was probably because you cannot get twelve wise men into the Christmas play.

During the middle ages, the number of wise men was reduced and many traditions and myths expanded. The church claimed that the three men were named Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. They were representatives of the three sons of Noah. Supposedly their skulls were miraculously preserved and discovered in the twelfth century by the Bishop of Cologne. The great cathedral of Cologne still exhibits these skulls, encased in a jewel studded glass encasement.

The questions remain though, from the plain text of scripture. Why make a trip across the continent, on a journey that took at least a year? And what would make the magi assume that when they arrived in Jerusalem, people would automatically know where the Messiah was living, which the text implies?

Why would they be willing to slip in the front door of Israel and slip out the back door into oblivion?^v

Most importantly, why would the magi be interested in a Jewish Messiah?

To begin to answer those questions, you have to travel back several centuries, to a time when Jews were taken captive by the kingdom of the east – Babylon.

Among the deported Jews were several Jewish teenagers who were handed over to the magi to be trained in the university. You know several of them by their names – Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Daniel, especially, had such a profound affect on King Nebuchadnezzar that he promoted Daniel to be

the chief leader over all the magi in the Kingdom of Babylon (Daniel 2:48).

So respected and powerful was he, when Darius the Persian King conquered Babylon, he retained the leadership of Daniel.

You may remember that the other Persian politicians created a plot to have him thrown to the lions. You might want to know that the magi were not a part of that plot. They evidently had tremendous respect for Daniel.

It would be the seventy years of godly influence by the life and, evidently teaching, of Daniel that would not only bring two kings to faith in Daniel's God, but many of the magi as well.

However, how would the magi, living hundreds of years after Daniel, be prompted by a star to come and meet the Messiah?

What did they mean in Matthew, chapter 2, verse 2b?

. . . For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.

First of all, this text reveals that the magi who traveled to Jerusalem were already believers. They were ready to worship the Savior. They already believed the scriptures. They knew the Messiah had been born.

In fact, as soon as Herod had the chance, he gathered the religious leaders and, in verse 4,

. . . inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

The magi said, in effect, "We've come to worship the Christ . . . literally, the Messiah."

Here they are, descendants of Daniel's magi converts, prompted to begin a journey that would take them more than a year to accomplish.

No doubt, they were in a large caravan with servants to cook and keep the herds they would need for food on this long journey. There would be a large division of soldiers as well, to protect them as they journeyed through foreign kingdoms. The soldiers would also protect the costly gifts the magi had with them.

Rewrite the picture you might have in your mind. These were Persian dignitaries who were renowned for their power and privilege. They were in a long line of Gentile believers as well, which stretched back to Daniel, their leading wise man.

There is still the question, "Why would an astral sign prompt their journey? How would they have connected a star with the Messiah?"

Daniel evidently had at his disposal the Torah, the law of Moses. He, and probably other godly Jews living in captivity, had apparently taught them of the coming Messiah.

Listen to one verse that I could only imagine Daniel explaining to his magi friends. It is from the book of Moses, in Numbers, chapter 24, verses 16 and 17.

The oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty . . . I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel . . .

In this Old Testament passage, the Messiah is called "a star".

Perhaps Daniel taught them from Isaiah's prophecy, in chapter 60, verses 1 through 3,

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. . . . Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

This is the same expression; the same idea of a star rising in brightness.

In Revelation, chapter 22, verse 16b, Jesus Christ is referred to as,

. . . the bright morning star.

You need to understand that the magi did not see just any star. This was not some meteor, or comet, or alignment of the planets.

This was a Messianic sign. It was star like, but it was, in fact, the light of God's presence – His shekinah glory.

The Greek word for star ("aster"), can be understood to mean "brilliance or radiance".

This was the light that guided the people of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21).

This was light that made the face of Moses to glow after he had met with God (Exodus 34:30).

This was the heavenly brilliance of the resurrected Christ that knocked Saul of Tarsus off his horse and blinded him (Acts 9:3).

This was the vision of John the Apostle as he saw the light of Christ's face shining like the sun (Revelation 1:16).

This was the same light that appeared to these Persian magi and led them.

How do you explain that it seemed to disappear when they arrived in Jerusalem? How do you explain that it suddenly seemed to reappear when they left Herod's palace? How do you explain that it was literally standing over the very house where the Child was staying?

There is only one way to explain it. The magi were being led by the light of God's glory. And it seems that they were the only ones who saw it.

That leads me to wonder, why would God bother with all this for eastern magi? What is so important about Persians coming to give Christ gifts?

3. The next scene displays the apathy of the Jewish leaders.

I agree with one author who suggested that this revealed that the birth of Jesus had worldwide impact and influence. It also showed that the Messiah was coming through Israel as a gift from God to all nations, not just to the Jews. And unfortunately, it illustrated, at the very outset of Christ's life on earth, that the Jews will not care about His birth, but Gentiles will.^{vi}

The Jewish leaders who told Herod where the Messiah was to be born, did not care enough to walk the five miles from Jerusalem to check it out; but Gentiles traveled across the continent.

Did you notice from verse 6, that they had memorized the prophecy of Micah? They knew the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

You would think some of them would have immediately run there to find out!

They knew the scriptures, but they missed the Savior.

The wise men, on the other hand, traveled a great distance. Persia was located in modern day Iran. They traveled through Iran, and then through the country of Iraq, and then down into the land of Palestine.

This was a journey of several thousand miles, which was a distance that would have taken them months to travel. They would have taken several weeks or even months as well, to prepare for the journey once the light appeared.

So understand that when they arrived in Bethlehem, they did not arrive at the stable, which was a cave perhaps, or the courtyard lean-to where the animals were kept outside the inn.

Notice verse 11 of Matthew, chapter 2.

After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary . . .

They did not come to a stable, they entered a house. There, they "saw the Child," not a "brephos," which is the Greek word for "baby," but the "paidion," which is the Greek word for "little child".

By the time the magi had arrived, Jesus was between one to two years of age.

4. The final scene is the adoration of Jesus Christ.

Verse 11 tells us,

After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. . . .

The expression that the magi "fell to the ground," means that they fell to their knees with their heads to the ground and then, in the oriental fashion of their day, kissed His feet and even the ground.

Can you imagine? Little Jesus, probably holding on to his mother's robe, wide-eyed, receiving worship from the king makers of a Gentile empire.

The king makers brought gifts.

- They gave Him gold.

Gold was the gift for a king. They gave gold for the One who was heir to the throne of David.

- They gave Him frankincense.

Frankincense is a gum from the Boswellia tree. It was used by the priests in the Old Testament as part of their priestly service.^{vii}

They gave frankincense for the High Priest, who will intercede on our behalf.

- They gave Him the strangest of gifts – myrrh.

Myrrh is a sweet fragrance taken from a small thorn tree. Gum from its sap would be mixed with wine to form a narcotic. That would be offered to Christ on the cross and He would refuse it. It was a common substance used to embalm a lifeless body.

They gave myrrh to the One who would wear a crown of thorns; who would suffer on the cross; who would be wrapped with it in the tomb.

They gave three gifts: gold for our King of Kings; frankincense for our great High Priest; myrrh

for our suffering Savior who will redeem mankind from among every nation on planet earth.

Responses to the Christmas Message

Let me give one more point. In these few verses, there are three ongoing responses of the world to the message of Christmas. From the first century to the twenty-first century, the cultures change, but the response of mankind does not.

There is the response of:

- anger (from Herod);
- apathy (from the nation's leaders);
- adoration (from those who worship Him as their Messiah).

There are those who:

- hate Him;
- ignore Him;
- fall to their knees and worship Him,
- the One who is Christ, the Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/5/2004 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, God With Us (Zondervan, 1989), p. 25.

ⁱⁱ Ivor Powell, Matthew's Majestic Gospel (Kregal Publications, 1986), p. 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ MacArthur, God With, p. 71.

^{iv} John MacArthur, Matthew (Moody Press, 1985), p. 27.

^v Powell, p. 35.

^{vi} Stuart Weber, The Holman New Testament Commentary (Broadman, 2000), p. 20.

^{vii} Powell, p. 42.