

Christmas Reflections from a Wise Man

Saturday, 3 December 2006 “Preaching With Flavour” Homiletics Seminar

Main Idea: Jews ignored Christ, but Gentiles worshipped Him. How about you?

Part 1: Follow Star

Salam! I was asked to share some of my own experiences about a very unique birth. As far as I can remember, the story begins one starry night when I lived in Babylon...

OXO My work that night began as did any other. My colleagues and I at the observatory set about
OOO our task to discern movements of the heavenly bodies. Others before us had taught us how to predict the daily positions of the moon and sun—and they plotted the paths of the five planets one could see with the naked eye. And the 1000 plus stars we could see? They remained relatively stationary as they traversed the sky each night. Other magi before us had already plotted them into 12 configurations for each month of the year...

Then Sheshbazzar, my fellow astronomer, suddenly had a curious and wonderful look on his face. “Do you see it?” he said. “Do you see that star in the southwest coordinates? It’s not on our charts!”

I looked intently where he had pointed. Sure enough, it was a star—at least it looked like a star—but it was so low and brighter than all the others. I noticed that it hung directly over the land of Israel. I asked, “Do we have anything in the library about a star at that location?”

“No, wait. The ancient Jewish scroll of Numbers quotes one of our own magi. Yes, one of our ancestors, named Balaam, was a diviner who talked about a star. Remember? He said:

‘A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel’ [Num. 24:17].”

Sheshbazzar looked at me with curiosity, “A star will rise in Israel? How odd! And why the scepter?”

“Scepters go with kings!” I replied excitedly. “But isn’t Israel under Herod’s jurisdiction? He’s ruled Israel for 33 years already. Why would the star appear now?”

“Ah!” my friend said. “A *new* king! Perhaps one has just been born! Maybe Herod just had a son!”

OOX “No, that wouldn’t make sense,” I said, “The Jews are looking for a descendant of *David*
OOO to be their king to free them from Rome. Herod is not a Jew but a collaborator with Rome. It must be another king...”

(Stops) Then it dawned on me. A miraculous star points to a *miraculous* birth—not just *any* birth. This new king of the Jews just born must be *from God*—the one the Jews have expected all these centuries! Perhaps he is divine Himself, for what human has a miraculous star attest to his birth?

“Something wonderful has happened this night!” I declared finally. “We must go at once to Israel to see this Babe with our own eyes—and offer the worship He is due!”

Part 2: Trip & Jerusalem

OOX We desired to leave soon but had to receive permission from the king, gather supplies
OOO and leave our work in the hands of reliable associates. Our entire entourage finally ready, we set out by “desert ship” toward the west, still seeing the star in the distance. You do know what a “desert ship” is, do you not? This we also called a camel.

I laugh when I see our journey depicted as three men trekking alone in the desert. Had we traveled in this manner, our gifts would have ended in the hands of bandits rather than the Christ! No, we were a *large* group traveling slowly near the rivers (not the desert) for over five months from Babylon to Israel—a long train of camels led by a donkey, for camels are much too stubborn to lead.

And some think us kings. I wish this had been the case! No, we were *searching* for the King!

OOO At any rate, the star still shone before us as we arrived at the hill country of Judea, but
OXO then, for some reason it disappeared. "Where should we go?" I asked. "Surely the king of the Jews would be born in the capital city," Beltezer replied. So at last we arrived at Jerusalem, bearing the dust of a thousand miles.

And what a stir we caused! We did not intend to make such commotion, but someone in our group disclosed our purpose—that we had come to worship the new king of the Jews.

We thought this was good news—so much so we bore the heat of the day for months. But we soon saw that *Herod* had not fathered another son recently. In fact, he recently had killed one of his ten wives and two sons. The saying began to be told that it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son!

When Herod heard why we had come to Jerusalem, he called in the entire Sanhedrin for questioning. I understand that many of them thought they would all be executed on the spot, for when Herod got angry, heads flew. But when he asked where the Christ was to be born, they had an answer from Micah's prophecy. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In fact, this was common knowledge among all the people—at least any who went to synagogue—which certainly did not include Herod.

We had not intended on having an audience with Herod, but that very afternoon we were secretly ushered into his court for questioning. I must say, I was impressed and fearful at the same time. But he too was disturbed. In fact, Matthew notes that Herod was "troubled" or "shaken."

XOO So Herod interrogated us, trying to sound objective and compassionate. We were treated
OOO quite well. But he seemed for some reason to be very concerned about the exact time the star appeared, though he did not tell us why. We told him it had been many months, and then he surprised us by actually encouraging us to go to Bethlehem. He told us to return and tell him the exact location so he could worship the child as well.

I thought we might have a Roman escort to Bethlehem. After all, it was only about a two-hour walk from Jerusalem. But I suppose Herod feared that this would cause an even greater stir in the city, so we were allowed to go by ourselves. Even more surprising was that not one of the members of the Sanhedrin desired to go. I remember thinking, "Are not any of these Jews interested in the birth of their king? After all, this is *their* king, not the king of us Gentiles! Will no one investigate this miraculous birth—the appearance for which Israel has awaited for centuries? Could it be that Jews are so caught up with their daily routine that they exert no effort to seek the very God of the Universe near them?" This kind of news one should shout from the mountain!

Part 3: Bethlehem

XOO It was late, but we decided to go to Bethlehem anyway. As we were wondering how we
OOO would find an infant in Bethlehem, suddenly one of my fellow scholars shouted, "There it is again!" I looked up, and sure enough, the star had reappeared. In fact, it led us not only to Bethlehem but directly to the house we sought.

Soon a common-looking peasant woman invited us into her humble dwelling. With crude walls, woodworking tools, and sawdust everywhere, I almost felt it improper for us to give our lavish gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. But we did. We bowed and worshipped a young toddler without hesitation.

The young couple was honoured by our visit. They had few visitors—only the lowest strata of society, shepherds. To my surprise, they asked us to stay the night—but we declined and stayed at an inn.

That night each of us had a dream—the same dream. God warned us not to return to Herod. I tell you, this was a relief! So we went back to Jericho through the back route and on to Babylon from there. Such a long journey for so short a visit! But all the way we marveled about the privilege of visiting the very God who had visited us. But what an irony! Those who lived closest to Bethlehem had missed this great privilege. Jews ignored Christ but Gentiles worshipped Him. How about you? The Jews who should have worshipped the newborn King ignored Him—but Gentiles like me embraced Him as God. Have you? They had no room in their hearts for Him—just as there was no room for Him months earlier at the inn.

Christmas Reflections from a Wise Man

Featuring Choirs, Wise Man, Joseph & Mary
Sunday Night, December 24, 1995 at Grace Baptist Church

Main Idea: Jews ignored Christ but Gentiles worshipped Him. How about you?

I. Choir Entrance (Shopping, Sales, Gifts)

(House lights dim. Choir enters briskly and loudly from the back of the church and offstage carrying gifts. Those without speaking parts move to their places while speakers move to center of choir loft.)

Man 1: (With excitement) I finally did it! I finished my Christmas “to-do” list!

Woman 1: (Sarcastically) Whaa, so hard! Your list only had one job—eating! My list as your wife has 231 items! I’ve walked from one end of this Orchard Road to the other and I’m only half done—but my body feels done in!

Woman 2: (Bitterly) Yeah, my husband only has to put up the tree. I have to decorate it, bake the cookies, buy the presents, wrap the gifts, deliver them to the owners, write and stamp and send all the Christmas cards...

Man 2: (Defensive and interrupting) Hey, that’s not true! I have to drive the kids down here to Orchard Road too! They get to see all the multicolored lights and displays. I only see red—from all the brake lights in front of me!

Woman 3: (To Woman 2) Speaking of Orchard Road... did you see the sale at Tangs? They had Zoe CDs for only \$75 each! So cheap, lah!

Man 1: Aiyah! That’s cheap? I can buy *three* Christmas buffets at the Carlton for that price!

Woman 1: Yeah, but this year don’t eat all three all-you-can-eat meals at the same time! So maloo!

Woman 2: (Wise Man begins walking to stage from back) All you think about is food for yourself! Christmas is about the spirit of giving! Especially to those who give back even more!

Man 2: In my house it’s about giving to Singapore’s future! But if I hear another plug for Mighty Morphin Power Rangers I’m gonna lose my mind—and my savings!

Woman 3: (With curiosity as she looks at the Wise Man who “freezes” as he walks up the dark aisle) Hey, what’s that? They’re sure making the displays life-like this year!

Man 1: Either that or tonight’s Christmas get-together is a costume party.

(Spotlight moves to Wise Man as he steps to center stage. The men and women quietly sit down in the choir loft.)

II. Wise Man (Part 1: Follow Star)

(To speakers, as he pursues them) Pardon me! Salam! (Apologetically, to audience as he walks up aisle) Excuse me. I’m not sure that I’m in the right place. Do you know what

experiences about a holiday called “Christmas.” Could this possibly be that which they were discussing? (no response) As far as I can remember, the story begins one very unique night when I lived in Babylon...

- My evening work that night began as did any other. My colleagues and I at the
- observatory set about our task to discern the movements of the heavenly bodies.
- Others before us had taught us how to predict the daily positions of the moon
- and sun—and they plotted the paths of the five planets one could see with the
- naked eye. And the 1000 plus stars we could see? They remained relatively
- stationary as they traversed the sky each night. Other magi before us had
- already plotted them into 12 configurations for the 12 months of the year...

Then Sheshbazzar, my fellow astronomer, suddenly had a curious and wonderful look on his face. I asked him about it as he gazed towards the west. “Do you see it?” he said. “Do you see that star within the southwest coordinates? We haven’t ever seen this star plotted on our charts!”

I looked intently where he had pointed. Sure enough, it was a star—at least it looked like a star—but it was so low and brighter than all the others. I noticed that it hung directly over the land of Israel. “It’s between the Dead Sea and Sea of Galilee,” I noted. “Do we have anything in the library about a star at that location?”

“No, wait. The ancient Jewish scroll of Numbers quotes one of our own magi. One of our ancestors named Balaam was a diviner who talked about a star. Remember? He said:

‘A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel’ [Num. 24:17].”

Sheshbazzar looked at me with curiosity and said, “So a star will rise in Israel? How odd! And why is the star associated with a scepter?”

“Scepters go with kings!” I replied excitedly. “But isn’t Israel under Herod’s jurisdiction? He’s ruled Israel for 33 years already. Why would the star appear now?”

“Ah!” my friend said. “It must be a *new* king! Perhaps one has just been born! Maybe Herod just had a son!”

- “No, that wouldn’t make sense,” I said, “The Jews are looking for a descendant
- of *David* to be their king to free them from Rome. Herod is not a Jew but a
- collaborator with Rome. It must be another king...”
-
-
-

(Pacing) I searched my memory for any other mention of stars relating to Israel. Yes, there was another! I reminded Sheshbazzar, “Years ago during the reign of King Xerxes there was a queen—a Jewish queen over our land. Her Jewish name was Hadassah, but she also took a Persian name, Esther. Surely you know what ‘Esther’ means in the Persian language. ‘Esther’ means ‘star’! She brought about a miraculous deliverance for her people. A miraculous star, royalty, a miraculous deliverance...”

(Stops) Then it dawned on me. A miraculous star points to a *miraculous* birth—not just *any* birth. This new king of the Jews just born must be *from God*—the one the Jews have

expected all these centuries! No, he must be divine Himself, for what human has a miraculous star attest to his birth?

(Music starts) “Something very wonderful has happened this night!” I declared finally. “We must go at once to Israel to see this Babe with our own eyes—and offer the worship He is due!” (lights dim)

III. Choir: “What Will I Give?”

IV. Joseph & Mary

(Lights come upon Joseph sitting up and Mary lying down at the stable. Mary stirs and sits up...)

Joseph: Oh Mary, you’re finally awake. Are you feeling any better now?

Mary: (Sleepily, with a yawn) Yes, I’m OK. Sorry I feel asleep. I was just so tired after the trip and the delivery. How’s the baby?

Joseph: He’s fine. Now He’s the one asleep. (Pause) Mary?

Mary: Yes. What is it?

Joseph: Tell me again what the angel told you.

Mary: Well, he said that I was conceived with the Holy Spirit, so that the baby inside of me would be the Son of God...

Joseph: I trust the Lord in all this, and I know that our Jesus is special, but at the same time I'm a carpenter, not a scholar. (Music starts, and Joseph says to the baby) I know you are God's Son, but what really does that mean?

V. Joseph sings "Little Yeshua"

VI. Mary sings "Isn't He Beautiful?"

VII. Wise Man (Part 2: Trip & Jerusalem)

- O Indeed, we too thought Him to be beautiful—thus we sought to visit Him. My
- O companions and I desired to leave quickly, but we had to receive permission from
- X the king, gather supplies and leave our work in the hands of reliable associates.
- O Our entire entourage finally ready, we set out by "desert ship" toward the west, still
- O seeing the star in the distance. You do know what a "desert ship" is, do you not?
- O This we also called a camel.

I laugh when I see our journey depicted as three men trekking alone in the desert. Had we traveled in this manner, our gifts would have ended in the hands of bandits rather than the Christ! No, we were a *large* group which traveled slowly near the rivers (not the desert) for over five months from Babylon to Israel—a long train of camels led by a donkey, for camels are much too stubborn to lead.

And some think we were kings. I wish this had been the case! No, we were *searching* for the King!

- O Anyway, the star still shone before us until we got into the hill country of Judea,
- O but for some reason it then disappeared. "Where should we go?" I asked.
- O "Surely the king of the Jews would be born in the capital city," Beltizer replied.
- O So at last we arrived at Jerusalem, bearing the dust of a thousand miles.
- X
- O

And what a stir we caused! We did not intend to make such commotion, but someone in our group disclosed our purpose—that we had come to worship the new king of the Jews.

Now I would think that would have been good news. We thought it was—so much so we bore the heat of the day for months on end. But we soon discovered that everyone knew Herod had not fathered another son recently. In fact, he recently had killed one of his ten wives and two sons. The saying began to be told that it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son!

When Herod heard why we had come to Jerusalem, he called in the entire Sanhedrin for questioning. I understand that many of them thought they would all be executed on the spot, for when Herod got angry, heads flew. But when he asked where the Christ was to be born, they had an answer from Micah's prophecy. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In fact, this was common knowledge among all the people—at least any who went to synagogue—which certainly didn't include Herod.

We hadn't intended on having an audience with Herod, but that very afternoon we were secretly ushered into his court for questioning. I must say, I was impressed and fearful at the same time. But he too was disturbed. In fact, Matthew notes that Herod was "troubled" or "shaken" or "stirred." Matthew uses the same word concerning how the disciples shook for fear when they saw Jesus walking on the water since they thought He was a ghost!

- X So Herod interrogated us, trying to sound objective and compassionate. We
- O were treated quite well. But he seemed for some reason to be very concerned
- O about the exact time the star appeared, though he did not tell us why. We told
- O him it had been many months, and then he surprised us by actually encouraging
- O us to go to Bethlehem. He told us to return and tell him the exact location so he
- O could worship the child as well.

I thought we might have had a Roman escort to Bethlehem. After all, it was only slightly more than an hour walk from Jerusalem. But I suppose Herod feared that this would cause an even greater stir in the city, so we were allowed to go by ourselves. Even more surprising was that not one of the members of the Sanhedrin desired to go. I remember thinking, "Aren't any of these Jews interested in the birth of their king? After all, this is *their* king, not the king of us Gentiles! Will no one investigate this miraculous birth—the appearance for which Israel has awaited for centuries? Could it be that Jews are so caught up with their daily routine that they exert no effort to seek the very God of the Universe who is right near them?" This kind of news one should shout from the mountain!

VIII. Youth: “Go Tell It On the Mountain”

IX. Wise Man (Part 3: Bethlehem)

- X It was late, but we decided to go to Bethlehem anyway. As we were wondering
- O how we would find an infant in Bethlehem, suddenly one of my fellow scholars
- O shouted, “There it is again!” I looked up, and sure enough, the star had
- O reappeared. In fact, it led us not only to Bethlehem but directly to the house we
- O sought.
- O

Within an hour a common-looking peasant woman invited us into her humble dwelling. When I saw the crude walls, the woodworking tools, and sawdust everywhere, I almost felt it improper for us to give our lavish gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. But we did. We bowed in reverence to a young toddler even without hesitation.

The young couple felt so honoured by our visit. They really hadn’t had many visitors—only the very lowest strata of society, shepherds. To my surprise, they invited us to stay the night—the whole lot of us—but we declined and stayed at an inn.

That night each of us had a dream—the same dream. God warned us not to return to Herod. Believe me, this was a relief! So we went back to Jericho through the back route and on to Babylon from there. Such a long journey for such a short visit! But all the way we marveled about the privilege of visiting the very God who had visited us. But what an irony! Those who lived closest to Bethlehem had missed this great privilege. Jews ignored Christ but Gentiles worshipped Him. How about you? The Jews who should have worshipped the newborn King ignored Him—but Gentiles like me embraced Him as God. Have you? (Music starts) The people had no room in their hearts for Him—just as there was no room for Him months earlier at the inn.

X. Shige: “No Room”

XI. Wise Man (Part 4: Transformation)

- X (Music starts as the Wise Man narrates this introduction to “The Stable of Our
- O Lives”) People missed the stable and the house because it was too simple, too
- O humble, too ordinary. Had they come they would have seen and felt what I did—
- O a transformed stable, a beautiful home where God’s peace dwells. Not
- O outwardly, but inwardly where it really counts.
- O

- O (Walking to right) As He entered the world that night long ago, so He longs to
- X enter our lives today; transforming the plain into something magnificent, the old
- O into something new, the dying into that which throbs with life. In the midst of
- O overwhelming trials and everyday stresses, He wants to lift us up and make us
- O strong. Why did He come? He came that we might have life—complete and
- O satisfying. His method: Not to change our external surroundings, but to change
- O us from within. He Himself is that light which shines in our hearts—a light worth
- O passing on to you. (Spot dims and Wise Man exits behind manger)

XII. Susan: “The Stable of Our Lives” (candles start to be lit at the end)

XIII. Message & Altar Call (Pastor George)

(Pastor George narrates the ending of the song)

The shepherds were men of humble means who heard God's message and did something about it. The wise men were wealthy astronomers who had studied the Scriptures regarding the promised child. When they saw the rising star, they responded to its call.

(Evangelistic message)

Paragraphs not used:

In A.D. 66 the Jewish historian Josephus recorded the appearance of “a comet resembling a sword hanging over Jerusalem.” He saw this as an ominous sign that the city would soon be destroyed, and, indeed, it was four years later. Unfortunately some modern scholars think that the gospel writer took this comet appearance long Jesus’ life and transposed it to Jesus’ birth. Some even suppose that we saw a configuration of the planets. How ignorant! As if professional scholars of astronomy like us can’t tell the difference between comets, stars and planets! This would be like supposing a doctor in my land couldn’t distinguish a heart from a stomach!

No, it was a star, but a peculiar one at that, always way in the distance. About half way we reached the outskirts of the Roman Empire. You will remember that Rome never conquered as far as my home. This was my first time to see both the grandeur and the atrocities of the Roman army. It was common to see crucified criminals on public roads—a practice actually learned by the Romans from my own Persian roots! But they did it so often and with such tortuous precision! No wonder why the Jews sought to wrest themselves from Rome’s barbaric grip.

The greatness of Rome was evident as well. I remember passing a huge and ornate palace just outside Jericho just after we crossed the Jordan. The locals then told me that this was Herod’s *winter* headquarters! Herod had numerous palaces and fortresses around the land—just in case his subjects rebelled, a luxurious fortress would always be close by.

Now I would think that would have been good news. We thought it was—so much so we bore the heat of the day for months on end. But we soon discovered that everyone knew Herod had not fathered another son recently. In fact, with his ten wives and numerous sons, there was already enough family trouble as it was. When Herod’s family retreated for holiday to one of the outlying fortresses, his wives and their sons stayed in separate palaces. They hated each other, and caused much grief to Herod.

Not too long before we had arrived Herod had killed his so-called “favorite” Jewess wife Mariamne the first (he had so many wives there were two with the same name—Mariamne). He thought he might die, and couldn’t bear the thought of his dying first and her living without him. Herod was insane, almost 70 years old and the historian Josephus wrote that he had horrible torments. He had a terrible craving to scratch himself, his bowels were ulcerated and his privates gangrenous and wormy. None of the doctors could ease his pain. Along with his wife, Herod killed his two sons Aristobulus and Alexander. One historian said it was safer to be Herod’s pig than to be his son!

I looked up, and sure enough, the star had reappeared. I saw this as God’s confirmation. Arriving in Bethlehem, it didn’t take long to find Joseph and Mary’s house—the first person we saw had heard the story of his birth from the shepherds. Fortunately, this happened quite late when almost everyone was asleep, or else the star’s light would have caused a great stir in Bethlehem like we did in Jerusalem!

But Mary and Joseph were awake—or else our large group woke them up! I was astonished to see such a common-looking peasant woman come from the house to invite us in. We graciously accepted and entered their humble dwelling. When I saw the crude walls, the woodworking tools, and sawdust everywhere, I almost felt it improper for us to give our lavish gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. But we did. We bowed in reverence to the young toddler even without a thought.

The young couple felt so honored by our visit. They really hadn't had many visitors—only the very lowest strata of society, shepherds. To my surprise, they invited us to stay the night—the whole lot of us—but we declined and stayed at an inn.

That night each of us had a dream—the same dream. God warned us not to return to Herod. Believe me, this was a relief! So we went back to Jericho through the back route and on to Persia from there. Such a long way for such a short visit! But all the way we marveled about the privilege of visiting the very God who had visited us. What an irony! Those who lived closest to Bethlehem had missed this great privilege.

(Music starts as Wise Man narrates this introduction to “The Stable of Our Lives”)

He could have been born in a castle or a palace, but instead this King of Kings was born in a stable with animals made weary by travel. In this setting He chose to demonstrate the love of His Father. By His humble birth, He transformed a dingy stable into something filled with grace. In the midst of the old and musty, something new and fresh with life was born. As He entered the world that night long ago, so He longs to enter our lives today; transforming the plain into something magnificent, the old into something new, the dying into that which throbs with life. In the midst of overwhelming trials and everyday stresses, He wants to lift us up and make us strong. Why did He come? He came that we might have life—complete and satisfying. His method: Not to change our external surroundings, but to change us from within.

1995 Christmas Eve Programme Announcement

Wise Man

Rev. Saturday, December 16, 1995

(Hands folded over elbows with a slight bow)

Salam and good morning, dear friends. Indeed, you do look as strange as I was told! What an interesting array of clothes and hairstyles!

Alas, I have come to remind you of the celebration of a most important event. Perhaps you think it not important to attend the Christmas Eve service at 7:30 next Sunday, but let me remind you that the story will be told by one who was an eyewitness to these events. I never tire of sharing how a most unusual star led me to a most unusual Child.

But in fact, when we arrived in Jerusalem we found that most did not find the news of His birth to be good news. Now I would think that would have been good news. We thought it was—so much so we bore the heat of the day for months on end. But we soon discovered that everyone knew Herod had not fathered another son recently. In fact, with his ten wives and numerous sons, there was already enough family trouble as it was. When Herod's family retreated for holiday to one of the outlying fortresses, his wives and their sons stayed in separate palaces. They hated each other, and caused much grief to Herod. Our enquiry was not good news to Herod.

Is it good news to you? Oh, you have heard it before? All the more reason to come Christmas Eve—and bring a friend—perhaps one who has yet to embrace the Christ child as you and I have done.