

Christmas WiseMenAndTheStar 12-12-14a

This is Friday, the 14th of December, 2012. We're going to depart from our study of Prophets and Kings to do a little special. We just have tonight and Sunday before the Christmas break and we're gonna have a fairly lengthy break.

I think we're gonna miss two weekends in a row. So I thought we better pack in all of the special we can this weekend. So I'll try to work through the groans of disappointment that we're not gonna be going through Kings, but this is something that does bear on it somewhat indirectly, as well as having something of a holiday motif as well.

So kind of spans the gulf between Kings, Chronicles, Prophets and the story of the nativity of the Lord Jesus. So we'll just call it our 2012 stellar special and we'll go to the Lord in prayer and then we'll begin. Father, we're so grateful that despite the distractions and the occupations of the day and of our task driven life, we are defined first and foremost by our relationship to you through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that infiltrates and affects and influences every aspect of our lives, waking, sleeping, doing, resting, visiting, spending time in fellowship or in contemplation or in activity and in performing our designated responsibilities. We are called by your name. We are here to reflect your glory.

We thank you for that privilege. We thank you for the opportunity to live in this age with the gifts and resources that you have granted to us because of the Lord Jesus and his victory on the cross. And we pray tonight as we avail ourselves of the gift of your spirit, his constant presence with us, his interpreting and explaining ability to us for those divine truths that would be beyond our human comprehension.

And our investigation of what is found in your word. We pray that we will each come away more fully equipped for every good work. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

There is a lot that you can look at at the Christmas season and partly because I have, you don't know this about me, but I tend to sometimes run contrary. And I didn't want to do a special on the nativity or the wise men or the Herod and the, well, actually it is going to be sort of about the wise men, but we hope that we can be wise men as well. And what intrigues me and we've touched on this before, but not in any depth is the wise men.

I don't understand the wise men, I don't get it. And so I thought I would investigate that on all of our behalf and toss out some ideas. Now I will begin by saying, this is not an exegetical study.

This isn't going to be drilled down into passage after passage. Like Christmas, a lot of this is going to be somewhat extra biblical. Jesus was born, there were angels and shepherds.

And after that, all the rest of Christmas that we celebrate is largely of our own making and

invention. And in the same way, there are some tantalizing clues that we have in the word of God that lead us somewhat beyond what is in the pages of scriptures to answer the question, what's the deal with the wise men? What's the deal with the wise men? This is why I call it the stellar special. It's all about the star.

There wasn't a star, there wouldn't be any wise men. What's up with the star? The star is up, why is it up? Where is it up? How do they recognize it? How many stars are there in the sky? These guys see a star, the star. And this is a unique star in that it can be followed across country and guide you to a specific spot on the ground.

This thing's better than GPS, better than a, what do they call that thing? A Gremlin or a Garmin. On your dashboard that tells you turn by turn directions, this star takes them straight over to where the, what is up with this star? This is my question. So put yourself in the position of being a Chaldean.

You're off well away from the nation of Israel. It is circa 5 BC, 4 BC, somewhere in that realm. You are a guy who has a copy of the scriptures, the Hebrew Torah, the Hebrew law and the prophets and the writings.

You've got the Old Testament scriptures, right? That's all that exists in this day. Looking at the sky and looking at the scriptures, these men say, gentlemen, it's time to pack up and head for the capital city of Israel and greet the king. How did they do that? This is my question.

So I will tell you at the beginning, I don't know. I don't know how they did it. But there are clues, there are suggestions, there are ideas that are circumbiblical.

They're close to the Bible, but not quite in it. And this is where we're going to be, much as our Christmas traditions with the stockings and jolly old Saint Nick are. So let us begin.

There is a star associated with the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and these men see it. We know that. Let's take a quick look at the Matthew account just to read ourselves into the picture.

And this will justify me calling it a Christmas special. We will have actually read, we will have read beginning in Matthew chapter two. Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem saying, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him.

Nobody in Jerusalem has got clue one about the birth of a king or a star. They haven't heard the angels chant or sing. They have no notion of this.

This is all fresh information. And the wise men probably in retrospect would have been wiser to not go to Jerusalem because they sort of give the game away. This is going to result in Herod slaying all the children two years old and under because he's superstitious enough to not take any chances that there might be some usurper or some future threat to his rule.

And you think this guy's got to be paranoid because if the child is just born, it's going to be two or three decades before he could pose any sort of obstacle or potential rival. But in verse seven, Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, notice, they come in and have a formal audience and there's all kinds of hangers on and court attendants and a general audience for the first dialogue. They said, all the chief priests and scribes of the people gather and inquire where the Christ was to be born.

There's a convocation. They're trying to figure this out because he figures if these guys are coming, this isn't just any old king, this is Mashiach. And so what do the prophecies say? And they say, Bethlehem in the land of Judah are not the least among the rulers of Judah for out of you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

Now, do the wise men have access to this particular scripture, which significantly is quoted for us here? Yes, they do. It's Old Testament. This is, I'm going to have to start wearing my glasses for class, Micah 5.2, Micah 5.2. So they've got this, they've got a copy of the prophets.

This is helpful for us to know. So Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, now they've gone to his conference room and it's just Herod and this unknown number of wise men. We don't know that there, you know this, we don't know that there were three and we don't know if one of them was named Balthazar or any of the rest of that.

It's just a gaggle, it's a group, it's a caravan, it's an envoy that has come. So he called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. So these guys are astronomers.

I would say astrologers, but not astrology in the sense that we understand it today, but they watch the skies. Being wise men, they are the scientists of their day, but they are believing scientists and they know what time the star appeared, which means they were watching the sky beforehand for what reason, I don't know, but they know exactly when the star appeared, which means they looked at this. They didn't say, oh, I wonder how long that star has been here.

They knew when it appeared. So they kept regular observations, kept records and they recorded the appearance of this. Now, if a star appears, what do we know about it? It's either a supernova or a comet.

It's not one of your standard, been there for a couple of billion years stars or a distant galaxy. This is something new. It's not a planet.

It's not a meteorite or an asteroid. It is supernova. I will argue momentarily that I think it was a comet.

Because it seems to move. Supernovas don't move. Comets do.

This thing apparently moves. So we're going to assume again, I'm extrapolating, I'm reaching beyond the limits of safety here to say it's a comet. What time did it appear? He tells them or

they tell him.

He tells them, go and search carefully for the young child. And when you have found him, bring back word to me that I may come and worship him too. Well, being wise men, they see through the transparency of this.

So they departed and behold the star, which they had seen in the East went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was. Now, you say maybe this is an angel with a sparkler, you know, getting down into the atmosphere. If he can park right over the manger, comets cannot do this, right? So that's a fact we need to tuck away for later.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. Now, when they see the star, they rejoice. Haven't they been seeing the star on this long journey from the East to Jerusalem? Well, apparently there's something different about the star that causes them to rejoice with exceeding great joy when they see it.

I would submit that the star acted one way to guide them from the East to Jerusalem. And it did something that made them very joyful once they leave the audience with Herod because it's new and different. I think they might've been a bit uncertain until they emerge and they say, well, where do we find the child? And when they look up, this star is now actively guiding them, perhaps in a way it didn't before.

I'm, again, it's a speculation. Something, they've been looking at this star night after night after night, but this night when they look at it, they get really excited. So I think it's reasonable to assume something has changed.

So that's where we are so far. Wise men, they've seen Herod. They wanna find the child.

They look up, they see the star and they are really, really happy. And the star leads them to the house, not the stable, not the cave, not the inn because this isn't the birth time. This is after Jesus has been born and has been around and evidently has, they've rented some quarters or they're staying someplace other than where Jesus was born.

So they come into the house. They see the young child with Mary, his mother, fell down and worshiped him. So all of your creches and your nativity scenes with the wise men staring into the manger, throw them out.

Cannot use those anymore. The wise men never saw the manger. Sad to say, another tradition for Christmas gets the ax.

But wise men never saw the donkeys and the ponies or the little drummer boy or any of the other paraphernalia that surrounded the manger. And I'll bet you that drummer boy wasn't there very long. Newborn baby, tired mother.

I think Joseph probably ran that guy way out of the area. But none of this, this is after. This is

some days, even weeks perhaps after the child is born.

Remember two years old and under is what Herod decides to slay. So however, they have not returned from coming down for the census to go back home to Nazareth and Galilee. So not too much time.

They give the gifts, which are interesting in themselves. We've covered that in other studies, but I'm on the trail of this star. So we have seen his star in the East.

Now, if they were looking up in the Eastern sky and saw the star, they would not be following the star, following yonder star. Just for clarification, and I think we've touched on this in past Christmas seasons, but we in the East have seen his star. We living in the East.

In the East is where the wise men are, not where the star is. We have seen his star while we were occupying the land of the East. And we have come from the East to worship him.

So East is where the men are. Stars in the sky. And of course the sky moves from our perspective through the night.

And stars that start at one compass direction are going to end up in another. If you watch long enough, if you've done any kind of celestial nav, you know this. So what about this star? I'm still trying to figure out how did that? We have seen his star.

His star. Now, be it a star, comet, planet, angel with a sparkler, whatever else it might've been, these things are not tagged, are they? It's not an icon in the sky you mouse over and there's a pop-up that says his star, star for the King of Israel, right? So my question, seriously, we have seen his star. So this takes us, as some of you remember, back to numbers.

Chapter 24, verse 17. This is a passage of scripture that these men would have that associates a star with the Messiah. Star and Messiah.

This is what we're after, right? So numbers 24, 17. If you look at the context of numbers 24, you know that this is one of the prophecies of Balaam. And I used to wonder before this connection formed itself, why all the detail? Balaam is kind of a rascal anyway.

He comes to a bad end and he's sort of a prophet for hire and he gets thwarted because he tries to curse Israel for money and he ends up blessing them several times. And Balak is just infuriated with him. And, but he could simply say, and behold, Balaam blessed Israel.

But we get more than that. We get detail on the prophecies. One of these days, if we get a chance to do numbers, we'll look at these four prophecies of Balaam.

But when you get to chapter 24 and verse 17, which is in the fourth prophecy, the utterance of Balaam, the son of Baor, and the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened. The utterance of him who hears the words of God. How many times in scripture, seeing they see and do not perceive, hearing they hear and do not understand.

Here is a prophet and his eyes are opened and his ears hear the voice of the almighty. This is the word of God taken in at firsthand. He identifies himself.

He gives his preamble. And the very first thing he says is verse 17. I see him, but not now.

I see him, capital H, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob.

A scepter shall rise out of Israel and batter the brow of Moab and destroy all the sons of Tumult. Now, just as an aside, one of the interesting things about a comet is when it first appears, it's a dot, but as it approaches, we begin to observe the tail. And if it's a close enough, bright enough comet, instead of a dot, what does it look like? Looks like a line with a knob at the front, which would be a scepter shape, you could say, a scepter.

So a star shall come out of Jacob. A scepter shall rise out of Israel. Well, this takes us a bit apart from scripture to some writing that was known in Jesus' day alluded to, at least indirectly, by Jesus and the apostles and is quoted by Jude.

And that's the book of Enoch, 1 Enoch. Enoch records, if nothing else, some ancient traditions that were well-known, had been known for generations, had been passed down in other than the Bible. Into the recesses of antiquity, nobody knows how old these are.

Whether it goes back all the way to Enoch, there's no way of knowing. It's not in the canonical scriptures, but there are people who make an argument for Enoch. I did a paper, as I think I've told you, on the book of Enoch when I was in seminary in Tulsa.

And I did an extensive amount of research, read the book through and through and through, researched everything I could find on it. And it is, I will say this much, it's an intriguing book. It's not like the Acts of Paul and Thecla or the Annunciation Gospel of the Virgin Peter or whatever else, all these crazy books that they come up with.

It's got some authoritative-sounding sections in it. There are some things that kind of raise your eyes. But it was quoted by the early church fathers.

Many of them treated it as scripture all the way up till about the third century. And it was in circulation before the time of Christ. So you can have respect for it without necessarily treating it as canonical.

I say all of that to say this, in the book of Enoch, there is an extensive section talking about the astronomy of Israel. This is where we get our information that we covered in the book of Exodus about there being a constellation associated with each tribe. Four of those associations are known.

We know which tribe was associated with which constellation and the others have sort of been lost. But Jude, of course, quotes Enoch in 14 and 15. Enoch, also the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these saying, behold, the Lord cometh with 10,000 of his holy ones to execute

judgment upon all and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds, which they have committed in an ungodly way and all of their hard speeches, which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.

Now keep in mind this book of Enoch that Jude quotes, Jude, ostensibly, the half brother of the Lord, is talking about this coming of Messiah. And you remember the open question of whether there would be one Messiah or two, John the Baptist raises. And so this prophecy could have been understood as being fulfilled at the first coming of the Messiah or the only coming.

There wasn't knowledge that there were going to be two comings and they could see the details and not resolve it. Suffering servant, conquering king, how can he be cut off but not for himself and yet bring in the kingdom at the same time? How can that happen? Well, resurrection is the answer, but that wasn't well known. So there are other places in Enoch and I just wanna give you a little bit of credibility for Enoch before we continue because some of this information is gonna come from that book.

There are parallels that are noticed between what Jesus said and some of the phraseology in that book. Jesus said in Matthew 5, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." In Enoch 5, "The elect shall possess light, joy, and peace, and they shall inherit the earth." Jesus said, "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son." That's John chapter 5. Enoch says, "The principal part of the judgment was assigned to him, the Son of Man." Jesus said in Matthew 19, "They shall inherit everlasting life and inherit eternal life," is a phrase also used in the book of Enoch. Jesus pronounced woes on the rich because they basically received their reward.

He told the entire story of Lazarus and the rich man sort of toward that end. Talked about using mammon to make friends for yourself so that you might get an afternoon visit in the kingdom. In Enoch, it says, "Woe to you who are rich, for in your riches you have trusted, but from your riches you shall be removed." Jesus told the disciples, "You also shall sit upon 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel." It's Matthew 19 also.

And Enoch says, "I will place each of them on a throne of glory." Et cetera. Some of these are more compelling than others, but there are a lot of common themes and in some cases, common vocabulary and ideas certainly that are shared and that come out of Enoch. Well, here's the idea.

These 12 constellations and their association with the 12 tribes of Israel, give you a backdrop, a frame of reference in the sky when Israelites, when the Jews looked up in the sky, they would see passing in procession through the seasons and through the tilt of the earth and so on. These constellations rising and falling through the seasons. Anybody that has studied any stargazing at all, you know how these things sort of process through the year and what is visible at different times and at different seasons.

And through the course of a year, you would eventually see each of these 12 constellations sort

of rise and fall. And this in their minds, this is Jacob, this is Israel, this is our heritage, going back to the dim dark recesses of the past, thinking back to the camp of Israel, aligning itself with the four cardinal directions and Judah as a key with the tabernacle in the center and the East, the East orientation and all of that. We went through that when we studied the tabernacle and the camp of Israel in Exodus.

Well, all of this is history. This is like us with Washington and Jefferson and Ben Franklin and the key in the kite. I mean, this was just common knowledge.

It was beyond folklore, it was tradition. It was their history. And even more so cherished in days when they were oppressed by foreign powers.

You know, we were once the nation that dominated the earth, our land stretched to the horizon that we could see and our constellations rose and fell around its perimeter. We were hemmed in with these signs from God. This is how they looked at it.

And this is reflected. I wish I had time to read that there's an extensive section in Enoch all about this. Well, this is our backdrop.

And I think this was the frame of reference. This is the setting for the wise men. So we have spanned a distance now.

We've got the wise men in the East. They've got access to essentially the same sky. Longitude doesn't make that big a difference to what they're going to see, it's latitude.

And their latitude is very close to that of Israel. So they're going to be essentially viewing the same heavens. And sadly, it's these men who are apart and away, who mark the sign, who interpret the scriptures, who are watching and waiting and recognize that the time of the coming of Messiah is at hand.

And isn't it interesting that you've got the old man, Simeon, you've got the woman, Anna, you've got the shepherds out in the field and the greatest gray heads, the Sanhedrin, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the priests and all of the religious establishment and the government of Herod, utterly clueless, not the first hint. It is these outlying observers, those who are faithful, those who know the scriptures. Why did the angel appear to the shepherds? Here's an angel, he's on final approach.

He's coming down to talk to somebody and announce the Messiah. Where's he going to touch down? Who's he going to talk to? Well, you remember the marking angel that we saw going around looking for those who had a concern, those who were sensitive to their calling as the people of God. They are preserved from judgment and they are designated for favor and for blessing.

We want that to be us. As we come to the close of our first session tonight, we want to be the wise men. We want to be the shepherds.

The wise men, they are the erudite scientists. They are rich and famous in their own land, but it doesn't impede their search and their hunger to know the truth of God, to see the fulfillment of God's word. Shepherds at the very lowest end of the economic scale have that same hunger and that same desire and that same knowledge of God's word one way or another.

They have gotten in and heard the scrolls. They've been to synagogue. They've retained it and remembered it.

They've conversed about it at night and they know exactly what the angel is talking about when the angel appears. That's why he comes to them and to no one else because they're ready. They will get it.

They are the ones who are looking. They are asking and seeking and knocking and God sends the angel to them. It's irrespective of any other factor except their hunger and thirst for righteousness.

God's promise is that they will be filled and they are. So from the highest to the lowest, these shepherds are close by. They're going to get to see it happen that very night.

Now, wise men have got a greater distance to travel. They see the sign at a greater distance. They don't hear an angel's voice.

They don't hear the great company praising God and saying glory to God in the highest. They see the glory of God manifest in the heavens. They are witness to it every night as they observe the celestial movements and they get a different message but they arrive at the same place.

All these roads of faith lead to Jesus Christ and that's where they are. That's where we want to be at this Christmas season. We want our road to lead us to the Lord Jesus, not just to the foot of the Christmas tree, not just to the tasks of getting out the cards and cleaning up the needles and keeping the tree from catching fire, getting the lights out, traveling, making sure no one's left out, getting the right gift for the right person at the right price.

It's so consuming but if this is a season to think about the coming of the Lord Jesus, think about the ones that God sent the word to. What kind of heart did they have? What were they focused on? What were they willing to do? They could set aside their work and go see where the child lay. They could set aside their scientific endeavors and make a long journey by caravan not knowing exactly where they were going.

Radically different circumstances. We want to make that journey. It may just be from our little Judean hillside or it may be from the far reaches of Chaldea but we want to make that trip and in this season somewhere amidst all of the Frosty the Snowman music and all of the holiday greetings that you get in public, we want to find the Lord Jesus in the fullness of His coming.

His coming the first time, His coming back for us, His coming the second time to establish His kingdom, His presence at the right hand of the Father, His role as the light of the kingdom of

the Father in the eternal future. Our wonderful privileged status as His body and His bride. That is something to take some time to grasp and to appreciate and to pray about in this season.

We're going to pause and take our break. When we come back, we're going to see if we can follow this star and figure out how the wise men did it. That's what we'll see when we come back.