

The True Message of Christmas

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Date: 05 December 2019

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[0 : 00] This is turn back into the passage that we read, Gospel of Matthew chapter 2. I wasn't actually going to take a particular verse as a text, but I suppose if we had to we would take verse 11.

Verse 11, although we didn't actually put it up on the screen as a text. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary's mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.

Then opening their treasures they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and milk. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. And I really want to look at the chapter as a whole this evening, and particularly at the visit of the wise men. It is of course that time of year again, isn't it, when all these things come into prominence and we pay a lot of attention to them.

But what we find of course along with so many other things, is that much of what is written in scripture is twisted, is misinterpreted, is added to in what is of course essentially a pagan celebration.

[1 : 26] And I suppose the first thing that we would have to look at here is our typical perception of the wise men. You notice I'm being very careful not to say three wise men.

And the reason for that is quite simple. The text does not say at any point three wise men. If you look in verse one, behold wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

And it's left ambiguous, blank wise men from the east. Now we have a popular conception of course, or shall I say misconception.

This is what we typically see around this time of year, although the light is a bit bright but it doesn't matter. And we typically, this is the typical picture that if you ask people about the wise men, this is the answer that you get.

Three guys on camel, on camels travelling by night. And of course with a mysterious star in the sky.

[2 : 42] Now again, if you go back to the scripture, what it actually says, and it's interesting that no one, none of the other evangelists, give any account of the wise, the visit of the wise men at all.

None of them mention it. Even the most complete record that we have of Jesus's birth and so on and loop, there is no mention whatsoever of the wise men. And so perhaps the first question that we ought to answer is, why does Matthew mention it when nobody else does?

That's a very interesting question and there have been various answers given to it, but the commonly agreed one is the following. Matthew is writing his gospel to the Jews.

And therefore one of his main objectives in his writing is to prove from the Old Testament how the Lord Jesus Christ in all his circumstances fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Even in that chapter as we read, if you've got it open in front of you, you will see in verse six, again in verse 18 and again at the end of the chapter, and also in verse 15, the amount of prophecies that he quotes, where Jesus is to be born in verse six, you owe Bethlehem and the land of Judah by no means among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

[4 : 14] And that comes from the prophecy of Micah in chapter five and verse two. And then you see again in verse 16, what was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, out of Egypt I called my son.

And that comes from Hosea, Hosea chapter 11 and verse one. And then he actually quotes to us in verse 17 and 18, that then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, a voice heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation and so on.

That's from Jeremiah 31 15. And finally he takes a prophecy in the very last verse of the chapter, that had been spoken by a number of different prophets, he shall be called a Nazarene, that he would come from Nazareth.

Now that would seem to be the reason why Matthew opens up this particular prophecy that he is to show how it fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament.

And there are other ways in which the visits of the wise men fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament, which will come on to in a moment. But here we have the typical picture.

[5 : 39] And perhaps one of the most interesting things, I'm sure you'll get a Christmas card or two with that picture on them this year, or you've had one or one very similar. First of all, of course, again, we dispute the figure three.

Why is it that everybody thinks of three wise men, we have a hymn, for example, we three kings of the Orient are, written by John Henry Hopkins in England in 1857.

But both terms are wrong. They're not kings, and it's not certain by any means that they were three. Where does the idea of three comes from?

It comes from the gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh. There are three gifts. But almost certainly each of the wise men would have offered all three things.

It wouldn't have been that one gave gold and one gave frankincense and one gave myrrh, but almost certainly all three of the wise men would have given each of these things. If it was three, or if it was more than three, then these would have been the presents.

[6 : 46] But tradition is a wonderful king, a thing, of course, and through traditions, many sort of myths have been built around this particular scene.

You'll notice the star. Now, it would suggest from that, would it not, that the wise men are travelling by night. But nothing could have been further from the truth. People did not travel by night across the desert for a variety of reasons, one particularly because of how dangerous it was to do that.

And if you look again at the star, when we're told about the star, there's only two mentions of the star. In verse two, we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

There's no mention of them following the star. There's no mention of the star taking them and leading them from wherever they came from to Bethlehem. Simply that they saw the star when it arose.

And the only place we see after that is when they come to Bethlehem. And we see it in verse eight, sorry, in verse nine. After listening to the king, they went on their way.

[7 : 59] Behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

And it would seem that the star first appears to them in their own country, or countries, wherever they were in the East, and then reappears to them again on their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

Almost certainly they didn't come by camel either. If, as we think, the term that is used in Greek for the wise men magos, meaning astrologers or astronomers, not magicians, but astrologers or astronomers, almost certainly they would have travelled up the fertile crescent and taken one of the major routes across to Jerusalem.

And they certainly would not have come alone. These men would have been men of great rank and great privilege in their own country. And they would have been accompanied by servants and a retinue and probably soldiers to guard them.

And so this kind of picture is completely, it's a fairy tale, it's going to do, of course, with the reality of what probably happened, like so many other things connected with Christmas, but I'm not going to go into all the details of that.

[9 : 31] But there's very interesting theories concerning the star. Is there any astrological or astronomical proof that a star like this actually appeared around this time?

And of course that gives another question of course, when exactly did this happen? Now I'm sure you're familiar with the word epiphany, but can you tell me the date of epiphany?

Oh dear. Well epiphany is on the 6th of January. And epiphany is 12 days after Christmas. And I'm sure you all remember, isn't there a Christmas song on the first day of Christmas etc. and so on, we go through to the 12 days.

And that's where it actually comes from. Why was that? Because again, of course, when Christmas was fixed in the 4th century as a date to repress the Saturnalia by Constantine, when Rome became Christian, then it was decided that the visit of the wise men must be fairly close to Christmas to keep the celebration, and so were fixed advent first of all the time before Christmas and then epiphany the time between Christmas and the coming of the wise men.

12 days. But you can see from what scripture says that there is an immense time difference between the birth of Christ and the visit of the wise men.

[11:04] How do we know that? Well there are two significant details. First of all, we see here that they come to the house where Jesus was, where Jesus and Mary and Joseph were, over the place where the child was in verse 11 and going into the house.

Now I'm not going to go into all the arguments about whether Jesus was born in a stable or anything else or the inn etc. We know that that is probably not through.

I think I went through that once before years ago. But it would seem now that they are living here in Bethlehem in a house, whether it's their own house or somebody else's house, but Matthew quite clearly uses the word house.

But the other telling thing is that we see later on that Herod's slaughter of the innocents, what's known as the slaughter of the innocents. In verse 16, he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem in all that region who were two years old or under.

Now again, you can work out the time frame. It's that two years since the wise men came from the first place, or is it two years from the time that the wise men depart from them etc.

[12:29] It becomes very, very difficult to calculate the time. But it's quite clear there that it is not. This visit does not take place immediately after the Lord Jesus Christ is born.

It's a curious thing to think on this. The first people who worship the Lord Jesus Christ when he is born are the shepherds.

And we don't read of anyone else worshipping him until the wise men come. The first people who worship are Jews. The second people who worship are Gentiles.

That of course is something, it's a point that we miss. And yet the Old Testament is full of references to the Gentiles being brought into the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They are Gentiles. Where are they from and why did they come? And it's here we get into the realms of fantasy and various other interesting things as well.

[13:39] If, as tradition suggests, if the wise men coming from the east, almost certainly from around Babylon, which is where the word magos as astrologers was most commonly used, then they would have been aware of the scriptures of the Old Testament.

How can we know that? Well all you have to do is go back to the book of Daniel. And you can see very clearly within the book of Daniel that many Jews did not return to Jerusalem that synagogues were established in Babylon and that the knowledge of the scriptures of the Old Testament was well known, particularly the Torah, the law, was well known, the first five books, was well known in Babylon and was studied by many of these astrologers.

And it's there that they may have found this prophecy. Oh, it's alright. Can you go to the prophecy? I think it's in the book of Balaam. Number, number, number, sorry. We'll come back to that in a minute or two.

Number 2417. If you remember this particular chapter there's a point where, as the children of Israel are about to invade the promised land, where Balaam is asked by Balak to curse them. And instead of cursing, he blesses. He cannot curse because as a prophet of the Lord he is unable to curse the people of the Lord. But at the same time he makes this prophecy.

[15:16] I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.

It shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Shev. Now, whether the star there was to be interpreted literally was a matter of great argument.

But it was believed in the ancient world that the stars very often foretold the birth of important people. And round about this particular time there had been a comet that had actually, according to the astrologers, foretold the birth of Julius Caesar.

It's no surprise then that when these astrologers, whoever they are, we'll come to them in more detail in a minute, whoever they are, when they see this star rising in the east, we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him that it is a most unusual star and therefore that it is a sign of

something important that is about to happen.

And almost certainly they would have consulted the scriptures of the Old Testament to see if there was any reference to this. And the majority of commentators think that this was the verse that brought them on their quest to Israel, particularly to Jerusalem, to find out what was happening with the birth of this particular person.

[16:54] A royal personage that is indicated by the word scepter there, but that the star coming out of Jacob, a scepter rising out of Israel, indicated that this would be a king.

And that's exactly what they ask. Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? Now again, you would think that if this was an astronomical, if you can go back to the first one with the star now, if this was an astronomical event, that it would have been recorded in the writings of the ancients, or even so that we would have been able to trace through in the history of astronomy, for those of you who are fascinated by the stars and things, you would have been able to find out whether in fact there had been an unusual astrological event in the heavens at this particular time.

There are various theories about this. Again, I'm not going to go into a detailed astronomical explanation of it all, but there are two possibilities.

One, that this was a comet. It may well have been Haley's comet, but it depends on the year in which this takes place. And you know, of course, that biblical chronology dating exactly which year Christ was born is extremely difficult, in fact almost impossible to pin down, even though Luke talks about the year of the census and Quirinius and so on, although that may have been ordered in Rome in one particular year, it may have been another couple of years before it actually took place in Judea.

So it could be anywhere between the years 6 and 3 BC. That's usually the range that most people bring it down to. But there was something very unusual that took place in those years.

[18:54] Something that takes place only, I think about every 200 and something years, I can't remember the exact detail. And that is the Jupiter and Venus rise together in the east in what is called in conjunction.

In other words, the two planets are so close to each other that they appear to be one. And astrologers have actually worked out that the date on which this may have happened, when they saw the star over the house in Bethlehem, that what they would in fact have seen was Jupiter and Venus rising together and giving the appearance of being one single star, and as such being extremely bright.

Now you will be aware, and if you're not, you ought to be. You should know that the difference between stars and planets is that stars twinkle and planets don't. Planets have a fixed light.

And therefore if this was Jupiter and Venus together, it would appear as one very large fixed light. And at a certain point in their ellipse, they actually appear rather than moving as the earth moves, they appear to stand still for a period of time.

In fact, they're almost as if they're going slightly backwards. And the astronomers think that this is what is referred to here until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

[20:32] There is of course another explanation. There is the explanation that this is one of God's signs that is given in a mysterious way in order to point out to the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But there is a curiosity with it as well. If that is the case, how come nobody else mentions it? There's no mention of it anywhere else in any of the ancient texts or any records. Only the three wise men are the only ones who seem to see the star.

And that is quite interesting. Now there are all sorts of theories about this, and we could argue about this for hours and probably will and so on. But scripture says very clearly that the star indicates where the Christ was.

It came to rest over the place where the child was. And if God is using, as he often does, natural occurrences in a supernatural way, or whether he's using a supernatural phenomenon, or a special star created for the purpose, or a comet, or whether it was the opposition of Jupiter and Venus together appearing to be a very bright star, it doesn't really make any difference.

It doesn't really matter. What matters is that it had a purpose and that the purpose was to bring these gentile worshipers to the place where the Messiah was, to the place where the Christ was.

[22:06] That was its purpose. So let's look for a minute at the three wise men. Here you have in close-up detail a photograph taken off them just outside the house of course at the time.

And you'll see a curiosity, won't you, about them. I don't know if you were aware of this, but one of them is black. One of them is always represented as black.

Who were they? Well, I can even put names to them for you. Kasper Balthasar, he's the black one, and Melchior. Now, this is easily obtainable information.

It actually comes as huge articles on it on the internet and so on. Balthasar is supposed to be from Arabia and Kasper from India and Melchior from Persia.

Which again raises another question, if that's the case, how did the three come together to travel together and then be in the same place? And again, that is of course probably just tradition.

[23 : 11] It's much more likely that the Maghos were in fact from Babylon and travelling from the east in Babylon would come to Jerusalem seeking, you notice that the star does not lead them to Bethlehem at first, but they go to Jerusalem.

And they go to Jerusalem by themselves. And of course the tradition of the three wise men and their gifts and so on is something that is celebrated on Epiphany in various parts of the world.

It doesn't seem to be an important festival here. I don't know if it is, is it in Canada? Epiphany? Not really. It certainly is in Latin America and it is in Spain.

In Spain it's a huge festival. And one of the things here, you're all dying to know what's in the box on J. One of the things we were given in Peru before we came home, I was given by a few people, was an activity scene.

An activity scene is a big business in Peru. They're all over the place in shopping malls and everywhere. In Latin America, not just in Peru, but all over the place.

[24 : 19] And here of course you have, I only dropped three, I didn't bring the whole thing. Probably fact that here we're bored down.

Very pretty young too. But there's one of us in here somewhere. Here he is. Black face, Parthasar. And so the tradition is maintained. Now where the idea is that Parthasar is black, again where it comes from who knows.

But that's what you find through, if you look at paintings of the Nativity and so on, you find this in so many places. And this is the scene that you have here, you'll find it on Christmas cards as well.

And it's curious that he's always the one who's kneeling. Always the one who's kneeling. I have no idea why. But he always appears to be kneeling. Is he kneeling there?

[25 : 25] He's always kneeling. And whichever picture you look at, that's the case. And you notice again of course that they have the crowns depicting the Muskegs, which they weren't. And in the next slide, again the typical scene.

Now again the lights are a wee bit heavy here. But here he is again and he's kneeling down. And you notice that there are servants, you can't see it very well here with the lights, but there are servants and things.

And then the typical Nativity scene with Joseph and Mary and the child in the main jar. Now the suggestion there of course, although you can't see it very well, is that this is taking place in the stable.

But you notice again that even from the text here that that is quite wrong. This is not taking place in the stable, it's taking place in the house. Jesus is still in the manger.

And if you go back to the older translations of Scripture before the 1611 authorised version, the word that's used is not manger, the word that's used is cradget.

[26 : 30] And what cradget meant was a basket. Now whether it was a basket for carrying foodstuffs for the animals, or carrying fruit or vegetables or that sort of thing doesn't really matter.

A manger would fulfil a similar purpose as well. But it suggests again of course that the preparation that we had in coming to Bethlehem, that it was an unexpected birth.

The word manger is mentioned in Scripture, but the word stable is not. There's no evidence whatsoever that Christ was born in a stable. But that of course is another issue altogether.

So a better shift these before they fall down and break. They're extremely fragile. Quite precious as well.

Really. And come to the gifts. And it's the gifts that really matter when we look at this. Gold. Why gold?

[27 : 35] Well gold was of course a symbolism of riches. And it's interesting that most commentators think that this gold was the gold that was used in order to travel to Egypt towards the end of the chapter.

That Joseph and Mary would have lacked the finances to travel to Egypt and to live there, although he would have probably worked as a carpenter there, but that the gold would have supplied their needs while they're there.

But the gold has another significance. Each one of the gifts has a significance. The gold symbolises kingship. And it signifies the kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the next one we have is frankincense. Now I don't know if you're familiar with frankincense. It comes from a tree. And it's a tree that grows in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa and so on.

And you deal with it very much in the same way as you deal with a rubber tree. That is, you make a cut somewhere down round about here in the tree.

[28 : 48] And then the sap, the gum that is in the tree oozes out of there. And from there you find that as this hardens, it produces this kind of gum.

And the gum is used as incense. It's still used, you can buy frankincense still today. And the gum is used as an incense, but again it had a particular significance.

If you go back to the Old Testament, go back to the incense that was used exclusively in the tabernacle. And you find that frankincense is one of the main ingredients of it.

What is the frankincense there for mean? It means the priesthood of Christ. That Christ here is the one who will enter as a high priest for his people to bear the sins of his people.

But in doing so, he brings the incense of prayer and mediation before God the Father himself. And the same is true almost of myrrh.

[29 : 58] Myrrh was a tree as well, a smaller tree growing in very similar areas. And the procedure was the same. You cut into the bark of the tree and you allowed the tree to bleed.

And then you got this sort of perfumy stuff which was then broken off in lumps and was used in incense. And it was also used particularly in the anointing and embalming of dead bodies.

What does it signify for us with Christ? How many times does he prophesy his own death?

Throughout the Gospels, throughout the Old Testament, the fact that the suffering servant would come to die for his people is repeated over and over and over again.

And the myrrh signifies Christ the Prophet. The three offices of Christ and the three gifts that the wise men gave. King, Prophet and the princes.

Prophet, priest and kings, we usually put them together. And these are the ones that had been foretold in the Old Testament. If you look back to Isaiah chapter 60, you find the following.

[31 : 17] The multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Eastern. All those from Sheba shall come. And Sheba was the old name probably for Yemen, the area of what is Yemen nowadays.

They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. And that's exactly what the wise men are doing.

They are coming to worship at the good news of a saviour being born. Some think that it is the Shekinah glory that appears over the house.

When they travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the star standing comes to rest over the place where the child was. That it is the same Shekinah glory as was seen over the holy of holies and in the temple when Solomon consecrated.

The sign of the presence of the Lord between the cherubim over the mercy seat looking down on the law where atonement would be made each year by the high priest sacrificing for the sins of the people.

[32 : 33] And something that would lead us again through the symbolism of the Old Testament to the sacrifice that was to be made on the cross of Calvary.

This is why he came. This is why he came into the world. This is why he was born. And you notice again how he is preserved miraculously in dreams.

They are warned not to return to Herod so they depart into their own country by another way. But you notice that the purpose of their visit is to worship.

The first Gentiles to worship the Lord Jesus Christ. And their worship is accepted. These are not covenantal Jews.

They have nothing to do with the law. They know perhaps very little of the religious ceremony of Jerusalem and the Jewish tradition. But they have come to worship and their worship is not rejected.

[33 : 36] And it's exactly in the same way that you and I come to worship as we come to worship not the child but the Saviour. We come to worship the Saviour who has been crucified for us by the officers of Prophet, Priest and King.

The one who gave his life for us so that you and I might have forgiveness from our sins and eternal life. This is what it's all about.

This is what in a sense Christmas should be all about. That's the meaning of the word. Christ mass. The Holy Communion service that was offered at the festival of Christ's birth.

And remember of course that the date of Christ's birth is again something that we can debate for ages. But this is the symbolism of what we see here.

And you see that after that in a dream again Joseph is warned, told to take the child into Egypt again so that prophecy can be fulfilled.

[34 : 50] There were lots of other places he could have gone to to avoid Herod slaying the children. But he is told to go to Egypt. And again you see how that fulfills the prophecy.

Out of Egypt I called my son. So what do you see when you sum all this up? There are so many things aren't there about Christmas that our tradition, speculation all roll together.

And when we see for example the tradition of present giving at Christmas this is of course where it comes from. Nowadays I heard, I think it was today or yesterday on the BBC saying that the average family spends 700 pounds or will spend 700 pounds this year on Christmas presents.

The average family, that's an amazing amount of money. Now there's no question that the presents that the wise men gave to Jesus would have been worth far more than that.

We have no idea how much gold they brought. Frankincense was extremely expensive and Myrror was as well at the time. These were very expensive presents.

[36 : 10] And again they show the respect in which the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Christ child was held by these visitors.

How much do we debase the meaning of Christmas, the meaning of the wise men, the meaning of gifts by the kind of presents that we give, by how much time we spend on the friveries of Christmas rather than concentrating on the real message of it.

It's lovely to get presents. I won't turn any down if you want to give me a present. But that is not the spirit of Christmas. That's not what Christmas is about.

That's not what the wise men is about. And Matthew shows us so clearly that the purpose of the Christ being born is completely different.

It not only fulfills the Old Testament prophecy, it shows the offices of Christ, but above all it shows the child who is to grow into the Saviour, who is to be worshiped, to be worshiped and adored as mediator, as Saviour, as intercessor.

[37 : 24] And that is something that the majority of people at this time of year will have no interest in, or even little knowledge about. Of course it is a time where we can witness.

It is a time where we can point out the real meaning of Christmas. But when we're caught up in the commercialisation of it, these things are very often completely forgotten.

So there's a few thoughts to ruin your Christmas for you. May the Lord bless each reflection on his word to us. Let us pray.

Our Father in Heaven, we thank you for the gift of our Saviour, the gift above all gifts, the priceless gift that was given and prophesied from the very beginning, that the plan of salvation was put into action when your Son was born in Bethlehem.

And we thank you for that. Help us to appreciate the immensity of the love that was behind that, the immensity of the sacrifice, and to rejoice that we the Gentiles are also called and to worship and to adored the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[38 : 40] Be with us now as we conclude our worship. Make this a blessed time to us, a time of year, as we remember and study these things again, and partner our sins through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.