

Looking for God's Working Today

December 16, 2018

When we read the Bible we often come away with more questions than answers. God gives us some information about what things were like in the first century, but not as much as we would like to know. For example, there are lots of things about the birth of Jesus that we are not told. I have questions with no answers. We are reading from Matthew's biography of Jesus, chapter two.

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV) After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Let's look back at what God did.

There are fascinating aspects to this story. But I have questions.

Who were these guys?

They are called magoi or magi in the text, a Greek word. Others interpret this to mean they were astrologers. They were worshippers of the stars. Many ancient peoples believed in astrology, that the stars guided or determined one's life. These men were aware of what the night sky normally looked like. So when a new star showed up, they noticed it.

Some have guessed these men to be advisors to their own king back east. As such they would have come representing him. Possibly there were astrologers and advisors, maybe even religious leaders in their own country all rolled up into one office. Whatever they were, they have come because they saw the star.

A new star?

Now there are not a lot of stars to be seen around here, even on moonless nights, unless the power goes out. There is too much light pollution. But back then there was no light pollution

and there were hundreds of stars of different brightness to be seen even when the moon was out. Possibly this star was larger and brighter than most of the others, making it more noticeable as a new star, especially to those who worshipped the stars.

It wasn't a normal star. It did not act like a normal star. It led them. It moved. It led them towards Bethlehem and stopped moving over the house where the Joseph family was staying. That is not how any of the normal stars behave.

What Prophecy?

We do not know why they believed this special star signified the arrival of a new, special king of the Jews. There must have been a prophecy by someone announcing that a king of the Jews would be preceded by a special star. Religious scholars have tried to find some prophecy in our Bible that would serve, but without success.

Contrary, secular scholars have tried to find some natural explanation, like a comet or such to explain a reason for this story in the Bible. They have not succeeded either.

God made all the stars. He can easily make a new one any time He wants, even a temporary one. And it appears He did so. The prophecy, the star, these men coming from a far country announcing Messiah's birth were all part of God's plan. He was working to announce, in His way, to His people, the arrival of the Messiah.

We know the star announced more than a Jewish king. It announced THE Jewish king, the Messiah. We know that from Herod's question to the priests.

This was also God's way of providing money for the family's move to Egypt.

Matthew 2:13-15 (NIV) When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When the birth?

When did the wise men see the star in relation to the birth? We don't know. Many assume that the star appeared on the day of Jesus' birth. It appears to me that the star appeared twice. It may be that the star appeared some months before the birth so that the magi would arrive about the time of the birth. Or the Joseph family may have been living for some months in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus. Babylon, which is about the middle of the guesses for where the magi originated is 800 miles from Bethlehem. On camels that would be only 40 days average by camel. Even if they came from 1200 miles away. That would be only 2-3 months averaging 20 miles a day by camel, with some rest days included.

If they walked the whole way, they could average 10 miles a day, and it would take them 3-4 months. So where does the two year period come from? That guess comes from what Herod did.

Matthew 2:16-18 (NIV) When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

Herod wanted to wipe out any opposition to his dynasty as King. He wanted to name one of his sons as the next king, and even killed others of his sons and wives to try to make sure his will was accomplished. So Herod would try to hedge his bet.

Depending on the exact wording of the prophecy the magi were working off of, Herod might not know when the birth occurred. He would kill more than the boys of one year or less. He chose two years to make doubly sure that whoever this new king was, he would be killed.

We don't know if the star signified the beginning of the pregnancy or the actual birth. And the star evidently disappeared for a while on their trip and then reappeared when they left Jerusalem for Bethlehem.

Again, it did not act like a normal star. It LED them to Bethlehem and stopped over the house the family was staying in.

Of course Herod failed in his attempt to kill the new king. No one can outsmart God. No one prevents what God says must happen. Others in OT tried to prevent God's will. King Saul, the first king of the Jews, tried to prevent David from becoming the second king. God chose David to succeed Saul. And Saul failed to prevent it. This is just one example of several we could point out.

Why did they come?

This was something of cosmic significance. Heirs to a throne were born all the time without new stars announcing their birth. This particular one was prophesied ahead of time. That made it significant. And a new star actually showing up made it significant. **They wanted to be in on what Yahweh was doing.** They wanted to experience it for themselves. Note that they knew this was Israel's God, Yahweh, not their own gods. And yet they came.

Look at the lengths people went to, to see the total solar eclipse last year. Some traveled to another state overnight in order to experience this rare event. They wanted to be a part of the experience. These magi wanted to be a part of what God was doing in their world.

But compare them, sadly, to the leaders of Israel. The leaders of Israel were not watching for a special star. And when it was announced, they were troubled instead of excited. We can understand Herod's reaction. He did not want any rivals to his throne. But how puzzling the reaction of the priests was. None of them bothered to investigate. They heard of the arrival of the Messiah and they ignored Him. They were too busy with their own lives, too involved in the political status quo to welcome the Messiah's birth. I can't help but wonder what they will say to God on the Day of Judgment.

Today, we look back on those events with joy and wonder at what God did. We envy the magi for the experience they had of this special king, our king. But they have reason to envy us too. For we have been saved from our sins by our king.

And we want to experience what God is doing today. So...

Look around for what God is doing today: stirring hearts.

There are things only God can do and is doing. Each week I try to speak to your head, hoping all the while that God is speaking to your heart, and hoping even more that you are listening and responding to Him.

God can stir hearts. Some speakers are good at stirring emotions. That isn't the same as stirring a heart. God stirs hearts to convict of sin. God stirs hearts to move people to seek the truth of God, of life after death, of life's meaning. God wants each person to seek Him. This is what Paul revealed to those at Athens.

Acts 17:26-27 (NIV) From one man he (God) made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

God wants us to seek Him. And so He stirs hearts to bring that about. Some people ignore this stirring. Others respond to it and start seeking the truth about God. Jesus speaks of this stirring in John's gospel.

John 6:44 (NIV) No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Sin and Satan blind our eyes to the truth of life, the truth of God. We need the help of God to even begin the process. And He does. He is drawing people all the time. Some of the people you come into contact with this week may be being drawn by God. You can see the evidence of God stirring hearts in people around you if you know what to look for.

What to look for?

> People asking questions about religious or spiritual things

> People attending/visiting a church

> People reading the Bible

> People praying or asking you to pray for them

This is where you get to participate with what God is doing. Ask questions.

What is God doing in your life? How can I help? What can I pray for you?

Invitation

The Christians here have already gotten involved with Jesus. We have experienced the reality of Jesus for ourselves. We believe He is the savior of the world that God sent long ago. We prayed ourselves into his hands, receiving Him as Savior and Lord. You can do the same this morning.