

Bite Size Bible Study

Christmas Story – 6 Shepherds & Wise Men #222

By Pastor Lee

This is the sixth in a series on the Christmas Story. This segment is dedicated to the Shepherds and Wise Men. Luke records the story of the Shepherds while Matthew records the story of the Wise Men.

In Biblical Israel, nomadic shepherds lived a lonely life with their flocks, providing all the food and care that the sheep needed. They would guide their sheep by day to find food and watch over them at night. It was a lifestyle that was lonely and isolated from other people.

We are taught that shepherds were the lowest of the people in that era. Even modern-day shepherds in the middle east fit this description. A shepherd has no house. No clothes to change. He piles on his back whatever he has and keeps wearing the same clothes for years and years. He cannot bathe and smells of manure. He doesn't work in the shade of forest trees or tall rocks. He is exposed to the sun or rain all day, and at night it is very cold in that area. He is excluded from any community, and he lives in isolation. No one cares about him.

But God chose the shepherds to be the first to hear the good news of the gospel and to share their story with others. A significant story that would reach out and go far beyond Bethlehem!

The shepherds were possibly local Jewish men, doing the hard but mundane job that no one else would consider. These shepherds may have been seen in the countryside as they traveled to find fresh pasture and water for their sheep during the day. At night the shepherds would group together for added protection from the danger of attack by wild animals and poachers.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Luke 2:8 NIV

One night an angel appeared in the night sky with the bright shining light symbolizing the glory of the Lord, to announce and proclaim Jesus' birth to the shepherds. The sight of an angel, a supernatural appearance, terrified the shepherds. The angel, however, reassured them that the message was one of good news for all people. That very day a baby had been born in Bethlehem, who would be a Savior, and the promised Messiah.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:9-12 NIV

As if this was not startling enough, suddenly a 'great company of the heavenly host' appeared praising God and pronouncing a blessing on mankind. The phrase 'heavenly host' is used in Scripture to describe the armies of heaven, a vast company with a powerful pronouncement!

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Luke 2:13-14 NIV

As soon as the angels had departed, they hurried off to Bethlehem. After meeting Mary and Joseph and seeing Jesus, they shared that they had seen for themselves the fulfillment of God's word and a promise of hope for the future.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So, they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. Luke 2:15-18 NIV

When the shepherds came to Jesus, they had no expensive gifts to bring, but they came to acknowledge Him with their praise and worship as an offering.

Scripture reveals an expectation by God that the leaders of the nation would 'shepherd' the people well. They would serve to provide for and protect those in their care. Some kings and rulers took this expectation to heart, but too often, many did not and they would be rebuked by God through the prophets.

The shepherds represented the people of Israel, invited to come and worship their Messiah. The significance of inviting the shepherds first, those Israelites who were overlooked and disregarded by many, fulfilled the promise to redeem Israel first and then the Gentiles. Those who seek out and acknowledge Jesus are those who are humble and recognize their need for a Savior. The invitation goes out to all, our nationality, occupation, and social status, are not relevant – our response is!

Some say these shepherds were possibly priests from the synagogue with the responsibility of raising unblemished lambs for temple sacrifice. And that would be interesting, if it is fact. That would mean that Jesus the final sacrificial lamb was born near where the sacrificial lambs were raised.

In Matthew 2 we learn of the story of the Wise Men.

Before we progress too far, we need to define this term Wise Men. The original word is Magi (plur), or magus (sing), and is the term for priests in Zoroastrianism and earlier Iranian religions. This original word has been translated into various English words such as "king", "magician", "sorcerer", "illusionist" and "fortune-teller"; and in more recent times as "wise men".

Herodotus identifies the *magi* as interpreters of omens and dreams. Likely they were astrologers in part and produced astrological predictions. Over many years they had developed the necessary observations of the sun, moon, planets and zodiac signs in the sky to a point that they could predict an alignment of these objects which were purported to have physical consequences to life on earth.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. This may have occurred within months to several years after the birth. Scholars disagree on this point.

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 when it rose and have come to worship him."

Likely they had seen the signs of an alignment of Saturn and Jupiter, which in their understanding meant the birth of a king.

*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 Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehe 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 shepherd 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 search carefully 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 when it rose 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, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.
Matthew 2:1-12 NIV

These men were quite likely they from Arabia or Persia and were likely Gentiles. The shepherds were from the Bethlehem area and were most certainly Jews, yet the wise men were Gentiles. The new "king of the Jews" was adored at his birth by both Jews and Gentiles.

The wise men arrived with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Rich people usually possess gold, and gold was mined in Arabia. But more specifically, frankincense and myrrh are harvested from trees that only grow in southern Arabia. Wealthy dwellers of those regions would naturally have gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew doesn't give us the names or the number of "wise men" that visited Jesus. It is only later tradition that they get names and the number three.

Luke tells us of the visitation and elation of the Jewish people, the so-called lower-class people. These people were anxious for a Messiah to come in their lifetime. But as we see in the rest of the Gospels, they were expecting a warrior Messiah to defeat Rome and stop its oppression of the Jewish people, and restore Israel to it's glory days.

Matthew tells us of the Gentile reaction to the birth of the Messiah, who came to honor the King of Israel. This did not set well with Herod and later we find that it wasn't going to set well with the Jewish priesthood and the elite, who were doing fairly well under the Roman rule. They didn't want a king nor the salvation that would come from a Messianic King.

However, as we saw in the two genealogies Jesus came for all nations, cultures and strata of life. Some of the people recognized that they needed forgiveness for their sins, others still needed to become aware that they were not as righteous as they pretended to be. Jesus came for all and was willing to die a criminal's death to demonstrate the love that God has for them.

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