

The Significance for Faith...

The Fulfillment of Scripture

Several passages from the Old Testament come to mind as one reads the nativity stories in Luke and Matthew.

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” (Isa 7:14 NRSV)

Many scholars insist that the original meaning of this passage concerned a young woman, not a virgin. But the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint had already translated the Hebrew *almah* (young woman or virgin) with the Greek word *parthenos* which does mean virgin. Early Christians simply accepted this as the meaning of the biblical text which they and many other Jews had used for generations.

Questions for discussion and reflection...

1. Give reasons why it has always been important to Christians that Jesus was born of a virgin.
2. Consider the difficulty for the first Christians in maintaining this belief against charges by opponents that Jesus was a *mamzer*, an illegitimate child, and therefore unworthy of respect in society.

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” (Mic 5:2 NRSV)

Not all scholars agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Some believe he was born in Nazareth. A few believe he was born in a different Bethlehem in Galilee. But besides the fact the Matthew and Luke say Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, the tradition from early times says the actual cave/stable where Jesus was born was visited by Christian pilgrims, and that it was on the outskirts of Bethlehem. Despite claims by some that the Gospel of John has Jesus' opponents denying the possibility of his messiahship because he did not come from Bethlehem, a closer look shows his opponents to be mistaken with every such objection in the Gospel.

1. Why is it important where Jesus was born?
2. Reflect on the irony that an edict from an unfriendly, unjust government caused the true, future king from David's descendants to be born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of the Scripture.

“The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. (Gen 49:10 NIV)

In this wondrously strange passage Jacob blesses his son Judah and, in doing so, determines the future of the tribe. There will be a ruler to come from Judah—clearly King David. Yet the rule of Judah will not be limited to this one man. The ruler’s staff will not depart... The difficulty in translating and understanding “he comes to whom it belongs” has naturally made a messianic reading of this text inevitable.

1. Having seen the video, can you imagine people long ago identifying the bright star Regulus as the scepter between the lion/Judah’s feet, and Jupiter representing ‘to whom it belongs’ coming to the scepter in a threefold conjunction? Is this interpretation likely?
2. Why do Judah and David have so important a role in the nativity stories? Can you cite other examples? (Hint: Luke 2:4).

“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 borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites.” (Nu 24:17 NRSV)

Here is another wonderfully strange passage. A man named Balaam is speaking, a kind of professional psychic who can bless, curse, and tell the future. Balaam refuses to curse Israel for payment by an enemy king, because he of all people knows how foolish it would be to oppose Israel’s God. In the course of all this he speaks the words cited above. A star will come who will exercise dominion over Israel’s neighbors so Israel can live in safety and security.

The people of the Dead Sea Scrolls were very interested in this text from the Book of Numbers. They were already interpreting it as messianic more than a century before Jesus was born (Damascus Document 7:19; War Scroll 11:6-7; Testament of Judah 24:1-6), . Did they think of this star as a person only, or as a person who would have a representative, actual star in the heavens? The second possibility should not be quickly dismissed, because it is consistent with the way many thought at that time, and what appear to be horoscopes were found among the body of literature known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

A century after Jesus a man named Simon led the Second Jewish Revolt. He was proclaimed the Messiah by the famous Rabbi Akiba. The result was eventual disaster for the nation. They came to call him Simon bar Kozeba: Simon, son of the Lie. But before this they had known him as Simon bar Kochba: Simon, son of the Star.

1. Reflect on the expectation that the star/messiah would “crush” Israel’s enemies. How does Jesus Christ exercise the authority which is his?

2. Before and after Jesus' days on earth, star and messiah went together in the minds of Jews. The Bible has many symbols for Jesus. How is the symbolism of a star especially appropriate? What other symbols can you think of?

"A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD." (Isa 60:6 NRSV)

The last chapters of Isaiah are about restoration for a nation growing weary of waiting and trusting in God to deliver. The items named above are signs of a restored people. Isaiah says: it *will* happen. The Magi's gifts resonate with Isaiah 60.

1. What does it mean that signs of a restored nation are connected with the child Jesus?
2. What effect does Jesus Christ have on persons and nations today?

A Cosmic Sign

If the Star of Bethlehem was a conjunction of planets as presented in the program, Jesus' birth was accompanied by a sign all the world could see, yet not necessarily understand. At least one other cosmic sign occurred on the day of his crucifixion.

1. "What are the odds" that the birth and death of Jesus should *accidentally* be accompanied by cosmic signs?
2. Signs can be misread as well as read. Perhaps the people in Rome thought the great conjunction of 2 B.C. was about Augustus. Reflect on how all the Scripture taken together leads to the proper interpretation of God's activity and God's will. (Hint: even the Magi could not find the King of the Jews based on the star alone. They had to be enlightened by the Micah prophesy about Bethlehem by Herod's advisors.)
3. Why would God display such a sign before the birth of Jesus?

King for All Nations

Wherever they came from, the Magi traveled to find the King of the Jews. Churches that celebrate the visit of the Magi call that day Epiphany. Epiphany is from a Greek word meaning to show or make plain. God, through the star, made plain that the Son of God was in the world. Yet the mission to the nations was still decades away, and even then it

would be an idea so revolutionary that many Jewish Christians would have trouble accepting it.

1. Reflect on the way that the Gospel's good news of Jesus is like a secret too good to be kept. Already it leaks out to the Magi. Why do others have such trouble with it?
2. The Magi represent people far away. How does this story work together with other Scripture texts to tell us that Jesus is meant for the entire world?

Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh

Much has been made of the possible symbolic meanings of these gifts. While the Bible's interest here is related to the Isaiah 60 text (above), it is certainly appropriate to think further about the Magi's gifts.

Gold is a gift fit for a king, reminding us that Jesus truly is a king who actually rules a kingdom forever.

Frankincense is a substance made from the sap of aromatic plants. It is itself a kind of incense. Therefore it had a special place in the ritual duties of priests. Frankincense can remind us that Jesus is our great High Priest (See Hebrews 7, 8, 9) who has atoned for the sins of the world.

One of the uses for myrrh was an agent within burial shrouds surrounding the dead. It was a sign of love and respect, and it mitigated the odor of decomposition. Myrrh reminds us that Jesus came to complete God's plan which included dying as a ransom for many.

1. Do you think the Magi understood and intended the potential symbolism of their gifts?
2. What might gold, frankincense, and myrrh have meant to the new parents, Joseph and Mary?
3. Can you recall the verses of "We Three Kings"?