

CHRISTMAS AS SEEN FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Jewish people were living in the excitement of the coming of the Messiah.

Are we living in the excitement of the second coming of the Messiah?

For this study we're going to look at three aspects of the Christmas story that will take us into the Hebrew Scriptures for background.

JOHN THE IMMERSER/THE BAPTIZER

Isaiah 40:3 speaks of John – “The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord.”

John would be the herald for the Messiah – the Messiah Who would come as the ULTIMATE SACRIFICE for sin.

The announcement of John's birth was given to his father, Zacharias - at the time of SACRIFICE in the Temple in Jerusalem!

THE SHEPHERDS

In reading the Christmas account in Luke 2 – it really doesn't make much sense unless you know what was written about the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Luke 2:8-12. . . . What does this mean to us in Arizona in 2011?

Firstly, why would an ANGEL OF THE LORD appear to shepherds?

Shepherds were the lowest of the low!

These Jewish shepherds were under a rabbinical ban since they were living in the fields.

Because they were with their flocks in the field 24/7, it was impossible to follow all the law's religious regulations –many of which the Rabbis imposed. Therefore, they were shunned by the Jewish community.

Where were these shepherds tending their flocks?

Micah 5:2 – Bethlehem Ephrathah.

Firstly, there were 2 Bethlehems. . .

One in Galilee – 6 mi. NW of Nazareth (Josh. 19:10, 15 – in the listing of cities given to the tribe of Zebulun)

Secondly, re: the Bethlehem in Judah, Ephrathah was north of Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem

(We know from Genesis 35:16-20; 48:7 – points to a place one mile north of present day Bethlehem and 4 miles from Jerusalem.)

Sheep destined for Temple sacrifice had to be “kept” in fields (24/7 – year round) that were within a certain radius from the Temple in Jerusalem. Ephrathah (on the northern outskirts of Bethlehem) was within that radius.

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AND in Ephrathah there was a watch tower which was used by shepherds for protection – against enemies – against wild animals.

According to writings by the Rabbis – this watch tower was the place where ewes were brought to give birth NOT to ordinary lambs – but to lambs that were destined for Temple sacrifice in Jerusalem. Sacrifice theme surrounding Jesus’ first coming!

Micah 4:8 – “To you, O tower of the flock, (this is the watch tower) to you shall it come – even the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.” WHO would come? The ONE Who would bring the Kingdom! JESUS!

The glory of the Lord shone round about the shepherds.

The glory of the Lord is God’s manifested presence (Ex. 16:7) – “Shekinah” in the Hebrew. It was the Shekinah glory of God that appeared to the children of Israel in the wilderness – in the pillar of fire by night – in the cloud by day.

The glory of God filled the Temple when Solomon dedicated God’s house.

We read in Ezekiel 8 through 10 that the “Glory of God” departed from the Temple – the glory of the Lord departed from Israel.

John 1:14, “And we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Jesus the Messiah is the very glory of God in the flesh!

The angel speaks of “Good tidings of great joy. . . .”

It was prophesied in the Tanakh – in the Hebrew Scriptures - Isa. 41:27 – that the Messiah would bring “good tidings”.

These “good tidings” would be “to all people”

When God made the covenant with Abraham 2000 years before Jesus, God promised to bless all the families of the earth through the Jewish people.

God’s plan of salvation/redemption included all peoples – not only the Jews – but the Gentiles too (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 49:6 – The Messiah would restore Jacob [Israel] and be a light to the Gentiles).

The Angel mentions that this great news – this joy - was taking place in the

City of David - Bethlehem – where David was born. The Jewish shepherds knew that the Messiah Who would be King would be a descendant of David.

Savior - He would save Israel – He would deliver Israel from physical bondage – and from the bondage of sin. The Jewish people were looking for a Savior.

The Hebrew word for “salvation” in the Heb. Scriptures is ---
Yeshua!!!

“Born”– In Gen. 3:15 we read about the Messiah as the seed of the woman.

Isa. 7:14 – a virgin shall conceive and give birth to Immanuel – God with us.

Isa. 9:6 – unto us a child is born – and His name shall be wonderful, counselor,
mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace

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“Messiah the Lord” - Messiah means “Anointed” . In Biblical times Prophets, Priests,
and Kings were anointed with oil.

The Messiah Whom God the Father had promised would be anointed with oil (Isa.
61:1). The Messiah would fulfill all 3 roles: Prophet (the Word), Priest (offered Himself
as the ultimate sacrifice; He is now our great High Priest), and King (will sit on and rule
from David’s throne during 1,000 years of peace when He returns).

The “sign” in Luke 2:12:

“Wrapped in swaddling cloths” - the lambs that were destined for Temple
sacrifice – when they were “ewed” – when the Ewes gave birth to these lambs – lambs
which had to be without blemish to be eligible for sacrifice – they were wrapped in
swaddling cloths – to protect them from bruising when they came into the world kicking!.

And – swaddling cloths – were also used for burials!

In this message to the shepherds we have symbols of sacrifice and death!
How appropriate for the entrance of the One Who would be our sacrifice!

Another part of the “sign” – this Babe was to be found lying in a manger – feeding trough
for animals.

Lowly birth:

Two images of lowliness – the lowly shepherds AND – in lowliness the
Messiah came.

AND, He Who was born – it appears – in the tower of the flock (as we
read in Micah 4:8) – He Who *is* our STRONG TOWER.

Prov. 18:10 – He is a strong Tower; the righteous run into it, and are safe"
Prov. 18:10.

Did the angel tell the shepherds where to find the Babe? Did the shepherds ask WHERE
in Bethlehem they’d find this baby?

Many of the homes in these towns had mangers. Some were merely ledges
protruding from the wall with hay for the livestock. These mangers could be found in
side rooms – in homes – set up for visitors who traveled with their animals.

In other homes there were mangers in the “livingrooms”. Homes typically had
one room. Mangers were even set up in the main room. How do we know that mangers
were inside homes?

I Sam. 28:24 – the witch of EnDor took a calf from the HOUSE and gave it to Saul.

Judges 11:31 – Jephthah vowed that the first thing coming out of his HOUSE – he would offer as a sacrifice – fully intending that it would be an animal that would come out of his HOUSE. But, of course, we know his daughter came through the door first.

The shepherds might've had to comb the entire city looking for this baby. YET Luke 2:16 tells us that they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe!

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I'm going to suggest that they found Him in that watch tower in Bethlehem Ephrathah – in the tower of the flock!

The Shekinah glory of God Who led the Jewish people through the wilderness in Moses' day, surrounded the Jewish shepherds in the field in the area of Ephrathah north of Bethlehem and the message the angel shared with those shepherds was directly from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The account of the shepherds speaks to the Messiah Who came as our perfect Passover Lamb – Who came – in His first coming – as the Suffering Servant – Who died for our sins.

THE MAGI

He's coming again. Time has gone by – and we're waiting.

Scripture speaks to a gap between the Messiah's first coming and His second coming.

Let's return to the Christmas account – but in the book of Matthew.

The Magi appear on the scene after time has gone by – following a gap - possibly 2 years from the time of Jesus birth. (Some say 3 mos.; some say 4 to 6 mos. But, there is a gap).

AND, we see the wise men visiting Jesus with a – different “agenda”.

The shepherds came to the family immediately following Jesus' birth. They found Him lying in a manger (Luke 2:12, 16).

The wise men only saw the star when Jesus was born and it took them some time to get to Bethlehem? NO - Jerusalem (Matt. 2:7, 16)

The wise men found Him in a house – not lying in a manger (Matt. 2:11). AND, He was a “Child,” not a “baby” (Matt. 2:11)

Matt. 2:1-2.

The shepherds' account speaks to Jesus as the Suffering Servant. When does He come as the Suffering Servant? At His first coming.

The Magi's account speaks to Jesus as the King? When does Jesus come as King? At His second coming.

And, there's a GAP between Jesus' first and second coming.

There's a GAP between the shepherds' visit and the visit by the wise men.

These Magi – these wise men --- who were they?
Matthew never calls these men "kings".

They were not kings. The Greek gives them the title of "magoi" or "Magi" – which means astrologers.

We have a limited amount of information about the Magi in the NT. However, we read about the Magi in Daniel in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Briefly – they were a priestly tribe of people from the Medes and the Persians.

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They became interested in astronomy and astrology and the study of the stars. According to notes from John MacArthur, they didn't make much of a separation between the superstition (astrology) and the science (astronomy).

They were known as those who interpret dreams (Daniel 2:1-4).

At the time of the Babylonian Empire, these Magi were dwelling in the area of Babylon – which we know from the book of Daniel. WHO ELSE was in Babylon at that time? The Jews! Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, took Judah into captivity (605 BC, 597 BC, 585 BC).

Why was there even a relationship between Daniel and the wise men?

Daniel saved the lives of the Magi when they couldn't interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Daniel 2). And Daniel became the chief administrator/master over the wise men (Dan. 2:48)

Daniel, a faithful Jew, taken into captivity to Babylon - believed in God's provision – the Messiah. Do you think he might've shared that with the Magi? God chose the Jews to be salt and light to the world. Isn't this a grand display of God's plan?

The Jews were not obeying God in this mission – so God scattered them and took them to Gentile lands where some of them – Daniel and his friends - could be "salt and light."

Did you know that the book of Daniel was written while Daniel was in Babylon and much of it was written in Aramaic, the language of the Babylonian Empire?

In fact, the book of Daniel speaks about the time of the Jewish Messiah – who would be for the world - so here was a book written in Babylon which prophesied about WHEN

the Messiah was to come (Daniel 9:24-27) – before the destruction of the second Temple in 70 AD.

Scripture tells us that many of the Jews remained in Babylon and Persia (Esther, Mordecai). So there was continuing intermingling with the wise men.

A bit more about the Magi – from history – they weren't kings – they were “king makers.” In Persia, those aspiring to kingship had to be approved by the Magi.

Fast forward. . . to the time of the Magi's visit to Jerusalem. . .

. . .the Persians were having problems w/ their king at this time. Actually, King Freidas IV – who was a real loser – was deposed. So, the Magi – the “king makers” – were looking for a new king.

That's why the Magi traveled to Jerusalem specifically – because of Daniel's teaching about the Messiah. The Magi were looking for the One Who would be the King of Kings reigning from Jerusalem.

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And their gifts --

Gold – symbolizing royalty

Frankincense – speaks of deity; frankincense was used on the altar of incense in front of the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple. Frankincense was a sweet aroma to God.

Myrrh – was used to embalm the dead.

These gifts truly depict the Messiah Who is God, Who would die for sin, and Who will return and reign as King.

In the Christmas account in Matthew and Luke we see God's plan of salvation – in a way that we might've not before seen it.

Isn't it exciting that we can share these GOOD TIDINGS? When these good tidings of great joy are rec'd – when Jewish person or Gentile person cries out to God and asks for forgiveness for sin through the Jewish Messiah, Jesus – the greatest gift is rec'd – ETERNAL LIFE - Life with God that lasts FOREVER!

