

As you are undoubtedly aware, there has been a great rise in feminism in the last century or so, and feminist leaders have made it a point to rewrite Christian scripture to show how the world would be better if women had been left in charge all along, rather than letting men run the whole thing into the ground. The biblical story of the Three Wise Men is among those stories feminists have chosen as proof of men's stupidity. If it had been the story of the Three Wise Women they would have asked for directions rather than following a vague star. They would have arrived on time, not twelve days late. They would have helped to deliver the baby. They would have helped to clean the stable. They would have made a casserole. And they would have brought practical gifts! Oh well, what is a guy to do?

I do want to look at these three highly impractical gifts because they are highly insightful. However we should first look at the broader context of the Christmas story. In the pulpit in front of me is our nativity scene. It is like many in that it contains a figure for Joseph and Mary. There is a baby

Jesus in the manger. There are animals, shepherds, wise men, and an angel overseeing it all.

The problem is, there is no substantial evidence for such a scene anywhere. It comes from an imaginative combination of Luke's gospel and Matthew's gospel. The two biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus have irreconcilable differences, but we have harmonized them so smoothly that we are unconscious of the discrepancies.

We should spend a few minutes just reminding ourselves of how much of the "biblical" Christmas story is really our imagination. For example, in what type of structure was Jesus born? Many people will say a stable or a barn. The Bible actually doesn't say. What it literally says is that Jesus was laid in a manger because there was no room in the *guest room* for him. Remember, most houses were two stories tall in those days, and animals were often housed in the lower level. Having a manger in a house was probably quite common. Matthew's gospel that we read today actually suggests that he was born in a house - but we completely ignore that detail.

How many wise men were there? Most people immediately answer "3". Where did they get that idea? They certainly didn't get it from the Bible! The Bible doesn't say how many there were. The number 3 comes from the three gifts they offer.

Where does the star rise that the Wise Men follow? Most people will say, "In the East." No, the Bible does not say that. The wise men *came from* the East. And think about it, if the star rose in the East they would have traveled east - not west. And besides, because of the rotation of the earth all heavenly bodies rise in the East. No, against all the rules of astrophysics, this star rose in the West.

Many people imagine Joseph and Mary arriving in Bethlehem on a donkey. The Bible doesn't say that. There's no mention of donkeys, camels, or any animals whatsoever in the birth story of Jesus - other than shepherds watching their flocks.

We have various names for the Wise Men. We call them Three Kings. We call them Three Wise Men. Sometimes we call them the Magi. That is closest. The truth is we have no equivalent for them in the English language. The Greek word is **μαγοι** which

hints that they were Persian or Babylonian priests in the occult, such as astrology and the interpretation of dreams. The idea of them being foreign kings is a later interpretation of their role through Psalm 72:10-11 and Isaiah 60:3.

I could go on, but I won't. Sadly, as we sit here on church on January 6th, the Day of Epiphany, clinging onto the twelfth and last day of the Christmas season, we realize that most everything we think we know about the birth of Jesus from the Bible is in reality the creation of centuries of imagination and tradition. Do we harm ourselves by doing this? No. Not really. It is a relatively innocent mistake. That is, as long as we still allow the Bible's actual story to speak clearly.

We read from Matthew today so what does Matthew actually tell us? He tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This is important information, not because of trying to be historically accurate but because Jewish belief was that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, just like King David. When Jesus appears on the scene as an adult he comes from Nazareth. The early Christians, like Matthew, had to give Jesus roots in Bethlehem if he was to be considered legitimate to Jews.

But, we learn that the Jews haven't noticed Jesus' birth. They are all ignorant of it. However, non-Jews, or Gentiles, from the East did notice something. According to their beliefs when a great king was born there were signs in the sky. They observed such a thing and followed.

Many explanations have been attempted to explain the star the magi followed. Perhaps it was a comet or a planetary conjunction or something else. Here we are faced with a detail that we simply cannot reconcile with science as we know it. It is simply a miracle and defies explanation - and there are plenty of explanations needed. Why didn't other people see it? Why did it lead the Magi west to Jerusalem? Then stop. Then change directions and move southwest to Bethlehem? Then stop over the house where Jesus was? Why didn't the other religious leaders follow the magi from Jerusalem to Bethlehem?

I think these are all valid questions. But the Bible has no intention of giving us any answers. Perhaps it is troubling to our faith. But if we are going to give the true biblical Christmas story its due attention we collide with these unanswerable questions.

I can, however, speak to what our gospel writer Matthew wants us to understand from this. These magi - these foreigners of a different religion - recognized that God was up to something. They saw a sign. And they not only saw it, they acted on it. It was belief put into action. They set out on a journey of which they did not know the end. (Now that's something for a man to tell his wife, "Well dear, I'm off. I'm going to follow a star to wherever it leads me. I don't know when I'll be back so don't hold up dinner for me.")

The star did not lead them on a straight journey. It wove from place to place, and the magi consulted with other experts along the way. A life of faith is not a straightforward journey either. (Interestingly, the Bible's account of the birth of Jesus isn't a straight story either.) But ultimately they were led to Jesus. When they saw him they were filled with joy.

And let's not forget that part. I often imagine three kings gravely and reverently offering three symbolic gifts: gold for royalty, frankincense as a sign of the high priest, and myrrh - an embalming spice - as an omen of the crucifixion. But

I am probably wrong with this. Matthew tells us that when they found the house they were overwhelmed with joy. Have you ever been overwhelmed with joy? They were. And then they went in, they saw Mary holding Jesus, and they knelt down with joyful anticipation of what this child would mean for the world, and offered him valuable and extravagant gifts - gifts fitting for a great king.

It is a wonderful account of the birth of Jesus. But clouds are brewing. You know what comes next. Herod and the religious leaders aren't pleased. There can't be two kings. There must only be one. The powers at work in this world are not happy. The magi leave by another road but Herod, like many tyrants fearful of the people they rule, starts a massacre.

It is Epiphany. An epiphany is the revelation of a god, or it is a great insight. God's presence has been revealed to the nations of the world. It is a good and wonderful and joyful message. But not everyone likes it. May God give you the insight to follow the stars God has placed in front of you. May God give you the strength to follow those stars though the paths be winding. And may God give you the courage to face the struggles that come when others oppose God's agenda. Amen