

The Blessing of the Messiah – December 20, 2020

Introduction — a Sunday school teacher had told her 6 year old students the Christmas story in Matthew 1 and Luke 1, and they had sung several Christmas hymns during December. On the Sunday before Christmas, she asked the boys and girls to draw the nativity. When she came to Billy's drawing, she said, "that is very good. I easily recognize Mary and Joseph, the baby Jesus in the manger, and the shepherds. But who is that plump little boy off to the side?" Billy said, "that is 'round john virgin!" It is easy for children to misunderstand the songs and the story at Christmas— time, when they are hoping for the best gifts they might get. But — some people are self—centered all of the time, focused only on themselves and their lust for power or wealth, or whatever....we see one man like this in the Christmas story in Matthew

i. The self—centeredness of King Herod

1. Herod was an Idumean, from an Arabian land just to the south of Judea & Jerusalem. His grandfather had been Jewish, and his father had been installed as the "governor" and ruler of all Palestine, by Julius Caesar, the roman emperor. Herod was 1st made governor of galilee when he was 25 years old; & after his father died, he gained control of the rest of Palestine from others who had a claim to it, and kept control, by deception & murder, including the murders of several relatives and family members. He was a ruthless, cunning, murderous man who held human life in little regard.

2. Herod, being only half-Jewish, was not the rightful heir to the throne of David— he was made King by Caesar— and he was hated by many of the Jewish people, especially the religious leaders. He was very concerned that the Jewish people might rally around behind a religious figure, especially one who might have a rightful claim to the throne of David! He felt threatened to have a possible replacement for him and his sons come from the city of David, and plotted a solution.

3. King Herod, being aware of the powers of Rome and the world beyond Israel, probably knew that there was a general expectation in the world, and not just in Israel, for a messiah or King , from the east or from Judea. The roman historian, Suetonius, wrote, "There had spread over all

the orient an old & established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world.” 1

4. Another roman historian, Tacitus, said: “there was a firm persuasion . . . That at this very time the east was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judaea were to acquire universal empire.” 2

5. It is even reflected in the writings of the Roman poet, Virgil, who wrote in a work known as the “messianic eclogue” that hailed the roman emperor Augustus as the “savior of the world.” So, there was at the time when Jesus was born, “a general expectation of an act of God to bring a person into the world who would deliver [humans] from [their] bondage and limitations.” 3 could this “King” the wise men sought, the magi from Persia, be that expected ruler? Or — would this “King” for whom they were looking be the “messiah of god” that the Hebrew prophets foretold?

6. Whoever this “King” was that the wise men were hunting, the birth of the messiah was a problem for Herod — it threatened his political power, and the plan to pass that power to his sons. in contrast to Herod was:

II. The growing faith of the wise men

1. In those days, astronomy (the study of the stars) and astrology (assigning myths and stories of gods and goddesses to the stars) were combined — since there were no electric lights, tv or movies or radio, most humans looked at the stars most nights. Most nations at that time were assigned a constellation of stars in the sky — millions of people must have seen in the constellation assigned to Israel, some unusually bright star, or perhaps a comet, or a super-nova.

2. The wise men were probably Babylonian astrologers who had studied many ancient manuscripts from around the world. They had had copies of the Old Testament in Babylon for centuries, since the Jews had been taken into exile there in 586 BC., & they may have learned of the coming messiah in studying the Hebrew scriptures. They put together the prophecies of the messiah, the promise of Isaiah, “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light,” (Isai

9:2) and determined that this “light” in Israel’s constellation was a promise of the coming of this great King of Israel.

3. As we saw about King Herod, there was great expectation of god sending a savior or King to rule the earth and deliver humankind from itself. The wise men must have hoped that this King to be born in Israel would be that great King!! Hope was high in their hearts —

4. Even the gifts they brought were prophetic and hopeful for this great King. Gold is a gift for a King, certainly, and frankincense is a gift for a priest , a sweet perfume for temple sacrifice. Myrrh was an ingredient in holy anointing oil for Hebrew worship, and often used for burial ceremonies in Hebrew funerals. These gifts were more prophetic that the wise men realized — for god had determined that Jesus would indeed be: the King of Kings; Jesus would be the eternal high priest; and that Jesus would be the one holy and perfect sacrifice for the sins of humanity . . .

5. The birth of Jesus, the Messiah, was a true blessing to the wise men— and many others.

Conclusion — is the birth of Jesus for you — a problem, or a blessing? If he is your savior, then his birth means the foundation of eternal life for you, and every believer