

THE CHRISTMAS STORY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Selections relating to the Wise Men and Herod

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There are two stories about the birth of the Lord. They are quite different. It was in the Divine Providence of the Lord that two such varied accounts should be written, which should harmonize so well, yet deal quite differently with the moment on which history turned. Without one, the story of Christmas would be woefully incomplete; together they fill our need to know of His birth and of those who came to worship Him.

We meld the stories together so well in our minds that the differences are easily missed. Here are a few.

Matthew tells the story from Joseph's point of view. His genealogy traces Joseph's ancestry, and Mary herself is mentioned through Joseph. It is Joseph who "called His name Jesus." *Luke* tells the story through Mary. He seems to have talked with her or one of her close associates: how else would he know of her ponderings, or her visit to the long-dead Elizabeth? Hence his reference to those who were "eye-witnesses from the beginning." Remember also that Zacharias and Elizabeth were of Mary's family.

There are other differences that we can observe. In the gospel of Luke, the angel was seen: by Zacharias, by Mary, and by the shepherds with a host of heaven. In Matthew, Joseph saw the angel only in a dream. But it happened four times: Joseph was told to marry Mary, for the Child was of the Holy Spirit; he was warned to flee to Egypt; he was told to come back; and he was warned not to return to Judea but to go to Nazareth. The wise men too were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. None of them saw an angel while awake.

Note what a force Herod is in the gospel of Matthew. He was troubled by the report of the wise men, sought to kill the Lord, and, when his attempt to trick the wise men failed, he wrought a terrible carnage on the babies of Bethlehem. None of this is told in Luke. Herod is simply mentioned at the beginning: "There was in the days of Herod the king a certain priest named Zacharias." No flight into Egypt, no danger, just the happy tale of the Lord's birth and upbringing.

There is another feature which we might easily overlook. In Matthew, Joseph and the wise men were given commands. "Don't be afraid to take unto you Mary your wife." "Thou shalt call His name Jesus." "Flee into Egypt." "Arise, and take the young child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for they are dead who sought the young child's life." "And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod..."

The angels didn't give any orders in Luke. Gabriel told of an event which would happen to Zacharias. He didn't tell Zacharias to do anything, but the old priest went home and hoped that his prayer was indeed answered, and sought to have a child. Mary wasn't told to do anything, merely informed that she was to be blessed with the infant Lord. Without a command, she consented: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." And the angel didn't tell the shepherds to go to Bethlehem; he simply told them the good tidings of great joy, and his friends filled their hearts with the song of heaven. Of course they went; with haste, and in freedom they went.

Even the tone of the two stories is different. Luke tells of His birth, the quiet peace of that night, and the newborn Babe. By contrast, the wise men came some time afterwards, when He was in a house, and is called a “young child.” They brought Him representative gifts. This story deals in events—a journey, a wicked king, a flight; it touches the understanding a little more than Luke does.

Why are there two stories? Why such differences? The reason is because they appeal to the different parts of us which are receptive to the Lord’s birth, and in the internal sense they tell of how Jesus Christ is born into our wills and into our understandings. Joseph seems to represent the human understanding and Mary that affection of truth which is the basis of our new will. So the story in Matthew tells how the Lord is born into the understanding, and Luke tells how He touches our hearts.

Let’s look at a few of the differences in the stories with this in mind. First, the angel is seen in a dream in Matthew, but actually appears in Luke. The angel who announced the birth represents an insight about truth from within. Such an insight is much more clouded when the understanding is dominant; when it touches the heart, it is more clearly seen.

Why was Joseph given commands, but Mary, Zacharias, and the shepherds merely told things, which in freedom they accepted? Truth that enters the understanding appears as a directive—do this, don’t do that. The more it enters the will, however, the more the Lord is able to lead us in freedom. He speaks, tells us about the happiness of a good life, and we respond to the implied invitation. Note the implied invitation to the shepherds: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.... Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” But they made the choice. “Let us now go, even unto Bethlehem.”

Herod has a lot to do with the story in Matthew, almost nothing in Luke. The understanding has the responsibility to see evil, and reject it. We ought to think about our selfishness and our pride, and realize how they could kill what is in us from the Lord—the loves that are growing up in us. We need to be warned by insights from the Word, try to understand the dangers that threaten the Lord in us, and escape to safety. The human understanding can know the danger of Herod—the love of self.

Then why is Herod absent (or almost absent) from the story of Luke? It is in the Lord’s amazing mercy that there are times with all of us when selfishness is just a distant memory. We know we’re selfish, and that battles lie ahead, and that we’re going to have to fight for the happiness we are seeing. But somehow there are moments when it is the joy of life we see, and it is this that we remember when the time comes to fight. Have you been in love and felt only unselfish impulses toward the loved one? Or maybe you have sat with the Word itself in front of you, and felt in its pages the certainty of the Lord’s love and of the heaven that He wants to give to you? Are there times when a friendship seems an unshakable source of joy to you, and you feel grateful to have this friend and to be able to help him or her when you are needed?

Selfishness seems so far off. You’re not being unrealistic. You know it’ll come back. In the meantime you know something else: that there is a life beyond selfishness. There’s a greater love that leaves self behind, and you have been allowed to feel it. Those are the moments when the Lord touches the will, and the best image of those times is Christmas night, in that stable in Bethlehem.

The Holy Babe who is born into us is charity, the positive, outgoing joy of serving others. It alone makes every day of eternity a new and exciting challenge; it alone makes human relationships gentle and loving. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea represents the first birth of charity into the mind of a person who has repented.

Bethlehem represents the truth from good that is in the Word—the living truth, the vital ideas that make up the Word of God. To this we turn when it is time for us to receive charity into our hearts, for it is the Word that shows the way. The Word isn’t just truth; it is truth from good, truth alive with the promise of charity.

The Wise Men and Herod

Like the shepherds who first came to see the Lord in Bethlehem in Luke, the wise men in Matthew represent those things in us which first recognize and rejoice that charity is come into being. The shepherds portrayed the states of good; the wise men, the states of truth which become aware of this new love which we have.

The wise men were from Syria, and they had some stories of the Ancient Word. They knew of Balaam's prophecy that a King would be born to the Jews, and a star would light His birth. We cannot doubt that they knew He was no ordinary king. Unlike the rest of the people on earth at that time, they still had from the Word a knowledge that He was God Messiah. Why else would they say, "We have seen His star in the east, and are come to *worship* Him"?

Had they watched each night for the star, as their ancestors did before them? Or was the star so large that it had made them wonder if it was the long-promised sign? We don't know. Nor do we know how long their journey took, only that when they arrived in Bethlehem, the Lord was a "young child," living in a house. What matters is their knowledge about the Lord, for it was that which led them to Him. Thousands must have seen the bright star in the sky; just a very few, because they had searched the Scriptures, made a journey to see Him.

The kind of people the wise men were helps us to understand what knowledges in us will recognize the Lord's birth in our hearts. For with all of us there are remains of truth—truths which we have learned and loved—which stay alive in our minds. Many truths that we learn seem unexciting and are filed away in the memory. Some few touch us, and we pay attention each time we hear them. They are constantly on the lookout for charity, leading us to seek kindness and love of the neighbor. When the Lord is born in us those truths are what recognize Him.

The situation is the same as with the shepherds. There were many people in Judea the night the Lord was born, but only a few knew of His birth. There were thousands of people in Syria at the same time, and only a few knew that a King had been born. For at first most of our mind stays earthbound, concerned with mundane things, and carried away by worldly knowledge. Just a few principles in us acknowledge charity and pay homage to it. Yet from that small beginning, from the worship of the "wise men" in our minds, charity can increase.

The wise men came first to Jerusalem. The gospel doesn't say that the star led them there, merely that they saw it in the East; but the Writings do say it led them to Jerusalem. Jerusalem represents historical or dead faith. At first that is all there is of the church in our minds, and the ruler in that church is Herod—the love of self.

Few people in history have been as contemptible as Herod the great. He was not a Jew, but managed to be placed on the throne of David—the first man to rule who was not descended from David. He wanted to be loved by his subjects but at the same time was insanely cruel in putting down any real or imagined uprisings, thereby ensuring their hatred. He built the temple in Jerusalem to curry favor, but his atrocities made favor impossible, and he secretly decreed that many leading Jews should be killed at his death, so that there would be mourning. He married a Jewish princess of David's line, and their son could have been accepted as king. But in a fit of suspicion he put them both to death, and then regretted it, both because he had loved her, and because the people had too.

Herod represents the government of falsity from the love of self, with all its contradictions and its self-destructive emotions. He was an old man when Jesus was born, yet he was troubled and sought to kill the infant Lord. It is the love of self that is threatened when charity begins to grow in our minds; and Herod's plots represent our battle with selfishness.

No one openly sets out to be uncharitable, or to pursue only selfishness. It is a spirit that lurks within us, and constantly tries to protect its own. The Writings point out that a selfish man is very pleasant, even apparently kind, while things are going well; but when self is seen to be in the smallest danger, hatred breaks out.

“He was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” because the King of the Jews had been born. The Lord is called the King of the Jews to represent His government in us from true love. And when that is born, government from selfishness does feel threatened. We will find ourselves for many years in a conflict between what will help others and what will help ourselves only.

Herod called together his own learned men, priests and scribes, and asked them where Christ should be born, and sure enough they knew. It would seem that these chief priests and scribes represent memories about truth which appear holy, but which actually serve self. It is possible to love truths, the Writings tell us, but only for the sake of reputation, and “if they do not minister to his reputation he loves them not” (*Life* 35). Charity interferes with much of our comfortable, self-centered life. Through that life the hells try to destroy it.

We may thank heaven that we are not left to ourselves. An angel, a sense of truth from within, keeps us from betraying the wonderful feelings that are growing within us, just as the angel warned the wise men not to return to Herod. Herod thought he was so clever, yet he wound up being tricked by the wise men, for the scheme he devised was known in heaven. Even so, the Lord will never allow charity to die in the willing heart, no matter how strong the danger seems when we are fighting.

The wise men found the Lord, not in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem. And charity is born into our lives, not in the dogmas we have grown up with, not in outmoded ideas of our former faith, but in new, exciting truths which we find in the Word itself. For years we may learn from the Word and find it sort of satisfying, but there comes a time, when charity is born, that that same Word seems to have new truth in every page. It is this new truth which is represented by Bethlehem, the place where Benjamin and David, and Jesus were born.

So the wise men went to Bethlehem and found that little family in a house, for a house in Bethlehem represents the thoughts of the mind that have been ordered by the Word. They worshiped Him, and they gave Him gifts—most special gifts, whose significance they were the last people on earth to understand for over 1700 years! For gold represents the good of love, frankincense the good of charity, and myrrh the good of obedience. What the wise men reflected in their gifts was the understanding that these things, and these things alone, are ours to give to the Lord. All we can give to the Lord is our free reception of these loves from Him. In giving these gifts, the wise men represented all people of all times, and the three precious gifts, which we all can receive and return to our God.