

Bethlehem's Treasure

*O little town of Bethlehem
how still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight*

Phillips Brooks wrote those words in 1868, right around Christmas time. So, we're celebrating the 150th anniversary of one of the world's favourite Christmas carols.

But why was Jesus born in Bethlehem, a relatively obscure village by the first century, a small town on the road into Jerusalem? And did the Jews expect that their Messiah would be born there? Would they have made a connection between the sleepy village of Bethlehem and the coming of their King?

To answer those questions we're going to look at a little bit of the history of Bethlehem, starting in the time of the Judges, in the book of Ruth.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah.

Okay, let's look at this introduction to Ruth. The name Bethlehem means "house of bread". But the house of bread had no bread - and Naomi and her family had to go elsewhere to find food to eat. This is the beginning of Naomi's emptying where she suffers loss after loss. First, her husband dies, then, within ten years, both her sons. Before their deaths, they had both married women from Moab and that's all Naomi has left in terms of hope - but it's no hope, really. She urges them to find husbands and move on with their lives and one does, but Ruth chooses not to. She attaches herself to Naomi with this:

*Where you go, I will go
And where you stay, I will stay
Your people will be my people
And your God, my God (Ruth 1:16)*

Ruth and Naomi head back to the house of bread, to Bethlehem, and they arrive at harvest season, and Ruth begins to glean after the barley harvesters. There she meets the owner of the field, a man named Boaz, who becomes her husband. Together, they have a son whom they name Obed, who would grow up to become the father of Jesse who, in turn would have a whole bunch of sons, the eighth of whom was David, who would be Israel's greatest king.

The story shows Naomi being emptied of all her hope and all her joy - so much so that she asks the women of Bethlehem to call her Mara, which means 'bitter' instead of Naomi, which means 'pleasant'.

I went away full, but Yahweh has brought me back empty (1:21)

But then she was filled again in the house of bread and the story ends with her taking baby Obed onto her lap and caring for him.

The next time Bethlehem figures prominently in the Bible is during the time of Samuel, after Saul had become King of Israel and after he had disobeyed God and been rejected by God. 1 Samuel 16 starts with this:

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king. (16:1)

Ancient Israelite society wasn't as mobile as today's western societies are. People were tied to the land that their tribes had been granted after the conquest of Canaan. So the family of Boaz had lived in Bethlehem for generations and his descendants continued to do so. Bethlehem was the home to the line of David. When the Messiah was described as a king coming in the line of David, it would be assumed that he would be coming from Bethlehem, or could at least trace his roots there.

Now we come to the direct prophecy of a Messiah that would come from Bethlehem. This comes from chapter 5 of the prophet Micah, who prophesied about the same time that Isaiah did, from the middle of the eighth century B.C. until early in the seventh.

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past. The people of Israel will be abandoned to their enemies until the time when the woman in labor gives birth to her son. Then at last his fellow countrymen will return from exile, to their own land. And he will stand to lead his flock with the LORD's strength, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. Then his people will live there undisturbed, for he will be highly honoured all around the world . . . And he will be the source of our peace. (Micah 5:2-5)

What do we see in this passage that should inform the expectation for the Messiah who was to come?

1. A ruler will come from Bethlehem
2. His origins are from the distant past - he's not an ordinary person then; he has a "prehistory", a story that goes far back in time.
3. There is an important birth - a woman in labor gives birth to a son
4. This birth facilitates, in some way, a return of more of the exiles to their native land
5. This ruler will lead the people in the strength of Yahweh Himself and in Yahweh's Name, which means, "as His representative", or even "in His person".
6. This ruler will receive honour from the nations of the world which will allow Israel to live in peace.

Does that description fit what we know about Jesus? He came from Bethlehem - we know that story. His origins were from the beginning, as the first verses of John's Gospel, along with many other texts tell us. There was a woman in labour and this was a special birth, marked by angels and a star in the east. Has there been a return of exiles that can be associated with Jesus birth? The only connection that I'm aware of has been Christian support for the modern state of Israel and the ongoing return of Jews from all over the world, especially from Eastern Europe and Russia. Did Jesus represent Yahweh to His people? That's at the heart of our faith - that Jesus was and is the presence of God with humans. Has He received honour from the nations? - unquestionably. That doesn't mean that all nations worship Jesus and follow Him in obedience, but simply that there are people who love Him and serve Him from every nation on earth and, someday soon, we hope, from every people group, every tribe and tongue, as the Bible puts it.

But let's go back to Micah 5. If there's a specific prophecy in the Old Testament that points out the place where Messiah will come from, it's this passage. There were two Bethlehems in the Old Testament, one just a few miles from the town that would be known as Nazareth - a city of some importance according to the archaeologists who have done digging there - and the one just south of Jerusalem where Naomi brought her daughter-in-law Ruth to live. The second one is known as Bethlehem Ephrathah. This clearly identifies the birthplace of the coming ruler as the village outside of Jerusalem. Jesse, David's father, was referred to in 1 Samuel as an "Ephrathite" and so is his grandmother, Naomi. Micah also states that Bethlehem is a small village in Judah - again making it clear that he's talking about the Bethlehem that was the home of David and his family.

All of this was not lost on the Jewish scholars. Those who served in Herod's court had a ready answer when the King of Judah was disturbed by a question that had been asked of him by some magi who had come to Jerusalem from the east - probably from Persia. The account is related to us in the Gospel of Matthew:

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time, some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We have seen His star as it arose and we have come to worship Him."

Herod was deeply disturbed by their question, as was all of Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law. "Where did the prophets say the Messiah would be born?" he asked them. (Matt. 2:1-4)

Now, let's stop there for a moment. Herod was a mad man - he had three of his sons executed, along with their mother, uncle and grandmother, and was suspicious of everyone to an extreme degree, but he wasn't an ignoramus. He knew that if magi had come on a journey of perhaps 6-8 weeks, depending on where they started from, had risked being arrested by the Romans who were Persia's great enemy at the time, and had come with the single purpose of honouring the future King of the Jews, there was something serious going on.

Magi were more than philosophers or counsellors to the king. They were Zoroastrians, who had emerged as a kind of priestly class and who were able to exert great influence on the Persian court. They were a politically significant group, one of the two main groups that advised the king. The Magi had kept up a special interest in two ancient prophets: Balaam, from Mesopotamia, who had prophesied a coming star, and Daniel, the Jewish exile in Babylon and then Persia, who prophesied about a coming Messiah. Let me just quote a verse from Numbers 24 as background to the expectation of a star appearing:

*This is the message of Balaam son of Beor,
The prophecy of the man whose eyes see clearly . . .
I see him, but not in the present time
I perceive him, but far in the distant future
A star will rise from Jacob
A sceptre will emerge from Israel. (15,17)*

Daniel's prophecies are more complex and spread out over several chapters, but they point to the coming and the killing of God's Anointed One. I'm not saying that Herod would have been aware of all this, but he would certainly have been aware that the magi were important people and that they had a reputation for seeking to understand the mysteries of great movements in human history that had once been prophesied. So, he turns to his leading priests and teachers of religious law and asks where the prophets said the Messiah was to be born.

*"In Bethlehem," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:
'O Bethlehem of Judah, you are not just a lowly village in Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'"
Then Herod sent a private message to the wise men, asking them to come see him. At this meeting he learned the exact time when they first saw the star.
Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too." (Matt. 2:5-8)*

The priests and teachers of the Jews knew exactly where to go to find the location of their Messiah's birth. "O Bethlehem of Judah ... a ruler will come from you." Notice that they give very little more than what Herod asks for. They don't say anything about this ruler's origins being from the distant past or his ruling in the strength and majesty of the LORD his God or the peace that he would bring to his people. They probably were well aware that these kinds of details would infuriate Herod and make him even more difficult to deal with. Notice from verse 3 that all Jerusalem was disturbed when Herod was.

And King Herod knew exactly what he wanted to do with this new threat to his rule ... or to his dynasty, he might have thought. "How long ago did this star appear?" he asked the magi. How old would this child be? No more than 2 - well, every bit of information is useful.

After this interview the wise men went their way. Once again the star appeared to them, guiding them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house where the child and His mother, Mary, were, and they fell down down before Him and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But when it was time to leave, they went home another way, because God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. (Matt. 2:9-12)

How often have you stood looking at the night sky and been able to point out the star that was right over your house. You could say without question that this star was not over a house down the street a couple of blocks, but the star was indicating to anyone watching ... the house where you live. The unusual star that proclaimed the birth of a new king in Judea led the wise men to a house - not a stable, that was much earlier - and to the place where they could worship this child, this king.

This is what God does. He speaks to a prophet 1350 years earlier and tells him that a star will rise from Jacob and a sceptre - the sign of royalty - will emerge from Israel. Then, nearly 400 years later, He speaks through a prophet to King David and promises him a lasting dynasty, that there would always be a king over God's people coming from David's line. And another 200 years go by and God speaks to a prophet and tells him that a ruler will come from Bethlehem of Judah who be a shepherd for His people. And then He brings all of this together, Mary and Joseph, descended from the line of David, and an angel; a Roman census to bring the ones He had chosen to be the parents of the Son of God all the way from Galilee to Bethlehem; the magi from Persia, star-gazers who somehow knew that this was the star, this was the sign, that the King was being born. And the star itself that somehow managed to point out which house the child and his family were living in. Only God does these things. Only God can.

So, what are we to learn from the story of Bethlehem and its special role in salvation history?

1. I hope we can stand in awe at the one who moves in and through human history to accomplish His great purposes. We know that God is all about redeeming people who are willing to admit that they need His help. We know that God had a plan from the beginning for our salvation, a plan in which most of the pain would fall on Himself. And we know that God worked His plan out so that, at just the right time, Paul tells us in Romans 5, at just the right time, Jesus came into the world and lived towards the goal of giving His life for us. Stand back from the incredible works of God and see them in their simplicity and beauty and the fullness of their glory. He had the power and the wisdom to create this vast universe and He has the power and wisdom to rescue us. His great rescue mission began in the little town of Bethlehem and everything went according to plan ... His plan. That's just one reason why we should worship Him.
2. We must be able to see from this story that God is able to move things around in our lives as well. What is it that you're facing that's not working out the way you'd hoped? What needs to change for you to move forward in the way you think God

wants you to move? When I look at the prophecy that Balaam gave about a star and a sceptre, I'm amazed that the magi of Persia would have got on camels and headed west. But God was speaking to them, too - I'm sure of it. And He is more than able to speak to you, to guide your steps, to give you freedom or peace - whatever your need. So, hear carefully this word from Paul's letter to the Philippian Christians: *Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done.* (4:6)

3. The third lesson is one we see throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth: God chose the humble road, and we shouldn't be afraid to do the same. "O Bethlehem of Judah, you are not just a lowly village in Judah, for a ruler will come ..." God chooses the lowly village, then the nothing town of Nazareth, then the larger backwoods area known as Galilee to show the world His love, and the power of His miracles and His teaching. God will find us more useful for His purposes if we don't mind being a servant, if we don't mind not being widely known or appreciated. It's in the unexpected, simple places that He shows His glory and does His greatest works. Don't be afraid to be found doing a servant's work in a humble place ... Bethlehem became the birthplace of the greatest of all kings.