

# SHEPHERDS & KINGS

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Two Christmas stories, two different occasions, two different locations, two groups of people, two different outcomes, but one result. Why is this important to us, and what does it tell us about God's plan for people?

## The Shepherds: Luke 2:8-20

*That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Saviour, yes, the Messiah, the Lord has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger. Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others, the armies of heaven, praising God and saying "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.*

## The Magi: Matthew 2:1-12

*Jesus was born in 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 new-born king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him." King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote: 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'" Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. 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!" After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided 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 and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.*

As part of the Christmas narrative the Bible tells two stories of people who visited the infant Jesus. They are very different but tell us very important things about Jesus and about God's plan for the world.

## The Shepherds

- These men were out in the fields watching their flocks whilst the events of Jesus birth took place. They were minding their own business, both literally and metaphorically. The sheep they were looking after were their livelihood, and they could not be left alone to become prey for thieves, wolves or other marauding animals. They were guarding their flocks, that was their job and they were doing it.
- Shepherds, by the nature of their jobs, were men apart. They did not live with other people in towns, they would have travelled around from place to place wherever pasture was to be found. They would not have heard of the news from the local towns, and even if it was generally known that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, which it probably wasn't, these shepherds would not have been in a position to find out.
- An angel suddenly appeared to them at night, a bright shining figure in the darkness. Not surprisingly they were terrified, and I am sure we would be as well if this happened to us. This was despite the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounding them. The presence of the glory of the Lord should be a thing that terrifies us; God is holy and omnipotent, and we humans are not, terror is a logical reaction.
- The angel reassured them that they need not be afraid, and told them that he had brought good news. He then explained that the Saviour, the Messiah, had been born in Bethlehem. This must have come as a surprise to them, one does not get the impression that this was something they were expecting to hear. They

were shepherds, ordinary people, not religious teachers or scribes.

- The angel explained where the shepherds could find the baby and was then joined by a heavenly host also praising God. The shepherds stayed where they were until this host of angels had returned to heaven and then they hurried to Bethlehem, found Mary, Joseph and Jesus. They told everyone that they met about the baby and what the angels had told them, then they went back to their flock, praising God.
- The shepherds were Jews but they were not seeking Jesus, it was revealed to them that Jesus had been born. They were not aware of the significance of this birth. They also had to have it explained to them who this baby really was, they were not seeking a Saviour.

### The Magi

- Contrary to popular Christmas cards and nativity plays these men were not kings but wise men, and they travelled from eastern lands actively looking for Jesus. This is likely to have been sometime after Jesus was born, we do not know the exact timescale.
- They had been led to Jerusalem by a star that they had seen rising. There are a number of theories as to what this astronomical phenomenon may have been, but interestingly it does not seem that the people in Jerusalem had noticed it, or ascribed any significance to it.
- King Herod was disturbed, as the Magi were seeking a king that Herod knew nothing about and Herod also realised that this king was the Messiah. This king could be a political rival so Herod sought advice from the priests and teachers of religious law as to where the king might be found. He was solely concerned with his own political position.
- Herod met with the Magi and asked them when the star had appeared, to give him a time frame for the threat, then sent them to find the child in Bethlehem, asking them to let him know where Jesus could be found, so he could eliminate this threat to his kingdom.
- The Magi went on their way and found Jesus with his mother, Mary. They gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- God warned them to return another way, so that Herod could not find and kill Jesus.
- The Magi were Gentiles, not Jews. They were not from the chosen people of God, and yet they came actively seeking the Messiah. They were educated men and able to discern the signs in the stars to find the Messiah, signs that the Jewish learned men had either not known about or not seen. They understood the significance of this baby born in Bethlehem and they actively sought Him.

These Christmas stories are well known, and feature in nativity plays the world over, but there is a deeper meaning underneath the superficial story. These two groups of people who visited the baby Jesus were very different. They included Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men who were seeking the Saviour and expecting His arrival, and those who had no idea He was going to be born. One group travelled a great distance, the other just travelled down the road, one journey had probably taken weeks, the other possibly an hour or so.

However, despite the differences between these two groups of men they all, ultimately had one thing in common: they found the baby Jesus, knew who He was and why He had been born, and they worshipped Him. It is also interesting that the story of the Jewish shepherds finding baby Jesus was written by Luke, who was a Gentile, and the story of the Gentile Magi finding Jesus was written by Matthew, who was a Jew. What does this show us?

- This baby was given for all men, whether they were Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, educated or not. There is no distinction, there is only one Jesus and he came for all men and women. Whoever you may be, wherever you come from, whatever your age, this Jesus came for you.
- Some may deliberately seek Jesus, some may come by accident or circumstance, but Jesus is the ultimate destination all men must find. It does not depend on who you are, Jesus is the Saviour you must seek. The journey may be different but the destination is the same.
- This baby in the stable was the Saviour, the Messiah, sent by God the Father to live on earth as a man and among men.
- This baby is worthy of worship, and of all the gifts and good things that men can give to God.

This is the real message of Christmas, that this baby is the hope for the world, come to live among us and eventually die on the cross to take away our sins so that we can live in heaven with Jesus in eternity. This is the gift of God to us at Christmas.