**Day 10, Bethlehem**

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, February 27, 2019

***Matthew 2:1-8 “****After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod , Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." NIV*

 The arrival in Jerusalem of these “wise men” from Persia set the whole city into a frenzy of discussion. Everybody was talking about it. It was unusual enough that such people from Persia would show up. It was even more unusual that they would describe a star that led them to come in search of the King of the Jews. Herod was interested for his own sick reasons, but everybody found it a riveting discussion.

In some ways, the relationship of a new King to a special star would have fit how they thought about things in those days. For a hundred years or better there had been a growing sense that something would be revealed by the stars. I happen to collect the images of the star and moon on ancient coins. What you see is this unusual fascination with stars among rulers in that period. I will show you five coins from my collection to illustrate the point. The first is by the Jewish leader Alexander Jannaeus who ruled from 103 to 76 BC. Note the star on his coin. The second is a coin from Byzantium also from the first century BC. The third is a Denarius minted in Rome in 42 BC. It has five stars. Seven stars came to symbolize eternal life. The fourth coin was issued in 6 BC. A guy named Michael Molnar has been on the science shows making the connection between the issuance of this coin and the star which appeared in Bethlehem as this additional picture of the “Bethlehem star” coin illustrates. Finally, this coin of Hadrian is one of many I could show illustrating how many subsequent emperors and kings used this image to bolster their standing as having the blessing of heaven upon their reign.

The point is, many were expecting some connection between a star and a king. So much so that when the wise men saw the unusual star they immediately made the connection and followed the leading of that star to arrive in Jerusalem.

 Given the momentous nature of his guests and their stated mission, Herod called the top scholars and religious leaders to get their opinion. All the talk shows were carrying the discussion and the evening news was filled with talking heads offering their opinions.

 The groups that he called together for special discussion were, in verse 4, called the “people’s chief priests and teachers of the law.” Their very title made it clear enough who the chief priests were. They were the big guys in terms of religion. The teachers of the law were also called Scribes or lawyers. In an earlier day they had the duty of creating copies of the law and teaching the same to others.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the era of Jesus they were the main public teachers of the law. Their style was to modify the law through the traditions of the Pharisees while the Sadducees just didn’t believe it anymore. If we were applying some of today’s titles we would say the chief priests and teachers of the law were the liberals who changed the law, calling it a dynamic or living document, while the Sadducees were the secularists who ignored the law substituting their own knowledge.

(As part of the notes and lecture on December 18, 2018 we included a section on Herodium as it related to the birth of Jesus. I am including it again here since it relates to the section on Bethlehem.)

 The contest between Herod and Jesus was to determine who would be proclaimed as King of the Jews. “*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod , Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."* (Matthew 2:1-8)

Jesus was known as “King of the Jews.” That title is a key part of the Christmas story. At the time of the crucifixion that title became a major factor. Matthew 27:11 *“Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"* *"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.”* When the soldiers were whipping and mocking him the Scripture records the reference there too. Matthew 27:28-30 “*They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said.”* The sign that went over his head as he hung on the cross was “King of the Jews.” Not everyone realizes that at the time claiming this title as a highly inflammatory capital crime. It was literally a crime against a sovereign power. Roman law made it a death penalty crime.

 It was doubly problematic given the other guy who had that title when Jesus was born. The Emperor Augustus had already given that title to Herod the Great. And you know if you like to be called Herod the Great you have a fairly good sized ego that doesn’t appreciate competitors. He was kind of the Kim Jong Un of his day.

 Herod was obsessed with his role as king and desperately worked to create a dynasty. He married the Hashmonean princess Miriame so he could claim royalty. Josephus said Herod destroyed the genealogical records in the archives at Sepphoris so no rival could challenge his pedigree or offer a competing one. Herod killed members of his own family, including sons, along with a host of others including anyone who he thought might want to challenge him or his family for rule.

 You can appreciate that Herod didn’t like the idea of Jesus being born as “King of the Jews,” the very title the Wisemen recognized. But God’s timing was apparently perfect. Paul said in Galatians “*But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman…”*It was exactly the right time for Jesus to be born literally under the shadow of the Herodium.

Bethlehem was just about three miles from Herodium, the fortress of Herod. Herod built fortresses to dominate. From Herodium he could look east and see the Dead Sea and the mountains of Moab (in Jordan.)

From the Mount of Olives you normally look at Jerusalem. But if you turned your head to the left you would see Herodium in the distance. You couldn’t miss it from either Bethlehem or Jerusalem because at 2,487 feet above Sea Level, it was the highest point in the Judean desert. Herod built Herodium on a hill where he had defeated the Parthians in 40 BC, killing many who had tried to kill him. It was literally a fortress memorial proclaiming that nobody lives who tries to take on Herod. From Herodium’s commanding presence it really was “O little town of Bethlehem.”

 One of the ironies of Christmas is that both Mary and Joseph had royal blood in their veins as descendants of King David who had lived a thousand years before them. They were not at all powerful but quite poor. Joseph couldn’t even provide for his wife. She had to give birth in a cave or an outbuilding because they couldn’t get better accommodations. They had more in common with people like the shepherds who still serve in those fields even today.

 Herodium was luxurious, bright and heavily defended. Bethlehem was dirty, dark, and quite vulnerable. The very soldiers that would eventually swoop down on Bethlehem with such violence may well have been stationed at Herodium.

 If you were sizing things up that day, you might have come to some wrong conclusions. Joseph didn’t even want to expose his wife to any public disgrace whereas Herod killed his own wife. Herod came to take the lives of the innocent. Jesus came to make our lives innocent. Herod was lifted up in his towering fortress. Jesus was lifted up on a cross. Herod would pass away but Jesus would live forever. Yet that first Christmas the good guys were losing while the bad guys were winning.

Herod wanted people to see what he had accomplished and be impressed. He wanted to be remembered in stone. At some point, he decided to turn Herodium, which he named after himself, from a fortress into his private mausoleum. Herodium was destroyed. Even the gold and jewels of the casket were taken and disappeared into the crevices of history. Only the broken fragments of the stone coffin remain having just recently been found and mostly reassembled.

From Herodium Herod could look down toward the Dead Sea and see his next fortress which was strategically built as the next stop toward Edom if ever he needed to escape that direction. At Masada you can see the long warehouses that were once filled with gallons of wine, tons of grain, and bushels of dried food all waiting for the possibility that Herod might show up. He had a luxury fort there too complete with a bath house and palace. The stucco has faded, the stones tumbled, and Herod does not come there anymore.

Even the massive temple he built in Jerusalem which could have become a wonder of the ancient world would barely outlive him.

In order to destroy the other King of the Jews, Herod had every baby boy born in Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed. It failed just as the other plan to destroy Jesus was overcome by the resurrection.

Bethlehem

Bethlehem is the birthplace for Jesus.

Gen 35:14-20 gives us the earliest account of Bethlehem as the burial place of Jacob’s wife. “*14 Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. 15 Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel. 16 Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. 17 And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, "Don't be afraid, for you have another son." 18 As she breathed her last — for she was dying — she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin. 19 So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). 20 Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb.”* (Rachael was from Haran and is the only one of the three earliest patriarch couples who is not buried in the cave of Machpelah at Hebron.)

The story of Ruth is set in Bethlehem as is the opening story of King David’s life. 1 Samuel 16:1 “*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."*

The well-water from David’s home held special memoires for David. 2 Sam 23:13-17 *“13 During harvest time, three of the thirty chief men came down to David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. 14 At that time David was in the stronghold, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem. 15 David longed for water and said, "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!" 16 So the three mighty men broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem and carried it back to David. But he refused to drink it; instead, he poured it out before the Lord. 17 "Far be it from me, O Lord, to do this!" he said. "Is it not the blood of men who went at the risk of their lives?" And David would not drink it.”*

Although there were great names associated with Bethlehem the Old Testament anticipated someone very great. Micah 5:2 “2 "*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* Micah prophesied well after David (somewhere between 756 and 697 B.C.) so he was not referring to David but to Jesus.

1. Ezra 7:6,10-12; Neh 8:1,4,9,13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)