

December 4, 2016 “The Authorities” Matthew 2:1-6

All of the information about the wise men, and their visiting the Christ child in Bethlehem that we can be sure of, is contained in 12 verses at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel in chapter 2. They came out of the east. But we do not know precisely where they came from. There are legends concerning them, but there is no corroborating proof. They came to Jerusalem first of all, on a quest to find the infant Jesus. They came after he was born, not really at this season of the year. They were Magi priests, we would call them astrologers. They had the most detailed charts concerning the the stars, the sun, the moon, the other planets, and their movements, day by day, and those movements related to events that occurred in the real world. They were known to predict the future based on these records, and what they heard and saw happening in the world.

They arrived in Jerusalem and began asking rather innocent questions, but with little insight as to how disturbing their questions could be to the existing power structure in Judea. They wanted to know where the baby had been born king of the Jews. Herod, was the king of the Jews. And he intended to stay king. The NIV gets it right when it says he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. The Romans had worked out the power structure to administer the peace to their advantage. They, the bureaucracy, Herod and his court were all disturbed. As we shall see...in more ways than one.

Verses 3-6 provoke a new theme to come to our attention. The authorities. You see the Magi on their arrival asked anyone they could find, but they also put out feelers to what they learned were the governors of this province. And so it was that they came to the

attention of the authorities. The relationship between the Romans and Herod was a tense one. That there might be another king floating around this small pond of a province of the Empire upset both. And yet it set some important things in motion.

The Magi claim to have seen the star that marks the birth of this King of the Jews. They set off in caravan with their servants, their tents, the flocks and herds that would be their food supply for the duration of the trip, with the money to buy what else they needed on the way, and a force of guards to keep them, their staff, and everything else...safe. They set off to follow that star. The trouble is, it disappeared. That has led modern astronomers to conclude that in fact it was a rare conjunction of two planets...producing the brightest light in the night sky. They have been traveling west. They have arrived in Jerusalem in Judea. Their question is, “where is the baby that was born King of the Jews.” They assume that if they know...everyone else in this area must know too!

Herod, who is troubled in more ways than one, instantly realizes he does not know anything about this. He wants the answer so that he can use the Magi to find the child for his purposes. And because Herod is King...people scramble when he screams. So the governmental authority in theory, recognizes one singular truth. They are talking about the Messiah. Messiah is the Hebrew word. The Greek word is the Christ. There is a very good chance that the religious authorities will know something about this.

Matthew says Herod assembled the people's chief priests and teachers of the Law. Today we would call it the Rabinical Council of Jerusalem. All the important Rabbis in Jerusalem including the Old Testament Scholars. Herod rephrases the question

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of the Magi and asks it in these terms. “Where is the Christ to be born?” These ecclesiastical authorities are quick to offer answer. “Bethlehem. Bethlehem in Judea. It is in the message of the prophet Micah. They did not say Micah 5:2, because none of the books were divided into chapters and verses, until much later when the church of Jesus Christ was well established.

But here is an interesting point to think about as you prepare for Christmas this year. The Magi reported in to the so-called political authorities. Herod assembled the spiritual authorities in Jerusalem. They take the question of these pagan astrologers, and the answer in authoritatively by saying what amounts to... “well here is what the Bible says! Bethlehem. Bethlehem in Judea. It was the authority at that time, and it is the one authority that unveils the meaning of this time of year today. For this is what the prophet Micah has written...”out of you, little Bethlehem, will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

Matthew does not know that he is writing a document that will become the first book of the New Testament, in which is quoted the Old Testament prophet Micah to answer the question of the wise men. Why do we call them the wise men? Because they seek Jesus in a world unaware. And yet in the Roman province of Judea, even Herod knows, the rabbis are the authorities when it comes to the Messiah. And the Rabbis know the authoritative answer to the question where in Judea is He to be born, will be found in Holy Scripture. Micah 5 verse 2. It amazes me. The wise men get direction through Herod, from the Rabbinical Council of Jerusalem, based on the Scriptures. It takes the 21st century for the Church of all organizations to begin to question the authority of Scripture.

One last thing. Take note of what happened in Jerusalem. It really is significant. The Rabbinical Council told Herod the answer to the Magi's question where is this baby born to be king, was Bethlehem, based on prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. Christians did not invent or revise interpretations of readings in the Old Testament that are said to refer to the coming of the Messiah. Nor did we add to the old testament readings said to refer to the coming of the Christ. Those are Jewish insights. Those passages had been recognized for centuries as referring to the coming of the Saviour. And the only point at which Jewish and Christian thinking disagree...is the point at which we say based on the testimony of Jews like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and Saul who would later be called Paul, that Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour of all the world.

Let us pray..

O Lord we give thanks for the wise men's zeal, their conviction, their energy. We give thanks that they asked their almost naive questions. We thank you for the actions of troubled Herod in assembling the panel of experts in Jerusalem that would send them to Bethlehem. Lord we give thanks for our heritage passed on from Jewish hands, that the Scriptures are dependable, true and holy, in that they will always lead us to you. Amen