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CHRISTMAS THOUGHTS

Several years ago I was summoned to court, possibly to be selected for jury duty. Before the selection process began, the judge took a few other cases. One was a young divorced woman seeking a court order against her former husband. The charge? It was not about battery, abuse, alimony or some other things that might come to mind. She did not want their son to be with him for Christmas! She explained to the judge: “My former husband will be going to his parents’ house for Christmas. They will have a Christmas tree there and my boy will be given presents. I am a Jehovah’s Witness; *celebrating Christmas is against my religion!*”

Some thoughts went through my mind. If her former husband was a gang member, if his parents were undesirable people, if the boy would be exposed to drunkenness, drugs, debauchery, or immorality—the concern would be understandable. But spending Christmas with grandparents?

Whatever one’s belief or conviction may be regarding Christmas, a certain liberty is in order. After all, Christmas observance is not a commandment, only a custom. But in our view, much needless division, confusion, and hurt has been caused by religious groups that require their people to take an anti-Christmas position.

We have all heard about the wise men who came to Jerusalem from the East. In the King James Version and some others, they are called “wise men” (cf. Dan. 2:48). Some translations use terms like magicians (Moffatt), Magi (Weymouth), stargazers (Williams) and astrologers (Goodspeed).

It is true that people who were monthly prognosticators, stargazers, or astrologers were not of God (Isa. 47:12, 13, etc.). At a time when there was a fine line between astronomy and astrology, we do not know exactly what the belief system of the wise men may have been. We know they were intrigued by stars, but it appears they had also heard about a coming Messiah, or Christ, who would be born King of the Jews. While superstitious beliefs about stars would be a negative, God apparently intervened, meeting them on their own ground, as it were.

I am reminded of a couple I met some years ago in Canada. Before they knew the Lord, each morning they would read

their horoscope. One morning it said they needed to speak with a teacher. It seemed the only one they knew that would be considered a teacher, was a pastor they had met briefly some time before. They came to see him, explaining what their horoscope had said, and asking what message he had for them. Without putting down horoscopes (which of course he did not believe in), he told the couple he did indeed have a message for them! The message was that they needed the Lord. He was able then to lead them to Christ, their lives were transformed, and they became a vital part of his church.

God has a way of turning things around. In the case of the wise men, they were shown a star that was unique and different than other stars, one that ultimately led them to Christ. We believe it was God, *not Satan*, who was involved in guiding these men in their journey, as we read of their return trip: “And being warned of GOD in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way” (Matt. 2:12).

But Jehovah’s Witnesses, in their disdain for Christmas, say the star that guided these men from the East was made by *Satan!* “Who do you think made what appeared to be a star guide the astrologers to Herod? It was not the true God, Jehovah, but his adversary, or enemy, Satan the Devil!” (*The Watchtower*; December 1, 2013).

The claim that Satan made a star that guided the astrologers “to Herod” is redundant. According to the Scriptures, the star never guided anyone to Herod!

These wise men, or astrologers (if some prefer), saw the star in their eastern country. Because it signaled the birth of the King of the Jews, they reasoned this birth would surely take place in the Jewish capital city of Jerusalem—so they set out for there. When they arrived, they asked the *first* question recorded in the New Testament: “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2).

They said: “We have seen his star in the *East*”—back in the country from which they came; and, explaining the purpose of their journey: “We are come to *worship* him”—the King of the Jews, the Christ (Matt. 2:1, 2, 4).

There is no indication whatsoever that the star *moved across the sky* guiding them to Jerusalem—or to Herod!

When Herod heard what the wise men were saying, he consulted with the Jewish religious leaders “demanding of

them where Christ would be born” (verse 4). Their answer, based on Micah 5:2, was that he would be born in *Bethlehem*. Herod then privately told the wise men to go to Bethlehem, search for the young child, and bring him word again. We know the story.

It was after this, and after departing from Herod, that the star again appeared: “When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the East, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was” (Matt. 2:9).

Notice their reaction to seeing the star again: “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy” (Matt. 2:10). Obviously they had not been following it all along on their 900-mile journey from the East! Now, upon the reappearance of the star, it did move along and guide them to Bethlehem, right to the place where the young child was.

It is difficult to understand why some teach Satan made the star that guided these men to Christ!

In manger scenes, the wise men and the shepherds are commonly pictured together at the manger with the baby Jesus. Probably the two groups were not there at the same time, though that is possible, as we shall see.

In an attempt to remove the visit of the wise men as far away from the Christmas story as possible, some have pointed out certain differences. *The Watchtower* (December 1, 2013) article, for example, quotes Matthew 2:11, and goes on to say: “So Jesus by then was no longer a **baby** in a manger; he was a **child** living with Joseph and Mary in a **house**.”

To make this distinction between “baby” and “child,” biblically speaking, can only reflect very poor research, as a simple reading of Scripture will show:

“You shall find the **baby** wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger...and they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the **baby** lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this **child**...and when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the **child**, his name was called JESUS....they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord...and when the parents brought in the **child** Jesus....” (Luke 2:12-27).

Even *before* Jesus was born, he was called a “child”! Mary was “with **child**” by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18).

The Greek word translated “baby” (used of Jesus in the manger) is translated “child” regarding Timothy who “from a **child** [obviously not a newborn baby] had known the holy scriptures” (2 Tim. 3:15).

The simple fact is: Every baby is a child, but not every child is a baby.

Next, it is pointed out that the wise men came to a “house,” not a manger (Matt. 2:11). But can anyone prove that a place for animals with a manger was not located at a house?

We are prone to think of a modern day farmhouse, with a barn for animals some distance away from the house. But in

more primitive times, the place for animals was often in close proximity to the house or dwelling, *even a part of it*.

Harper’s Bible Dictionary (article “House”) mentions houses of Palestine which included “an open, walled court, where domestic animals were kept.” In simple houses, one room might have two levels, “the upper platform, where the family cooked, slept, and wove; and a lower level, where the animals ate from stone mangers and rested on straw.” A photo of a scale model of a simple Palestinian house which includes a connected area for animals, is included in the article.

Consider the word “sheepfold” (John 10:1) which is based on two Greek words: *probaton*, sheep (Strong’s Concordance 4263) and *aule*, fold (Strong’s Concordance 833). Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says the word translated “sheep” can refer to four-footed animals in general: small cattle, goats, as well as sheep. And the word translated “fold” is defined as “an uncovered space around a *house*, enclosed by a wall, where the *stables* were,” hence used to describe “the courtyards of a *house*...the word is *extremely common*, denoting the court attached to a *house*.” Note the connection with house and animals.

In Hebrew usage, the word *bayit* (Strong’s Concordance, 1004), translated “house” hundreds of times, is used, according to Strong, “in the greatest variation of applications.” These include a dwelling or habitation, the family living in a house, the temple as the house of God, a tomb, prison, receptacle, a box for perfume, or a shelter or abode for animals. *Bayit* is even used of places where animals are housed in the wild—such as a donkey, sparrow, swallow, or stork (Job 39:6; Psalms 84:3; 104:17). With this latitude of meanings, could not “house” include a place for animals?

In an article on *bayit*, the scholarly two-volume *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Vol. 1, p. 105), having no particular doctrine to uphold on this point, mentions various parts of primitive houses and adds: “There was also a room for domestic animals.”

The house [*bayit*] of the woman with a familiar spirit at Endor serves as a biblical example: “The woman had a fatted calf in the *house*” which she slaughtered to feed Saul and those with him (1 Sam. 28:24).

So when the wise men came to a house in Bethlehem, this *could* have been the place where the manger was located. Some translations say the wise men came *into* the house, others simply say they came *to* the house. The Greek preposition *eis* can be translated either way, so too much should not be built on this single word, one way or the other.

Suppose different people came to look at a car I had for sale. One person might describe the car as being in the *garage*. Another might say he looked at the car when he came to my *house*. Whether the garage was attached to my house or was a separate building, in either case they would have come to my house. The house to which the wise men came *could* have been the location of the manger.

In the attempt to remove the visit of the wise men as far away from the time of Jesus’ birth as possible, some say Jesus

may have been as much as *two years old* when the wise men came to Bethlehem. That is impossible. Jesus was not in Bethlehem two years after his birth!

We don't know how many days Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were in Bethlehem, but they were there only *temporarily*. We do know that 40 days after Jesus' birth, they were at the temple in Jerusalem where they "performed all things according to the law of the Lord." This dedication of the child, according to Jewish law, was 40 days after his birth (Lev. 12:2-8).

Following this, according to Luke, they returned to "their own city Nazareth." But evidently not immediately, for as Matthew explains, they fled into Egypt (Joseph being warned in a dream of Herod's rampage), remained there for a period of time, and then moved on to Nazareth.

About one hundred years ago my mother's family moved from Missouri to California. This is the *short* story. The *longer* account might explain they actually moved from Missouri to Colorado for a couple years (where my mother was born), and then on to California.

Following the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, Luke provides the *short* story about the move to Nazareth. Matthew gives the *longer* account, showing that the family fled to Egypt, and then to Nazareth. There is no conflict between the two accounts, when rightly understood.

With these things in mind, the idea that Jesus could have been as much as two years old when the wise men came is untenable. At two years old he would have been in Egypt or Nazareth—not Bethlehem!

We don't know at what point the wise men left Bethlehem to return home, but "being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod"—who was in Jerusalem—"they departed into their own country another way" (Matt. 3:12). The title "Herod" means *hero*, but he was certainly not that in the true and good sense of the word. Just the opposite. Eventually he realized the wise men were not coming back to him, he considered it a mockery, and set out on his murderous pursuit.

Evidently it was prior to this that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were in Jerusalem 40 days after Jesus' birth. Had Joseph known that Herod would try to kill Jesus, why would he take the risk of going there? That he did not know of this threat, from the wise men or otherwise, is implied by the fact that it was after the wise men departed that "the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt... for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: And was there until the death of Herod" (Matt. 2:13,14).

All of this places the visit of the wise men in Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus or soon thereafter.

So what about the claim that Jesus may have been as much as two years old when the wise men came?

This, of course, is based on Herod having male children slaughtered "from two years old and under, according to the time when he had diligently enquired of the wise men" (Matt.

2:16). Going back to verse 7, Herod "enquired of them diligently *what time the star appeared*." This refers to when the wise men saw the star in the East.

If this star appeared to them right at the time of Jesus' birth—which Herod may have assumed to be the case—by the time they made the 900-mile, slow and treacherous journey in those days, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus would have already left Bethlehem! So we can rule this out.

If the star appeared to them when Christ entered into this world, at his *conception*, this would allow nine months for travel before the actual birth.

Or it could be, as is often the case with a sign or prophecy, that it was given in advance concerning something that was about to happen, without the *exact* time being spelled out. Numbers 24:17, a Messianic passage, provides an example: "I see him, but not now: I behold him, but not near, a Star shall come out of Jacob..."

It is of interest to note that Herod believed the Scriptures enough to consider this one born in Bethlehem as a threat to his rulership—even to kill for it. He learned from the wise men when the star appeared, but how he calculated the two years is not explained. Like some today who try to set end-time dates, over and over, those dates have proved untrue. In his fanaticism, Herod might have figured a *larger* timeframe, just to be sure his objective was accomplished. We know he did this with the *extent* of his slaughter: not just males born in Bethlehem, but the districts around Bethlehem as well.

Some believe Herod's order to kill children two years old and under may refer to children who had entered their second year, not necessarily that they were a *full* two years old. We can notice the wording of a couple verses for comparison about how a year was figured:

"When that year was ended, they came to him the *second year*..." (Gen. 47:18). The year after the first was called the second year, even though the first year had just ended. Or, "And it came to pass in the first month in the *second year*, on the first day of the month..." (Exod. 40:17). In this verse, even the very beginning that followed year one was called the second year.

If that same principle applied in the case before us—and it is not without some possibility among scholars—a child who had just completed one year of life, was then in his second year, and consequently was considered two, even though not a *full* two years old. No need to labor a technical point; nothing essential hinges on it. But if valid, this would narrow the time period in question.

As well-known as the basic story is about the birth of Jesus, there are some details the Bible does not explain—and some things the Bible does say have been misunderstood. Consider the *number* of males killed in Herod's horrible massacre, commonly known as "The Slaughter of the Innocents."

A note in the NIV Bible regarding Matthew 2:16 says:

"The number has often been exaggerated as being in the *thousands*. In so small a village as Bethlehem, however (even

with the surrounding area included), the number was probably not large.”

If we estimate the population of this area as high as 2,000 people—figuring ages from those just born up to age 80—this would average out to 50 children two years old and under. But since only males were involved, this would cut the number in half. Of this number, it is possible that some escaped, as Jesus did, when Joseph and Mary fled into Egypt. *The Pulpit Commentary* estimates it was not over 20. (If, as mentioned earlier, the slaughter involved those who had just entered their second year, and younger—which may or may not be the intended meaning—the number would be even less.)

Many are familiar with the words of a lovely old hymn: “We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.” But the Bible does not actually call them *kings*, though some suppose this might fit with Psalms 72:10,11,15 and Isaiah 60:6.

Nor does the biblical account say there were *three* of them. The number three might be correctly assumed from the three gifts offered—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—and, right or wrong, a tradition has assigned to them the names Balthasar, Gaspar, and Melchior.

Whether the number of the wise men was three or not, there can be little doubt their entourage included *many more*, including body guards for protection, especially with the riches that were in their possession. For a journey like this, it would have been necessary to carry supplies, food, and water, requiring pack animals, probably camels.

Two thousand years have passed, but in some parts of the world camel trains still function as they did back then. In 1983, I was with a group of pastors “somewhere” between Gaza and Cairo when our bus broke down, causing a delay of several hours. We had not noticed a trail along the nearby sand dunes until a train of several pack camels and a couple riders passed nearby.

One of the most common objections to Christmas is that some of today’s customs and seasonal decorations were also known among *pagan* people. It is easy to quote encyclopedias to this effect. But often these claims have *no real connection*. See my book *THE BABYLON CONNECTION?*

There are those who suppose that if something once had a pagan significance, once pagan, always pagan! That is simply not true.

Some time ago I read a story about a man who was suing someone for causing damage to a hatchet he owned. It was no ordinary hatchet, he claimed, for it was the hatchet George Washington used to chop down a cherry tree! But under cross-examination, the present owner admitted that the handle of the hatchet had been replaced five times over the years, and the head had been replaced twice.

It was still a hatchet—there was that *similarity*—but the *significance* had changed!

One of the silliest teachings *some* anti-Christmas folks use is that people who decorate with a Christmas tree are

worshipping it as a god; that in placing presents around the base of the tree, they are bowing down to it. That is really farfetched. If anyone regarded a Christmas tree as their god, why would they later put it out for the trash pickup or burn it up in the fireplace?

Placing a star decoration on the top of a Christmas tree is a common custom. Those who try to demonize Christmas say the star is the symbol of an ancient pagan god (Amos 5:26). But they should remember that Jesus Christ himself is called a “star” (Rev. 22:16; cf. Num. 24:17).

The Watchtower article, referenced earlier, after stating that *Satan* made the star seen by the wise men, goes on to say: “Today, *Satan* tries to make people think of Jesus *only as a helpless baby*.” *Satan* tries to make people think of Jesus only as a helpless baby? *Really?* If that is what *Satan* is trying to do today, he has not been very successful. Does ANYONE think of Jesus “only” as a helpless baby?

Finally, in this article we have covered a variety of points. It is not our intent to put down any who may have a different understanding, including Jehovah’s Witnesses or other anti-Christmas groups. These various points are for the reader’s consideration, intended as “thoughts,” not dogmatic or divisive conclusions.

— Ralph Woodrow

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Did the celebration of Christmas start in Babylon?

Was December 25th the birthday of Nimrod, the first Santa Claus?

Does “Santa” mean “Satan”?

Is decorating with a Christmas tree “Baal worship”?

Did Jeremiah preach against Christmas trees?

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