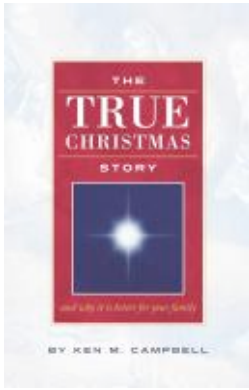


THE
**TRUE
CHRISTMAS**
STORY



and why it is better for your family

BY KEN M. CAMPBELL



The truth about what happened on that first Christmas depends on an understanding of the Biblical text but also on a knowledge of the first century Middle Eastern cultural context. This little book provides that. It reviews what can be known about Joseph, Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, the shepherds, the wise men, and Herod. It will challenge the reader to view Christmas afresh, with deeper appreciation and joy.

The True Christmas Story

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4 – *Sleepy Shepherds*

Luke 2:8-20

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby.

(LUKE 2:8).

Before we discuss the shepherds, we have to consider the problem of when Jesus was born, because Luke informs us that the shepherds were sleeping in the fields, and shepherds did not sleep out in the open during the rainy season.

We have been brought up on Christmas hymns that describe the birth of Jesus in the context of a Western winter scene.

*“See amid the winter’s snow,
born for us on earth below . . .”*

*“The shepherds at those tidings rejoiced much in
mind
And left their flocks a-feeding in tempest, storm and
wind . . .”*

THE TRUE CHRISTMAS STORY

*“It came a floweret bright
Amid the cold of winter. . .”*

*“In the bleak mid winter
Frosty wind made moan . . .”*

These are the fancies of writers who have never visited the land of Israel. If the shepherds were sleeping with their flocks in the fields, the one time of year that Jesus could not have been born was our winter time. Moreover, while snow has been known to fall around Jerusalem, it is rare and brief, usually melting the next day. So when was Jesus born?

We cannot ever discover the exact date, but we can narrow it down.

The time of the Roman census was determined by Rome, and administered locally by the emperor’s chosen representatives. Rome was sensitive to local conditions in their government of the empire, especially over such sensitive and unpopular issues as the collection of taxes. Three matters were relevant to the choice of a date for a census.

First was the weather. Since the population had to travel to their home town to be counted, often quite long distances, it was wise to select the best travel times: that is, during the dry months. The rainy season was the worst possible time to travel, as the roads could be muddy, and people

4 – Sleepy Shepherds

would be cold and wet and therefore not at all happy (note Matthew 24:20).

Second was the agricultural calendar. Planting and harvest times had to be avoided in order not to interfere with the economy and thus reduce taxes. That was not in Rome's interest. In Israel, barley was sown in November and harvested in March/April. Wheat was sown in October and harvested in May to early June.

Third were religious feasts and festivals. There were three main agricultural pilgrimages required by law (Deuteronomy 16:1-16). First, Passover in March/April, second, Pentecost in May/June, and third, Tabernacles, or Booths, in September/October.

Putting together these considerations, Rome would avoid appointing a census in December to March, because of rain; in October and November because of the planting season; in May and June because of harvests; and because of the required feasts mid-September to early October, early March to mid April, and mid-May to early June. That leaves the best time to organize a census as late June to August.

Now back to the shepherds sleeping in the fields in the middle of the dry season!

Shepherding

Shepherding was one of the despised occupations in Israel. A village would sometimes hire someone to shepherd the collective sheep owned by different families. Or a landowner would employ his own shepherds. Or the job would be given to the youngest son in the family – like David, the youngest son of Jesse (I Samuel 16:11-12). Shepherds were social outcasts, suspected of being thieves. They were seen as people without honor, the last choice to be favored with important information.

This statement is found in the Mishnah:

A man should not teach his son to be an ass-driver, or a camel-driver, or a barber or a sailor, or a herdsman or a shopkeeper, for their craft is the craft of robbers.

(KIDDUSHIN 4:14).

Shepherds carried a club, sometimes called a rod, and a sling, as weapons to defend the sheep against their natural predators – lions, bears, foxes, jackals, hyenas. Shepherds were expected to fight for the sheep. They also carried a staff to direct and correct the sheep, a leather pouch to hold food, and often a reed with which to play music.

Sheep were valued for their wool, their meat, sometimes clothing was made from their skin, and even their horns were employed as oil containers and as shofars (trumpets). Alongside the sheep were goats, also valued for their meat,

4 – Sleepy Shepherds

their skin for leather, their milk used for milk, yoghurt and cheese, and their hair was employed as stuffing for pillows.

During the day the sheep and goats grazed. When the water sources dried up they had to be fed water from wells. At night they were put in enclosures. These could be caves with a ring of large stones in a semi-circle around the entrance, perhaps with thorns arranged on top, or they could be circles of rocks in the open field laid over with thorns. At the entrance, the shepherd lay down to sleep, using his body as a door and as a barrier against wild animals entering or the sheep wandering out (John 10:7-10).

There was a flock of sheep raised specifically in this area for Temple sacrifices. Perhaps these shepherds had this privileged role; we do not know for certain.

At any rate, these despised people were the last people one might expect to be selected to receive the great news of the birth of the son of David in the town of David. The prophecy of Micah was probably not at the forefront of their daily thoughts!

Angels

So when an angel from God suddenly woke them up as they were sleeping that night, they were naturally terrified (Luke 2:9). This divine messenger informed them that this very

THE TRUE CHRISTMAS STORY

night a Savior had been born in Bethlehem – the Messiah. The evidence they would find would be a baby lying in a manger (Luke 2:10-12). After this dramatic announcement, a choir of angels appeared and began to sing praises to God:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. (LUKE 2:13).

This is not as sometimes misrepresented, a promise of universal peace on earth and an end to war. Rather it is a promise of God's peace coming to those whom God has chosen to be His people, a promise that has been fulfilled for centuries.

Immediately the shepherds decided that they would go at once to Bethlehem and see for themselves. Presumably they closed up the entrance to the sheep enclosure before they left! In due course they found Mary and her new-born child, and with great joy they proceeded to tell everyone in town what had happened. They were probably heard with some skepticism at first. Then they returned, rejoicing, back to the field of sheep. Their role in history was over, but it was a role for which they will always be remembered. The social outcasts had occupied center stage for one night.

Luke leaves us with Mary “pondering these things in her heart”. She had given birth, as the angel had promised her. But what was the significance of the visit from the shepherds. Why them? And what happens next?

4 – Sleepy Shepherds

Is it likely that Mary began to keep a journal at this time, one that Luke was later given access to? Normally in Biblical times record-keeping was a job for scribes, but the long-awaited event of the coming into this world of the royal son of David who would one day occupy the throne was something that someone needed to record. Who better than Mary, who had the “inside track” from the beginning of this story?

5



THE WISE GUYS

Matthew 2:1-12

The Biblical text does not call these visitors kings, nor does it say that there were three of them. There could have been two or twenty-two, or more. Nor does it seem to matter. So what does this passage tell us, and why is it given to us?

We will consider first who the visitors were; second where they came from; third what gifts did they bring, and why? Fourth, we must consider the mysterious star.

Magi

The word comes from the Greek *magoi* meaning astrologers or astronomers, the “wise men” of the day. They studied the stars and interpreted their movements to discern current and future events. Astrology is condemned in the Bible, but these wise men may have been simply learned men, “seekers of wisdom”, what passed for scientists in those days, often

employed by royalty. Daniel had become chief of the wise men in the court of Nebuchadnezzar.

From the East

The most popular idea is that the wise men came from Persia, where astrology was prevalent. Some of the church fathers stated that they came from Babylon or Persia, and this tradition has continued ever since. There are even traditions for the names of these “three kings”, the most common being Balthazar, Melchior, and Gaspar.

Positioned in Europe or America, this makes sense, since to us, Persia lies in the east. You can see it on any map! However, positioned in Israel, as Matthew was, Babylon and Persia lie to the north-east, not the east. The children of Israel did not have maps and only a vague idea of the world outside their own land. So those people who came down from Babylon or Persia are called in the Old Testament the “people of the north” and they come from the “land of the north” (Isaiah 14:31; Jeremiah 1:14-16; 4:6; 6:1). When they attacked Israel they followed the same International Coastal route as Abraham had – north-west along the border of the Euphrates River, avoiding the Syro-Arabian desert, to the Mediterranean coast, then south about 300 miles down the ridge route of Israel towards Jerusalem. From the perspective of someone on the ground in Israel, the Babylonians and Persians did not come from the east; they came from the north.

The wise men, however, came from the east.

The Chinese also were famous for their astronomical skills at this time, but most nations had their wise men who studied the stars, including the nations of Arabia. Nowhere can stars be observed so clearly as from the desert where there is no moisture in the air.

Whenever the Bible refers to “the East” or the “people of the East” it indicates the land east of the river Jordan, what we call today the Transjordan, and was then known as Arabia, and the ethnic groups that lived on that side of the river. Among those peoples were the Ammonites, the Moabites and the Edomites, not friends with Israel. But there was another ethnic group that was very close and friendly to Israel – the Ishmaelites, who lived in north and south Arabia.

Justin Martyr in 155 A.D. stated five times that “the magi came from Arabia’. So also did Tertullian in A.D. 208 and Clement of Rome in A.D. 96.

To understand who these folks were, we must review a little Biblical history. In Gen 12, God made a covenant with Abram:

*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you . . .
and you will be a blessing . . . in you all the families of the
earth will be blessed.*

(GEN 12:2-3).

Abram sired a son with his wife’s maid, Hagar, named Ishmael. Through Sarah’s jealousy, Hagar was kicked out, but

THE TRUE CHRISTMAS STORY

brought back by God. According to the angel who met with Hagar, her son would be a “*wild donkey of a man . . . and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen*” (Gen 16:12). The wild donkey was a symbol of toughness, independence, and the ability to live off the land, which became true of his descendants and their lifestyle.

Thirteen years later, God repeated his covenant to Abram, renaming him Abraham:

Behold my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations . . . and kings shall come from you. (GEN 17:4-6).

God then instructed Abraham to apply the covenant sign of circumcision and this the patriarch did at the age of ninety-nine to himself, at age thirteen to Ishmael, and to the rest of his household (Gen 17:9-14). Then God repeated his promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah, this time their own natural son (Gen 17:15-16). This son would be Isaac, the father of the chosen people, Israel. Then God added:

As for Ishmael . . . behold I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and will multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. (GEN 17:20).

While only Isaac was to be the ancestor of the elect people Israel, both sons were blessed by God. Ishmael went to live

across the river in the land to the east, Arabia, where he and his descendants lived the life of nomads. They roamed the desert, following their flocks, and became prosperous. But most of their wealth came from the spice trade, which they came to control.

The first use of the term “Arab” appears in an Assyrian record from 853 B.C. It is not an ethnic term, but means “a nomadic desert dweller”. It included various tribes, especially the Ishmaelites, the Midianites, the Hagarites, and the Amalekites. Later the word applied to anyone living in the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabs were also called the “children of the east” (*bene qadam* in Hebrew).

Among them was a man called Job, who was “*the greatest man among all the people of the east*” (*Job 1:3*). He lived in the land of Uz, which is in Ishmaelite territory in north Arabia. God described him thus:

There is none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil. (*JOB 1:8*).

Agar and Lemuel were two sons of the east who contributed to the book of Proverbs (*Proverbs 30:1; 31:1*). David’s sister was married to an Ishmaelite man (*I Chronicles 2:17*).

By the fourth century B.C., the Arabs (or at least many of

THE TRUE CHRISTMAS STORY

them) were called the Nabateans. They controlled the spice trade, were very wealthy, and interacted economically with Israel. They were semi-nomadic by now and had a capital – Petra.

So the closest relatives of the Israelites in the time of Jesus were the descendants of the Ishmaelites, the “people of the east”, and from among them came the wise men of Matthew chapter two, probably crossing the Jordan at Jericho.

The Gifts

First, the wise men did not give any gifts to Joseph or Mary. And the gifts they brought to Jesus were not toys! Far from it. “Gold and frankincense and myrrh”. They were indeed strange gifts to bring to any child; but of course this was not “any” child.

We know that gold was mined and was plentiful in Arabia (I Kings 9:28; 10:2). In the Messianic psalm 72, the writer refers to the area of Sheba: “May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts...May gold from Sheba be given to him” (Psalm 72:10, 15). The queen of Sheba later traveled to meet King Solomon with large amounts of gold (I Kings 10:2). She was

commended by Jesus in Matthew 12:42. Other Arabian kings brought tribute of gold to King Solomon (I Kings 10:15).

Not only was gold plentiful in Arabia, so also were frankincense and myrrh, and the Nabateans controlled their production and trade. These two plants provided gum resins which were used for perfume, incense and for medicinal purposes. They were extremely costly. In the first century, gold was worth \$600 a pound; frankincense was worth \$500 a pound; and myrrh was worth \$4000 a pound. It was only in the deserts of central Arabia and Somalia that these plants were found. The Nabateans had a monopoly of these products.

These facts were familiar to many in Israel. Those who studied the scriptures were also familiar with another Isaianic prophecy, one that was relevant to this matter – Isaiah 60:1-6:

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you . . . Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising . . . A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah. And those from Sheba shall come, they shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you”

(ISAIAH 60:1,3,6,7).

THE TRUE CHRISTMAS STORY

What is remarkable about this prophecy is how detailed is the mention of tribes from Arabia, tribes descended from Abraham and Ishmael. Midian was one of the sons of Abraham and Keturah. Ephah was one of the sons of Midian. Sheba an area in southern Arabia. Kedar and Nebaioth were the first two sons of Ishmael.

Here is an explicit prediction that the Arabic descendants of Ishmael would bring tribute of gold and incense to King Jesus. How appropriate that the first gentiles to fulfill the prophecies that “the gentiles will come to the Messiah” would be the closest kin of the Israelites, their brothers, the Ishmaelites! And it is also appropriate that the wise men fulfilled prophecy by offering tribute as an act of respect, even worship to one who was a new king. They traveled, as prophesied, on camels in a large caravan, probably carrying not three little boxes, as often is portrayed in paintings and pantomimes, but likely with a generous quantity of the gifts (as had the Queen of Sheba centuries before for Solomon), suitable for the son of David, the king of Israel.

The Star

What kind of star was this? This is a problem that has vexed commentators for centuries:

We saw his star when it rose (in the east) and have come to worship him. (MATTHEW 2:2).

The wise men saw this star back home on the other side of the Jordan. They followed its movement west to Jerusalem, where Jewish kings lived, but then they turned south to Bethlehem, following the star which then “*came to rest over the place where the child was*” (*Matthew 2:9*).

There are those who believe it was a comet. Chinese records indicate comets occurred in 12 B.C., 5 B.C., and 4 B.C. The one in 5 B.C. is the most likely time-wise, especially since it was a “tailed comet”, and was visible for 70 days. There had been other notable astronomical events in the few years preceding the birth of Jesus, so there was high interest internationally at this time in celestial movements. Israelites may have been very interested also if they were familiar with the prophecy in Numbers 24:17:

“A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” (NUMBERS 24:17)

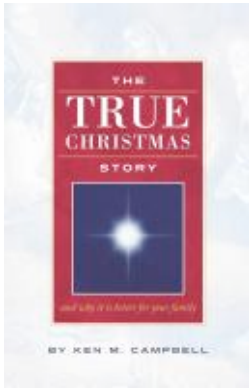
Others have suggested that the star was a meteor. Others have observed that there was a conjunction of the planets Saturn and Jupiter that were observed moving east in 7 B.C. But that is too early for the birth of Jesus.

There are difficulties with all these suggestions. For example, How come no-one in Jerusalem apparently saw this star except the wise men? How could a star change its course dramatically from west to south? And how could a star – a gigantic object – stop over precisely one house in a small town? Skeptics have denounced the story as mythological because of these problems.

THE TRUE CHRISTMAS STORY

But there is a solution. The wise men saw a “bright shining” object in the sky and not surprisingly concluded it was a star. But perhaps what they saw was an angel. Angels are usually described as shining brightly, so brightly that they scare people. Mary had seen an angel. Joseph had seen an angel. The shepherds had seen an angel. It would be consistent with God’s means of communication at this time if he also sent an angel to the wise men. And angels can change direction quite easily; and they can stop low over a particular house so the wise men had no difficulty in finding the new-born child in a foreign country and in a strange town.

In the Revelation of John the apostle is shown a glorious figure “like a son of man” holding in his hand seven stars. The awe-struck John is informed by Jesus that “*The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches*” (*Revelation 1:20*). In the Bible, stars are suitable symbols of the purity and splendor of angels. When they had worshiped Jesus, the wise men were told in a dream – presumably, like Joseph, by the angel – to go home by another route, which they did. But Herod was not to be outwitted – so he thought.



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