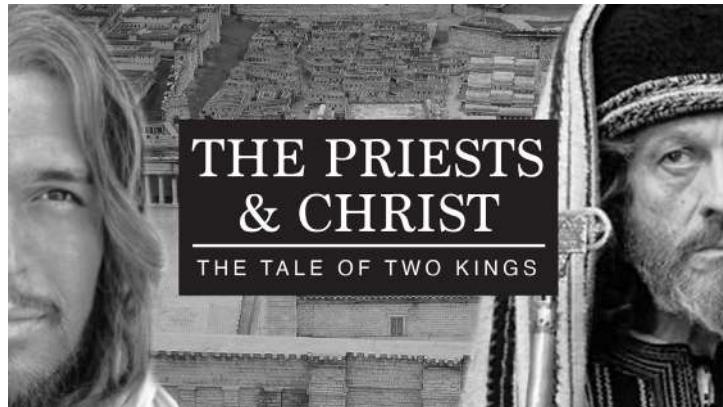


Characters of Christmas



Written By
©Dr. Marty Baker
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The late Dr. Duane Gish is best remembered as a highly educated Christian scientist who courageously presented the weaknesses of evolution and the strengths of special creationism on secular university campuses. His academic and professorial record made him a force to be reckoned with. During WWII, he bravely served in the Pacific Theater as an Army Captain. For his heroism he received the Bronze Star. After the war in 1949, he earned a B.S. in chemistry from UCLA. By 1953, he secured a Ph.D. in biochemistry from the University of California at Berkeley. He, then, did a short stint as a postdoctoral fellow and then assistant professor of biochemistry at Cornell University Medical College. From this teaching opportunity, he turned a became a researcher from 1956 to 1960 at UC Berkeley. From 1960 to 1971, he did chemistry research for the Upjohn Company. In 1971, he joined another gifted Christian scientist, Dr. Henry Morris, as the Vice President of the Institute for Creation Research which Morris had founded in 1971. Until his death on March 5, 2013, Dr. Gish demonstrated the utter superiority of the creationist viewpoint as opposed to evolution by means of a debate and a prolific writing career.

I'll never forget the night I heard him debate the science department at the University of Pacific campus in 1980. Hardly any of the professors showed up to engage this highly intelligent, credentialed, and gifted man. One lone science professor sat behind me with a few of his doctoral students. After Dr. Gish presented his scientific evidence for the untenable, illogical nature of evolution, followed by the superiority of the creationist position, he kindly opened the floor for questions. Nobody raised a hand. The silence could not have been more deafening. After a few moments, I thought to myself, "Who in their right mind would attempt to engage a man of Gish's stature? It would be intellectual suicide."

Within the next few minutes, I heard the lone science professor give a question to one of his choice doctoral students, followed by a challenge for him to stand and take on the scholastic

interloper. The young man stood, posed the provocative, pugnacious question and then sat down. Dr. Gish respectfully and systematically took the question apart, leaving the doctoral student and his professor no response. And there was no response. Only deafening quiet. Not long thereafter, Dr. Gish thanked everyone for attending and we all headed home.

I've thought about that lecture for many years. Why didn't the science professor pose the question himself? I can think of a whole host of answers: he didn't want to lose scholastic face; he didn't want others to see the blatant limitations of his scientific worldview. How did the professor and his entourage of evolutionary science disciples respond to the reasoned, factually grounded reply of Gish? With intellectual smugness and disdain wrapped up in the robe of complete indifference to the hard evidence at hand. They appeared to walk out of the lecture hall committed, more than ever before, to their inferior scientific worldview and ideology.

Indifference to scientific truth wedded to an unhealthy, illogically scientific worldview is a terrible thing. Why? It will lead a person away from learning about the living God who created all the wonder and complexity with see and enjoy. Indifference wedded to spiritual truth is even more dangerous and destructive for it will cost the person in question an amazing relationship with the living God, followed by an eternity spent cut off from the wonders of heaven.

Perhaps you are sitting here today full of indifference to the birth of Jesus Christ. You have heard the Nativity story all of your life, you know about the star which supposedly guided the Magi to his humble home in Bethlehem, and you have heard more than once about how the shepherds near Christ's birth city who supposedly encountered gleaming angels announcing His arrival on planet earth. You can certainly sing all the nice Christmas carols too, but at the end of the day you merely shrug your shoulders concerning the identify of this ancient Jewish male babe.

I trust and pray this Christmas will have a different outcome for you. I trust and pray that as we consider the response of the religious leaders to the birth of Jesus from Matthew 2, you will not only see yourself, you will see that God calls you to move from being indifferent about Jesus to being inflamed by a newfound faith in His person and work. This is no time to yawn and walk on. It's time to bow and press on to higher ground. I think a careful analysis of this familiar chapter can assist to that end in your life.

From our study of this chapter with an eye on Herod the Great last week, we realized the truth of this main idea: *In tough times God does His most tender work*. Indeed, He does. Just when His chosen people are up against the Red Sea with no weapons for protection and no way of escape from the ensuing Egyptian army is when God steps in and parts the sea. Likewise, just when the world descended into terrible darkness during the ruthless reign of Herod and Rome, God sent His humble, innocent Son to bring spiritual salvation to sinners enslaved to sin (Rom. 5:12-21). The tenderness of this timely move still echoes in our day.

Looking at this Matthean passage again, this time by focusing on the religious leaders of the day, we encounter a secondary motif:

Revelation Regarding Christ Leads Either to Ruination or Reformation (Matt. 2:1-9)

Put differently, if you reject the evidence for the person and redemptive work of Christ, the Scriptures are clear your decision will cost you in the here and now and in eternity (John 3:16). If, however, you embrace the evidence by faith, the Lord will save you from your sin, make you His

child (Rom. 8), give you a life full of inner joy (John 10:10), inner peace (Rom. 5:1), and grant you life eternal. The choice is clearly yours. I just hope indifference is not your go-to response when God uses the evidence of this tremendous passage to knock on your heart's door. A study of the chapter readily demonstrates two radically different responses, outside of that of Herod's paranoia, to the birth of Jesus. Which is yours is the question.

Exhibit 1: Israel's Religious Leaders

We begin by reading the historical, divinely inspired text:

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

The Magi came from the east, which probably means the Parthian empire. This empire rose from the ashes of the Babylonian and Persian empires of Daniel's day. Danker's Greek lexicon tells us this word, *magi* (*magoi*, μάγοι) pointed to "men of letters and experts in astrology." These men were not cooks and charlatans, but the cream of the academic, intelligentsia crop within their nation. They studied the stars and were well-versed in mathematics, agriculture, and astrology. There is good reason to believe they followed this particular astral anomaly because the prophet Daniel, some 500 years before them, had commanded their school of wise men. Daniel 2:48 validates this observation:

⁴⁸ Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon (Dan. 2).

Daniel achieved this position after God gave him the specific details regarding the massive image King Nebuchadnezzar had seen in a dream, an image detailing with great historical specificity the rise and fall of the final world empires before the arrival of the Messiah. No wonder Herod became politically nervous. If anyone bothered to explain any of this fulfilled prophecy to him, he would have known that he, along with the Roman empire, were not long for this world.

Why did they follow this star? Probably because through Daniel's influence and teaching they knew the prophetic import of Numbers 24:17-19:

¹⁷ I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, And destroy all the sons of tumult. ¹⁸ And Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession, while Israel does valiantly. ¹⁹ Out of Jacob One shall have dominion, and destroy the remains of the city (Num. 24).

The Moabite king, Balak, whose name in Hebrew means "destroyer," or "one who lays waste," sought to destroy Israel, who moved their forces through his land on the way to the Promised Land, by hiring Balaam, a prophet, to prophesy evil against them. God had other plans, however.

He caused the misguided prophet to only prophesy hope, wonder, life, and protection. Here in Numbers 24, God's prophecy foretold a royal star who would come out of Israel one day. He would be instrumental in subduing Moab and Edom, Israel's ancient enemies. Again, if Herod were privy to this info it would have made him squirm in his throne for he was from Edom. Prophetically speaking, this prophecy has been fulfilled in part (1 Kings 11:15-18); however, the final judgment of these two hostile countries awaits the Second Coming of the Messiah (Isa. 15-16; 21:11-12; Jer. 48; 49:7-11; Obad. 15-18, 21).

In any event, the Magi followed a star which acted like no star they had ever seen. It guided them west to Jerusalem, and eventually hovered over the home of Jesus. Obviously, this was no heavenly star. What was it? As I've said before, it was probably a divinely crafted hole in our dimension which allowed the glory of God to shine through. He merely moved that hole in the sky in order to guide this God-fearing Gentiles to THE regal Star, Jesus, THE Christ. And why were they there? To worship Him. This is the key take-away from the passage. They followed the evidence to the most logical conclusion and bowed to worship the Christ.

Worship of Jesus was not Herod's response.

³ When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod became immediately hostile. Why? Jesus threatened his throne by his mere presence. And the fact Parthian wise men were in town seeking information about this new Jewish king was alarming. Why? The Parthians had sided with Antigonus, the Jew of the Hasmonean bloodline, and helped him establish his rule over Jerusalem in Israel from 40-37 B.C. Herod fought a bitter, bloody war to defeat and oust them in finally in 37 B.C. Herod must have thought, "Could this be another sneak attack of sorts?" Why, on earth, was Jerusalem troubled? Probably because they feared anything which might upset Herod for they knew, firsthand, how he responded to any and all threats to his throne. Brutality ensued. (This is what occurs when you have power-hungry leaders. They intimidate good, moral people so they will be afraid to stand up for principles they know are true.)

In order to ascertain where the Christ was born (so he could terminate Him), Herod first sought the counsel of Israel's most educated religious leaders:

⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

Who were these men? The chief priests were from the tribe of Levi, and descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, Israel's first High Priest. Israel only had one High Priest at a time and he served for life. By the time of Christ, the role of High Priest had become a political football, resulting in office being, at times, held up for the highest bidder or the most powerful. In any event, the High Priest did high and holy functions like administering the sacrifice for the people on the Day of Atonement, and serving over the powerful Sanhedrin, Israel's Supreme Court composed of seventy key and highly academic religious leaders, leaders steeped in the law of Moses and the Mishnah, or Oral Law. If anyone knew the Old Testament, it was these men. The fact the word is plural here denotes that former High Priests were alive at this time. The religious, scriptural brain power amassed just with these men couldn't have been more formidable.

Other chief priests would have been the captain of the Temple. A large contingent of soldiers was attached to him, and Rome vested him with the authority to arrest and imprison those who disrupted societal peace, especially as it related to the Temple. Other key priests were entrusted with leading the daily and weekly course of priests to make sure worship happened efficiently, and the Temple treasurer kept track of the gifts of the people. Together we can safely say if anyone knew anything about the coming of the Star, the Messiah, it was these men.

The scribes, who were primarily Pharisees, were Jewish lawyers known as authorities of Jewish law and traditions. They held a literalistic understanding of the Mosaic Law and were very strict in their observance of legalistic laws of purity. Sadducean scribes, on the other hand, were liberal lawyers who questioned things like the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:8), and were, by definition, more flexible in their interpretation of the “fluid” Torah. Again, if anyone knew what the Old Testament said about the coming Messiah, it was these men.

When asked where the Christ would be born, they wasted no time answering the softball question.

⁵ So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

⁶ 'But you, Bethlehem, *in the land of Judah*, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.'¹

The collectively knew the prophet Micah had prophesied the place of the Messiah’s birth. The full quote from Micah 5:2 is even more illuminating:

² But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *though* you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth *are* from of old, from everlasting (Mic. 5:2).

The birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem and not Jerusalem prophetically illustrated that His birth would come at a time when Israel was not in control of their key, regal city, and such was the case in the Herod’s time. Hence, from the insignificant God, would bring the significant, the King of Kings. Further, as Keil and Delitzsch correctly argue, the last clause concerning “The announcement of the origin of this Ruler as being before all worlds unquestionably presupposes His divine nature.”¹

Think of this. The highly educated religious leaders *knew* that the God-man-Davidic-king was going to come to Bethlehem. *They knew more than this, too.* Alfred Edersheim, a converted Jew and biblical scholar, informs us in Appendix IX of his must read book, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, how the ancient religious leaders counted 456 exact prophesies from the Old Testament concerning the Messiah: 75 from the Pentateuch, 243 from the Prophets, and 138 from the Hagiographa (Ruth, Psalms, job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles). He goes on to list each of these for your consideration, analysis, and prayer. A person should study these because it is statistically impossible for one man, Jesus, to fulfill these if He were not the Christ.

¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. X (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 480-481.

Coincidence is completely ruled out by the mathematical science of probability. As I've said before, but some evidence is worth repeating, Peter Stoner in *Science Speaks* demonstrates that the odds of Jesus precisely fulfilling merely eight of just sixty prophesies is one in ten to the seventeenth power. That's a one with a staggering seventeen zeros after it. Stoner helpfully illustrates this huge number by adding, "... take 1017 silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote them in their own wisdom."²

How can a person be indifferent toward hard prophetic data points like this? But they are. The religious leaders were. With the prophecy of Numbers 24, no doubt in mind, these highly intelligent religious leaders quoted a prophetic text concerning the Messiah's birth location. They did this but *this is all they did*. I think a couple of questions are in order at this juncture: Don't you think the credible astral anomaly testimony would have moved at least *one of them* to consider heading outside that night to look up and see if it were true? Don't you think at least *one of them* would have traveled with the Magi to Bethlehem to see if the information was, in fact, true? Yet it doesn't appear anyone bothered to tag along with the Magi when they headed for Bethlehem. This is absolutely sad and shocking, both at the same time. (Note to self: In despotic political times, the best legal minds will be tempted to abandon the truth of the foundational documents for the sake of preserving their power and societal order.)

What kept the religious men in the know from heading to Bethlehem?

- Fear of reprisal from Herod if all this prophetic word turned out to be true.
- Fear of losing face with your academic colleagues if the word turned out not to be true.
- Fear of losing religious power. You know, once people have power it is very difficult to get them to let go of it. Regarding this, John Steinbeck once quipped: "Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts. Perhaps the fear of a loss of power." In a similar vein, Henry Kissinger once stated, "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac."
- How about academic indifference? They were so locked into their knowledge, love of traditions, and day to day routines they just didn't care. After all, they had heard about, and seen, false Christs before. Who wanted to waste their time on another claim? Better and wiser to just sit tight in your indifference.

Any of this ring true in your life? You know the prophesies, the pivotal passages, the main story line of the Messiah, but you sing the carols once a year, hold your flickering candle during a corporate singing of *Silent Night*, open presents around the tree, enjoy a large meal on Christmas day, but merely shrug off the information God has placed before you regarding the identity of His

² Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino: Campus Crusade, 1972), 175.

Messianic Son and redeemer as just, well, ho hum. If this is you, be warned for the willful failure to embrace this prophetic messianic evidence leads to present and future spiritual ruination.

How should you respond? This answer is embedded in . . .

Exhibit 2: Parthia's Wise Men

The text gives us the answer even a child could see:

⁷ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." ⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was (Matt. 2:1-9).

They followed the written and astral evidence to the feet of Jesus, the true Christ. They, who were steeped in pagan astrology, listened to God when He came to them and helped them connect the dots of Numbers 24 with the special "star." They left their comfortable thinking and training for the uncomfortable but true. They didn't care what people thought of them as they mounted the camels to ride 600 miles across barren, unfriendly, austere terrain to Jerusalem. They didn't care what the journey would personally cost them. They just knew God gave them revelatory insight about the coming messianic king they had heard about, and they quickly moved out, these three friends, to meet the infant king. What faith wedded to the iron-clad prophetic evidence. How ironic. The men who had much revelatory light did not walk toward the light of Jesus, while the men with little revelatory light couldn't wait to get into His holy presence and worship Him, and worship Him they did. What a special, moving moment that must have been.

In John 4, John introduces us to a woman with ethical, marital issues. Jesus met this half-breed Samaritan woman at a well one day. Within a few minutes, Jesus tells her that He is more than equipped to meet her spiritual thirst for all eternity. She didn't quite get what he was saying so she asked for some of this physical water (John 4:15). Jesus then lovingly turned and showed her that He, a total stranger knew she had had five husbands and was living with a sixth man (John 4:16-17). It didn't take her but a few seconds to realize He was a prophet, and with a little more teaching from Christ she realized that He wasn't just a prophet, but THE prophet, really, THE Messiah. It was at that moment she, a woman with a ton of spiritual baggage, a woman who had been utterly indifferent to the Jewish belief system, embraced Jesus as her Messiah and Savior. Wisely did she follow the evidence to the most logical conclusion. Her walk of faith resulted in spiritual water rushing through her sin-parched heart, leaving her with joy, peace, and life meaning.

In this fashion the woman at the well was, in many respects, like those ancient wise men. God gave her a little revelatory light and it rocked her world, forever. What will the revelatory light of this Christmas do to your world?