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During the Christmas season in the West, our culture becomes enrapt in a mythical world of twinkling lights, snowmen, decorated trees, Santa Claus, reindeer, wrapped gifts, and sleigh bells. Among all these familiar icons, thankfully, a few Christian symbols have endured: the manger scene, a bright star, shepherds, the Magi.

Even in secular, materialistic society, the Wise Men are a part of the Christmas atmosphere. They are pictured as intrepid and inspired seekers of truth, traveling by night, bearing gifts.

But what was it about the Wise Men that in Scripture they should be called wise? Was it because they were learned? Was it because they were on the cutting edge of their time in the disciplines of mathematics and astronomy?

For that matter, what does Scripture mean by the word *wisdom*? We're told that Solomon was the wisest person who ever lived. Does this

THE WISDOM OF THE MAGI

mean that he was the world record holder for the highest intelligence quotient?

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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’” (Matt. 2:1, 2, NKJV).

It would surely be accurate to say that the wisdom of these men resulted at least in part from their knowledge of astronomy. Even in a time long before the technology of optics and telescopes and radio telescopes, they knew enough to recognize an unidentified flying object when they saw it. Clearly, it appeared to be moving in a way that was uncharacteristic of the other heavenly lights.

Further, their wisdom is evidenced by their recognition that this object was surely a fulfillment of prophecy. Scholars tell us that they probably came from Arabia or Per-

sia, an interesting irony for our time. The way the religious establishment in Jerusalem responded would be called profiling today.

But they had apparently studied the available Hebrew Scriptures closely enough to know that this star was significant. The prophecy of Balaam in the Book of Numbers speaks of the “star of Jacob” (24:15, KJV). “As these magi studied the starry heavens, and sought to fathom the mystery hidden in their bright paths, they beheld the glory of the Creator. . . . In their own land were treasured prophetic writings that predicted the coming of a divine teacher. Balaam belonged to the magicians, though at one time a prophet of God; by the Holy Spirit he had foretold the prosperity of Israel and the appearing of the Messiah; and his prophecies had been handed down by tradition from century to century.”¹ Almost certainly the Wise Men drew on Balaam’s prophecy, and there were others as well.

The wisdom of the Magi must have surely derived from something more than knowledge of the celestial universe and scholarship on the subject of prophecy. Their wisdom was demonstrated in the fact that they saddled up their camels and headed west. They acted on what they had learned. They embraced and lived the truth as they discovered it in their study.

Throughout the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy, the term “experimental knowledge” occurs a great many times. This expression may sound at first like a kind of knowledge in which you dabble with this and experiment with that, rather like an emphasis on trivia. But a careful reading of the context of this phrase shows that consistently Ellen White is writing about what is called today “*experiential* knowledge.” It is far more than information.

“There are very many who claim to serve God,” she says, “but who have no experimental knowledge of Him. Their desire to do His will is based upon their own inclination, not upon the deep conviction of the Holy Spirit.”²

Have you ever wondered why Herod’s theological experts in prophecy could have known that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem—yet they hadn’t responded to the star? It’s probable that they hadn’t even seen it. They readily rejected the prophecy in their own Scriptures (Micah 5:2), that precisely pinpointed the location of the Messiah’s birth. And *they* looked upon the visiting Magi as heathen!

Truth doesn’t always come from the establishment. Sometimes it comes from unexpected sources. All truth is God’s truth.

But how do we respond to truth when it presents itself to us? In any study of Scripture, do we stop at

mere knowledge—mere information? As we study and discuss the Sabbath school lesson, as we participate in any Bible study group, as we read Scripture personally and devotionally, as we recount Bible stories to our children and grandchildren, are we merely exercising intellect?

“Modern knowledge is characteristically noncommittal. Much is known, but all is consequence-free. What we know and what we do about it are two different things. . . . What matters for our thought-style is not simply doctrine but the Christian responsibility of knowledge exhibited in all our knowing. . . . Knowledge for the Christian is never noncommittal nor consequence-free. Knowledge carries responsibility.”³

Any encounter with Scripture should affect our hearts as well as our heads. Learning should lead to transformation, else it’s just an intellectual exercise. By their own account before King Herod, the wise men summed up their reason for being in Jerusalem: “We have seen His star in the East [information] and have come to worship Him [transformation]” (2:2, NKJV). The Magi didn’t say they had come to confirm a hypothesis or prove a doctrine.

“The best-informed man,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “is not necessarily the wisest. Indeed there is a danger that precisely in the multiplicity of his knowledge he will lose sight of what is essential. . . . The wise man will seek to acquire the best possible knowledge about events, but always without becoming dependent upon this knowledge. To recognize the significant in the factual is wisdom.”⁴

Let’s be reminded in the coming Christmas season that the knowledge of Jesus is more than mere information. Knowledge of God’s revelation through Scripture and the star is important—but more significant is our response to this information. It should make a difference in our lives. It should cause us to go beyond our library research, our panel discussions, and our publication of papers. It should cause us to get on our camels and hit the road. It should prompt us to *worship*.

REFERENCES

- ¹ *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 59, 60.
- ² *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 48.
- ³ Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), pp. 145-148.
- ⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 69.

