

Advent Bible Study – Little Town Big Story 1

This Advent study takes as its theme the well known carol, 'O little town of Bethlehem' written in 1868 by Phillips Brooks an Episcopal priest as a suitable carol for his Sunday School. Each study takes its theme from a verse of the carol.

Study One 'O little town'

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years

Bethlehem was first settled by Canaanite tribes who named it Beit Lahama. It was here that Jacob buried Rachel ([Gen 48:7](#), [35:20](#)). Ruth lived here when she married Boaz ([Ruth 2:1](#)) and looking out from Bethlehem she would have seen her native land, Moab, across the Jordan valley. Samuel anointed David king in Bethlehem ([I Sam. 16:1-13](#)) and David was a descendant of Ruth and Boaz (it was a small town!) To the Jews it was the connection to King David that was foremost in their mind. Bethlehem was the city of David, and it was in Bethlehem that the Jews expected David's greater Son to be born, God's anointed One. ([Micah 5:2](#))

It is interesting that at the time of Jesus' birth there was a real sense of expectation in the air, a waiting for the coming of a king. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote 'There had spread over all the orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judah to rule the world.' If David Pawson is correct and Jesus was born at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles¹ then that is hugely significant, as Jews today still look for Messiah to come on that day.

Stars and angels

We're probably familiar with the story of the Magi. They were soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. We don't know exactly what brilliant star these Magi saw. Some have claimed that the story of the Magi was simply a legend, but given the common belief in that part of the world that the time was right for a great king to be born in Judaea who would usher in a new age of peace there is no reason to think that intellectuals such as the Magi would not want to follow up such a lead to discover the truth.

Of course, in our nativity story there is not just one celestial event which led visitors to Jesus and his family. There were shepherds looking after their flocks close by, possibly the same lambs that would be sacrificed in the temple for the sins of the people.

So here we have Bethlehem, the one place that the Jews were looking to for God to bring forth a new and mighty king, a place full of history and significance. We have a real sense of expectation that the time was drawing near when God would act, wise men setting off from the East because they have seen the sign that a new king is to be born in Judaea, and a pregnant Mary together with her husband Joseph travelling to their ancestral home, hoping to find a room for the night!

Questions

1 Time and place seems to have had real significance in the nativity narrative. How important to your Christian faith is the time and place of Jesus' birth?

2 Has a significant time or place had an impact on your faith?

3 The Magi followed a star, the shepherds got their directions from angels, how did you find your way to Jesus?

4 "To get into Bethlehem from Jerusalem you have to go through a checkpoint. Actually nowadays it looks more like a border crossing. Israeli security personnel sitting behind blast-proof-glass ask for your passport. "The barrier goes up, and you drive in through a gap in the 30-foot high concrete wall that Israel says it has built to keep out suicide bombers." (Matthew Price of BBC News 3 Nov 2006)
How can the story of Jesus' birth talk to us about this situation?

Was Jesus born in September?

David Pawson, with a little Biblical detective work suggests that the Gospels hint at a month for Jesus' birth. We're told in Luke's Gospel that Zechariah belonged to the priestly tribe of Abijah. 1 Chronicles tells which month of the year this tribe was called to serve in the temple (in the one-year cycle they were eighth out of 24 tribes). So Zechariah was in the temple in the fourth month of the Jewish calendar. Elizabeth became pregnant at that time, six months ahead of Mary... so Jesus could have been born 15 months later (in our calendar that would be late September/early October at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles).