

In the 1920's, the British scholar Eric Bishop met with a Bedouin tribe in Jordan. The people of the tribe referred to themselves as al-Kokaboni. Their name was derived from an Arabic phrase meaning, those who follow the planets. Bishop was curious about this name, so he asked them why they had taken this name. One of the elders of the tribe said that his ancestors followed the star to pay homage to the great prophet, Jesus. Knowing the reliability of oral tradition in the Bedouin culture and the strong sense of tribal identity, Bishop was convinced that the members of this tribe were indeed descendants of the wise men who visited Jesus and infuriated Herod.

This group of wise men who traveled to Bethlehem to pay homage to Jesus had some time earlier observed an astronomical phenomenon at its rising. Matthew does not give us much background, but from the fact that Herod sent troops to Bethlehem to kill all of the children in Bethlehem two years and under, it may well be that the wise men had been following the star for two years. It is also likely that it was an entire tribe traveling to Bethlehem, and not just three. No one with any wisdom would set out on such a journey carrying gold, frankincense, and myrrh with just three men.

In any case, these wise men were astrologers. The practice of astrology is forbidden in the Law of Moses. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah both spoke of the vanity of those who looked to the stars for signs of what was going to happen on earth. We might then find it interesting that the wise men were led to their discovery of Jesus by following a star.

Part of the explanation for this might be that the wise men did not have the Law, so they had no idea that astrology was not God's preferred way of leading people. They did not have the benefit of the scriptures, so they had no way of knowing that God had promised that he would send a messiah who would defeat sin and death. Certainly, they had no way of knowing that the promised messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Yet, these wise men were seeking God. The fact that they undertook a long and dangerous journey tells us that they were not concerned what it would cost them to receive that revelation. They were filled with a desire to receive a revelation from Him, so God sent a revelation to them in a form they could understand.

Contrast these wise men with Herod and the Chief Priests and Scribes. Herod and the religious officials had access to the scriptures. The Chief Priests and the Scribes studied the scriptures. They knew them by heart. Herod had apparently not spent much time studying the scriptures. He had been too busy currying favor with Rome for that. So he had to call the Chief Priests and Scribes who told him that the Messiah was to be born in Israel.

You might think that on seeing the tribe of wise men following the star and asking about the Messiah, the Chief Priests and Scribes would have dropped everything to join the caravan on its way to pay homage to Jesus. But they did not. They were very interested in the mechanics of the law. They were very interested in how they could apply the Law to various situations, but it seems that they were not so interested in the One who had given the law. So, they said goodbye to the wise men, and returned to what their normal activities. The Messiah had been born, foreign tribes were going to see him, and the Chief Priests and the Scribes stayed home. I suppose their reaction was one step better than Herod's. Herod was not going to allow the Messiah to come under his watch. He had no intention of giving up his authority, so he hatched an ill-fated plot to kill the Messiah.

We in the church need to be on guard against the attitude of Herod, and the attitudes of the Chief Priests and Scribes. It is possible for those of us who have heard the scriptures read, and have several versions of the Bible in our homes to become indifferent to scripture. Like

Herod, we can become so consumed with our own agenda that we don't bother with the revelation of God that has been handed down to us by our parents and grandparents. It is possible for us to engage in reading the scripture as an academic or legal exercise. We can study the mechanics and the commandments, but miss the God who has revealed Himself through the words on the page. Like the Chief Priests and the Scribes, we can become very familiar with the text but lose any sense of excitement about the message.

I wonder if the wise men found it odd that the leaders of Jerusalem appeared so indifferent to the coming of the Messiah. As the Prophet Isaiah had foretold, nations were streaming to the light of Israel. Rulers were to come to see the dawning of the age of the Messiah. Multitudes of camels from Midian and Ephraim, and gold from Sheba, were on their way to Bethlehem. The words of prophecy were being fulfilled, but the religious leaders and Herod decided to stay home.

I don't think we should read this as an endorsement of astrology. I would not recommend that anyone start planning their life around their horoscope. We cannot take this bit of the narrative and make it into a general principle for how God guides us. The important thing in this part of the narrative is not how God guided the wise men, but that He guided them to His self-revelation. God's desire is to reveal Himself. His desire is for us to know Him.

God had revealed Himself to Israel. He had revealed Himself through his actions. In guiding Abraham to the promised land, God revealed Himself. In delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt, God revealed Himself. When He brought Israel into the promised land, He revealed Himself. God had also revealed Himself through the Law. The commandments pointed to His holiness, His wisdom, His love for His people, and His concern for all people. God revealed Himself through the prophets. Finally, He revealed Himself through His Son, the Messiah of Israel. God's desire was to be known by Israel, and for the nations to see Him through Israel.

When Israel failed to receive this revelation, and failed to bring this revelation to the nations, God revealed Himself outside of the ordinary channels. He used a star to lead those who were seeking so that they could come to His Son. Those who were seeking were honored above those who were privileged.

God's desire is still to reveal Himself. The scriptures have been entrusted to His church. We have the record of the life, death, and resurrection of His incarnate Son. We have been given His self-revelation in the word made flesh. God continues to reveal Himself through the work of His Holy Spirit, who dwells with us and in us to bring to remembrance all that Jesus did and taught. His Holy Spirit dwelling in us unites us to His Son so that we can reveal His glory to the world.

If your desire is to know God, take heart. His desire is for you to know Him. If we seek Him, He will show Himself to us. Seek Him first, not His plan, not His healing power, not His commandment, but seek Him, and He will show Himself to you. The One who used the star to guide a group of astrologers to His Son will certainly lead you to Himself when you seek Him.