



Who Were The Wise Men?

by Verneil W. Simmons

Mormon writes two fascinating verses near the end of the Book of Helaman:

But it came to pass in the ninetieth year of the reign of the Judges, there were great signs given unto the people, and wonders; And the words of the prophets began to be fulfilled; and angels did appear unto men, wise men, and did declare unto them glad tidings of great joy; thus in this year the scriptures began to be fulfilled. (Helaman 5:125-126 RLDS) [Helaman 16:13-14 LDS]

It was Alma who had written that they were just waiting for the joyful news of Christ's coming to be declared to them by angels. The "glad tidings of great joy" must have heralded the coming birth of Jesus, although the event was still almost two years away.

This writer is not the first to point out the possibility that the "wise men" of Matthew's account, who came to Bethlehem to worship the newborn king, were priesthood members from the church in the land of Zarahemla. Who else was looking for his birth and knew not only the exact time but also the sign of the star which should announce the birth? They had two years and more to make the journey to the "land of Jerusalem" where Alma had prophesied Christ should be born. When the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, they asked where the child was, for they had seen the star and knew the birth had taken place. Having found the babe, they were again guided by revelation from God not to return to Herod. That the men who came were of the heritage of Israel, and prophets of the Lord, seems more fitting than the idea that they were

pagan priests of a foreign religion, as the legends have taught.

Only the gospel of Matthew mentions the visit of the wise men, and the account is short.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. [Matthew 2:1-2 KJV] (Matthew 3:1-2 IV)

Herod, after consultation with the priests, sent them to Bethlehem. There they again saw the star and found the child, with his parents, living in a house in the village. Having knelt in worship before the infant, they presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gifts might symbolize his role as king, high priest, and (by his death) Redeemer.

According to Matthew, the commandment to take the child and flee to Egypt followed immediately upon the departure of the visitors. If so, then some weeks had passed since the birth of the baby. Luke writes that Jesus had been taken to the temple in Jerusalem after the required forty-day purification period for Mary. They had gone up to make the sacrifice offering of a pair of turtledoves or young pigeons, as was the custom following the birth of a male child. There Simeon had taken the child in his arms and prophesied concerning him. This must have preceded the arrival of the wise men. Only Matthew refers to the sojourn in Egypt.

Legends, which perhaps began as early as the second century, made these men three in number,



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and eventually equated them with the Magi of Persia. Sometime in the Middle Ages they were given Oriental names. The term *magi* is now known to be an old Accadian word, used to designate one of the learned priestly class who was also a keeper of sacred things. Under the later Persian Empire, the Magi were also considered diviners and astrologers. The ancient Semitic term could have been correctly used, implying that these men were priests of God. Legend later turned them into Oriental kings. Interestingly enough, legend also maintains that one of them was dark-skinned.

If we were to propose three names from our Book of Mormon story to qualify as the legendary three wise men, we would have to suggest Nephi, his brother Lehi, and the Lamanite prophet, Samuel. Nephi left the land of Zarahemla following the news brought by the angels of the nearness of Christ's birth. He turned all the records and sacred things over to his son, also called Nephi, and then disappeared. No one knew where he had gone. He never returned to Zarahemla and, though a search was made, he could not be found anywhere in the land. It was also said of Samuel, the Lamanite that he nevermore was heard of among the Nephites. As for Lehi, he seemed always to accompany his brother on their missionary journeys. He could have gone along on this one as well. Remember that the Lord had promised Nephi that he could have whatever he asked for, because

the Lord knew he would not ask for anything contrary to His will. He and his brother had been named, by their father Helaman; in memory of their forefathers who had left Jerusalem. He had taught them to remember the words of Lehi and Nephi whenever they remembered their own names. There must have been a strong desire on their part to see the land of Jerusalem from which their forefathers came, especially when they knew the Christ was to be born there in a very short time.

Of course, this is speculation and cannot be proved, but it does no harm to suggest the possibility that the angels' message to wise men, as recorded by Mormon, is a clue to the wise men of Matthew's account.

Christ Is Born!

The author of Third Nephi was the son of the prophet Nephi, who disappeared from Zarahemla just prior to the sign of Christ's birth. He had been custodian of the records and sacred objects from the time of his father's disappearance from the land. He continued the record, beginning his account in the ninety-first year of the Judges. This was also the six hundredth year since Lehi had left the land of Jerusalem. The evidence of Christ's birth, his death, his appearance in land Bountiful, and his ministry there is contained in Third Nephi. The writer was one of the twelve disciples chosen by our Lord in this land.

Fourth Nephi is a very short account begun by the son of Nephi the disciple, but so greatly condensed by Mormon that apparently even one in the line of historians was left out. It covers the period from A.D. 34 to A.D. 320. Sometimes Third and Fourth Nephi are referred to as the New Testament portion of the Book of Mormon.

Nephi's account began in the year that marked the fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy. It was time for the sign that would mark Christ's birth in Judea—a night that would seem as day, and the appearance of a new star. Those of the church who

were anticipating these wonders were greatly in the minority. The majority of the population had decided the time predicted by Samuel was past, thus making him a false prophet. A day was set for the death of all those still awaiting the sign.

Nephi the prophet went to the Lord in fervent prayer on behalf of the people who had faith in the prophecies. The Lord answered his prayer in these words:

Lift up your head and be of good cheer. for behold. the time is at hand. and on this night shall the sign be given. And on the morrow come I unto the world. to shew unto the world that I will fulfill all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets.

(3 Nephi 1:12-13 RLDS)

[3 Nephi 1:12-13 LDS]

Night came, the sun set, but darkness did not fall. It continued as light as though it were midday. An unknown star also appeared, as Samuel had prophesied. The next morning the sun arose at the proper time and the people in all the land marveled at these strange happenings. Many were fearful because the sign had appeared, for they knew that it marked the birth of the Son of God. Some repented of their disbelief and their many sins and went to Nephi for baptism.

But even the wonder of a night without darkness soon faded and the populace “began to disbelieve all which they had heard and seen....” Shortly the Gadianton robbers were back in business, determined to take over the control of the government in Zarahemla.

Lachoneus was governor, having taken office sometime prior to the sign of Christ's birth. In A.D. 17 Giddianhi,

the leader of the Gadianton band, sent a letter to Lachoneus. He boldly demanded that the country and the government be turned over to his organization of robbers; otherwise he would attack and destroy the people. Lachoneus had a month in which to make his decision. He used it to alert the people to the danger and to ready the armies for combat. He named one of the leading prophets, Gidgiddoni, as his commander of the armies. (3 Nephi 2:24 RLDS)
[3 Nephi 3:19 LDS]

Gidgiddoni's strategy was to call all the people into the center of their lands, with their possessions and supplies. Here he placed the armies to protect the people and waited for the robbers to attack. The land which they were prepared to defend encompassed the territory from the northern boundary of Bountiful to the southern boundary of Zarahemla. The total land area could not have been

great for there was only a month for the people to receive the warning, gather their possessions and supplies, and move themselves into the central zone.

When the robber bands began to take possession of the abandoned cities and land, they found no foodstuffs and no wild game. They

could find meat only in their own wild mountains. They dared not attempt to raise crops in the cultivated areas because of the attacks of the Nephite armies. Thus Giddianhi was finally forced to come to battle, as the Nephite general had planned. He lost the battle, along with his life. His successor, Zemnarihah, tried a siege rather than a direct attack, but was unsuccessful since the Nephites still had sufficient supplies and the robbers were unprovisioned.



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The eventual decision was to abandon the whole campaign and retreat to the far reaches of the land northward, which would have taken them beyond Nephite territory. But their retreat was cut off by the Nephite army and their leader captured, along with thousands of his men. Zemnariah was hanged and the rest imprisoned. Thus ended the civil war with the Gadiantons, which had lasted nine years.

It was now more than twenty-five years since the sign had been given and Mormon writes, "This book cannot contain even a hundredth part of what was done among so many people, in the space of twenty and five years." (3 Nephi 2:92 RLDS) [3 Nephi 5:8 LDS] The people had returned to their ancestral lands, with their families and all their possessions, and other land had been given to those robbers who had signed a peace treaty. But there was a great deal of social unrest in the country and the church was affected, as well as the nation.



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And some were lifted up unto pride and boastings, because of their exceeding great riches, yea, even unto great persecutions: for there were many merchants in the land, and also many lawyers, and many officers. And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches, and their chances for learning; Yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches;

Some were lifted up in pride, and others were exceeding humble; ... And thus there became a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up; yea, insomuch that in the thirtieth year the church was broken up in all the land, save it were among a few of the Lamanites, who were converted unto the true faith; And they would not depart from it, for they were firm, and steadfast, and immovable, willing with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord.

(3 Nephi 3:11-16 RLDS)

[3 Nephi 6:10-14 LDS]

Mormon adds his own commentary:

Now they did not sin ignorantly, for they knew the will of God concerning them, for it had been taught unto them; therefore they did willfully rebel against God.

(3 Nephi 3:20 RLDS) [3 Nephi 6:18 LDS]

Again prophets came among the people, not

only warning them concerning their sins and iniquities but testifying boldly of the coming death, resurrection, and redemptive ministry of Christ. This brought persecution from those in official positions such as lawyers and judges. The law provided that no such officer could condemn anyone to death unless the death warrant was signed by the governor, but many were put to death secretly. Eventually charges against such judges reached the central government in Zarahemla and the men were brought to the capital to stand trial.

The friends and relatives of the accused men joined with those elements in the society who still supported a royalist party. Together they formed a conspiracy to kill the governor and set up a king who would free the guilty judges. They succeeded in murdering the chief judge, undoubtedly Lachoneus II who had succeeded his father in A.D. 29. This action dramatically divided the people and brought an end to the democratic form of government which had been instituted at the beginning of the reign of Judges.

It is obvious that the central government was

already greatly weakened and unable to enforce its laws outside Zarahemla. The economic drain of the long war, coupled with the breakdown of moral law, had left the nation vulnerable to internal pressures. The people did not want a king, but neither did they have any confidence in the corrupt government of the Judges.

The civil disturbances in the land resulted in a collapse of all law and order, as far as a national government was concerned. Those in the conspiracy to establish a king found themselves in the minority and unable to impose Jacob, the man of their choice, upon the nation. Seeing that he could never rule in Zarahemla, Jacob led his followers into a remote area and founded a city where he could be king. He flattered the people, telling them that soon they would have many dissenters join them and, in time, they would be strong enough to take over all the country.

The rest of the population gathered together into family and clan units, resulting in the restoration of the old tribal system. Each tribe chose a leader to see to its interests and make laws for the tribe. These tribal chiefs agreed not to war with one another, so a semblance of peace was maintained, although the nation was actually in a period of anarchy.

What of the church during these turbulent events? Mormon wrote an abbreviated account of the state of the nation, of which the church was a very insignificant part. He mentioned that a few Lamanites had continued as staunch members during this time of national disaster, but it is obvious that the church was in trouble too. Nephi had continued to minister with power and authority, even in the face of persecution, but with few results.

And it came to pass that they were angry with him, even because he had greater power than they, for it were not possible that they could disbelieve his words, for so great was his faith on the Lord Jesus Christ, that angels did minister unto him daily; and in the name of Jesus did he cast out devils and unclean spirits; and

even his brother did he raise from the dead, after he had been stoned and suffered death by the people; and the people saw it, and did witness of it, and were angry with him, because of his power; and he did also do many more miracles, in the sight of the people, in the name of Jesus.

(3 Nephi 3:59-61 RLDS)

[3 Nephi 7:18-20 LDS]

Nephi continued to preach repentance and remission of sins by baptism in water, and some few were baptized and added to the church. Nephi was not alone in this ministry, so the church organization was still functioning among the people.

Now I would have you remember also, that there were none who were brought unto repentance, who were not baptized with water; Therefore there were ordained of Nephi, men unto this ministry, that all such as should come unto them, should be baptized with water, and this as a witness and a testimony before God, and unto the people, that they had repented and received a remission of their sins. And there were many in the commencement of this year, that were baptized unto repentance: and thus the more part of the year did pass away.

(3 Nephi 3:68-70 RLDS)

[3 Nephi 7:24-26 LDS]

The year was A.D. 33. The church group may still have been few in number but they had great faith in the words of the prophets concerning Christ. They knew that the time was near for the sign which would mark the crucifixion of the Lord, as prophesied by Samuel. This must have been a time of dread, for Samuel had been specific about the earthquake, tempest, darkness, and destruction which should mark that tragic day. Some watched in soberness, some with doubts and disputations.

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