

CHRISTMAS STORY

SHEPHERDS

- they are the first to learn about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (Luke 2:8–20)
- shepherds represent the average Judean (literally, the man on the night shift): long hours, protect sheep from animals and robbers with a staff, sling, or metal-studded club about a yard long, shear the wool, aid in lambing, feed and water their flocks
 - hated by the religious leaders and common people: (1) had a reputation for theft and trespassing, (2) pilfered wool, milk, and lambs from the sheep-owners, (3) was a despised trade like tanners, tax collectors, and physicians, (4) were not able to keep the ceremonial law or attend the synagogue regularly, (5) were not allowed to testify in court or be a judge (denied civil rights), (6) were often slaves (Luke 17:7)
- tradition says there were four shepherds from Beit Sahur (a herdsman's village): Misael, Acheel, Cyriacus, and Stephanus
 - God cares about the common people—even the outcasts of society
- the main message to the shepherds is the good news (gospel) of salvation—proclaimed by an angel (Luke 2:10–11)

WISE MEN

- the wise men represent intelligence, wealth, position, and privilege
- they probably arrived forty days after Jesus was born—after his presentation at the Temple in Jerusalem (Matt 2:1–12)
- "magi from the East" were astrologers from Persia, Babylon, or Arabia: (1) an old and powerful priestly caste among both the Medes and Persians, (2) well-educated specialists in medicine, religion, astronomy, astrology, divination, and magic, (3) early Syriac traditions give them Persian names, (4) wear Persian clothes in 2nd century Roman catacombs (Christian art), (5) most early church fathers thought they were Persian, (6) invading Persians spared the Church of the Nativity in 614 A.D. when they saw a golden mosaic over the doorway of the wise men in Persian headdress, but (7) the earliest records say they were from Arabia (Clement of Rome in A.D. 96; Justin in A.D. 160 "Magi from Arabia came to him"; Tertullian in A.D. 210)
- gold signified Jesus' kingship, frankincense his future priesthood (fragrant gum resin burned as incense), myrrh his burial (expensive, aromatic, orange-colored resin used in perfumes, anointing oil, medicine, and embalming, Mark 15:23; John 19:39)
- Christmas carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are" has three mistakes: (1) we don't know how many there were, (2) they were not kings, and (3) they did not come from the Orient (the Far East)
- earliest tradition: as many as twelve came in a caravan; later tradition (6th century A.D.): there were three, one for each gift—including their names (Gaspar, Melchior, Balthasar), ages (twenty, forty, and sixty) and skin colors (white, yellow, and black)
 - the magi were the first Gentiles to worship the King—rich Gentiles joining poor Jews

SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS

- Herod the Great is the monster of the Christmas Story: he too was called "King of the Jews" (Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.311)
 - about 20 male babies (not 14,000 in Byzantine or 64,000 in Syrian tradition) would have been slain by Herod's soldiers in a small town with a population of 1000 (Matt 2:16)—assuming an annual birthrate of 30 and a high infant mortality rate
- Bethlehem is first mentioned in connection with Rachel's death in giving birth to Benoni ("son of my sorrow," Gen 35:16–20)
 - Rachel personifies the mothers in Ramah who were weeping for their dead and captive sons in 586 B.C. (Ramah was the place where Jewish POWs were imprisoned and awaited exile to Babylon, Jer 40:1–6)
- their mourning at Ramah (Jer 31:15) foreshadows the future mourning for the babies slaughtered in the vicinity of Bethlehem (Matt 2:17–18)—apparently this Ramah was close to Bethlehem and should not be identified with Er-ram 5 miles N of Jerusalem
 - Jesus changed the reputation of Bethlehem from a place of sorrow, death, and burial to a place of joy, birth, and life