

Pax Romana

It is around 20 years since Octavius was granted the title Augustus and became the first Emperor, and he has proved a wise one indeed, with peace (the Pax Romana) stretching throughout the Roman Empire.

He has been called the 'father of his country' and has transformed Rome into a city of marble, courtesy of course to the revenues generated by the provinces, of which we of course are one!

The Jordan - A special river

The Jordan River is a key water source for Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. But its importance is just as much cultural as material.

In the Holy Scriptures the Jordan is described as a source of fertility for Israel. It is the place where Joshua and the tribes of Israel crossed into the Promised Land near Jericho, and Elijah and Elisha crossed the river just before Elijah was taken up to heaven.

From the fertile north to the southern end approaching the Sea of Salt the Jordan has touched the lives of the people of Israel throughout history, and no doubt will continue to do so.

It Makes Sense to Census!



No one likes being taxed, but unfortunately that's the fuel that pays for government, new roads, improvements in civic infrastructure, law and order, religious freedom, security and other benefits.

On the downside we also pay a big share of the administrative costs of Empire and the occupying army, which takes the shine off the benefits of being a province of Rome!

So be it income tax, import or export tax, crop tax, sales tax, property tax or emergency tax we pay our dues to Empire and hope for a little benefit in return!

No one likes paying via the publican or tax collector either, particularly when they are Jewish, but that is the way that Rome allows for taxes to be collected, so all we can do is grumble and trust they do not fleece us more than is just!

Now it is Census time again and a demand that every man should go to the place of his birth to be counted, so that Rome can be sure how many eligible taxpayers it has in the

Empire, and men of the right age for army service.

And what do the census figures tell us? Well, to be honest not a lot in times gone by, as we've lost track of exactly who they were counting - was it male citizens, citizens and their families, women, freedmen, slaves or everybody?

According to the figures of Caesar Augustus, the citizen population of the Empire is currently around 4 million.

We shall be following a couple as they make their way to Bethlehem for this year's census.

Small, but blessed!

Situated between the fertile farmland in the hill country and the pasture lands of the Wilderness of Judah to the east, Bethlehem Ephrathah has a long and proud history.

It was not far from here that Jacob placed a pillar in memory of his wife Rachel. Here Ruth lived when she married Boaz, and looked out across the Jordan valley to her native land of Moab.

Of course our city owes its



real fame to an association with the well-loved story of Samuel anointing a young David as King in preference to his older brothers.

Since that day we have considered this place to be special

in the eyes of the Lord.

The prophet Micah said. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

We might only be a small rural community of a few hundred souls, but in the history of the Chosen People we are very important!

We shall also be very busy in the near future as traveller make their way to register at the forthcoming census.

Look to the stars, say Persian astrologers!



Our correspondent in the East has sent news that certain Magi are taking a particular interest in the heavens and awaiting the appearance of a bright light or star.

It is being said that this star might herald in the entry of a king into the world. There is a well established belief in the Orient that at this time men coming from Judea will rule the world.

For this reason alone the sudden appearance of a bright star in the East should be of interest to us all.

I have no doubt that the Roman authorities will be keeping a close eye on any developing situation!

So who are these Magi?

They are an ancient priestly caste living in the Parthian empire, and known about for at least 700 years.

They are men of holiness and wisdom, skilled in philosophy and the natural sciences, well practiced in the art of astrology and the interpretation of dreams.

Magi currently form the upper house of the council of the Megistanes, whose duties include the election of the

king of the Parthian empire.

With a remnant of the Jewish nation living in the east, the Magi as scholars will no doubt be familiar with our Scriptures, which might explain their interest in connecting this heavenly event with a Jewish king.

It is more than likely that the Magi, once they have plotted the trajectory of this star or heavenly body, will follow it to confirm their theory.

? Opening Chat

Just like the Jews, we (maybe grudgingly) pay our taxes to the government of the day and hope that they use the revenue gained wisely.

Looking at the taxation issue as a Christian do you think there are priorities being ignored, and if so what could be sacrificed to fund them?



Key Verses

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Our 'news reporting' of the birth of Jesus ends with the visit of the shepherds. Matthew's Magi arrive later, but we need to include them for the sake of completeness, as the message of their visit is important to our understanding of who Jesus is.

It is still not entirely clear what the Christmas star of Matthew's story actually was. The most compelling suggestion may be the result of a known alignment of Jupiter and Saturn which happened around 7BC.

The ancients called Jupiter the "kingmaker planet" or "royal star" and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews.

POINTS TO PONDER

Not long after Jesus was born, 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 Judaea to rule the world.' (Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*, 4:5)

Matthew is not so interested in the reasons why the Magi found their way to Jesus, and indeed does not speculate on any spiritual significance of the gifts they brought. His message is summed up in verse 2, 'Where is the one who has been born to be king of the Jews?'

Jesus is the true king, not Herod!

Jesus is not just king of the Jews, as prophecies point to Messiah bringing peace and justice to the whole world (Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72)

? Discussion

1 Who can honestly say that they do not know what their star sign is? What do you think is main reason for the enduring popularity of astrology, and why should Christians have no need to read their daily horoscopes?

2 'Whereas the Providence which has guided our whole existence and which has shown such care and liberality, has brought our life to the peak of perfection in giving to us Augustus Caesar, whom it filled with virtue for the welfare of mankind, and who, being sent to us and to our descendants as a saviour, has put an end to war and has set all things in order' (Priene calendar inscription; 9 B.C.)

How different is the Christian understanding of the word 'Saviour'?

3 'It seems that despite ourselves we sanctify places, whether that place is as personal as the place of our first kiss, or as public as side of the road where we leave flowers marking the spot of a traffic accident, or as overtly-sacred as the place of baptism, burial or marriage.' (Glenn Jordan, *Theology of Place*)

The Jordan river and Bethlehem are rightly revered as special places in the history of the Jews and Christianity.

What makes a place special or sacred, and are we right in seeing some of these as places where God seems somehow closer?

4 The Magi took their time in journeying to Bethlehem. The Church gives us four Sundays, or between 3-4 weeks (depending on the year) to prepare for Christmas. How might we best spend that time?

Matthew 2 (NIV)

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem
2 and asked, Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.
3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.