

The Magi

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There is, perhaps, no other Scriptural narrative around which has sprung up such a mass of tradition as that which we find concerning the story of the Magi. This is probably due to the fact that their history is recorded in such brief simplicity and has left unanswered a host of questions which arise so naturally in the curious mind of man. Who were they? Where did they come from? How many were there? So one could go on at great length asking questions which apparently are of no great interest to Scripture.

Tradition, however, has as many answers as there are questions. The number of the company is placed variously at from three to twelve, although three seems to be the favored number. The most often cited proof for this contention is the three-fold gift which is presented to the Christ Child. From the third verse of Isaiah sixty: "And Gentiles shall come to thy light and kings to the brightness of thy rising" many assume that the Magi were kings. Others go to great length to establish them as shepherds or of some other calling. The best known of all the traditions actually names the visitors: places their number at four, three of whom reached Bethlehem. The fourth member of the group, so the story goes, was lost on the way and never saw the Christ until the time of His crucifixion. It is said that this lost traveler arrived just in time to hear Christ call: "I Thirst" and to this fourth is ascribed the doubtful honor of having offered Christ the sponge of vinegar after His cry. Tradition can even show the remains of the Magi safely kept through the years in a special tomb. Obviously such stories are products of a vivid imagination.

In reference to the questions which arise, Scripture leaves us almost entirely in the dark. Or to put it positively, the Biblical narrative is told simply and directly without the addition of any nonessential details which would serve only to satisfy the curiosity and add nothing at all to the point or significance of the visit of the wise men. Turning to Scripture, we find that no stretch of the imagination would ever yield the names of the visitors and that their number is almost as obscure. So too their position and later history is not nearly so specifically circumscribed or even suggested as many would have us believe.

Among the facts that Scripture does give we might note the following. In relation to Jerusalem, they come from the East, or more correctly from the rising (of the Sun). Therefore, certainly from quite a distance, which is also substantiated from Herod's private conversation with the Magi which resulted in his decision to slay all the babies of two years and under. That they were not kings is clear from their specification as Magi, which is reference to their position. The term "Magi" may be compared to our present day astronomer. These men were students of the firmament and especially the starry firmament. What they learned as they studied the heavens, they passed on as teachers and astrologers. Also in reference to their position it can be determined that they were not poor but rather well-to-do, rich in fact. The gifts which they presented are evidence of this for they were signs of wealth at that time, even as today: nor are people with limited means and of a meager livelihood very likely to make a long extended journey. That they were Gentiles and not Jews is evident not only from their question: "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?", but also from the fact that they go first to Jerusalem and not immediately to Bethlehem. Every interested Jew surely knew that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem as prophesied by Micah.

At the time of their visit Herod occupied the throne of David in Jerusalem. The iniquitous reign of the usurper was drawing to a close. He had ascended to the throne through intrigue, trickery and by way of a bloody purge. His dissipated life had left him with a loathsome disease as seeming expression of his wickedness.

Now into his realm is born the King of Righteousness. It is He for whom and through whom the worlds were created. All of God's revelation and prophecy converge to fulfillment in the Babe of Bethlehem. Throughout the 4000 odd years of the Old Dispensation He had been coming. Way back in Paradise Adam and Eve looked expectantly for His for, already they, had had the promise of this Child.

So too, Israel had lived earnestly awaiting His birth. In bondage, dwelling in tents or living in the Promised Land she had been constantly reminded of His coming; through her own prophets or with double emphasis through a wicked instrument such as Balaam, whom God used to prophecy so beautifully: "There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel..." During the darkest hours that light of prophecy had shone ever more brilliantly, coming ever closer and keeping alive in the hearts of the true Israel the expectancy of Christ's birth. Isaiah is full of the glory of His coming, including such specific references as: "And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people: to it shall the Gentiles seek..."

Just a few months ago when the prophecy is ready to burst into the radiance of realization He is once more promised when Joseph is told of His coming while he already sees the Babe hid beneath the heart of his beloved... "She shall bring forth a Son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins". And now Jesus was born, the fulfillment of all revelation, the Saviour of His people, the Light in their darkness.

He was born- yes- but not in the regal splendor of a king's palace or in the capitol of an earthly monarch, but in the desolation of a small town smothered in the hills of Judea. A village of no account, as it stands in the shadow of the smug smartness of a great metropolis. That was Bethlehem: not much more than a wide spot in the road about six miles south of Jerusalem. How truly the song speaks:

"O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless
sleep, the silent stars go by;
But in thy dark street shineth
The Everlasting Light."

Prophecy has once again spoken to fulfillment: "Thou Bethlehem in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda for out of thee shall come a governor that shall rule my people Israel".

But we find no beaten path to the door of His birthplace nor does it even open on the main street of that little town. No cradle for a bed, but a manger and a layette of swaddling clothes. All these- the manifestation of divine power in utmost weakness, for though totally lacking in the natural, the scene is thoroughly equipped with the Divine. A virgin conceived and bore a son, whom the Herald angels announce to shepherds in the field, Anna and Simeon have seen the glory of the Lord and tell it in Jerusalem, and the Magi seeing His star take up their journey to visit Him.

As always a godless science seeking to frustrate a beautiful faith attempts to explain these wonders. Undoubtedly, according to some, the star the Magi saw was nothing more than a conjunction of planets, while others go to great length to prove that it was a comet. Scripture points out that star as a unique occurrence: miraculous in its appearance and effect. Not Jupiter or Saturn nor yet Halley's Comet but HIS star, created in the beginning and predestined from eternity and now called forth to serve its particular purpose and follow its specific course as HIS star. And after all, is a conjunction of planets or a comet so much easier to explain or believe than HIS star? The most that we or Science can ever do is gaze in awe at any star and ask: How I wonder what you are?

With the wonder of that particular star, the magi undoubtedly received a special revelation. They must have had an expectation not only of the birth of Christ, but also of a star to announce His birth for they designate this stranger in the heavens as HIS star. Their immediate and subsequent action, also is an indication of a Word of God to them for they take up their journey- not to China or Africa, but to Palestine coming not only to visit at the home of a new borne babe but to bow before a promised Messiah who had been revealed to them as worthy of praise and adoration.

Coming to Jerusalem they ask: "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" Apparently this great city is too busy enjoying itself to be concerned about its only legitimate business of worshipping the True King and consequently the question of the Magi falls on deaf ears. That was their negative response, but they also responded positively, as all must. For God had sent these men to Jerusalem as witnesses of the birth of Christ. And so these Magi evoke an answer for in faith they persevere and go to the highest authority at the palace of the King.

What a contrast is formed there. Gentiles from the East, out of a heathen land with a mere spattering of knowledge demanding "where is He?" Over against these dusty and weary travelers, the palace of the King. Herod on David's throne. The Scribes and Pharisees representing the Jewish nation. Interpreters and copyists of the law and the prophets with the whole library of prophecy and revelation at their finger tips, for without hesitation, argument or dissenting opinion, they give the answer of Micah, "Not here, but in Bethlehem of Judea."

No wonder then that Herod and all Jerusalem were troubled. For they had been put to shame by these Gentiles. But greater cause yet for inward commotion and uneasiness of heart and mind was the fulfillment of the Scriptures which the carnal heart and mind of Herod and all Jerusalem dread so much. And in that troubled heart lies the real answer to the Magi's question. The expression of that troubled heart, the real answer of Jerusalem comes a few years later when they cry, "We have no king, but Caesar", and shout, "Crucify Him". And on the sign on His cross was their final answer, "*This—This* is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews".

Once again the travelers take up their journey, departing from Jerusalem with heavy hearts. Nor is there found even a kindly stranger to lead them on their way. But, behold, they are not alone! Their God has not left them, nor does He ever cease to guide His sheep, for lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them. Through this only means, divine guidance, they are led to Bethlehem. Seeing the Star, they rejoice with exceeding great joy. Their inmost beings filled with renewed hope and happiness drowning out and effacing all the disappointment and heartache of a few moments before. Now they have completely left the world behind and through divine guidance are led to the very doorstep for the star went before them until it came and stood over the very house where the young Child was.

Their journey has not been in vain. Their seeking has been a finding, and this they acknowledge by bowing reverently with faces to the ground: doing homage to the new born

King. Having opened their hearts, they also open their hands. Gold- for His Kingship? Frankincense- to a Priest? Myrrh- for His prophetic office? Perhaps, but certainly unwittingly for to them these gifts were the expression of the best that they had; the best their country could offer.

Their sacrifice concluded, they rest in peace at the close of a glorious visit. During that night God reveals to them to depart into their own country a different way. They are gone, but surely we may believe that God has not left them alone. He whose star had gathered them from their Eastern homes to Bethlehem, and whose Spirit had prompted them to worship, He has not left them to die in heathen ignorance of unbelief. Surely we may cherish the hope that they who bowed so reverently before the earthly cradle are now worshipping with a more profound reverence before the heavenly throne and that they too, shall one day rise up in judgment of their generation and condemn it, for they too came from the uttermost parts of the earth.

May the lessons they have taught be written deeply in our hearts and ne'er forgot. May we too express unquestioning obedience and persevering faith as we take up our journey to the heavenly throne, while led by the Star of complete revelation. The Star that has risen and never sets, but is with us constantly- the Word of Truth. "We have a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto we do well to take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in our hearts."

The Magi belong to that prophecy as a fulfillment of it; as the first fruits of the Gentiles that have come to the brightness of His rising. They express the expanse of the Kingdom which is no longer for the Jew only, but also for the Gentile. They bow and worship at Bethlehem's cradle as our representatives, the first expression of our faith and offer of our allegiance. Let us rightly follow in their steps. Seeking to find. Finding to worship. Worshipping to offer treasures. All this is now also our blessed privilege all the way to the heavenly home where shines THE STAR eternally.

Star of the East,
Thou hope of the Soul,
While round us here,
the dark billows roll,
Lead us from sin,
to glory afar,
Thou Star of the East,
Thou Bethlehem Star.

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