

Strangers in a Strange Land
Matthew 2:1-12

From the time of the early church fathers through the middle ages and into the modern era, the story of the mysterious strangers from the east who came bearing gifts for the Christ child has fascinated Christians who heard and read Matthew's story of their visit. How many were there?... Three? Read the story carefully and you'll see that the Bible doesn't actually say. We guess there were three because there were three gifts, but some have speculated there could have been as many as fifteen.

Who were they? Were they Kings, as in the song, "We Three Kings"? Well, you won't find that in the Bible, either -- only that their gifts were fit for a king.

Where were these Magi from? From the east where their gifts came from? Arabia, Babylon, Persia? The name *Magi* -- the same word we get magic and magicians from -- suggests they were Persian astronomer/astrologers -- scholars who mixed what we would consider science with what we might call pseudoscience. But they may well have been Zoroastrian priests, followers of an ancient religion still practiced today by thousands of followers in Iran -- once known as Persia -- and in India -- where they are called Parsis -- and even in Colorado. Zoroastrian priests, who are fewer and fewer in number in modern times, lead the faithful in rituals at fire temples, ancient versions of found in ruins in the middle east, and modern ones in Iran and India.

Legend says that when the Persians occupied Palestine in the 7th century, they destroyed most of the churches from the era of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian but spared the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem when they saw its mosaic depicting the Magi in Persian clothing.

What Matthew didn't tell us, imaginations haven't hesitated to supply. In 1896 Henry Van Dyke wrote a fictional story, *The Other Wise Man*, but in the middle ages others embellished their story.

They were given names -- Caspar (or Gaspar) Balthazar, Melchior -- and stories of their journey and their lives -- including their supposed baptism by the disciple Thomas on his way to India and their deaths as genuine Christians.ⁱ The cathedral of Cologne, Germany is even said to house what remains of their bones.

As far back as the sixth century in Armenia, depictions in church art gave each one a different age -- one white-haired, the second middle aged, and the third a young, beardless man. They were even said to be sixty, forty, and twenty, respectively.ⁱⁱ

Eventually, in the fourteenth century, one was portrayed as black and they were said to represent what was thought to be the three races of humankind from the three known continents.

Noble families included them in their family trees, and some coats-of-arms still bear a star in their honor. Popular imagination suggested a kind of sorcery in which their names inscribed on a ribbon worn on a person's wrist could cure the "falling sickness."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Medieval traditions relating to the Magi are both numerous and picturesque. The far east... [where] they came [from] induced dreams, and fanciful stories of the land of the Queen of Sheba, that land of gold and spices, were no longer... kept in bounds. The Magi were reputed to be descended from Balaam [the reluctant prophet with the talking donkey in the Hebrew scriptures], and to have inherited the secrets of ancient magic."^{iv}

The gifts were seen as the tools of their Magician's trade. By offering the tools of their occult craft, the Magi were giving up their pursuit of the secrets of darkness and surrendering to the light of the Christ child.

"It was said that the pieces of gold they brought to the Child were struck by Terah, father of Abraham, and that they were given to the people of Sheba by Joseph, son of Jacob, when he went among them to buy the spices for embalming his father's body."^v

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What kind of gifts *are* those for a baby? If not a toy, then how about some clothes? Or a crib? Or even some diapers? How about something a little more practical!

Maybe you've heard a version of the joke that if they had been wise *women* -- instead of men -- they wouldn't have brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh but some casseroles for dinner, a year's supply of diapers, and bicycle stroller to hitch to the back of the donkey. And instead of just sitting around oohing

and aching over the baby, they would have helped clean up the house, held the baby so Mary could take a nap, and baby sat for an evening so Mary and Joseph could go out for a little fun!

On the other hand, the gifts may have been more practical than even they realized.

Gold, of course, makes sense. But what about Frankincense and Myrrh? Both were affordable only to the rich.

Both were rare, very expensive, aromatic gum resins, sold in "small hardened droplets called 'tears.'"^{vi} Both come from trees from the east -- found in southern Arabia and east Africa. Both can be used as incense.

They may have actually have been the most portable and practical gifts – because they could be used for money or sold – especially for a mother, father and baby traveling far from home.

Since the second century the gifts have been seen as symbols of Christ as king, God and self-sacrificing Redeemer: gold - a gift for the King of Kings, incense - an offering worthy of the Son of God, and myrrh - a foretaste of his suffering and death.^{vii}

In his poem, "Journey of the Magi," T.S. Eliot imagined a hard journey with difficult lessons for these worshipers of a lesser god, now catching a vision of something hopeful, yet something dark, too.

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times when we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities dirty and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wineskins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.

Although the Bible tells us very little about these strangers from the east, what we do know for sure is that they were foreigners, strangers to the faith and culture of Jesus' people.

That's very remarkable when you realize that Matthew is the most Jewish of the four Gospels, portraying Jesus as the new Moses sent to set his people free, the Messiah sent to save them. Why, then, would Matthew, of all the gospel writers, include the only version of a story about foreigners, worshipers of a pagan god, who came to pay homage to Jesus when he was a child?

Although Matthew's Gospel is the most Jewish, it's also where we find Jesus most critical of some of his own people – those who are blind to what God was doing. So it shouldn't surprise us that Matthew's tells us there were mysterious strangers who, even through their pagan seeking, learned of a child born to be king of the Jews.

They came from far away to naively ask the reigning king where this new king could be found.

Can you imagine going to Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, or Saddam Hussein in Iraq to ask where you could find a successor.

Only because they were open to a warning from this new God, were they spared the consequences of an returning to the capital to face an enraged monarch bent on killing this new rival.

When you look at Jesus' genealogy in Matthew, you see something else. Among those counted as his ancestors, usually traced only through the male line, are two foreign women – Rahab of Jericho, a prostitute who secretly aided the Hebrew forces taking her city, and Ruth the Moabite, who, as widow, adopted her mother-in-law's people as her own.

And when King Herod ordered the slaughter of all the boys under two in the village of Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph and their son had to flee Bethlehem as refugees, they hid in Egypt, across the border.

Throughout the Bible, there is a message that often runs against popular ideas of keeping the faith or the people pure and free from contamination from foreign influences and suspicious strangers. It doesn't mean that all paths lead to the same place, regardless of belief, or that Jesus isn't the fullest revelation of who God is, but neither does it say no truth can be found in other faiths. Instead, it's an invitation to strangers to join us on the journey.

Time and again in the Scriptures, the people of God are commanded to welcome and protect strangers and aliens. All people are God's children, made in the image of God, brothers and sisters in the human family. All lives are precious in God's sight. Time and again, the people of faith are ourselves described as strangers in a strange land, aliens and sojourners not quite ever at home anywhere but on the journey in the kingdom of God not only in the future, but now, not yet, but here already – in the company of friends and welcome strangers. God knows no boundaries.

ⁱ *The Gothic Image* This translation is from the third French edition and is reprinted here by arrangement with E. P. Button & Company, which originally published it in 1913 under the title *RELIGIOUS ART IN FRANCE OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, A Study in Mediaeval Iconography and its Sources of Inspiration*. First HARPER TORCHBOOK edition published 1958 Library of Congress catalog card number: LC 58-10152

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ⁱⁱ *THE GOTHIC IMAGE...*

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^{iv} *THE GOTHIC IMAGE...*

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^{vi} Allan Hauck, *Calendar of Christianity*, 84.

^{vii} Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 199.