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Some Notes on the Wise Men

From Wikipedia

Traditions identify a variety of different names for the Magi. In the Western Christian church they have been commonly known as: Melchior (also Melichior), a Persian scholar Caspar (also Gaspar, Jaspar, Jaspas, Gathaspa, and other variations), an Indian scholar Balthazar (also Balthasar, Balthassar, and Bithisare) an Arabian scholar

Myrrh was used as an embalming ointment and as a penitential incense in funerals and cremations until the 15th century. The "holy oil" traditionally used by the Eastern Orthodox Church for performing the sacraments of chrismation and unction is traditionally scented with myrrh, and receiving either of these sacraments is commonly referred to as "receiving the myrrh". The picture of the Magi on the 7th century Franks Casket shows the third visitor - he who brings myrrh - with a valknut over his back, a pagan symbol referring to Death.

What subsequently happened to these gifts is never mentioned in the scripture, but several traditions have developed. One story has the gold being stolen by the two thieves who were later crucified alongside Jesus. Another tale has it being

entrusted to and then misappropriated by Judas. One tradition suggests that Joseph and Mary used the gold to finance their travels when they fled Bethlehem after the magi had warned them about King Herod's plan to kill Jesus. And another story proposes the theory that the myrrh given to them at Jesus' birth was used to anoint Jesus' body after his crucifixion.

Western Christianity celebrates the Magi on the day of Epiphany, January 6, the day immediately following the *twelve days of Christmas*, particularly in the Spanish-speaking parts of the world. In these areas, the Three Kings ("*los Reyes Magos de Oriente*", also "*Los Tres Reyes Magos*" and "*Los Reyes Magos*") receive letters from children and so bring them gifts on the night before Epiphany. In Spain, each one of the Magi is supposed to represent one different continent, Europe (Melchior), Asia (Caspar) and Africa (Balthasar). According to the tradition, the Magi come from the Orient on their camels to visit the houses of all the children; much like Santa Claus with his reindeer, they visit everyone in one night. In some areas, children prepare a drink for each of the Magi. It is also traditional to prepare food and drink for the camels, because this is the only night of the year when they eat.

Matthew 2:1-12

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 when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Some notes on the Epiphany

By Pastor Cahill

during the time of King Herod

Luke is always careful to tell us when these events happen so that we'll know they're placed in history, and not mere mythology.

Herod was the "puppet king" of Palestine in the time of Caesar Augustus, placed there by Caesar to keep the trade routes open between Rome and the east. He was a mean-hearted tyrant who was not above murdering the wife he loved and seducing / marrying his own sister-in-law. Sound like J.R. Ewing?

Magi from the east

We always call them Wise Men, but *Magis* a very specific title. It designates learned followers of the religions of Zoroaster, which originated in the area anciently called Persia (now Iran / Iraq). Magi were learned in many ancient arts and sciences, including mathematics, astronomy, and astrology. *By the way, Zoroaster's name in German is spelled Zarathustra, and we all know how Strauss thought Also Sprach Zarathustra.*

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

This quote is from the Old Testament book of Micah in Chapter 5, verses 2 and 4. See the Things to Talk About section for some notes on how Matthew uses prophecies in his Gospel.

On coming to the house

Some scholars take these words to imply that Joseph had moved his family into more permanent lodgings than the stable by the time the Wise Men arrived, and so the Magi may not have seen Jesus in the stable as the shepherds had.

gold, frankincense and myrrh

These are traditional gifts for royalty. The song "We Three Kings" explains the significance of each one.

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Look for more about the Wise Men in . . .

Literature

The Other Wise Man

Author Henry van Dyke tells the moving story of Artaban, one of the Magi who sets out on the journey with the others but, through a series of misadventures, is left behind and never makes it to the manger. He does, however, make it to Calvary and is blessed there as his soul is received into heaven.

The Journey of the Magi

T.S. Eliot's haunting poem, written as if by one of the Magi at the end of his life, reflects on their journey so many years ago and connects it to the journey of Jesus to the cross and perhaps to their own death.

The Gift of the Magi

In this story by O. Henry (William Sydney Porter) a young wife and husband try to find appropriate gifts to give one another, and each finally settle on the perfect gift – much to the surprise of both.

Matthew 2:13-18

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸ "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

More Notes on the Epiphany

"Out of Egypt I called my son."

The context of this verse (Hosea 11:1) is a reminiscence by God of His love for Israel over the centuries. He begins by saying that He called Israel out of Egypt when he (Israel) was just a child, but it wasn't long before Israel abandoned the Father who loved Him and chased after the Baals. God then wonders how long it will be until Israel returns to Him.

¹⁸ "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

This verse is from the book of Jeremiah in Chapter 31. In this chapter, the Lord tells Jeremiah that even though Rachel refuses to be comforted, still the Lord will restore her lost children to her. Remember that Rachel was the beloved wife of Jacob, also known as Israel. While the Bible usually refers to God's people collectively by the father's name, in this instance the reference is by the mother's name because of the extreme emotional distress in this circumstance.

Some things to talk about

1. Matthew quotes the Old Testament a number of times, usually by saying something like “as the prophet said.” However, if you look back at the original contexts of the quotes you may find yourself scratching your head and wondering what connection Matthew thought this had with the events he describes. It’s almost as if he is just

Look for more about the Wise Men in . . .

Music

Amahl and the Night Visitors

In this opera by Giancarlo Menotti, Amahl is a crippled boy whose mother runs an inn on the road to Bethlehem. One night three mysterious visitors stop there on their way to worship the Christ Child. Amahl is so taken by their quest that he offers to give the Child his crutch, and he is healed of his infirmity.

Film

Ben Hur

The opening sequence is the story of the birth of Christ and the arrival of the Wise Men. One of the Wise Men, Balthasar, returns later in the story in his lifelong search for the Christ only to find Him at last at Calvary.

Matthew 2:19-20

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

grabbing a verse out of thin air to support his story. Scholars call this “indirect prophecy.” (By the way, “direct prophecy” is when the prophet can say “this will happen,” this happens, and the prophet or someone else can say “I told you so.”)

2. Martin Luther suggested that the Wise Men followed the star until they got to Jerusalem, where they were distracted by the power and glitter of the temple and Herod’s palace. Does that ever happen to you? In what ways? Does that ever happen in the church? In what ways? How did the Wise Men get back on track? How do we?

3. The Wise Men worshiped Jesus and gave Him gifts. Is it possible to worship Him but not give Him gifts? How? Is it possible to give Him gifts but not worship Him? How?

4. Did you notice that the Wise Men sought Jesus together whereas Herod made decisions on his own? What implications might that have for our Christian life together? Even

as Scripture is consulted for God’s guidance?

5. Think about the details of the Wise Men’s story as they came to visit Jesus to worship Him and give Him their gifts. What aspects of their story might inform us as we see strangers enter our church to worship Jesus?

6. After the Exodus, God had told the Israelites numerous times not to rely on the Egyptians for anything. Yet here His angel tells Joseph (an upright man!) to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod’s hit squads. Imagine yourself in Joseph’s place, or Mary’s. Consider the details of being in a hostile country that you’ve been warned against, speaking a language you don’t know, with a newborn, looking for lodging for who knows how long, waiting for an angel to tell you when it’s safe to go back home. Does this part of the story remind you of any contemporary group of people? In what ways?

*Next Week:
The Baptism of Jesus*



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