

## We Saw His Star in the East

### Advent 2017 Reflections

In the heart of Advent 2017 and in the final newsletter of the year, I turn our attention to the Magi whose visit to the newborn Jesus is recorded in Matthew 2:1-12. There are a number of fascinating aspects to their story but this time I focus simply on who they were – these Magi from the east (“magi” is Latin, plural for the singular “magus”) or Wise Men, astrologers, interpreters of dreams, skilled also in medicine and natural sciences, likely Zoroastrian priests.

As such they were students of the nighttime sky, the orderly nighttime sky, and when something extraordinary happened in the sky they supposed something extraordinary was also happening on earth. A dazzling light in the sky at night raised expectations of a Savior, a Deliverer, a Hero, a Prince, being born on earth. And, in fact, in Persia (modern-day Iran), where it is most likely these Magi came from, there had long been expectations of a Savior appearing. With his coming, a Satan-figure would be destroyed. Hell would be destroyed. The dead would rise again. And everlasting happiness would reign over the earth. Nor were these Magi far from Babylon where there was still a large Jewish community. They may even have known the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17 that “A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel.” (Balaam himself was recognized in the first-century BC as a Magus).

There is much to be learned from the appearance of these Magi in the birth story of Jesus – these men from the East, who saw Immanuel’s star in the sky and came to worship him, these non-Jews, these Zoroastrians, followers of an ancient faith that believed in a God of dazzling light, a God committed to truth and justice, but who also believed in a Satan-figure and in a Hell for the wicked long before Gehenna is first mentioned in the New Testament.

Laying aside how their story has played out in popular imagination, what matters most is where these men came from. They saw Immanuel’s star in the East and came to worship him. The gospel writer is making a point he makes again and again, that great faith is often found outside Israel, that God is often encountered where we do not expect to – often outside the walls of orthodoxy we have constructed. So Jesus will say of a Roman centurion in Matthew 8:10, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith,” and then adds in the next verse, “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”

So these Magi are in a long list of people in Scripture who don’t quite fit in “the expected story,” good people who do not fit the pattern. So even in the Old Testament with its clear notion of Israel as God’s chosen people there were many, many righteous people who were not strictly Israelites: Melchizedek, king of Salem (that is, ancient Jerusalem) and acknowledged as priest of God Most High though not an Israelite; Job the man from Uz; the prostitute of Jericho, Rahab; Ruth the Moabitess; Uriah, the noble Hittite,

shaming even King David with his honor and integrity, Naaman, the Syrian commander who even after his encounter with the prophet Elisha and his healing from leprosy by Elisha will still find himself bowing down with his Syrian king in the temple of Rimmon (2 Kings 5:19); the Persian emperor Cyrus described as “the Lord’s anointed” in Isaiah 45:1; even the Ninevites, legendary for their cruelty, repenting at the preaching of Jonah. And then in the New Testament, we have the Roman centurion of whom Jesus said, “I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith;” the Canaanite woman in southern Lebanon who Jesus acknowledged had great faith (Matthew 15); the Samaritan who turns out in one of Jesus’ most famous stories to be the truly good person; but first these Magi, astrologers, likely Zoroastrian priests, who come to worship Jesus at his birth.

So Immanuel’s star could be seen in the East, in the lands we associate with other world faiths. The star could be seen in the East: in the nighttime sky and in the prophecies of ancient scrolls, but also in the image of God in all peoples everywhere, in the law of God written on their hearts, and in the wrestling of fine, thoughtful, sensitive souls who everywhere are struggling with life and seeking truth. I think of my friend, a local Muslim mullah, who will say that the difference between Jesus and the legalism of many Muslims is that “Jesus interpreted with love.” I think of how when I am reading spiritual teachings from India I find them again and again to be “Christ-haunted,” and how once I read in such a source the most specific, the most detailed, the most graphic account of resurrection I’ve ever read. Where I expected to read of re-incarnation, I was confronted powerfully with resurrection. And I think of how many other things I’ve learned from studying spirituality worldwide: how to deal with change and uncertainty, with not knowing what will happen to me next; how to relax with the idea that things are always coming together and falling apart, and coming together again and falling apart again, and that often it’s their falling apart that brings healing and creates space for what is new and better; how to live in the present moment; how not to swing a every pitch – to just let some things be; how to connect with larger and kinder perspectives.

So is it possible, as Wendy Farley concludes in her thoughtful book *The Wounding and Healing of Desire* (p. 165) that the spirit of Christ is incognito in many, many people in many, many lands following many, many traditions, and that the power for transformation that Christians identify with Christ is incognito in every act of compassion, in every movement toward justice, in every life devoted to peace?

I think of how Jesus would answer the question, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” (as he did in Luke 13:23 ff.). He would talk of “a narrow gate.” He would remind his listeners that many of them would miss it, that time for them was running out, that if they didn’t hear what he was saying they would suffer catastrophe at the hands of the Romans. But then he would say that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or it’s like a little yeast in flour. It starts small and becomes immense. Yes, there may be weeping and gnashing of teeth for many in Jesus’ audience, but (now in Luke 13:29), “People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.”

A star will be seen in the east. And the west .... and the north ... and the south. It will be seen in the scrolls. In the prophets. In the nighttime sky. In the image of God in all peoples everywhere. In the law of God written on their hearts. And so, through Immanuel, God-with-us, we are invited into a larger story, a story in which all the other stories of justice, compassion and peace can one day fit, a story that has room for all the other truthful stories of the world.

So when you find a person or maybe a situation outside your formulas, someone you did not expect, something you did not expect, a friend, a kid at school maybe with a Sikh head covering, a work associate, some stranger in your life, some person very, very different from you, remember they still may have seen the star in the East. They still may be very much a part of the story in which we find ourselves.

– Dale Pauls