

Our King
Matthew 2:1-12
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If you want to fall down an internet rabbit hole, go searching for information about the Magi. I know, because I did that this week. This story and these mysterious figures from the East have fascinated people for two thousand years. And the accumulation of myths, traditions, art, and music about them, their gifts, and the star are fascinating.

Magi is originally a Persian word referring to the priesthood of the Zoroastrian religion. These priests were internationally known for their close observations of the stars and other historical sources from the Roman world mention visits of these priests from East.

It was the King James Version that translated the word as “Wise Men” because of the negative connotations of *magi* with the occult in 17th century Britain. But one article I read suggested that for the original readers of the Gospel of Matthew the point was not that they were wise, but that they were *fools*.

The article explained that the only previous appearance of the term *magi* in the biblical tradition is in the Book of Daniel where the magi are the foolish sages of the Babylonian and Persian courts, opponents of the prophet Daniel.

There is also a connection with the character of Balaam from the Book of Numbers. Balaam is the prophet from the East hired to curse the Hebrews during the exodus. He’s the one whose donkey talks to him, in one of the most bizarre stories in scripture. Balaam ends up speaking blessings instead of curses. That is definitely a story about foolishness.

So, the article I read suggested that the original readers of Matthew would have understood these characters to be fools, with the message of the story being, *even fools realize who this child is and worship him*.

In the Christian West, particularly after the writing of the Venerable Bede in the 8th century, the Magi became known as the “Three Kings” with specific names—Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar. Originally they represented three ages of men—one young, one middle aged, and one elderly, to signify that men of all ages had recognized and adored the child Jesus.

But eventually they came to represent various nations, though the traditions vary. Sometimes one is European, one Asian, and one African. Sometimes one is an Arab, one is Persian, and one is Indian.

But these are just our Western traditions. There are many others. For instance, there is the tradition that Gaspar was in fact Gondophares I, the founder of the Indo-Parthian kingdom. He appears in an apocryphal work, *The Acts of Thomas*, where he is visited by the Apostle Thomas. The historic Gondophares gave his name to the Afghan city of Kandahar.

Ethiopian churches give the Magi the names Hor, Karsudan, and Basanater. The Armenians name them Kagpha, Badadakharida and Badadilma. Some Syrians use the names Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas. But the oldest Syriac tradition is that there were 12 magi, not three.

Oh, and some Chinese Christians believe at least one of the magi came from there. The Mongol Khans believed themselves descended from the Magi.

This myriad of differing traditions does emphasize one of the key theological points of this story. Here's how minister Stephen Bauman puts it: "Everyone has been invited to God's natal party, even those who have been traveling radically different paths on their search for their true home."

This is a story for all humanity, as spiritual seekers. Something radically new has happened. The star, the magi, and the gifts are signs to pay attention to this new work of God, which is going to benefit all of humanity.

Professor William Danaher, Jr. describes the star as a "physical marker of a new outpouring of heavenly light."

His commentary sent me reading a number of Epiphany sermons of Leo the Great, who was Bishop of Rome in the early 5th century. In Sermon 31 Leo discusses the curiosity and intellectual desire of the magi, who set out on a journey to better understand this star they've seen in the heavens. Leo preached that God "gave the sign, gave to the beholders understanding of it, and caused inquiry to be made about that, of which He had thus caused understanding, and after inquiry made, offered Himself to be found."

Thus when the Magi encounter the Baby Jesus, their desire is fulfilled. Leo preached, "They adore the Word in flesh, the Wisdom in infancy, the Power in weakness, the Lord of majesty in the reality of man: and by their gifts make open acknowledgment of what they believe in their hearts, that they may show forth the mystery of their faith and understanding."

Leo believed this to be a story about intellectual curiosity fulfilled, a new spiritual insight gained.

But what happened when these seekers finally discovered the Baby Jesus? In Sermon 37, Leo preached about what the magi witnessed:

When the brightness of a new star had led three wise men to worship Jesus, they did not see him ruling over demons, not raising the dead, not restoring sight to the blind or mobility to the lame or speech to the dumb, nor in any action of divine power. They saw him, rather, as a Child - silent, at rest, placed in the care of his Mother - in a situation where there appeared no indication of power.

What the magi saw was humility. Humility was the new work of God in Jesus. From this Leo draws a lesson for us, "Consequently, dearly beloved, the whole learning of Christian wisdom consists not in abundance of words, not in cleverness at disputing, not in desire for praise and glory, but in a true and willing humility. . . . Whoever, therefore, humbles themselves like this child will be the greater in the kingdom of heaven."

So this is also a story about our greatest virtue—what kind of character we should have as God's people.

There's more. For Leo the Great, what is significant is not just understanding what happened in the past, but discovering the lasting meaning of the story for new generations of believers. He proclaimed,

Today those joys must be entertained in our hearts which existed in the breasts of the three magi. . . . For that day has not so passed away that the mighty work, which was then revealed, has passed away with it, and that nothing but the report of the thing has come down to us for faith to receive and memory to celebrate; seeing that, by the oft-repeated gift of God, our times daily enjoy the fruit of what the first age possessed.

This is an on-going story. God is still working to bring insight to seekers and teach us humility. Plus, the True Light continues to shine, leading humanity out of darkness and visiting our minds with splendor. We continue to experience wonder and awe at the epiphany of God incarnate in the Baby Jesus. "Raise your hearts, dearly beloved, to the shining beauty of eternal light."

And so the story is about the light continuing to shine through us, as we gain insight and live humble lives. We become the signs of God's work in the world.

Shiny disciples is a theme in the Gospel of Matthew, where the followers of Jesus are the light of the world who are to let their lights shine. The Gospel of Matthew opens with the nations bearing witness to who Jesus is and closes with the disciples of Jesus taking the light out into the nations of the world, baptizing "into God's new chosen people" [Paul Achtemeier].

So who are we? We are Children of God. Curious spiritual seekers. Humble agents of God's power. Lights shining in the darkness.

The story of the Baby Jesus is that divinity has taken on humanity. Our humanity has been lifted up. We share in the glory and the power of God. From this flows our dignity.

To acknowledge this baby as our Sovereign and King is to commit ourselves to following Jesus in a new way of living, a new humanity. To become our best selves.

In this new year, this season of opportunity and possibility, may the Light shine upon you and through you.