

The Legacy of the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

By Doug Sterrett

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ 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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.””

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

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

¹¹On 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 and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The Bible is full of mystery—that is it often leaves us asking a lot of questions for which it gives no obvious answers. For instance, there is that beautiful scene in the Christmas story that shows the Magi—sometimes called the wise men or the three kings—bringing gifts to the baby Jesus. It’s a beautiful story that has so gripped our hearts that the Magi have become part of almost every Christmas pageant. Their mysterious appearance has inspired many writers, artists and musicians. Legends have grown up around them, but what do we really know of these mysterious men and why they decorate our manger scenes today?

No one really knows who they were or from whence they came. Some have proposed that they journeyed from the southwestern portion of the Arabian peninsula, others have supposed that they may have come from different areas, east of Judah and linked up along the way. These theories have largely been derived from the gifts they brought: Gold (a precious metal of universal value); Frankincense (an incense used in worship) and Myrrh (a sweet smelling resin

used to cover the odor of a decaying body in the tomb). We know that these were often imported into Palestine from Southwestern Arabia. But, they were easily obtained in centers of trade throughout the Middle East. So, important though they are, they give us no real clue to who the Magi might have been.

Let me tell you what I believe is the more plausible story of their origin and the priceless legacy they have left us. To tell the story I'll have to go way back, almost to the beginning of time for the story I tell is related to a whole chain of Biblical events.¹

You will recall from the Book of Genesis, that God placed the Garden of Eden somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. These rivers still flow through a region we know as Kurdistan covering parts of eastern Turkey, Northern Syria, Northern Iraq and Northwestern Iran. It was also in this region that the story of Noah and the Ark originated. In fact, when the waters of the Great Flood receded the Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey, in northern Kurdistan. It was from there that life on earth commenced once more. Today, the people who populated the entire area we know as Kurdistan are called Kurds. In the Bible they were called the Medes.

When God's people were carried off into captivity by the Assyrians the Bible tells us that many were settled in the towns of the Medes (2 Kings 17:6). Indeed, the whole story of the Book of Esther is set in Kurdistan. Esther was the beautiful Jewish girl who became the favorite queen and who risked her life to save her people from destruction. Many other Bible stories took place in Kurdistan: Nahum, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Daniel. These prophets spoke about the Medes. In time these words have come to pass revealing the truth of the Bible and the importance of the Medes in redemptive history. Here are a few of these accounts: Nahum 3:7, the downfall of Nineveh was foretold and later accomplished by the Medes. In Jeremiah 51:11 it was predicted that the Medes would destroy Babylon. Then in Daniel 5:28 this prophet predicted the rise of the Medes and Persians as a great empire. In fact, it was Darius, a Mede king, who let himself be deceived into putting Daniel, one of his favorite advisors, in the lion's den. God protected Daniel and the next morning a repentant and relieved king released him. As a result the King gave a decree *"that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel."* Many, including the King became believers and left much evidence of this in places like Arbil, Akra, Shush, Amadiya, and other cities of Kurdistan—cities often in the news over the last decade.

After Darius became a believer he appointed Daniel to be the chief teacher and the head of the magicians or wise men of his kingdom—men called *magi* which is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew for magician or wise man (4:7).² Daniel (9:25) told the people that someday God would send a Messiah to earth to become the sacrifice for their sins. As a teacher, he would have taught the other wise men about the signs of the Messiah's coming. One of those signs was that a great star would show the way to the Messiah. This star had been prophesied hundreds of years before in Numbers 24:17. Nearly 600 years after his death

there were still magi in Kurdistan and when Jesus was born the Bible says that the magi saw the star and followed it to the region where the Savior, Jesus Christ, was born.

Another study shows that the government of the Medes and the Persians had two houses, similar to what we have, but made up of the aristocracy. The members of one house were called magoi. These could have been the magi we are referring to and could still have been Medes or Kurds. They would have traveled in larger numbers than the legendary three wise men and would have been accompanied by cavalry for protection. They would have had ready access to King Herod.

From either perspective the magi came bearing rich gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is these gifts upon which we usually focus when speaking of the Magi. We don't know what Mary and Joseph did with those gifts, but it may have been God's provision to take care of the couple and His Son as they fled, almost immediately, into Egypt to save the baby from King Herod's wrath. God had used ordinary shepherds as the first to hear the Good News, to go seeking the Savior, and then to witness to what they had seen. He made ordinary into something extraordinary!

Now, it seems to me, he took some rather extraordinary men, from an earthly point of view, and taught us a very ordinary lesson. For each gave more than gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Each gave the gift of hope. Magi had expectantly watched the dark skies for hundreds of years and when everyone else saw darkness they saw the light. The sparkling new star sparked a desire in their heart and sent them off on a journey. God often uses the darkness to reveal His light—"The light shines in the darkness" (John 1:5). And light in the midst of darkness inspires hope. This gift of hope should cause us to look beyond our disappointment and loneliness to seek the light that only He can give for He promises "I am the light of the world. The person who follows me will never live in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Each also gave the gift of time, for long before they gave God gold and frankincense and myrrh they gave him their time. It has been estimated that their trip took as long as two years during which they would have left families and responsibilities behind on what many would have called a "wild goose chase." Likewise each of us is called to seek out our Savior and to give Him the gift of our time. Following the example of the Magi we learn that it is not a fleeting moment of time it is a willingness to give up the rest of our life—and that includes all eternity. It means, too, that this time must become our top priority, just as it was with these men of old.

Finally, these wise men or magi gave Him the most valuable gift of all: worship. They were men of wealth—else they could not have brought the valuable gifts or made the long journey. They were men of influence—else they could not have gained an entrance with King Herod. And, they were men of

intellect—else would they would not have known the skies and been able to follow the star across vast distances. But what did they do when they saw Jesus? They fell down and humbly worshiped at His feet and so should we. Hope, time and worship these are the real gifts the Magi gave. These are their legacy for us.³

¹ Douglas Layton, Kurds in the Bible. Rutledge Hill Press, Servant Group International, 460 Pleasant Grove Rd., Mount Juliet, TN 37122.

² Holman Bible Dictionary, *Magi*

³ Max Lucado, *Following the Star, One Incredible Moment*. Nashville, TN: J. Countryman, 2001, p. 41-44