

Sunday January 1st, 2023
New Year's Day

Matthew 2:1-12
"We Three Kings"

"**We Three Kings**", original title "**Three Kings of Orient**", also known as "**We Three Kings of Orient Are**" or "**The Quest of the Magi**", is a Christmas carol that was written by John Henry Hopkins Jr. in 1857. At the time of composing the carol, Hopkins served as the rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and he wrote the carol for a Christmas pageant in New York City. It was the first widely popular Christmas carol written in America.

John Henry Hopkins Jr. organized the carol in such a way that three male voices would each sing a solo verse in order to correspond with the three kings. The first and last verses of the carol are sung together by all three as "verses of praise", while the intermediate verses are sung individually with each king describing the gift he was bringing. The refrain proceeds to praise the beauty of the Star of Bethlehem.

The Magi's solos are typically not observed during contemporary performances of the carol. The carol's melody has been described as "sad" and "shifting" in nature. Because of this, it highly resembles a song from the Middle Ages and Middle Eastern music, both of which it has been frequently compared to.

The carol centres around the Biblical Magi, who visited Jesus as a child in a house (Matthew 2:1) sometime after his Nativity and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh while paying homage to him. Though the event is recounted in the Gospel of Matthew, there are no further details given in the New Testament with regards to their names, the number of Magi that were present, or whether they were even royal.

There are, however, verses in the Old Testament that foretell of the visitors. Isaiah 60:6: "The wealth of the nations will come to you. A multitude of camels will cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, and will bear good news of the praises of the Lord." The number three stems from the fact that there were three separate gifts that were given.

The Greek of the NT when translated, simply calls them "magi from the East," and the term magi is usually translated as magicians (hence the derivation of that term), wise men, or astrologers. And "the East" has variously been identified as any country from Arabia and Babylonia to Media and Persia (both in modern Iran), but no farther east. The magi were an ancient priestly caste among the Babylonians and Medo-Persians and these priest-sages, were extremely well educated for their day; experts in religion, history, medicine, astronomy, astrology, divination, and magic.

The safest conclusion is that the Magi of the Nativity were either Persian or Babylonian, perhaps both, since Persia controlled Babylon for many years. Whatever their origin, their visit was of great significance for later Christianity: The Wise Men were pagans, not Hebrews. And the fact that Gentile Magi performed the same adoration as Jewish shepherds, symbolized the universal outreach for future Christianity. In the OT lesson the prophet Isaiah foretold this momentous event, "Nations [Gentiles] shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (60:3).

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And so, they have, since Gentiles comprise the overwhelming majority of Christians today, the Magi were our representatives at the Nativity. The light they saw in the baby at Bethlehem pierced the darkness of their paganism, just as the Light of the World can illuminate the darkness of sin, ignorance, fanaticism, and terrorism surrounding us today. The great good news of how God revealed His Son, not just to Jewish people, but to all of humanity everywhere.

The gifts that the wise men brought the baby Jesus are very significant in what they represent: Gold in honour of a King and Jesus is the King of all kings. Incense to the priest they bring and Jesus is our Great High Priest who makes intercessions for us. Myrrh for time of burying and Jesus was crucified, died and was buried but it didn't end there. All of this is so significant in this wonderful feast of the Epiphany, which means 'manifestation' – the showing forth and one name for today is, 'the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.'

The magi's arrival to see Jesus prompts one of the most interesting questions to ask someone if they are a Christian and that is to enquire what it was that first drew them to Jesus. Mark Buchanan the noted Baptist author and pastor, suggests that even though there are a variety of experiences, most people fall into one of two categories in their coming to Jesus. There are those who like the Apostle Paul are surprised and knocked off their feet by Jesus. They are the people who are just minding their own business, and one day Jesus just shows up and says hello. The shepherds in the Christmas story have an experience like that.

Here they are minding their own business in the hills around Bethlehem; a business that was shepherding sheep. I picture them sitting around a fire, trying to get themselves and their sheep through the night without a predator stealing a lamb, and hoping some storm didn't blow in and cause havoc. Then the sky suddenly explodes with brightness and voices announcing Jesus' birth and these men respond, "Let's go see this thing that has happened."

This is the experience of some people. People just minding their business and then wow! There is also another group of people whose encounter with Jesus is more like a long journey. They are represented by the Magi who took a long time to get to Jesus.

Unlike the shepherds, these men were not afraid of the night; in fact they looked forward to the night. It was at night they could study the stars, and scour the heavens for signs. These men had studied for many years the ancient writings from all kinds of cultures, looking for prophecies about major events. Their motivation is really quite simple and quite human; they were looking for the meaning to life. They have, we might say, been spiritually hungry for a very long time.

This is the other kind of person we meet in the spiritual experience of God's people. They too are minding their own business, but their business is finding a truth that is worth living for, and dying for, and they are ravenously hungry for it. We often wonder how many wise men or magi were there. We simply don't know. Church tradition says three, but that is because there were three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

There could have been twelve gifts of gold and four of myrrh etc. for all we know.

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We know they traveled hundreds of miles, and despite what we might think and what is often depicted on Christmas cards, they would have traveled in a great caravan, with servants and maybe even some type of security.

They would have had many camels and supplies for their long journey. This depiction is important because such a large entourage would have caused quite a ruckus when it arrived at Jerusalem. All these strange people and pack animals and noise would have caught everyone's attention. They would be very much like a parade going through town. Nobody could miss them, including those loyal to Herod.

There is something very important about these Magi that we need to remember. We tend to want to Christianize these men, by making them seem somehow pseudo followers of Judaism or early followers of Jesus, but they were by every description pagan. Their cultural background was pagan. The very word *Magi* is the word we get magic from. These guys were magicians, and I am not talking about someone like David Copperfield.

They didn't work at perfecting parlous tricks or sleight of hand; no, they truly believed in the power of magic, ala Harry Potter. They firmly believed that with the right knowledge and right activities you could manipulate events and nature itself. They were also astrologers. They believed that you could predict events by studying the movement of stars. At some point in their searching for truth, they had an inkling that something special had happened.

Something so momentous that it was worth the longest, most arduous journey of their lives and something that was worth bringing their very best gifts. They agreed together that there was something out there and they decided to go and search. One of the lessons from this story is that God is very passionate about revealing his glory to the nations, so that in turn the nations will bring glory to him.

So, the question rises about how many ways are there to God, according to the bible? Just one right? How do you get to God? Through Jesus. He is the way. Yet, here we can ask another question; how many ways are there to Jesus? A different yet crucial question, wouldn't you agree? The answer is; well, how many people are there? Jesus is using all kinds of wonderful ways to draw people to himself.

Recently we hear about people having dreams, especially in Muslim countries where the bible and missionaries are banned. We read about people receiving badly needed items after praying for them and receiving answers to needs for healing etc. God through Christ is incredibly imaginative when it comes to reaching people and bringing them to himself. What might surprise you though is that such methods while incredible are not God's first choice to reach people.

God would prefer that his people, you and I, might be light; actually, that we might be the star of Bethlehem. Paul says in Philippians 2:14-15: "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe."

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You and I know that people today, just like in the ancient world are into all kinds of weird things. There are people who take very seriously what their horoscope says, just as the Magi did two thousand years ago. The church is quick to tell them they are wrong, stupid, or sinful for doing such a thing, but how do we respond to the hunger such behavior represents. We are to be the lights shining in these dark places. But if we fail, God will find other ways to reach people.

The story continues with the Magi reaching Jerusalem. What a scene that must have been? Those who saw them knew immediately what they represented. These were very learned men, but Matthew also wants us to see them as somewhat childlike. They are a bit naïve. They come to Jerusalem and are quite open about what they are looking for. “Where’s the new born king? Do you know where he is?”

These magi would have been giddy with excitement. They believed their journey was over. Surely the new king would be in Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews. When word gets to Herod the reigning king, Herod becomes disturbed, as does all of Jerusalem. Here is the naivety on the Magi’s part. They think religious people are interested. They think that the people who have held the prophecy all these years, cherished the hope for centuries, were going to be excited like they were.

How short sighted the magi were to think that just because people possess knowledge, they would want to act on that same knowledge. They forgot what happens in the hearts of people when they know the truth: sometimes they become arrogant and complacent and they simply stop looking. “Have you seen him, the king? The king is born! Do you know where?”

“Stop bothering me. I’m trying to shop.” God’s people get so caught up in the commercialization of Christmas, that we forget that a king was born; a king who is Christ the Lord. The culture we live in shrouds our shining star like clouds coving the night sky. Here is where the Magi’s story intersects with our own, rebuking us. The people who are least in possession of the truth are the most hungry for it in the story.

The magi are simply working on a hunch. They read the stars and got a sense that God was up to something. They search the Hebrew texts and made a connection. In the story we see what evil can be perpetrated by those who possess the truth. Disturbed and twisted by his own lust for power, Herod inquires of his own religious leaders as to the truth of what the Magi are talking about.

The religious scholars knew right away where the new king was to be born. They know chapter and verse: “Oh, yes, it’s Bethlehem. The prophet said so long ago. We’ve studied this for years, we’ve preached on it, we’ve done bible studies on it, we’ve written articles on it.” The magi came on a hunch, but the Jewish religious leaders had the full truth and what did they do with it? Absolutely nothing! The magi have made a several hundred mile: arduous, dangerous journey across a scorching desert on a hunch. The religious leaders of Jerusalem had only to travel five miles to Bethlehem and they couldn’t be bothered.

This is a very important lesson for all of us. We need to understand that God doesn’t reward the knowledge in your head; so much as he rewards the hunger in your heart.

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It is a dangerous thing to possess the truth and do nothing with it. It's better to have a hunch and go with it. I am sure these magi were not young men. In their journey they probably took a few wrong turns, but God rewarded their hunger.

It is a good thing to have the truth. We need truth. But if you are not going to do anything with it, if you can't be bothered to make the five mile journey to see the fulfillment of the thing you've waited for all your life, it's actually better to have no knowledge at all. Let me approach it this way. Why are you reading your bible? Why are you studying and getting your theology good and correct?

These things are good things. But if it's making you proud, complacent, or arrogant that you understand something in intricate detail that the magi were utterly confused about, then all your knowledge is useless. We need to make absolutely sure that our knowledge of the truth translates into a burning hunger to see the king.

Here is an interesting observation: some of these religious leaders, who advised Herod, would still be alive when Jesus was carrying out his ministry years later. It is also true that the story of the magi's visit would have been passed down to the sons and nephews of those who had seen the visitors from the east. Do you know what Jesus himself said to them some years later? John 5:39-40 has our answer.

“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” Bible knowledge is fantastic, but if it isn't getting you closer to Jesus, it's dangerous. I should mention also that there is one person in the story who possessed the truth and does do something with it but not what God would want.

It is King Herod or Herod the Great. Herod the Great was known for his lavish living. He was also known for his pagan ways. He set up idols to all kinds of gods. He was also notorious for his murderous ways. He was deeply paranoid about people trying to overthrow him. By the time the Magi arrive Herod had already killed his wife, three of his biological sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, his uncle and many others.

If you appeared in any way to be a threat to his hold on power, he simply had you killed. Herod had also been searching for the Christ child, but for very different reasons. He tells the Magi that he too would like to find the child and bring him a gift and worship him, but it is a filthy lie. The only gift he wants to bring comes at the end of a sword. Now we might think we are nothing like Herod but we can learn something from him.

We may not be out to kill the Christ child but we need to realize that we cannot sit on the throne and have Jesus there as well. You cannot be the possessor of your possessions and have Jesus as the possessor of them too. It's one or the other, not both. In our hearts we often set Jesus up as a rival of our kingdom. We say, “You can rule as long as it's okay with me and don't encroach upon areas that I've decided are my domain.

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How often have we said to Jesus, "I'm lord of this, thank you?" The funny thing about Herod is that he understood what was going on. For all his depravity, for all his malice, for all his narrowness, bitterness and paranoia, the guy got it. He understood, you can't both be a king and have him king. You can't both be on the throne and have him on the throne. It's not going to work. It's one or the other, so I will destroy my rival.

For all the evil portrayed in Herod, he ends up giving the best advice in the whole story. "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report back to me, that I might go and worship as well." Herod was lying of course; he was going with a dagger hidden in his cloak. But we need to heed Herod's words. We need to go and make a careful search for the child.

If you are steeped in the truth but it's been a while since you did something with it, then go and make a careful search. If you are steeped in some confusing ideas about the divine, or you know someone who is, don't get all twisted up trying to get their theology correct first. Instead, get them to Jesus. Go make a careful search with them to find the Christ child, because in our seeking our theology becomes clear.

If it's five miles away, go. If it's a hundred miles away, go. Go make a careful search for this child, and when you find him, worship him and tell others, that they might worship as well. He is the one worthy of our long journey. He is the one who satisfies the hunch you might have about the meaning of life. He is the one worthy of the gifts we might give him; gold, incense or whatever precious thing we have.