

THE THREE KINGS, A STAR CHILD, AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION

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A myth is a tale that tells truth.

—anonymous

Wait a little while, just under the star! Then if a child comes to you,
and if he laughs, if he has golden hair, you'll know who he is.

—St. Exubery's Little Prince

During my 1992 sabbatical in India, I had the great privilege of sharing food and living quarters with “Saint Thomas” monks in Bangalore. These Christians trace their lineage all the way back to the Apostle Thomas, who came to Southwest India and converted large numbers of Indians. Christians now comprise 20 percent of the population of the state of Kerala.

St. Thomas Christians reported to a Syrian patriarch in Damascus until the 16th Century, when they, at the point of Portuguese swords, were forced to pay allegiance to the pope in Rome. The St. Thomas priests were married so they were, in a delicious irony, compelled to divorce their wives.

As early as the Second Century, a Syrian Christian author penned a remarkable work entitled *The Revelation of the Magi*. It was written in Syriac, a language related to Aramaic, Jesus' own tongue. Syrian scholars were the first Arabs to translate Greek philosophy, literature, and medical texts. They were then translated from Syriac into Arabic and then taken to Medieval Spain, where they were translated into Latin. Christian theologians were blessed by the insights of Greek philosophy because of efforts of great Muslim scholars. Only during the Renaissance did Europeans have access to the original Greek texts.

St. Thomas Aquinas was profoundly influenced by Aristotle and the Muslim philosopher Averroes, whom he simply called “The Philosopher” and “The Commentator.” *The Revelation of the Magi* was well known and honored by Medieval Christians. Aquinas cited its authority in *Summa Theologica* q. 36, art. 5, and dozens of artists depicted details from the texts in their paintings of the Magi. *The Revelation* states that there were twelve not three, and many of these paintings show a large number of them in huge caravans.

The Revelation languished in a Vatican library until an English translation appeared just this year. Scholars of ancient Near Eastern languages rarely get any press, but Brent Landau, professor of Religious Studies at the University of Oklahoma, has now made a popular version of his doctoral dissertation into a best-selling book: *The Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethelhem*. Chapman University's Marvin Meyer calls the book “astonishing, delightful, and theologically sophisticated.”

According to *The Revelation of the Magi*, the Apostle Thomas visited the Wise Men in their home country of Shir, “located in the extreme east of the world, at the shore of the Great Ocean.” “Wise Men” is a translation of the Greek *magoi*, which literally means “magicians,” but *The Revelation* explains that it means “those who pray in silence.” Nowhere in scripture are the Magi called “kings,” but in *The Revelation* the Magi do lay down their crowns when they bow down to the Christ Child.

A further reference to Shir “as a place where silk comes from,” has led some scholars to believe that the country of Shir was China, where Buddhist and Daoist monks meditated in silence. These monks usually did appeal to personal deities, so Landau is perhaps closer to the truth when he points out that Syrian Christian monks used silence as “a means for inducing ecstasy.”

Other experts believe, following the early Church fathers, that there is better evidence to conclude that the wise men were Zoroastrian priests from Iran, to whom the word *magoi* would most appropriately refer. Jesus never laughs in the canonical works, but the Christ child in *The Revelation* does, just as Zoroaster did as a newborn. Some Syrian Christian writers believed that Zoroaster, when talking about his own savior Saosyant, was actually predicting the coming of Christ.

The early Christian Fathers were suspicious of the Wise Men. The fact that they thought they were magicians and astrologers did not set well with them. Furthermore, even though the Magi worshipped the Christ Child, there is no biblical evidence that they became believers. The author(s) of *The Revelation of the Magi* claim, amazingly enough, that they were Christians even before the disciples were! They were also orthodox on every major Christian doctrine: the Virgin Birth, the deity of Christ, the Trinity, blood redemption, and the Second Coming. Only the reference to children without the stain of sin is unorthodox.

Landau’s book has received good press—reviews in *US Today* and mention on ABC News—and he has appeared on several talk shows during the Christmas season. You can listen to his interview with Diane Rehm at the NPR website. I guess that I was not surprised to read that the first e-mail to Rehm was from a fellow named Justin who said: “This writer has no hard facts, only vivid imagination.”

One could easily say this about many parts of the Bible, especially the vivid visions in the books of Ezekiel and Revelation. The latter scripture was so controversial that it was the last to be accepted as the true Word of God. The closing of the biblical canon was just as much political as it was theological.

The implication of Justin’s post is that the only hard facts about the Wise Men are the 12 verses in Matthew 2. Historians and Bible scholars worth their salt, however, question whether there is any historical basis for any of the birth stories. In a letter to me conservative Bible scholar F. F. Bruce wrote that when British historian W. M. Ramsey defended Luke census, he “unwisely damaged his well-founded reputation.” See my article “Serious Problems with Luke’s Census” at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/census.htm.

The biblical authority for the Magi’s book was Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. Professor Landau describes Seth’s prophecy: “A star of indescribable brightness will someday

appear, heralding the birth of God in human form.” Adam had told Seth that the star had stood over the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, but it had disappeared when Adam ate of the Tree of Knowledge. This may be connected to a very powerful tradition that the Cross on Golgatha was actually the Tree of Life. One of the Magi has a vision of a redemptive lamb hanging on the Tree of Life.

The most striking aspect of the star is that it is the cosmic Christ himself. The Magi refer to the star as “his star” not just “the star” (Matt. 2:2). In Plato’s *Timeaus* God created “souls equal to the number of stars and assigned each soul to a star” (41d-e). Plato is the source of this reference in St. Exubery’s *Little Prince*: “People have stars, and I will be laughing on one of them for you.”

In the Magi’s own country the Star Child appeared to the them in a mountain cave and told them that he was to be born in a far away land. The Magi set out on their long journey and the Star Child protected them from danger and miraculously restored their provisions. (Ludolfus de Saxonia’s “The Three Magi” of 1410 depicts Jesus inside his star hovering over them.) When they arrived in Bethlehem, the Star Child appeared once again in a cave near the house of Mary and Joseph. Some early Church Fathers preserved a long tradition that Jesus was born in a cave and not a stable.

Because the star is tied directly to Adam, the father of all humanity, the Magi’s Christ is a universal savior not tied to any particular religious tradition. In *The Revelation* the star-child (not yet identified as Jesus Christ) says that he has come “to fulfill everything that was spoken about me in the entire world and in every land” (13:10). The Magi tell Herod that star child “has worshipers in every country”(17:5), and reminds Mary and Joseph that forms of him “are seen in every land, because he has been sent by his majesty [God the Father] for the salvation and redemption of every human being” (23:4).

Until late in text the Star Child has no name and is referred to only as the incarnate son of the Father. When St. Thomas comes to Shir to baptize the Magi and their people, only then is the word Jesus Christ used frequently. This has led Professor Landau to conclude that this last section of the text was added by editors concerned about misunderstanding Christianity as a universal revelation not related to Abraham, Isaac, and David.

Much ink has been spilled about the Star of Bethlehem as an actual celestial event. Was it a Supernova or was it a conjunction of planets? The latter lasts only as long as the planets converge in their orbits. A Supernova would move as the stars do, slowly through the cycle of the heavens, not offering much specific direction.

For at least a third of the year the Magi would have been traveling East not West, and if they lived in Eastern China, they would have taken boats very soon in their journey! Only when a star rising in the East reaches its zenith could it be said to be “western leading,” as we sing in the carol “Three Kings of Orient Are.” Furthermore, no heavenly body stops suddenly and remains over a specific place (unless it is a spaceship!). We are obviously talking myth and miracles not astronomical events. Finally, the Magi claim that they only they can see the star, and it seems to disappear for them as soon as they arrive in Judea. If they still had it in view, they did not need to visit Herod to ask about his whereabouts, and only after that visit does the star reappear and guide them to the cave.

According to modern cosmology we are all made of star dust, so we are all star children. Let us all celebrate Epiphany on January 6, the date that Christians set aside for the adoration of the Star Child by the Three Kings of the East. I for one very much like the universal religion that is found in *The Revelation of the Magi*, and I also think that we should adore all children, for as Sophia Fahs says, "Every night a child is born is a holy night."

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.