

THE WISE MEN

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What a journey the Wise Men had! Their trek from Persia to Bethlehem would have required months of preparation and travel. Their journey to faith was remarkable, too: when they saw the star, they didn't just gaze at it and wonder. They acted. They set out on an urgent quest to find the new King.



Most of what we think we know about the Three Kings – the Wise Men or Magi – is *not* in the Bible. They appear only in Matthew's gospel. There is nothing about their names, how they traveled or whether they were kings. Some scholars think the story is a literary device to fulfill prophecies and show that Gentiles like the Magi (not just Jews) could be Christians.

Others believe the Magi were astrologers, Zoroastrian priests known for their knowledge of the natural world. Some scientists say a major astrological event – perhaps an alignment of the planets – could well have created a bright “star” to attract the attention of the Wise Men.

Their quest has been the topic of poems, stories and artwork for centuries. For C.S. Lewis, the Magi teach us to see the universe through a “baptized” lens: they understood that the world is infused with significance, and they were willing to trust what they saw and experienced, writes scholar David W. Congdon. We too are called to see the star, trust our instincts and act. Our lives, T.S. Eliot says in *Journey of the Magi*, will never be the same.



“The journey the wise men made to Bethlehem was not the only journey they made. They also made a journey in their hearts.”

The Rev. Tommy Lane, Mount St. Mary's Seminary

“The star which they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where they child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house, found the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

Matthew 2:9-11

“The star would not have sufficed had the Magi not been people inwardly open to the truth.”

Unknown

“This is exactly what this feast day is about – change – transformation. Our spiritual lives can never be stagnant, they must always be moving, always be seeking, always striving for that more intimate experience of Christ. ... The Magi are transformed by the revelation at the end of their journey. They live on uncomfortably as men of the new dispensation among people of the old. That is a lifelong spiritual tension with which we must all learn to live. ... The spiritual journey is long. The journey is difficult. But, like the Magi, the reward is so great we leave completely transformed. The reward is not possible without the journey.”

The Rev. Shawn Hughes, Queen's University, Ontario

The Epiphany – the Feast of the Three Kings – is January 6.

Journey of the Magi

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and
women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,

With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.
... and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and
death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T.S. Eliot



"Like the magi, each of us has a treasure to offer Christ."
Deacon Greg Kandra, Diocese of Brooklyn

"Here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. ... They are the magi."
O. Henry

"We are all seekers. There is something about this time of year that reveals the hunger in our hearts, this yearning for something."
Munachi E. Ezeogu, CSSP



He Qi's depiction of the Magi

"The gifts themselves have also been criticized as mostly useless to a poor carpenter and his family, and this is often the target of comic satire in television and other comedy. [Historian Howard W.] Clarke states that the deist Thomas Wollston once quipped that *if they had brought sugar, soap, and candles they would have acted like wise men.*"
Wikipedia entry on the Magi, analyzing the veracity of the story

"Why not look for a sign, an epiphany that will bring us to something interesting, something meaningful, something to fill our days? As is often said, wise folk still follow the star."
Unknown

Questions for contemplation

1. C.S. Lewis says the Magi saw the world through a "baptized" lens. They believed that the universe was infused with meaning, and they trusted what it told them. How does God speak to you through the natural world? How can you listen?



2. T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* is ostensibly about his own agonizing spiritual quest. The journey was ultimately rewarding, but Eliot found it difficult to live his new life in a world filled with old acquaintances and places. What do you suppose he means?