

# ***“Ecstatic”***

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***The gifts we brought paled in comparison to the glory and power he deserved.***

***Matthew 2:9-12***

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## ***Quest for meaning***

So you want to know more about the Magi? Good, because I want to tell you. Sort of. I won't tell you all about us. We prefer an aura of mystery. The word "Magi" does sound like "magician," doesn't it? Magicians don't reveal *all* their secrets.

We are from Persia, an ancient center of knowledge and wisdom. Our ancestors worshiped many gods until Zoroaster redefined faith in one supreme being, Ahura Mazda, a good and powerful God who nevertheless allows free will. But don't confine us to the religion of our ancestors or our rulers. We Magi are priests who constantly search for truth wherever we can find it.

Most people live out their lives trying to meet basic necessities such as food and shelter, or seeking purpose in things and pleasure. We want more. We want answers to questions others don't even ask. We practice divination. We seek to interpret dreams. We spend our days reading in our vast library of ancient global texts.

We do not serve Caesar Augustus, although the Romans have tried to subdue our sovereign, whom we call the King of Kings. We live to the east, in Parthia, but for centuries we have been invaded by Babylon, Persia, and Greece, each leaving a rich store of culture. The Babylonians brought the Jews here, a highly literate people.

We love to share our collected wisdom...for a fee. Those unwilling or unable to spend time in our pursuits pay handily. We serve in the court of our King of Kings with knowledge and prophecies and incantations. Then we put our fees to good use, lending

and making more money, exerting influence, and enjoying imported luxuries such as silk from China, spices from India, and gold from Asia Minor.

The great Daniel lived among our people, dreaming dreams and interpreting visions of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and Darius the Mede. Daniel exceeded all the astrologers, magicians, and sorcerers of Babylon and Persia. Kings acknowledged his God as a revealer of mysteries and the Lord of Kings. Still today we search his prophecies and dream his dreams. He foretold a kingdom that would endure forever.

### ***Never before seen***

As for me, nothing had satisfied my search for ultimate meaning until...that star. We Magi believe stars and constellations conceal and reveal truth. We study their movement across the sky. Our people always believed that Ahura Mazda was inviting us into his mysteries as we gazed into the heavens at night.

One winter night two great lights in the sky began to converge. Night after night they drew closer. We strained our eyes southwest to the Great Sea. Those two stars perfectly aligning had never been seen or recorded by the sages. I was so happy.

Through months of searching we uncovered the writings of a legendary seer named Balaam. You might call him the founder of the Magi. From here at the Euphrates River he established such a reputation that Balak king of the Moabites had offered him great payment to curse the Israelites who had escaped slavery in Egypt. Having been warned by the Israelite God Yahweh to say nothing except what he was told, only blessings flowed from his mouth. Balak was furious and refused to pay him.

Not long after, Balak and Balaam conspired to seduce the Israelite men with women and feasts to the Canaanite god Baal. For this the Jews killed him in battle.

As we read Balaam's story, we encountered this prophecy: "A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17). I was the first to find those words. I was excited. "Melchior!" I called. "The star we saw over Jerusalem – it means a new king has been born!"

During those same months, another astrologer from India, Gaspar, arrived in our city claiming to have seen the star. Soon another sage from Arabia, Balthazar, sought us to inquire about the star. It must have been visible from east to west.

We all agreed we must pay homage to him. We packed our camels for the long journey westward. We debated at length what gifts would be fit for a newborn king. The Jewish prophet Isaiah wrote of camels carrying gold and incense. We decided on the finest gold to line his palace; frankincense, used worldwide to honor royalty and gods, and myrrh, an exquisite product accessible only to the rich. We use it for holistic medicine and beauty treatments. With everything packed, we were enthusiastic.

We added it all to our treasure chest and packed our tents and supplies. Then we made our way to Jerusalem, traveling west along the Silk Road, then south down the Via Maris (Way of the Sea) through Damascus. We would bow down before this king. We would seek until we found him. He would fulfill our longings.

### ***Dead end***

Weeks into our journey, we crested a mountain east of Jerusalem and saw below a magnificent temple built on a large stone platform. Glistening with gold, the temple thronged with worshipers as smoke rose from the sacrifices inside the walls. I was intrigued.

At the eastern gate a guard named Petronius met us. He seemed uneasy, uncertain. I asked him, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"

"Herod the Great is king of the Jews," he answered matter-of-factly. We knew nothing of Judean politics. I had heard his name, but had not followed Roman rulers.

"Is this Herod a newborn king?" I asked innocently.

"Why would the Jews serve a baby? Herod has ruled for three decades, building roads and theaters and aqueducts and this great temple."

"We have seen a star in the east and have come to pay homage to a new king. Perhaps Herod has a new son who will be his heir?"

Petronius seemed to smirk at the thought. He said he would have to consult with his superiors, and disappeared inside the gate. I looked up and realized the entire conversation had been eavesdropped. We could see nothing beyond the wall, but the city seemed to grow quiet as the hours passed. We began to set up tents for the night.

As the setting sun glistened on the golden temple, we were told only two of us could meet this Herod. Our entourage would not be permitted to accompany us. Melchior and I were told to remove our turbans and cover our silk garments in a pauper's gown. We should say nothing as we walked through the streets.

Accompanied by soldiers, we met this King Herod. He was dressed regally with attendants, but seemed feeble if not ill. He nervously questioned us. I told him about the star and the prophecy of Balaam. I did not tell him about our treasure chest.

"Our chief priests and scribes have researched our Scriptures," he began.

"Oh, may I see these writings?" I interrupted. "Ancient prophecies are our business."

“No!” he shouted, then gathered himself and softened his tone. “I am told their Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. It’s not far from here. Five miles to the southeast.”

“Will your spiritual advisors or perhaps your soldiers accompany us?”

He coughed and paused. “No, no, that might cause a scene and be troubling to this little family and their small town. I’m sure when you find him you will come back to me and tell me of this new star in our world.”

Herod seemed nervous again. “When exactly did this bright star appear?”

We told him. He paused again. “Oh, so...not a newborn. Perhaps by now a young child learning to walk?”

“Perhaps,” I said, not knowing why he had such interest in the child’s age.

Then he repeated himself: “Now when you go to Bethlehem and find him, you will come and tell me so that I may pay him homage as well. You will, right?”

Something in his tone, or in his eyes, caused me to mistrust him. But we were in his palace, in disguise, under cover of darkness, with his soldiers surrounding him. I had never felt this in the presence of our King of Kings. “Yes, we will,” I promised with all the sincerity I could muster.

We cloaked ourselves in plain garments again, walking through the dark streets of Jerusalem toward the gate. I was discouraged. Had the star grown in my imagination since I first saw it at its rising? Had we misread the prophecy of Balaam? One would think a new king would be Herod’s own son. We had imagined we would be adding our gifts to a rich storehouse others had brought to welcome the heir to the Jewish throne.

Instead, we had been dispatched to a small town, unaccompanied by anyone of significance, unrecognized for our own status and knowledge and intuition. This king seemed so uninterested in the possibility that Ahura Mazda had revealed himself. I had hoped this journey would not only result in homage to a newborn king, but would unlock the larger secret of the universe, fulfill the longings of generations of Magi.

### ***Look!***

Outside the gate we shed our borrowed costumes and joined our fellow travelers. “We must be on our way,” I said. Our camels ambled away from Jerusalem.

“Look!” I said. “There, in front of us, the star reappears!” Unmistakably the same star, it hovers low and moves with us. This must be a miracle, a sign that the God of heaven has brought us here!” We were overjoyed! I gestured to a stranger on the road, who seemed rather unobservant. “Why do you continue toward Jerusalem? Turn around and follow that star with us.”

He spun his head momentarily and looked at me quizzically. “What star? Where are you from, dressed like that? Do they raise jesters in your country? I see nothing but a few flickering fires in a sleepy town on the hill. I have no time for foolish visions.”

But it was indisputable. Melchior, Balthazar, Gaspar, and I – we all saw it. Apparently this wondrous light was visible only to our caravan. We followed it all the way into the town. Then it stopped, resting over a humble home. To us it still seemed to light up the night sky, yet the little town was undisturbed, uninterested.

By now it was almost dawn, the star’s brightness dimmed by the soon-rising sun. I peered in the window and saw a young mother holding the hands of a toddler as he stood shakily. “Hold on to this table Dada built for us.” She let go and backed up. “I’m right here. Walk to me. You can do it. Good boy!”

Then she looked up and saw me. Startled at first, she asked why we were there. “We have come in search of a newborn king,” I said. “We saw a star....” She interrupted me. “Please, come in.” She said her husband was already at work that morning. When she realized I was accompanied by many others, she invited all of us in.

“It’s not the first miracle or vision or light connected with this child,” she said. “I’m not surprised by your story. An angel spoke to me before he was born, and to my husband, and to shepherds in a nearby field. They reported a night sky full of angels. Things have mostly been quiet since. We’re from Galilee to the north, and had only come here to register for the census. But after the baby was born it just seemed, well, less complicated to stay here in Bethlehem.”

We inquired of the boy’s birth, and it coincided with the first time we had seen the star at its rising. I was ecstatic. From that moment there was no doubt we had found the new king. We had expected he would be attended by maids and guarded by soldiers in a Jerusalem palace. Instead, here he was in a small home attended by a young mother whose husband was out before dawn trying to put food on the table that night.

We fell on our knees. This was not about homage to a human king. We worshiped him! He is worthy! “Quick, Gaspar,” I said. “Open the treasure chest!”

“Come back, Jesus,” she chuckled as the little fellow tried to crawl away. “They brought gifts.” The humble maiden’s eyes grew wide as she saw the gold glisten in the morning light streaming through the window. She breathed deeply the frankincense, but she seemed puzzled by the myrrh. “It’s a costly ointment,” I said. Apply it to your skin and to the baby’s. You will be surprised at its benefits.” She was overwhelmed.

I suddenly realized how tired I was. “We have not slept since yesterday morning,” I said. “Does Bethlehem perhaps have an inn?”

“Funny you should ask,” she said. “There was no guest room available when we first arrived, and Jesus was laid in a manger. But the census overflow has long since dissipated, and I’m sure the inn would love to have the business. Two streets over. You can’t miss it. Do you need some gold to pay for it?”

We lodged for the night, happy to find a room in the inn. After I fell asleep I had a vision. “Don’t return to Jerusalem,” the voice said. “Herod’s intentions are evil.”

Rather than returning northwest to Jerusalem to follow the Via Maris, we turned south and east and rounded the Salt Sea. We saw a great mesa with a palace on one end, which we assumed to be one of Herod’s many homes. We followed the King’s Highway and returned to Parthia with hearts that were full.

### ***My greatest gift***

You may wonder about the rest of our story. If your ancient writer never saw fit to tell it, it must not be important to his purpose. One of our companions named Artaban sought this Jesus for three decades in Egypt, Judea, Galilee, and Syria. He always seemed to miss him. Armed with the knowledge we gained about Herod and the Romans, the family probably sought obscurity.

I can only tell you that never again did we see a star like the one we saw in the east. It was a unique event, and it changed us forever. It changed the world forever.

Some may think your writer invented this tale in a thinly veiled attempt to fulfill prophecy. I can tell you that to whatever extent he is faithful to the Jewish law, there is no possibility he would invent a story like ours. Jews had no use for astrology. Ever since the time of Balaam, with few exceptions, they rejected any source of light or knowledge except their own writings. They thought of Magi as fools, not wise men.

I can only believe that your gospel writer told this story because first, he knew it to be true, and second, he understood that this Jesus, this star, this king of the Jews, was not king of the Jews. This child was born not to inhabit a palace or rule over one nation, but as the true King of Kings. I never again spoke of our sovereign that way.

My heart was strangely warmed that early morning. The baby boy had fulfilled my quest. The gifts we brought would only be the beginning of a life of offering to him. That day I realized that our gifts, exceedingly generous as they seemed in the moment, were nothing compared to the glory and the power he deserved and even possessed. My greatest gift to him was not my gold. It was my worship.

Everyone worships something. I used to worship mystery, the quest for knowledge. I worshiped fame, being sought out. I worshiped stars, because I thought that in them was life. Now I worship a Person in whom all the mysteries are revealed. What do you worship? *Whom* do you worship?