

Philippians 2:1-11

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy,² complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other.

³ Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. ⁵ Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: ⁶ Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

⁷ But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁹ Therefore, God highly honored him

and gave him a name above all names, so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east^[b] and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ^[c] 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."^[d]

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He 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."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east^[e] went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Last week between Christmas and New Years, my husband Bill and I were grateful to have had the opportunity to visit the Detroit Institute of Art. We were amazed at the extent of their religious art collection there. Room after room were filled with pictures and sculptures of Mary holding baby Jesus or other works of art of Biblical themes with characters from Adam and Eve in Genesis to the Beast in Revelation. Our scripture passage for today was also represented at the Detroit Institute of Art. There were several paintings of the three kings coming to worship Jesus. While some of the paintings rendered the Magi in the clothing styles of the first century, many of them took artistic license and portrayed the wise men in clothing of the era of the painter.

One memorable painting in the Detroit Institute of Art depicted the wise men as kings from around the world. On the left side of the painting the artist had portrayed one of the kings as being a King from Asia. The man even had a royal looking Asian dog with him that was nosing in for a peek at the baby Jesus as the King bowed in the manner of Asian martial artists. The second wise man, portrayed as a king from Africa, was painted as royally clad in beautiful skins from that continent. He was striding into the scene in order to bow his proud head to the little baby. And right in the middle of the painting, kneeling and presenting gold to the infant Jesus was

the third wise man, dressed in the finest clothing of the European nobility. The painter obviously was taking some artistic license as he demonstrated that kings from around the world were the ones who gave gifts, honor and glory to the king of the Universe in that stable long ago.

During the Renaissance, it became a popular trend for wealthy landowners to commission an artist to paint their portrait right into a Biblical scene. In several paintings at the Detroit institute of Art, a wealthy European renaissance couple or even an entire European family is shown kneeling right there in the manger scene! It is sort of odd for us today to see an image of European couple dressed their finest Renaissance clothing kneeling right next to the wise men gazing with wonder at the holy infant so meek and so mild. During their era, as well as today, there is a yearning among us to have a spiritual experience around the birth of Baby Jesus. They, just like us have a longing to have been there with the wise men, to have experienced this amazing birth of Jesus first hand.

But what do we really know about this account of the wise men, and what has been added to this tradition over time? The account here in Matthew is quite short and doesn't give us much descriptive at all. There are a lot of details that are tantalizingly absent. --For example, our

scripture doesn't even tell us that there were three Magi, we simply assume that there were three, because there are three types of gifts that are mentioned.

What we do have in this short Matthew text is the unique word used to describe the wise men. The word used here is "Magi." While the King James translates this word as "Wise Men" here in Matthew, in other places in the King James Bible, "Magi" is translated as "sorcerer or magician". These men were Magi, and the word is used in other first century texts to describe people who were born into the Priestly caste of Zoroastrianism.

Now, Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the powerful neighboring country of Iran. This religion had began about six centuries before Christ, when a 30 year old man named Zarathustra had a series of visions about God. This god he envisioned was the creator of all good things, and that god alone was worthy of worship instead of the host of other gods that were being worshipped at the time.

As part of their religion, Zoroastrians paid great attention to the stars and to the movements of the heavens. Their priests were regarded as internationally renowned astronomers and magicians because they could accurately predict eclipses and other heavenly phenomenon. Along with

their predictions of the movements of the heavens were their priestly interpretations of how those night skies were predicting and influencing events that were occurring here on earth. A very unusual astrological event, like a great conjunction of "Wandering stars" (which we now know as planets) would mean that something of great importance was about to occur on earth.

In our text today, the Mages are predicting the birth of a King, and they logically go to the house of the ruling King in order to find out if there has been a royal birth. But their prediction of a king born to the Jews who were completely under the control of Herod puts the entire royal household and all of the Jewish priests under their control into a frantic tailspin.

---The last thing that King Herod wanted was an uprising of Jews around a person that wanted to usurp his throne. Note that the prediction of the Zoroastrian Mages is not even questioned, instead Herod quickly gathers even more intelligence from his group of priests on retainer. He quickly identifies the target city as Bethlehem, and then tries to get an approximate date for this unfortunate Kingly birth. King Herod's final move is to try to recruit the Zoroastrian priests to help him locate this dangerous infant. But the Mages are much smarter than Herod. They know that Herod has evil

intentions and they purposely avoid him as they leave the area another by another route after they find the baby.

Now one very interesting thing about the statement made by the Magos to Herod is that they wanted to find the baby in order to honor and worship him. Zoroastrians believe they should worship god alone, but they believe also that god would come to earth in the form of a Sayoshant, a savior figure who will remove all evil from the earth and make the earth perfect and immortal. Because Zoroastrians only worship their God alone, the fact that these Magos kneel down and worship this Jewish infant as a Sayoshant would have been shocking and a huge statement of legitimacy to any first Century listener. If these respected Zoroastrian priests, these big time astronomers who read the heavens and predict the future came and worshipped the infant Jesus as the newborn Sayoshant, it meant that Matthew's claims that Jesus was God come to earth were completely legitimate. It meant to the common first century Jewish person that another major world religion had already given their allegiance to this person as God come to earth, and that this Jewish person was very likely to be their long awaited and much predicted Messiah. -- It is hard to put into today's context the magnitude of such an event of Zoroastrian priests worshipping a Jewish baby. --It would be as shocking as Buddhist Monks showing up at

your hospital room and declaring that your American infant was the next Dali Lama. It would be an event that would rock the entire religious world and would definitely have huge theological ramifications.

So if the first century listeners would have understood the Magi to be well respected Zoroastrian astrologer/ priests, where did the tradition of the Magi being Kings come from? In the ancient documents that we have, there is no record of the Magi being referred to as being Kings until 500 AD. At this point, the Zoroastrian religion was waning, and their old reputation and their importance was being forgotten. A Greek manuscript composed in Alexandria came out of the Western half of the church and filled in some of the missing details about these characters who were present to worship at the birth of Jesus. This document identifies them as three Kings and even gives them names and different countries of origin.

- [Melchior](#) (also Melichior^[8]), a [Persian](#) scholar
- [Caspar](#) (also Gaspar, Jaspar, Jaspas, Gathaspa,^{[8][9]} and other variations), an Indian scholar
- [Balthazar](#) (also Balthasar, Balthassar, and Bithisarea^[8]), an [Arabian](#) scholar

Gone are any references to the Zoroastrian priests, and instead we have rulers from Persia, India and Arabia all coming to worship the baby in

Bethlehem. With Constantine adopting Christianity as the Roman state religion in 312 AD, and Jesus consequently gaining recognition worldwide, it is no wonder that characters from foreign governments all coming to worship the Baby Jesus could get added to the birth tradition. By 800 AD, more creative details are being added to the story including detailing camels and other accompanying animals along with the Kings. This tradition, that the Magi were actually kings from different countries has now become so entrenched in our Christmas tradition through song that it is unusual to see a manger scene or a picture of the Nativity without the Magi wearing crowns and having an accompanying camel.

So what does all of this mean to us today? From the very beginning , the visit of the Zoroastrian Magi was meant to give authority and great legitimacy to the claims made by Matthew. --Claims that Jesus of Nazareth was no ordinary Jewish boy, that instead he was the long awaited Messiah; that he was God who had come to earth. The later adding in the tradition of secular kings coming to worship the baby were moves that were made with the same intent in mind. If even kings from other countries came to bend their knees, what should be the reaction of the regular listener?

So what about you? What would it take for you today to believe something so earth changing and amazing as the reality that God has come to earth in the form of a human baby? Imagine with me what it would take today to give this message the same sort of credibility that it has here with the actions of the Magi in the first Century:

Imagine the President of the United States hearing the incredible news and immediately traveling on Air Force one to the Kalamazoo Airport, and then taking his armored limousine to a lowly farm on the outskirts of the town of Allegan? Once there, Obama would meet with a group of other world and religious leaders who have come to see this amazing event: Vladimir Putin of Russia, Angela Merkel of Germany, and even The Ayatollah Khamenei and the Dalai Lama all arrive as fast as they can, each of them kneeling and bowing their heads to an infant who represents an end to evil and the beginning of a reign of hope and love and peace in the world? What would it take for you to believe it? Would the images of this incredible meeting broadcasted by videos on: CNN, FOX, ABC, MSNBC, as well as on the internet and all of the Newspapers from the New York Times to the Wall Street Journal convince you that this is true, that this is real and that this really happened? Would you even then believe that God

has come to this earth for you?

Today, I pray that you will put your trust in God and in this ancient evidence from the past as you seek follow Christ in your daily life today. Amen.

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