

We might try it these days.

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“Star of Wonder”

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Imagine them arranging a caravan, servants packing up camels, traveling hundreds of miles inspired by a wonder, a supposition, an idea, a hope. Remarkable. The Bible never names them. The gospel story never tells us how many there were. Tradition identifies them as kings from India, Persia, Arabia: Balthasar, Melchior, Gaspar. Multicultural. Interracial. We count them as three because Matthew’s gospel, resurrecting Isaiah’s prophecy, mentions three gifts: gold (a gift fit for royalty), frankincense (a gift fit for a priest), myrrh (a gift fit for a healer and for anointing the dead).

It’s rich symbolism. As I told a colleague: “Because I’m an authentic evangelical, I believe in the plain text of the Bible.” I paused. “Of course, the plain text of the Bible usually is symbolic and metaphorical.” Chill out, agnostics, we know how December 25 isn’t the actual date of Jesus’ birthday but a date chosen by the church for theological reasons. We’ve addressed this for millennia. Christianity joins the smorgasbord of cultures and religions celebrating the symbolism of the Winter solstice. Daylight now begins to increase. We want light to increase. We’ve endured enough darkness. The old yields to something brighter. We celebrate this promise.

The old order gives way to the new. It always does. According to Matthew’s gospel, these Magi dramatize the fulfillment of the promised covenant to Abraham, a promise of universal love, universal justice, universal salvation. Even gentiles (foreigners) will worship the God of All manifested in the flesh of this new baby boy named Jesus. The old differences no longer interfere. Our manger scenes highlight this optimism, even though chronologically the Magi didn’t show up until Jesus was out of the manger and crawling around. Our crèches convey what sanity truly wants. We want the beautiful symbolism of these sophisticated kings kneeling to adore the child alongside those migrant workers of the time, shepherds. Talk about humility and unity. Talk about setting aside differences and opinions for something holier than ourselves. We might try it these days.

Neither their names nor number matters. What matters is what they did and why. Who were they? Scholarship leans towards identifying them as Zoroastrian priests, which means they were scholars and astrologers. They belonged to the educated and wise caste. Matthew’s gospel alone tells us about them. He calls them, ‘Magi.’ Magi comes from the root word for magic, which itself connotes gaining power through knowledge of life’s mysteries. It makes sense (for those of us who want things to make sense) that these Magi traveling from the east were scientific stargazers. Their study of the stars’ secrets combined with the extrapolation of Hebrew scriptures to reveal that something significant was afoot, namely the dawn of a new era.

What about this Star of Bethlehem?

Stars obey natural law. They cannot slide across the sky like upside down spotlights. The suggestion of a comet streaking over Bethlehem is shaky. Likelier is how astronomers have calculated that in 7 BCE an extremely rare triple conjunction of Jupiter (symbolizing Marduk, the supreme god) and Saturn (symbolizing a king) took place three times, in May, October, and December, finally joined by Mars (symbolic of the west, of Syria-Palestine, of war) in the constellation of Pisces (the constellation of

wisdom, life, creation). Astronomical research talks about retrograde motion and the kind of cosmos stuff astrophysicist Neal deGrasse Tyson could better explain. For the Magi, the symbolism of the signs converged to portend a longed for new age.

It was this hope that led them to pack up and journey to unknown Israel. They followed a dream. How many of our loved ones have risked pursuing a dream? In composing his gospel, Matthew gives us a brilliant insight. The Magi traveled for the child. They traveled a hard road to kneel before the child. The child incarnated the future they sought. Palace and temple were irrelevant. Parents, family, shepherds, astrologers, gentiles, Hebrews, rich and poor, the powerful and the humble – this new community of faith forms around the child, not around religion, not around a kingdom or land, surely not around any king. The center of this new hope isn't a place or an idea or a principle or a philosophy or an ideology, it is this child. His new humanity shows us all how to be human.

Thank you, Magi. You had the fortitude and the optimism, the determination and the desire to act on your hope to find a better day. What star are we willing to follow?