



The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleyнат, Jr.

*Volume I:
From Bethlehem to
the River Jordan*



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THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: A JOURNEY INTO THE KINGDOM: VOLUME I: FROM BETHLEHEM TO THE RIVER JORDAN.
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From Nazareth to Bethlehem

Matthew's narrative has little to say about the events immediately surrounding the birth of Jesus. Its larger themes are found preceding and following the birth itself, covering a vast expanse of time and distance. A wealth of interpretive material is found in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, Joseph's dreams, the author's mystical link to the Testament prophecy, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, each of which offers a lens through which to view the unfolding story of the Messiah. At the same time, Herod's slaughter is embedded in the material, as circumstances foreshadow Matthew's conflict of kingship theme. Later in this chapter we will see how these events begin to prepare the way for the birth.

For now, we will turn to a more tranquil, even pastoral, scene. According to Saint Luke, the events that occur immediately after the birth of Jesus are of great diversity; they tell us something about what the church and mission will ultimately accomplish, as the builds upon the

from the oppressor; to restore the people; to protect the flock; to make it secure; to preside over a reign of peace; and to be great to the ends of the Earth. Does the figure whom Micah foretells sound like anyone you know?

1. Does Micah's prophecy establish credentials for identifying the Messiah? How does Jesus fulfill them? Does the word "impeccably" come to mind?
2. We have spoken of Matthew's echo effect with the OT. Is that primarily what we see here? Do we see a comparable approach in Luke's gospel? How do we hear the same echoes today?
3. An overly zealous insistence on historical reliability can strip away much of the gospel story, leaving little in the arena of mystery to ponder. And, failure to study the Bible critically can leave us stranded in a literalism that doesn't always work. How do we strike a balance?
4. If we fail to raise questions that go to the heart of people's faith lives, would that somehow mean that they didn't really exist? And would we, in our unquestioning silence, miss the opportunity to engage others who do feel compelled to grapple with them?



The connection of the Messiah with Bethlehem, and the reports of Jesus' birth there, whether they are literal or literary, tell us about his identity, as does other imagery in this passage.

An Ethereal Visit

On January 6th of each year, the Western Church observes the visitation to the Holy Family by wise men from the East. It is the Feast of the Epiphany, and follows the twelve days of Christmas. The term "epiphany" means spiritual revelation. It is a manifestation of God to

humanity. In a more general setting, the word can be understood as a moment of sudden intuitive understanding, or a flash of insight. To the Christian Church, in particular, Epiphany is the celebration of the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, represented by the wise men who had seen a star in the East.

The Religious Traditions of the Wise Men

The wise men, or Magi, were part of a pagan, priestly line, possibly from Persia or Arabia, the area in the “East” where the star was seen. In this context, the best translation of the Greek term used to describe them is “astrologer.” A number of biblical words were developed to delineate among those with mystical or magical powers. Some practitioners of these arts were mere tricksters. They occupied the bottom rungs of the “magical” spectrum, both when considering their power and when considering the seriousness of their undertakings. At the upper end of the spectrum were the astrologers, or Magi, highly educated people who were able to discern spiritual and mystical truths.

The Magi are often associated with the ancient Zoroastrian religion, a movement that was already in flower at the time of the Babylonian exile of the Jews around the sixth century B.C. Before then, the Jewish people held a limited to non-existent view of the afterlife. During the exile, the Jews encountered Zoroastrian belief systems. Developing Jewish ideas of an afterlife bloomed following this religio-cultural exposure. In fact, the OT Book of Daniel, some portions of which were likely written during the Babylonian exile, contains the most fully developed concept of the afterlife found in the Hebrew Bible.¹³

The Zoroastrian system included dualistic aspects involving two gods. One’s nature was pure good while the other’s was pure evil. They were joined in cosmic battle in heaven. In keeping with religious ideas that prevailed in the area of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, conflicts among deities were believed to be mirrored by struggles among their human followers on Earth.

These struggles had eternal implications. At the end of life, one was to walk out upon a broad sword over a pit. If he had lived a life of good, he would cross safely to the other side. If not, the sword would turn edgewise and he would fall into a pit of fire and destruction.

The Jews who returned from the exile carried Zoroastrian imagery back to Israel. This imagery worked its way into Hebrew thought, and was also carried forward in Christian

¹³The remainder of Daniel was written later.

notions of good and evil, heaven and hell. However, neither Judaism nor Christianity is a dualistic faith. Unlike the Zoroastrian system of duality, the God and Satan of monotheism are not on equal footing.

The late C.S. Lewis, professor of Medieval and Renaissance literature at Cambridge, is perhaps better known as a writer of Christian apologetics and the author of the Christian fantasy, *The Narnia Chronicles*. Lewis had considerable respect for the ancient Zoroastrian faith, which he describes in his book, *Mere Christianity*. He observed that calling one of the dualistic gods “good” and the other “evil” presupposes that they are both measured against some higher, even ultimate, standard. It is at the point of that standard, where good and evil are fully defined, that we meet the monotheistic God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. And, it is because of our individual and collective understanding of that ultimate standard, that we know to call one way “good” and the other way “evil.”

C.S. Lewis illustrates this point by treating evil as something that does not have independent vitality; that is parasitic. He argues that most examples of sin are, at heart, distortions of good. The desire to provide comfort and protection to oneself and one’s loved ones—a good thing—becomes sinful when money becomes our god. More subtly, it also becomes sinful when we enjoy the benefits of security, but do not strive to extend that security to others outside of our closest kin. The passion and attraction that lead to love, marriage, and procreation—also good things—can be distorted into seduction of the weak by the strong, and into sexual abuse. Likewise, the desire to achieve and do one’s best can be turned into puffed-up false pride. Sin takes a good thing and distorts it; it does not spring forth of its own volition. Considered this way, dualism mistakenly treats good and evil as symmetrical. Monotheism, however, calls that which is Godly “good,” and that which distorts or attacks God’s goodness as “evil.” God’s way transcends both labels.

To return more closely to the topic of the text, we see that astrologers, possibly practitioners of this dualistic Zoroastrian faith, step onto the scene while following a star. They are moving from their insightful, but limited, dualistic philosophy toward a transcendent conception of the divine. They are drawn to a light, and are “overwhelmed with joy” when they reach their destination (Matt. 2:10). This passage suggests that they have made the spiritual connection to the true God, beyond dualistic ideas of lesser deities, good and evil.



The Sign

Astronomers and scholars through the years have pondered what type of phenomenon might have been seen in the skies near the time of Christ's birth. We have already placed his birth toward the end of Herod the Great's reign in Israel, around 4 B.C., with a less probable date being closer to 6 A.D. Within five to ten years of the estimated range of dates for Christ's birth, a number of unusual celestial signs were seen. These included Halley's Comet's periodic visit to the skies above the Earth; the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter low in the sky, creating a bright light; and the Mesori Star (meaning "Prince Star" in Egyptian, connoting a royal birth) rising at sunrise and displaying itself in a different fashion than normal. If this story is understood in a literal sense, it may be that the Magi witnessed one or more of these astronomical signs and were drawn toward Jerusalem.

These pagan philosophers observed the signs of nature and walked faithfully in the belief that they were being led toward one born to become the king of the Jews.¹⁴ However, as they did not know the precise place where the child was to be born, they went to Jerusalem, the seat of religious and political authority, seeking that knowledge. Herod called his court priests, who were familiar with Old Testament prophecies concerning the birth of the Messiah. They confirmed that it was expected to occur in Bethlehem. Thus, Jewish tradition and Scripture provided a more substantial content to flesh out the general framework of theistic faith that the Magi already possessed.

The Gifts

The Magi are reported to have brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ child. Each gift was of high value, rare and precious. And each held a certain symbolic significance. Gold was a gift fit for royalty. Beautiful and incorruptible, it was a currency accepted throughout the Mediterranean world. Frankincense was a gift fit for a high priest. It was the pure incense used in temple worship to please God. Myrrh was a gift fit for one who is to die. It was the perfume used in preparing the body for burial. All were extravagant, and none were particularly suited for a child. And so, the gifts the Magi bring in the birth narrative foreshadow the royal, priestly, and sacrificial identity of the adult Christ.

¹⁴In an episode of Luke-Acts, Saint Paul affirms an understanding of the divine nature being apparent through such a general revelation. See Paul's speech to the men of Athens in Acts 17.

The Title

When in Herod's court, the wise men ask where is the one born "King of the Jews." These mysterious Gentiles appear in the opening chapters of Matthew and ascribe an exalted title to Jesus at the very beginning of his life. It is a title that will be repeated in Holy Week by another Gentile who appears at the end of Christ's life. Then, Pontius Pilate will nail the words "King of the Jews" on an executioner's cross at Golgotha.

The Future

The Magi also foreshadow the extension of Matthew's church mission. If Gentiles came from the East at the time of the child's birth to pay him homage—while "all of Jerusalem" responded with fear rather than joy—could it be that the Christian message is intended not only for Matthew's predominately Jewish Christian audience, but also for the Gentile world as well? Matthew's birth narrative sows the seeds for justifying an extension of that mission to the Gentiles. The seeds will come to full bloom in the Great Commission, the final verses of the gospel, where the risen Christ sends apostles out to make disciples of all nations.

The biblical story of the Magi ends with them still attuned to the spiritual world. They are warned in a dream to go home by a different route, instead of honoring Herod's request to bring him news of the child's location. Danger looms in Herod's shadow. The conflict of kingdoms begins. Still walking in faith, the wise men follow the counsel of dreams, and evade Herod's trap.

The Traditions

Many traditions have sprung up around the story of the Magi. While their precise number is not mentioned, an early belief was that there were two astrologers. Later, the number went as high as twelve, perhaps representing the twelve disciples or the twelve tribes of the new Israel. The final number settled by church tradition was three, corresponding to the number of gifts given.

Other traditions around the Magi include naming their places of origin. We have already tentatively placed them in Persia (modern-day Iran), or in Arabia, both of which are east of Jerusalem. Another tradition is that they were from different places: Arabia, India, and Persia, all located in the East. Artistic renderings show yet another tradition, with each of the Magi displaying different skin color and other physical traits. This suggests that one is of Asian descent, another of African, and a third of European.

These Magi are among the most mysterious characters who present themselves in the Bible. Whether they are real people, or are symbolic of God in Christ being available to all humanity, we do not know. Yet, whether real, symbolic, or both, their connection to the spiritual world and their willingness to abandon their comfortable surroundings and venture far into the realm of the unknown is a lasting model for our own faith journey. As we, too, venture beyond the known and into the unknown, we can take from this story that God is available to all who seek him.

In “Journey of the Magi,” the poet T.S. Eliot speaks with the voice of one of the wise men, who had, years before, gone through this hard and difficult journey—seeing both death and life—and returned home to an “alien people clutching at their foreign gods.” He longs for fulfillment of the Epiphany promise that, even in the midst of darkness and suffering, God offers a light to transform a sick, battered and broken world. So let it be with us.

1. The wise men from the East are not practitioners of the Jewish faith. But they accept what the Jewish leadership of Herod’s court does not—the place of Jesus in God’s saving action. Does that insight tell us something about remaining open to God’s revelation and grace outside our own religious institutions?
2. Not only Joseph—a Jew descended from David—but also pagan wise men from the East, respond to dreams. Does God speak to us in dreams? How can we tell?
3. The sign to the unsophisticated shepherds was simple. The sign to the sophisticated wise men was ethereal. Does this mean God meets us where we are? Do you have examples from your own personal experiences?

4. This section speaks of the influence that another religious tradition, Zoroastrianism, might have had on Judaic thought. Does the story imply that Christians should be open to the faith experience of other peoples? Do we lose our particular call when we are? Or, do we gain other insights into the experience of God when peering through a different lense?

5. The pericopes studied in this chapter immerse us in questions of literal versus literary approaches to Scripture. Are there points where we are able to wade in the waters of both? Those with more mystical leanings can thrive in the ambiguity. Others tend to get caught up in historical speculation. We have to remind ourselves to give the left hemisphere of the brain a rest, and let the right one work for a while.

6. The rector at my home church, an exceptionally able clergyman, speaks of a willingness to die in some ditches, but not in others. What he is talking about is differentiating between our core religious and ethical principles and those which hold a lesser claim. But he doesn't give easy solutions, leaving it up to individual conscience to decide which principles are critical to one's own faith life. Can you identify some set points to which you must hold? Are there others where you are more flexible? Can you know whether you have chosen the right ones? Are those choices, once made, still open to change through growth? And, more to the point, in which ditches are you willing to die?

