

The Magicians
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Matt 2:1

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Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ γεννηθέντος
ἐν Βηθλεὲμ τῆς Ἰουδαίας,
ἐν ἡμέραις Ἡρώδου τοῦ βασιλέως,
ἰδοῦ, μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν
παρεγένοντο εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα

(RSV)

Now when Jesus was born
in Bethlehem of Judea
in the days of Herod the king,
behold, wise men from the East
came to Jerusalem

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus wrote in the mid-5th century BC. Part of his book he devoted to the mysterious figure of the Magus. (The word “Magus” is related to words like magic and magician.) His sect interpreted dreams, read the stars, and controlled supernatural forces. They stopped a storm by putting spells on the wind. But the Magus (capital M) was one traitorous and power-hungry sorcerer in particular.

There are few references in antiquity to his sect. Other than Herodotus, only one other source records anything, about some who lived several centuries after the infamous Magus. That latter tale goes something like this:

From the top of their pyramids (ziggurats) in Babylon, these later Magicians made an earth-shattering discovery. The planets revealed that a new age was approaching. A leader would soon arise to hold humanity in his hand, so far transcending the Magus as the Magus was above the common people. In response, the later Maguses sent a number of representatives to greet this ruler. But he would not be born in their native Babylon, but rather among a people who called themselves Jews.

The envoy traveled directly to the old and wizened king of the Jews, because if anyone in this land knew what the stars clearly foretold, surely it would be he. Unfortunately, this king was as shocked at the news as the Maguses were at first. But in addition to the celestial sphere, the future was also written in sacred scrolls—the collected words of the holy prophets. In the ancient language of the Hebrews, scribes found that the promised King would be born in Bethlehem.

The Magi left Herod and continued to study the sky as they went. Herod was an astrological dullard; to him, eclipses and the zodiac were unintelligible. In fact, for many Jews to hear what heaven declared, the sky would have to audibly speak with words like, “Unto you is born in the city of David this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!” But the Magi needed no such communication—to them it was as if a neon sign marked where the child was. They finally arrived at the humble abode of the destined king.

When they approached the child, they could have seen in him their own demise. But unlike the Magus of old, these powerful Magicians knelt down, worshipped him, and paid tribute.

The great God spoke through comets and stars, but also in dreams, and warned the Magi about murderous Herod. So they did not tell him about Jesus. Herod the king of the Jews, however, behaved like the evil Magus of old. He went to great lengths to cling to power—even butchering innocent children. This insane attempt to deny what the cosmos, the prophets, dreams, and the heavenly host were announcing made Herod infamous for all time.

World leaders like Herod and the Magi have this choice before them: will they try to compete with God and resist his purposes? Or will they bow the knee and submit to his rule? This is the same choice you have before you. How precious is your autonomy to you? I believe that many who choose to reject the gospel do so because they want to be the captain of their own ship. They just don't want God telling them what to do or how to live—like Herod, like the Magus, who simply would not have the rightful king rule them.

You may think, "Sure, I don't want to be captain of my own ship! Sure, I'll have Christ as Lord." But perhaps we Christians are far too easy on ourselves. We confess that Jesus is Lord, and then we take liberties. We gossip. We grumble and complain. We are not as generous as we should be—are we greedy at heart? How easy is it to cause your prideful anger to flare up? We are comfortable with our lust. And we think, "Sure, I'm a follower of Christ. I don't insist of having my own way!"

Learn from the Magi. Think on the cosmic wonder of Immanuel—and be renewed in holiness and righteousness. Listen to the angels sing, look up at the stars, read the prophets, and rejoice in your salvation from your sins. Then go, and live like a servant of Christ. Let that be your tribute to him.

Amen, and Amen.