

STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

ISAIAH 60:1-6

MATTHEW 2:1-12

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MATTHEW'S GOSPEL BEGINS STRANGELY.

He opens his gospel tale with a genealogy, not unusual in itself. What was odd however was that it contained a list of strange women in Jesus' lineage: there was Tamar who pretended to be a prostitute and Rahab who was one. There was Ruth, an immigrant from Moab and Bathsheba the wife of the Hittite Uriah. All of these women were gentiles who had somehow been grafted onto Israel's family tree. In a strange way, Matthew is preparing us for the strange story of the Magi and their trip to Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

THERE IS ONE MORE OLD TESTAMENT EVENT THAT PROVIDES A BACKDROP TO THIS STRANGE STORY OF THE MAGI.

Tucked away within the folds of the Book of Numbers is the strange case of Balak and Balaam. Fearful of the approaching Israelites, Balak, King of Ruth's country Moab, hires Balaam, a magus from the East to curse the oncoming Israelites. God reveals to Balaam that these are His Chosen people and Balaam blesses them instead—much to the chagrin of Balak. In his blessing Balaam utters an oracle:

“...a star shall come forth out of Jacob
And a scepter shall rise out of Israel...”

It is this star that the Magi in Jesus' time will see and follow. It is this ruler they come to worship. But the star alone will not lead them to the one born King of Jews.

AFTER A VERY LONG JOURNEY, MAGI FROM THE EAST ARRIVE IN JERUSALEM

They come not to curse but to bless. But although they can read the stars they cannot as yet read the ways of the God of Israel. They are wise in the ways of Persia but not in the ways of Israel. They seek the newborn King in the palace of Herod, a king as friendly to the ways of God as was the Pharaoh who knew not Joseph or as was Balak who hired Balaam.

HEROD WAS GREATLY DISTURBED TO HEAR ABOUT A NEW KING.

And when Herod was disturbed bad things happened to good people. Like Joe McCarthy, he saw a threat under every bed and in every closet. He had a quick and deadly way of dealing with anyone he thought threatened his power and position. Neither his wife nor even his mother was safe from his paranoia. Ironically, although the Magi

who were foreigners were overjoyed at the coming of the Messiah, the people Israel were not.

Herod calls his religious advisors and they search the Scriptures for clues as to the birthplace of the Christ. Herod was neither the first nor the last politician to use the Bible to further his purposes rather than God's.

HIS SCRIBES DO THEIR WORK WELL.

The Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, less than nine miles from Herod's palace. God will not begin his saving work in a center of power, but rather in the backwaters of the mighty Roman Empire. The king summons the magi and gives them the needed information. Herod then tells them to search out the child and come back and tell him the Messiah's whereabouts, so that he too may go and worship him. If the Magi were suspicious at this point they did not reveal it-they were after all wise men.

GUIDED BY A STAR AND ENLIGHTENED BY THE REVELATION OF GOD, THE MAGI FIND THE CHILD.

They bring him gifts inspired by God Himself.

- Gold, a gift fit for a King
- Frankincense, a gift to be used by a Priest
- Myrrh, a gift for a prophet who will die a prophet's death.

More important than their gifts however is their adoration. They bow down before him, or as Paul might have put it: the wisdom of the world bowed down before the foolishness of God.

And God's pleasure is immediately forthcoming. He warns the wise men in a dream not to return to Herod. They would not have survived such a return and neither would God's son. For just as sure as the Pharaoh who knew not Joseph tried to kill God's first redeemer, this King who knows not God will try to kill God's final redeemer. And so, Matthew tells us, these strange visitors from another world, return to their home by another way.

I TOOK A LOOK AT A MAP OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST.

I tried to determine what that other way might have been. Turns out there was no easy other way. They would have had to go south into the desert and then at the tip of the Dead Sea turn east and north and follow the path Israel of Old took as they entered the Promised Land for the first time. They might even have passed by the very spot that Balaam the magus had blessed Israel and had prophesied the natal star.

And now through Israel, God has blessed the world. The promise the Lord had made to Abraham to bless the nations through his offspring had been fulfilled and the Magi were the first fruits of that promised blessing. This is no doubt why Matthew included this strange story in his Gospel.

BUT HE HAD OTHER REASONS AS WELL.

As did John, Matthew knew that God's son "came unto his own, but his own received him not." Israel's Messiah

would be largely ignored or persecuted by Israel, while being greatly embraced by outsiders. Matthew knew that Jesus would be welcomed by those whom one would not expect to do so, and be rejected by those whom one would think would accept him. Matthew knew that the coming of the Kingdom of God would greatly disturb the kingdoms of men and women. The Powers that Be see change as a threat and they will use their power to annihilate that threat. But the Gospel is that they will not succeed, any more than did Herod of old.

DID YOU EVER WONDER WHAT HAPPENED TO THOSE MAGI?

We know they went back to their native land, but what happened to them there? Surely they would have told friend and foe alike of their trip and what happened on it. How would the sophisticated Persians have received their strange story? I suspect with ennui, ridicule, or open hostility. The supreme God sending his Redeemer as a

baby Jew? Ridiculous! Surely Mazda would choose one of their own to redeem his world.

I suspect the Magi had two choices. Give up their belief or give up their friends and colleagues. I suspect they would have to end their lives as strangers and exiles in their own land. In T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" one of the wise men says, "We returned to our places...but no longer at ease here in the old dispensation, with an alien people, clutching their gods."

THE COMING OF THE CHRIST CHANGES EVERYTHING.

And although we still live in the world ruled by men and women, we live in it-as St Augustine once put it-as resident aliens. We have here no lasting country. We worship only the king, all glorious above. And so if we are comfortable in this world shaped by power, greed, and fear, than we still have a very long journey ahead of us, but one we, like the magi must take if we are to find the newborn king. Like them, we must be guided not by the wisdom of the world, but by the foolishness of God found in God's word written, the Sacred Scripture.