



Bishop's Reflection

THE GREATEST GIFT WE CAN GIVE

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One of my favorite parts of the Christmas story is the visit of the Magi, the wise men, to the Christ Child. We only know about these wise men from the words of the Gospel writer Matthew, the only New Testament writer to tell us about these mysterious men from the East. It is a fascinating story that has captured the imaginations of artists, writers, and mystics from every century since then.

One of my favorite paintings of the Magi's journey is by the 19th century French artist James Tissot, who spent the last part of his life traveling throughout the Middle East in order to be able to paint the life of Jesus within his Middle Eastern context. The painting is titled *Journey of the Magi*, and it helps us visualize what it might have looked like to see these wise men caravanning to see the Christ Child.



James Tissot, *Journey of the Magi* (1894)

In the Early Church, interest almost immediately centered on these intriguing personalities. They appear ten times in the ancient catacombs. While not much is said about them in the Gospels, their graceful camels have lumbered back into the Nativity scene ever since Christmas was first celebrated. The coming of the Magi was portrayed long before the shepherds appeared on the Christmas scenes in early Christian art, even before the earliest portrayals of the Nativity with Jesus in the manger surrounded by an ox and donkey were sculpted or painted.

During this season of Christmas and Epiphany we often sing the popular carol *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. As beautiful as the carol is, just in the first six words, three errors have been made due to legend. First, how many magi made the trip to Bethlehem is not known. One finds different numbers in early Christian writing and iconography – two in one catacomb depiction, three in another, four in another. An ancient Syrian tradition even speaks about twelve magi. However, later the tradition that there were three became almost universal, due to the three different gifts they presented to the Christ Child.

Once their number had been settled, Christian imagination, as it often does, worked overtime. Thanks to the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, we were given their names: Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. Much earlier, in the medieval era, the three Magi began to be depicted as coming from different cultural traditions - European, Asian and African. The 15th-16th century Italian artist Andrea Mantegna's painting titled *Adoration of the Magi*, highlights their distinct cultural backgrounds.



Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi* (1495-1505)

Secondly, the carol errors in that they were not “kings.” Matthew in his Gospel calls them “magi from the east,” which is usually understood to mean wise men, astrologers, or magicians. Historically, the “magi” were members of a religious group numerous enough to be considered one of the six tribes of the Medes, an ancient people in the area now known as Iran. The magi were priests-sages that were specialists in medicine, religion, astronomy, astrology, divination and magic. They became to Persia what the Levites were to Israel, those responsible for carrying out the “religious acts” for the people. The way Matthew uses the term “magi” indicates honorable men from an Eastern religion.

Thirdly, the carol errors in that they did not come from as far away as the “Orient,” the Far East. While the old caravan routes entered Palestine “from the east,” we do not know from what part of the east these magi came. Some say they came from Arabia Felix (Southern Arabia) due to the type of gifts they brought. However, most scholars believe they were Persians coming from what is today modern-day Iran. I love the image of Iranians coming to see the Christ Child.

Whatever their number and from wherever they came, they traveled thousands of miles to see the infant Jesus. Upon finding Jesus, they gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, as in the ancient Middle East no one would pay homage to a “king” or important person without bringing a gift. This is still very much the case today.

While all the background and history of the Magi can be quite fascinating, if all they did after traveling thousands of miles was to give expensive gifts, then the story would be beautiful but profoundly lacking. The story's spiritual significance is found in the words of Matthew's Gospel, "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage." I love the double entendre in those words: "knelt down" – indicating a physical activity, and "paid homage," *inferring an inner bowing down*, of submission in their hearts. Irish contemporary artist Brian Whelan quite memorably captures this moment of worship by the Magi with his whimsical style in his painting *Adoration of the Magi*.



Brian Whelan, *Adoration of the Magi* (2004)

I love how the author Jim Bishop in his marvelous little book *The Day Christ Was Born* portrays this moment; "The three wise men threw themselves onto the grain-sanded floor, the folds of their brocaded garments spilling into the chaff. They touched their foreheads to the floor, and announced that they had come to pay homage to the new king." The power of the story is that they not only gave their gifts, but they gave themselves too. In effect, that simple house became a temple that day. It is so easy to be caught up with simply "living," doing one thing or another, that this whole idea of consciously submitting and resubmitting ourselves to our Creator, can be overlooked.

The greatest gift we can give this season is the gift of ourselves anew to God. It is about having an ongoing attitude of homage to our Creator. This season provides us with a wonderful opportunity to stop and reassess what the driving force is in our lives. Certainly, "paying homage" to God means something different at each phase of our spiritual journeys. One lesson gleaned from the Magi's visit to the Christ Child is the need to live in a state of continual "homage" to our Creator to the best of our understanding.

I am reminded of T.S. Eliot's moving poem *The Journey of the Magi*. The poem focuses on one of the Magi who in old age recalls his journey to see the Christ Child. In the poem, he describes the profound change this experience made in his life. It is interesting that their paying homage to the Christ Child follows right after with the Magi hearing the voice of God's Spirit in a dream as to the direction home they should take for their safety. One of the themes throughout the Biblical narrative is that active reverence for God allows for extra sensitivity to God's Spirit.

After this exotic nativity incident, the Magi are never heard from again in the Scriptures. Yet their mystical visit has so much to teach us. They submitted their very hearts to God, which led to hearing the voice of God afresh in their lives.

The greatest gift we can give this season is quite simply the gift of ourselves anew to our beautiful Creator by recommitting to follow the way of life taught us by this Christ Child. It was a long journey to Palestine by some distant Magi, but the result of that journey made and continues to make all the difference.