

Introduction:

- A. Magi had night jobs. You hardly ever met one in the daytime but if you did, they were squinting or had really dark shades. They wore hats with huge visors ... called nightcaps. They carried a whole line of star merch—T-shirts, mugs, little cardboard telescopes, calendars. They had a couple guys who were huge fan favorites. Crowds would gather in the dark all wearing pointy hats and these guys could point to a constellation and spin a yarn about war and heroes, beautiful maidens, bears and big dippers. Those guys were called, well, Star Stars.

OK, I made that up but the real magi were from modern-day Iraq. They knew the stars better than the backs of their hands. In the inky black Mesopotamian nights, they had mapped the stars, planets, and comets on leather circles. They knew the arcs and trajectories of the heavenly bodies. They had tracked the almost imperceptible trails for generations. They knew the characteristics and stories of the constellations. Not only were they astronomers. They were astrologers. They believed the great God had diagrammed the grand workings of history in the stars. To study the stars was to understand the past and to peer into the dark future. There was a large Jewish population in their area and the magi were very familiar with the prophecies in the Old Testament, like those of Balaam, Daniel, Isaiah and the others.

- B. Then they saw something astounding. Was it a bright confluence of planets? A supernova? A comet? I was fascinated by an interview with biblical scholar **Colin R. Nicholl** in *Christianity Today* last year who made a very compelling case for a great comet and had an impressive list of Bible scholars endorsing his book. He points to Balaam's prophecy in **Num 24:17**, with which he believes the magi were familiar: "*I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter*

will rise out of Israel.” A comet was called a scepter star because of its tail. In his interview he said,

The Magi seem to have concluded that Balaam’s oracle in Numbers, about the rising scepter-star, was the key to interpreting the comet’s behavior. I also believe that the opening verses of Revelation 12 paint a picture of the heavenly sign the Magi witnessed. (Rev. 12:1–2 reads, “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of 12 stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.”) The Magi saw a nativity drama unfolding in the heavens, in which the constellation figure “The Virgin” played the role of a pregnant mother giving birth to a baby, whose part was played by a great comet. This celestial drama was strongly suggestive of Isaiah’s oracles about a virgin becoming pregnant and giving birth to a son (7:14), and about a great light shining in the darkness to signal the Messiah’s coming (9:2–7). [CT, Dec, ’15, “Comet of Wonder”]

- C. However it happened, the magi saw a star of some kind that so clearly signified to them the birth of the King of the Jews that they traveled some 900 miles just to bow before him. They said, “*we have seen his star.*” **It wasn’t only a guiding star but a signal star, announcing the birth of Israel’s long-awaited Son of David.** Only the great God could announce his King in the stars. So the magi traveled some 900 miles, taking some months, and following the same route Abram had followed to the Promised Land some 2000 years before
- D. Finally, they came to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, and they immediately began asking, “Where is he who is born King of the Jews?” People looked at them uneasily. Some scurried away. The magi had expected to arrive to a buzz of excitement about the infant king but instead people just shook their heads. *Don’t talk to me about it!* There already was a king of the Jews. His name was Herod, but he’d insisted people call him Herod the Great. It was his practice to kill anyone who had a shadow of a claim on his

kingdom. So no one knew about another King of the Jews, and if they did, they weren't talking. Turn to **Matt 2:1-2....**

- E. Luke's account of Jesus' birth is rather gentle and sweet but Matthew's is a nail-biter. Sly looks, shadowy figures in doorways, intrigue, lies, deadly danger. And shockers at every turn. Like this:

I. THE BIRTH OF THE KING OF THE JEWS WAS MISSED BY THE JEWS YET SEEN BY FARAWAY PAGANS!

- A. The star was God's silent evangelist. Notice that the magi said it was "*his star*"—the King's star. I don't believe it was a confluence of bright planets. It was a single bright heavenly body, not seen before or since. Its place in the heavens, its timing, its singular brightness, its movement—all were unique. It was not so bright that people were alarmed but it was bright enough that those with eyes to see couldn't miss it. That, of course, is often the way God works. *Those with eyes to see...*

It had been 1500 years since the prophet Balaam prophesied that "A star will come out of Israel; a scepter will rise out of Israel." Through Isaiah, God promised Israel,

*"Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn."* [Is 60:1-3]

At the very end of the Bible Jesus leaves us with these words: "*I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.*" [Rev 22:16]

- B. The magi were the gospel's pioneer seekers. Remember God's promise to Abraham, "*All nations will be blessed through you*"? Here they are, coming to the Son of Abraham, the bearer of the blessing. I imagine a scene of

those magi and their retinue plodding over the lonely and long trail to Jerusalem, but then as the camera rises we see behind them a couple of Roman Centurions, and a weeping woman from Syria, and a Samaritan woman with a water jar—and others from her town. And look, there’s the dark-skinned Ethiopian just baptized. And Cornelius and the gentiles of Cyprus and Ephesus, Corinth, Athens, Philippi, and Rome. Look at all the people behind the magi! From Asia and Africa, from Europe and the Americas, across all the ages... It seems as if the whole world is going after them! All coming to worship the King of the Jews!

Second shocker:

II. THE JEWISH LEADERS TRIED TO KILL THE KING OF THE JEWS!

- A. Matt 2:1 sounds innocuous enough, “*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod...*” Therein lies the problem! Herod was murderously ambitious. He was the governor of Galilee by 25. Later the Roman Senate gave Herod the title, King of the Jews, even though he was only part Jewish and, as we would say around here, a “nonobservant Jew.” *He* was the King of the Jews! He would not tolerate any other king. He had ordered that at his death if the nation didn’t mourn sufficiently their leaders would be killed. He killed some of his own family lest they seize his throne. But he was at his worst when he learned that a child identified from the star and the magi as the King of the Jews had been born in his jurisdiction, only a few miles away. He ordered all baby boys under 2 in the vicinity of Bethlehem be killed—the slaughter of the innocents—all in an effort to kill the infant King.

Just as the magi were forerunners of all the nations who would come to Christ, so Herod is the forerunner of all the God-hating tyrants who would come against God and his King. In **Ps 2**, the most quoted psalm in the NT,

*Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up*

*and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,
“Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”*

*The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.*

*He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
“I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”*

- B. Since the title, King of the Jews, is so significant, I thought perhaps that I would find it scattered throughout the gospels but I didn't. We don't hear that name again until the end of the story.

Pilate asked Jesus, “*Are you the king of the Jews?*” “*You have said so,*” Jesus replied. Pilate even said to the Jews, “*Here is your king.*” But the crowds cried, “*We have no king but Caesar.*”

Then there were the Roman soldiers: “*They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. “Hail, **king of the Jews!**” they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again.*”

And when Jesus was crucified, “*Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.*” John records,

The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.” Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.” [Jn 29:21-22]

But, of course, it was from the cross that Jesus conquered, from the cross that he seized the keys of death and hell, from the cross that he triumphed over Satan, from

the cross that sinners were ransomed and from the shame of the cross that he claimed the glory of David's throne.

Illus.: One of my favorite Christmas stories in disguise comes from that old infidel, Mark Twain, from his book, *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. It tells the adventures of a very ordinary man from the 19th century transported back to the medieval world of King Arthur. At one point he convinces King Arthur to dress like a peasant and take an undercover journey through his kingdom.

They happen upon a rundown hut, deadly quiet. When they enter they see a woman near death in the corner and when they get close to give her a drink of water they realize that she has deadly smallpox—and that they are in desperate danger. But the king won't leave. And when the mother asks him to go into the loft, he goes, finding the dead father on the way. This is what happens next:

“There was a slight noise from the direction of the dim corner where the ladder was. It was the king descending. I could see that he was bearing something in one arm, and assisting himself with the other. He came forward into the light; upon his breast lay a slender girl of fifteen. She was but half conscious; she was dying of smallpox.

“Here was heroism at its last and loftiest possibility, its utmost summit; this was challenging death in the open field unarmed, with all the odds against the challenger, nor reward set upon the contest, and no admiring world in silks and cloth-of-gold to gaze and applaud; and yet the king's bearing was as serenely brave as it had always been in those cheaper contests where knight meets knight in equal fight and clothed in protecting steel. He was great now; sublimely great. The rude statues of his ancestors in his palace should have an addition—I would see to that; and it would not be a mailed king killing a giant or a dragon, like the rest. It would be a king in commoner's garb bearing death in his arms.” [#2703]

That was how Christ claimed his kingdom: “A king in commoner's garb bearing death in his arms.” **That is**

what Jesus did for you on the cross. Christ's kingdom is populated by people once condemned, all-but-dead, hopeless. His subjects were once nobodies—orphans, outcasts, beggars, diseased, homeless—but we were welcomed to the Kingdom, to the feast of the Lamb who died in their place and now are a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God.

Conclusion

Revelation tells us that in the end, when all things are made right, Jesus will no longer be only the King of the Jews, but that he will wear many crowns. His redeemed subjects will sing, "*Just and true are your ways, **King of the nations.***" He will triumph over the wicked "*because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.*"