



The Gift-Givers

The personalities associated with Christmas are many and each—from the wise men to Santa Claus—has his own legends.

The wise men

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he that is born king of the Jews?'"

Who the wise men were or where they came from is not known, but they are called "Magi," which was a sect of priests among the ancient Medes and Persians who were known for their enchantments, their knowledge of astrology, and their wisdom. They were believed to have found the Christ Child on January 6th, which is known as Twelfth Night, or Epiphany.

Legend tells of a nation near the sea in the East which possessed the writings of a man called Seth, that said, "Twelve of the learned men of the country... had disposed themselves to watch for that Star, and when any of them died, his son or one of his kindred... was appointed in his place." For generations following the harvest they went to a high mountain to watch. Then one day "it should appear descending on the mountain having within itself the form of a man child, and above the similitude of a cross; and it spoke to them, and taught them, and commanded them that they should go to Judea. And journeying thither for space of two years, neither food nor drink failed in their vessels."

Other legends say the journey took 12 days and that they neither common church literature says there were three wise men, since there were three gifts. Melchior, King of Arabia, 60 years old, brought a casket of gold. Gasper, or Casper, King of Tarsus, a youth of 20, brought myrrh. Balthasar, King of Ethiopia and Saba, 40 years old, brought frankincense. Each gift symbolized what Jesus was to become: Gold for a king; frankincense for a high priest; myrrh for a great physician.

In return for their gold they received the gift of charity and spiritual wealth; for their frankincense they received perfect peace; for their myrrh they received perfect truth and meekness.

Legend says the three kings returned to their own countries, gave away their wealth, and spent their lives telling about the Prince of Peace. They were martyred in India.

Three hundred years later their bodies were transferred to Constantinople by Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great. After the

ate nor drank on the way. First Crusade the bodies were taken to Milan and finally to the Cologne Cathedral by Emperor Barbarossa. They are still today housed in a shrine in the Cologne Cathedral and are called the Three Kings of Cologne.

According to Spanish folk tale the Wise Men go each year to Bethlehem. As they pass through Spain they bring gifts for the children. On the eve of Epiphany the children leave their shoes with straw for the Wise Men's horses. In the morning the straw is gone and in its place are gifts. In Madrid it is customary for men and boys bearing torches and bells to go the city's edge to meet the Magi. In the last rays of sunlight some children see the caravan in the distance. They hurry to the cathedral to find the Magi there.

La Befana

La Befana was a widow who lived alone along the highway. One January 6th a group of men appeared at her door, asking the way to Bethlehem. Three of the men were dressed like kings and they talked about a baby and a star.

She would have liked to have gone along, but decided to mind her own business. Soon a shepherd came by and said, "Come with me to Bethlehem to see the young King." But she decided to wait until tomorrow.

When night came La Befana was surprised to see the sky was lit by an enormous star and seemed to be filled with angels singing. She decided to hide in her house with the shutters closed.

But she could not sleep. So she found the things that had belonged to her dead child—a seed and a doll—an wrapped them in cloth. She rushed out of the house and started up the hill the way the Wise Men and the shepherd had gone but she did not know the way. She wished she had not waited—had gone with the Wise Men or the shepherd.

So La Befana has travelled ever since, looking for the Christ Child. On Twelfth Night she goes from house to house, looking at babies and bringing them gifts, hoping at last she will find the right child.

In Italy, La Befana is the bringer of gifts. Because she was sweeping when the Wise Men came by she is pictured with a broom. The children hang out their clothes on Epiphany. Even so La Befana can put gifts in their pockets.

Baboushka

In Russia, La Befana is called Baboushka. In the Russian legend she

misdirected the Wise Men and she refused to shelter the Holy Family when they fled into Egypt. Now she journeys through Russia knocking at each door with her staff, looking at each child's face as he sleeps. After putting a toy under the bed, she

goes on searching for the Christ Child.

Saint Nicholas

St. Nicholas was born in Patras, a city in Lycia, in Asia Minor. His father was a wealthy bishop and his

mother a holy woman. As a child Nicholas devoted his time to studying the scriptures.

When his parents died Nicholas decided to secretly give away all of their wealth. He heard of a man who had three daughters who would

have to be sold into slavery because they had no dowries. He secretly gave each a bag of gold—some say he threw the bags down the chimney.

Nicholas set off on a journey to
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