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Henry van Dyke

Fact and Mystery of the Magi

How legends of Three Kings of Orient entered the wondrous Christmas story

By HENRY VAN DYKE

THE story of the Wise Men who came from the East to pay their homage to the Holy Child at Bethlehem has always been a favorite theme of Christian art and legend. From the second century the long, rich train of representations runs unbroken. We may safely say that there is no subject in the range of history, sacred or profane, which has found so many or such splendid illustrations.

Side by side with this stream of pictures and carvings runs the kindred current of imagination speaking to the ear instead of to the eye. Traditions and fables, myths and allegories, fragments of history and philosophy, poems and plays and chronicles, gather about the story in marvelous abundance. It is like a trellis overgrown with vines, so luxuriant, so fertile in leaves and blossoms, that the outline of the sustaining structure is almost lost. It would be easy for one who looked at it carelessly to suppose that the whole fabric was flowery and fictitious, with nothing substantial about it.

On the other hand, it is no less easy to mistake the growth of fancy for the framework of history, and accept the later legends as if they belonged to the original narrative.

The story of the Magi, as it is given by the evangelist Matthew, is astonishingly brief and unadorned. He tells us without pre-

NO one after Charles Dickens wrote so many stirring and memorable stories and pieces about Christmas as Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933), clergyman, poet, essayist, author, educator. *The Other Wise Man* and *The First Christmas Tree* are among the Van Dyke compositions to be found in many anthologies.

The text given here is a condensation of an essay, *The Adoration of the Magi*, which anticipated a dozen years his now better known *The Other Wise Man*.

race that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem certain foreigners arrived at Jerusalem. He does not tell us how many they were, nor of what race, nor of what station in life; although it is fair to infer from the consideration with which they were received at the court of Herod, and from the fact that they carried treasure boxes with them, that they were persons of great wealth and distinction.

The most important statement in regard to them is that they were Magians, that is to say, disciples of Zoroaster, and members of the sacred or priestly order of Persia, which was then widely scattered among the Oriental nations, and included men of exalted rank. They came from the East, a word which to the dwellers in Palestine could hardly have any other meaning than the ancient region of Chaldea, lying beyond the Jordan and the desert. Their explanation of their journey to Herod was that they had seen an appearance in the heavens (whether one star, or many, or a comet, they did not say) which led them to believe that the King of the Jews had been born, and they had come to do reverence to Him.

HEROD was greatly troubled at hearing this, and sent for the chief priests and scribes to inquire where the prophets had foretold that the Messiah should be born. They answered at once that Bethlehem was the chosen place. Then Herod, having asked the Magi how long it was since they first saw the appearance in the sky, sent them away to Bethlehem, promising that when they found the young Christ he also would come to do reverence to Him.

On their journey they saw once more the celestial Sign, and its motion was such that it guided them to the place where Jesus was. Coming into the house (for Joseph had now found better shelter than a stable), they saw the young Child with Mary His Mother, and prostrated themselves before Him in worship.

Opening their treasure chests, they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Then being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they took another road into their own country.

IT was no wonder that the Christians of Rome, painting upon the walls of their underground hiding-places and cemeteries those rude but cheerful pictures, like bright flowers blossoming in the darkness, which expressed the hope and joy of their early faith, fixed upon this story as one of the first subjects of their art. It spoke to them of the universality of their religion, of its swift passage beyond the narrow limits of the Jewish race, of its coming triumph over all lands and thrones, of the glory and dignity which touched the Christ even in His cradle. For the chapel and for the grave it had a word of promise, glad, generous, and exultant. In the hands of these first artists the picture corresponded with the simplicity of the gospel narrative. It was little more than a sketch, a vague outline without fixed form or curious detail. The number of the Magi varied from six to two.

As we go on tracing the subject through the long series of representations in the fourth and fifth and sixth centuries we find its form becoming more fixed and particular. New details are added: an open book, to show that the Magi were familiar with the prophecy of Balaam; a star above the Child to show the way in which He was recognized; an old man standing behind the chair of Mary and pointing upward, to represent Joseph or the prophet Isaiah, or the Holy Ghost; the heads of camels, to tell the story of the journey. The number of the pilgrims is fixed at three, to correspond with the number of their gifts. At length the crowns appear. Byzantine art shows us the "three kings of Orient," stiff, formal, glittering with gold and jewels, as they stride with equal step to present their offerings to the Madonna and Her Child, en-

throned in state and guarded by four archangels with star-tipped sceptres.

Here we find ourselves in the midst of the great stream of legend, which takes its rise in the apocryphal gospel of St. Thomas, and flows on through sermons, and mysteries and miracle plays, and poems and chronicles until finally there is hardly any conceivable question which pious curiosity could ask about the Magi for which the pious fabulist had not an answer. Some of these legends are very beautiful, and some of them are very grotesque.

If we wish illustrations for the story there is hardly a single point of it for which we cannot find some creation fantastic, or splendid, or lovely, as the genius of the artist and the spirit of his age and country may have moulded his work. You have only to choose what you want, devout feeling, or gorgeous color, or dramatic intensity, marble or wood carving, bronze or mosaic, fresco or oil painting, and you shall have it from the hand of a master.

PERHAPS the most remarkable and interesting of all pictures of the Magi is Benozzo Gozzoli's long fresco of the "Viaggio" in the Riccardi Palace at Florence. Now this Benozzo was a man most correct in his conduct, respected and beloved by his neighbors because of his amazing industry and exemplary piety. But he was filled with a great passion of wonder and delight for all the creatures of God. Everything that was in the world seemed to him curious and beautiful and worthy to be painted, and as soon as he began a picture he was carried away with desire to show the excellent things that he had seen in the Heavens above and the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth.

So it was that when the Medici sent for him to adorn the chapel of their palace with a representation of the Wise Men of the East, this quick-eyed, bald-headed little painter, working month after



One of the Magi—a detail in black and white from the great fresco by Benozzo Gozzoli at the Riccardi Palace in Florence. That is the "wonderful and splendid" picture referred to in Henry Van Dyke's text below.

month after month by lamplight (for there was no window in the room), covered the entire walls with the most wonderful and splendid procession that ever was seen. Prancing steeds, stately warriors, graceful pages, wrinkled councilors, spearmen and huntsmen, footmen and horsemen, sleek greyhounds, leaping stags, spotted leopards, and keen-eyed hawks, all go winding forever through a landscape of rock and river and valley, in which the pines stand straight and solemn, and the laurels show their glossy

leaves and the palms lift feathery heads against the sky.

Michael Paleologus, Emperor of the East, dark, haughty, superb in his dress of green, and gold, rides on with his face turned upward and his right hand upon his hip looking just as he did when he rode through the streets of Florence in 1439. The gray-beard Patriarch of Constantinople, the founders of the family of Medici, the painter himself with his name on his cap, and a place in the train. But the central figure is beautiful young Lorenzo

de Medici, afterward called the Magnificent.

What has all this to do with the story of the gospel? Little enough to be sure, if we take it literally; but it was the best that Benozzo knew of the pomp and splendor of earth; and if the innocent old painter could only have brought it all in truth to the feet of the infant Christ, Florence might have had a happier history, and the dream of the Emperor Paleologus might have been fulfilled in the union of East and West Christendom.

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