

Freemasonry and the Wise Men

I know it's only September, and not close enough to the winter solstice to be thinking about the Christmas season, but please bear with me. Since I don't usually prepare a 'nugget' for our December meeting I researched this one in an attempt to incorporate Freemasonry with Christmas, thus, denoting the universality of our gentle Craft.

Over the past sixty plus years, I have heard the Christmas story many, many times, just as you have, I'm sure. Within its beautiful narrative there is of course one key player, and numerous supporting roles. But, there are also three performers that play what I consider a rather significant, although somewhat brief, role. I decided it was time to learn more about the "Wise Men"; and thus began my research.

This interesting subject quickly took on all of the uniqueness of many of my studies and searches into Masonic history. After several weeks of somewhat fruitless searching, my quest eventually lead to the discovery of an excellent article presented by C. Fred Kleinknecht, Past Sovereign Grand Commander of the Scottish Rite of the Southern Jurisdiction....I've adapted a segment from his presentation into this 'nugget'.



Entrance to the Church of the Nativity

We begin with a bit of Biblical history: The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which by the way still stands today, was erected in the year 329 AD by Queen Helena, and is believed to be *the* place where Jesus was born. There's a 14 point Nativity Star located inside that church which, according to tradition, marks the actual birth place of Jesus.



The Nativity Star

About 300 years later, in 614 AD, the Church was right in the path of destruction by the Persian rampage, but it was spared. Why? Because the Persian attackers discovered a mosaic pattern depicting the Magi, dressed in Persian garb, in the tiles of the floor of that Christian Church. Was

the discovery just coincidence, or perhaps Divine Providence. Brethren, those Wise Men of the Christmas story have had an effect on all people - of all faiths – in all times, so let's take a closer look.

Almost everything we *'think'* we know about them --their names, the fact that they were kings, that they rode camels, that they were accompanied by attendants, even the notation that there were three of them—all of this detail comes *not* from Biblical sources but from later written and verbal traditions.

The ancient Greeks and Hebrews knew them as Astrologers, Interpreters of Dreams, and givers of Omens. By all accounts we know that they were indeed wise, that they had personally observed some unusual astronomical event in the heavens, and had interpreted this as the heralding of a major event in the history of the Jewish faith. We know that they consulted with Herod, that they ultimately visited the Holy Family and presented gifts - of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Perhaps that's how the generic term 'Magi', came to mean *'the three wise men'*. They all brought their own gift...three gifts...and thus, three wise men. Perhaps! We also know that they were warned not to return to Herod and share the news of this historic event.

These Magi became three very powerful figures and played a major part in the Christmas story and a part that relates to people of all faiths. If, as many scholars believe, they literally were Magi (Magi is the plural of Magus) then almost certainly they were from Persia, for a Magus was a semi-official figure in Persian cultural and was held in very high esteem in their Court life.

I look at these Magi as walking/talking University professors of the day, whose sole task was to learn, to know, and to teach. They were concerned with knowledge of the spiritual as well as the physical world. If they observed a sign in the heavens, it would most certainly have been their responsibility to discover what it meant, even if it required traveling to a great distance to a foreign country.

They represent a blending of faith and reason -- of the ability to believe, and the ability to question. And that state of mind is essential to a healthy faith. They also represent a broadening of the message of this special season we celebrate, for they were of a faith very different from that of the Jews, or what would become Christianity, or even from Islam. The Magi would have been followers of Zoroaster, the great religious reformer who had lived 500 years before Christ. He is said to have been a rather unusual child who was gifted with having visions at an early age. Born in Azerbaijan in Northern Persia, he taught a belief in one God, the existence of the devil, and the doctrine of immortality. It is alleged that these priests (the magi) predicted the birth of the Christ Child. As ruling monarchs, the priests were referred to as "Kings of the Orient" and "the wise men."

Zoroaster believed in the oneness of God and preached that God was the creator of heaven and earth, the initiator of justice, kindness, and truthfulness, and one who guided his creatures to those same principles. Their philosophy was based on good thought, or *reflection*, good words, and good deeds. Everybody had the liberty to choose the right way, out of his or her good *reflection*. Since human *wisdom* is related to good *reflection*, the followers would thus pave the way for the continuation of science and education. In this manner, Zoroastrianism became the "forerunner" of knowledge and enlightenment. My research indicates that there is a trace of this ancient religion still in existence today. It's found in India, and is known as Parsi.

And so, here they are, the Magi from Persia, in the middle of what we know as the 'Christmas Story', playing a very important role, being guided by Divine Providence. To me that suggests the same universality we find in Masonry -- where good men of every faith can seek to serve God and minister unto His plan.

The Magi's entire trip is a quest. They are following the light, that strange phenomenon in the heavens to the East, seeking understanding and enlightenment. And they are willing to make sacrifices to follow that light, to understand more. It was a need in them as great as the need for food or drink - to grow and develop spiritually and intellectually.

Aren't we as Masons endeavoring to do the same? Receiving more light in order to better understand...to make us better men? That's another part of the Masonic message of this season. We need to become *more*, to know and understand *more*. The Mason who stops seeking, learning, and growing is being untrue to his profession.

In the process of learning, the Magi gave. They gave not only of their time and attention, but also their material gifts. There are some who condemn the holiday season's gift-giving, claiming it commercializes what should be a spiritual moment. It can go too far, of course; any good thing can. But it seems appropriate to me that each year we should think of ways we can make those we love happy, with some gift carefully chosen, and given with joy. In the Christian tradition, the giving of gifts at Christmas began with the gifts of the Magi.

This combination of *learning and giving* is a powerful symbol of a successful life. And, again, it resonates in Masonry. It is stated well, in the Entered Apprentice Degree that, at your leisure so that you may improve in Masonic knowledge, you are to talk with well-informed brethren, who are always as ready to give, as you will be ready to receive important instruction for your Masonic journey. Thus, Magi and Freemasons, and of course, all wise people have the same motivation: to grow and develop spiritually and intellectually.

On a personal note, but still relating to the subject of Masonic education, I am very pleased with the importance and priority that our Grand Master is giving to Masonic education. Over the past 33 years I have read many thousands of pages of Masonic history and find it predictable, how, the hidden meanings and philosophies of our rituals would always become apparent. An excellent example is with tonight's subject, the Magi of the familiar Christmas story. As research revealed the motivation behind their quest, so did the intricacies of Divine Providence become more apparent.

And finally brethren, as we approach the end of another Masonic year and will soon enter into a wonderful season which has special meaning to Masons of all faiths, may the example, and the gifts of those Wise Men, shine in your life. May you seek and find the object of your personal quest, and may the New Year ahead bring you more happiness and fulfillment than ever.

Yes, I know...it's only September, but it gives us something to think about, and something to really look forward to.

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Sources: Wor. Walter J. Harmon - The Invisible Lodge
C. Fred Kleinknecht -The Wise Men