

The God of Surprises

Clergy Column, *The Centre Daily Times*, January 2, 2016
by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

Did you know there are actual wizards in the Bible?

Did you know they show up at the very beginning of the story of Jesus?

In the second chapter of the first book of the New Testament, these words are recorded: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem..." (Matthew's Gospel, chapter 2, verse 1).

The word translated "wise men" is really the Greek word *magos*. It stands behind the word *magikē*, from which we get our word 'magic'. The "wise men," then, were actually "magi."

Who were the Magi?

Magi first appear in the Bible in the Old Testament book of Daniel, where they are named as the "magicians" who served in the court of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. They specialized in astrology, dream interpretation, and sacred texts. In short, they were wizards.

According to Matthew, the appearance of Magi in Jerusalem after the birth of Jesus created quite a stir. And no wonder! For behind the familiar story is a truly unsettling account...

Imagine that it's a quiet Wednesday evening somewhere in the State College area. A group of very conservative Christians are gathering at the home of a church member for Bible study. Just as they are about to begin, the doorbell rings. Who is on the doorstep?

A biker gang, in full leather...

Looking for the Bible study...

...that they saw in their horoscope.

Friends, this is the level of shock that would have rippled through Jerusalem as a band of *foreign wizards* waltzed through the city gates claiming that *astrology* had informed them that there was a new Jewish king whose name was *not* 'Herod'!

The more we really think about it, the more surprising it all becomes. And the more you study the New Testament, the more you realize that this is neither the first – nor the last – of its surprises...

Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy that explicitly mentions some very questionable characters as ancestors of the Christ: Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah. A few verses later, an angel announces to the virgin Mary that she is going to conceive a child "from the Holy Spirit" – a story even her devout fiancé, Joseph, has difficulty believing. (Wouldn't you?) After this, when Jesus is born, Matthew names him 'Immanuel' ("God with us"). To say God became man – that the Creator would take on flesh – was an offense to both the Jewish and Greek worldviews of the day.

As if all this were not provocative enough, Mathew begins his next chapter with... wizards.

Read it for yourself sometime. You can't make this stuff up...

And that's just the thing. If Matthew, or the early church, had simply "made it all up" – if they had deliberately crafted the story of Jesus as a piece of religious propaganda – they would have done it very differently. The genealogy would have been 'pure' – not mixed with the blood of a prostitute, a Gentile, or an adulteress. His conception might have involved God's help – but it would not have been "from the Holy Spirit." And his name might have been called 'Messiah' (God's Anointed) – but it would never have been called 'Immanuel' (God With Us).

If Matthew's Gospel were mere fiction, it might well paint Jesus as Superman. But it would not make him the God-man. That would be too incredible – even for fiction.

And so the story of the Magi introduces us to a much larger dilemma. What are we to make of the Gospel accounts? Nobody in their day would have considered them a “good story.” They are too offensive to their potential audience. What then are they?

The dilemma facing us with regard to the text of the New Testament is the same dilemma that faces us when we consider its central character, Jesus Christ. As C.S. Lewis so memorably put it many years ago, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” (*Mere Christianity*)

In the end, the story of the Magi is not really about the wizards. It's about Jesus, and who we say he is. Examine the details of his story. Wrestle with the logic of Lewis. Consider praying about it. Who do you say Jesus is? Your conclusion may be surprising.

Jeremiah Montgomery is pastor of Resurrection Orthodox Presbyterian Church in State College. Visit Resurrection online at resurrectionopc.org. He quotes the English Standard Version of the Bible.