



## CHRISTMAS STORIES

### Servant of the Magi's Story

#### *(Listen to reminiscences of a journey to discover a King)*

I am the servant of a regal man. A princely man, though not a prince. "Good" would describe him well, though without colour. "Kindly" would give a touch of warmth, though perhaps too much. "Strong", almost "austere", would communicate that solid core of seemingly immovable determination to pursue truth and knowledge, commanding allegiance in the quest. "Inquisitive", would tell you the power of his mind to search out and discover and unravel what is unknown, piercing through what must remain mysterious still to the likes of me.

"Mysterious." Now that's a word to summarize my Master. As a delver into mysteries he himself often seems wrapped in them, like a haze. There's something almost other-worldly about him, yet piercingly insightful.

"Mysterious." An apt description for the Magi as a whole, the priestly caste, here in Persia, interpreters of dreams, unravellers of mysteries. I count myself lucky to be servant to such a one.

To be sure, not everywhere is "Magi" a name of honour. There are charlatans and petty conjurers, those who delve in black arts, men of vile character without moral grounding. But here in Persia such is the esteem for the Magi that no one is deemed worthy to become king who has not first mastered the understanding and discipline of this caste. Their learning is great, their insight unparalleled.

I have met many, for my Master's home is often a gathering place for the learned. And I would serve them, one after another, wading through their talk over the delicacies of dinner and the teasing out of riddles as they lingered over fruit and wine and the close conversation extending into the early hours of the morning. And ever the stars – invariably the days would end with intense consultations in the roof-top garden, the night air pleasant on up-turned faces, Magi examining the configurations of the stars, each commenting in turn, welcoming constellations as old friends, expounding the significance of each nuance of the sky.

All things spiritual were also of interest to my Master and his colleagues. From whatever end of the world they came, rumours of the gods and their workings intrigued them, piqued their interest, prophecies of all kinds and from all sources, and anything to do with the great movements of time and history.

And so, among others, the rumours that were rife about Judaea caught their attention. There was a growing expectation, traveling throughout the circles of the learned, that there would soon appear rulers from Judaea who would make themselves masters of all things, acquiring universal empire. This news seemed to arise unbidden, permeating the collective atmosphere, growing in intensity. Such a pervasive rumour did not go unnoticed.

And then the sky changed.

I remember the night. It was the late Spring of that year, an evening of consultation over much food and wine. They retired together to the roof-top. And then they saw it. I remember the undignified shouts of excited surprise, almost fearful in their intensity, yet eager like children. There in the sky, more plain to their eyes than mine, was a conjunction of planets – Jupiter and Saturn – their union taking place in that part of the sky known as the great constellation of the Fish. Such a dance by these two giants had never before been seen by any of the eyes on the roof-top that night. Indeed, pieces of the excited conversation that flowed from their lips informed me that such an occurrence could not have happened for many, many hundreds of years. Never had I seen such a gathering so animated.

My own Master was most agitated, inquisitiveness prompting him to recite the information he knew in order to elicit what he did not. *“Jupiter is the planet of royalty”,* he intoned, *“And Saturn has long been held to represent Israel. Can this sign mean anything other than a new King rising among the Jewish people?”*

Another of the Magi, old, ordinarily stately in his learning, tumbled forth words in frustrated eagerness: *“Yes, yes, yes! But don't you see the location in the sky? There it is in the Fish – right at the end of the sun's old course, and the beginning of the new. Don't you see? This ruler is not any ruler. This is a ruler for the last days, making all things new.”*

Eyes riveted in that corner of the sky. The words, with the stars, hung in the very air. A King of kings, rising in Israel? A King for the last days? Could it be?

The conversation lasted late that night. They reconvened the night following. And again the next. Dinner itself was on the roof-top. The sky was studied, catalogued afresh. The conjunction only lasted that one night, but its echoes reverberated evening after evening.

Their decision was taken easily. It seemed so obvious, so inevitable. These were men devoted to learning, devoted to unraveling mystery. They were committed to mapping not just the stars but the course of divine influence in the affairs of men. How could they turn away from such an opportunity, such a calling? Bags were packed for Judaea.

Each of the gathered Magi determined to go, each with his own retinue of camels and provisions and servants galore. I accompanied my Master, ready for the arduous journey, for arduous it would be. But my Master said, *“Having sought wisdom from the stars, how could I stay home when they speak of a last days’ event impacting all people? And how could I fail to welcome the sovereign ruler whose kingdom will be established whether I bow the knee or not? What fool would I be to not freely pay him homage while I may?”*

These Magi lived their convictions, bringing with them exquisite gifts to place before the new King, gifts of honour and reverence, wealth and devotion.

And so we traveled, a rich entourage, pressing ever forward, seeking Israel, seeking the King.

By the time we had prepared for departure and then set out and then traveled and stopped and set camp and then traveled more, the summer was gone and we were into early Fall. We neared Israel and its capital city of Jerusalem. But our eyes were ever on the night sky, feeling still the surprise of that first night, seeking further signs. Night after night we watched. And then it came – the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which had not visited the sky for centuries, now made its second appearance in less than six months, gracing our eyes as we looked in the direction of the Fish, once again. My Master reveled in the moment, getting little sleep that night in camp, soaking up the sight and wonder of it all.

That second conjunction energized our flagging spirits, speeding us on toward Jerusalem, seeing us through the city gates soon thereafter.

So sure were my Master and his colleagues of the message in the stars, that little thought had been given to this portion of our quest. Wouldn't news be easy to gather of such a new King announced by the heavens? But our inquiries met with blank faces, indeed furtive glances. Was it fear in the eyes we encountered? *“Does King Herod know of your inquiries?”* we were asked. Again and again.

Herod, so-called “the Great”. The rumours we pieced together helped us understand the fear-filled eyes. Here was a man to inspire fear, even in his own family. This was a King who had endeared himself to the conquering Romans, receiving from them the designation “King of the Jews”, gaining for himself a position his own lineage could never have supported, for Herod was but a half-

Jew, and certainly did not come from the royal line of the Hasmoneans. Forcibly he had married into that family and then, overcome by suspicions, had executed successive family members, eventually sending his own wife to her death. That had been years ago, but just before our arrival his suspicions had again been aroused by the two sons of that same marriage, his own sons, his designated heirs – their executions had been the result.

And so our inquiries created deep tension. And they led us to Herod himself – or at least to his palace. Our question was passed along to him: *“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?”* I can only imagine, now, the deep disruption such a simple question provoked. Herod assembled a council of such religious and spiritual men of learning as Jerusalem then possessed. The question was put to them regarding the expected birthplace of such a King. These learned men had no doubt of the answer. *“Bethlehem,”* they said, naming a small town, a short distance south of Jerusalem. They quoted a prophecy from the Jewish scriptures:

*“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”*

It was what my Master had seen in the stars.

Herod himself then granted us audience, but secretly. I attended on my Master, expecting the worst. But we were greeted warmly. King Herod was most gracious, eagerly inquiring for more information about this newly born King. What did we know? And exactly when was it that the star had first appeared? The Magi entered in with a spirit of consultation, ever quick to re-examine their findings, to seek out further insight.

But Herod seemed too eager, almost greedy for information. *“Go and search carefully for this child,”* he said. *“As soon as you find him, come back and tell me. I, too, want to go and ... worship him.”*

We went. And in the night skies, wonder of wonders, for the third time in that single year, the unexpected conjunction of planets appeared once again – royal Jupiter and Saturn of the Israelites, dancing again in the house of the Fish, joyfully proclaiming the last days rule of a new-born King. We sped on, heaven’s sign seeming to hang right over the location of Bethlehem before us, the place where the child was.

Arriving in Bethlehem we found ourselves puzzled. Whatever splendour Jerusalem may have had certainly was not represented here. Where could such a royal child have taken up residence? We made inquiry. This time, no blank faces greeted us. Rather faces of wonder, spilling forth news of a child born earlier in the year, heralded by angels, greeted by shepherds. We were directed to a house, small, rough, worn, where a young family resided. We were ushered in, needing to take it by turns, the single room, cramped and spare, almost tentative in its appearance.

My Master was among the first. I followed, attending. What greeted my eyes was nothing of apparent royalty, nothing of power or rank, nothing to impress, except in sheer simplicity, and peace. The mother's face, surprised, yet serene, soaked it all in. Her husband, alert with gentle strength, attended her every move. And the child – beautiful, small, vulnerable – lay contentedly on her lap. So ordinary. Is this what we came to see?

But my Master, ahead of me, sank to his knees. One by one each of the Magi present, squeezed to the floor, their lavish garments crumpling round them, stretching a rich carpet before the child, the King. I was simply pressed back against the dirt wall. And as I watched, gifts were brought forth – gifts for a King – gold, token of the world's wealth, and frankincense, accoutrement of worship, and myrrh, exquisite, fragrant ointment for embalming the dead. Light glinted from the gold. The close air filled with a sweet, aromatic offertory. The child stirred, then slept again, comfortable in his place, commanding all attention, unaffected by the press of the world.

And what will this child be? And what path will he walk? How will he take such poverty and turn it to power? What will these last days bring? And how will he rule them? What difference will this birth make?

We never did go back to Herod. These Magi, interpreters of dreams, were wakened in the night with divine messages, warning them to avoid Herod and return home by another route. And so we did, the dream itself accentuating the message of the stars.

And en route home my Master recited often a poem he gleaned in Jerusalem from the Jewish scriptures, ancient prophecy waiting long years for fulfillment. He spoke it and sang it and turned it over and over again in his mind. And each time I heard it I knew that we ourselves were caught up in it, for the ancient word, spoken to Israel, embraces all.

*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.*