



First United Church of Oak Park

The Story of the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

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The story of the visit of the Magi begins long before Bethlehem. It begins long before the Magi even arrived in Jerusalem. The story of the Magi begins in the far reaches of the stars. It begins 800 years before the birth of Jesus. It all begins with the great king Nabonassar, ruler of the Babylonian empire in the 8th century BCE.

To Nabonassar goes the honor to have first begun work on the tablets recording the precise movements of the stars. King Nabonassar began a project that would span centuries. Every single night, the Babylonian astronomers would observe the stars, chart their movements in the sky, make note of appearances. Every night for hundreds of years — these experts in the night sky would watch for when the stars arose and what their positions were relative to one another in their sky. They would record their observations in minute detail on clay tablets, looking for the most minuscule changes and recording them for posterity. This recordkeeping strained beyond the limits of their material science. They needed to move beyond papyrus, which would rot away, and so they began to carve their findings into wet clay with metal styluses, so that their records would not rot away. Their task strained beyond the capabilities of their written language, and so they developed a new one. In order to make more efficient records, these astronomers developed an ornate and complex code, the mathematical wing of the Cuneiform alphabet. It was a code as daunting as it was brilliant. Each tablet of records would be covered in thousands upon thousands of tiny triangles, and to the uninitiated, it would look like gibberish. But to astronomers initiated in this hidden language, each tablet held accurate star charts that spanned years. In just a day's work and calculation, consulting these tablets, a Babylonian astronomer could look backward across ten lifetimes of observation. They alone of the ancients could perceive time and space together, accurately, beyond the human lifespan. They alone in the ancient world could watch centuries rise and fall.

They looked for patterns in these centuries of records, and when they found patterns too complex to analyze, they developed new speculative mathematics. They accurately depicted the movement of Jupiter relative to the earth, charting an eccentric curvilinear line moving through abstract geometric space — with precision. With advanced mathematics and meticulous records, they could not only describe where those stars had been, but with precision could predict where these stars would appear and what their movements were going to be. Make note of that: These Babylonian astronomers could predict future events accurately.

The Babylonian astronomers were known throughout the ancient world as the foremost experts in the stars. They were called all sorts of things around the ancient Middle East, but in Israel, people called them Magi. Wise men or kings does not capture it. They were more than magicians. Magi were people who could do otherwise impossible things — like tell the future — because they had access to hidden technical knowledge. Their tools were astronomical observation, specialized coding and decoding, abstract and theoretical mathematics. This is how the world's foremost experts in astronomy came walking into Jerusalem, asking where is the child who has been born king of the Jews, for we have observed his star at its rising. No word had been sent to them. There hadn't been time. These Babylonian astronomers learned about the birth of Jesus by looking at the stars.

They saw something in the stars that others could not see. And the gospel story unfolds as if it is quite obvious that the birth of Jesus would be attended by certain appearances in the heavens. The gospel author is not troubled in the least that non-Jewish people from distant lands were able to discern what God was doing in the world simply by looking at the stars. It seemed only natural that these Magi, these experts in hidden, technical knowledge, gleaned from the stars, should understand what God is doing in the world. The Gospel of Matthew is not troubled in the least that by divining the stars, they knew the will of God.

For the Bible, as for Christians in ancient times, there was no distinction between what God was doing and what was going on in the natural world. It was a two-way street: God created the natural world, and the natural world revealed true things about God. Learning about the natural world was a legitimate and well-established way to learn about God. It even has a name: natural theology. Natural theology was one of the theological disciplines. It is rather old-fashioned, not popular these days, but natural theology is well attested to in the Bible. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, logically grounds its opening arguments

in the idea that all people are capable of knowing God simply by examining the world that God has created.

The apostle writes in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, “For what can be known about God is plain, because God has shown it to us. Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the world God has made.” It is also there as plain as day in the Psalms. Psalm 19 reads, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the dome of the stars proclaims God’s handiwork. Day to day they pour forth speech, and night to night they declare knowledge.”

For the vast majority of Christian history, probing scientific understanding and deep faith have gone hand in hand. To know and understand the world deeply is to know and understand something true about the divine. The Magi show us this. The Magi, who could discern God’s coming into the world simply by looking at the stars. And some of the brightest lights of scientific inquiry in all of history have been either theologians as well in their own right, or deeply faithful people.

There is Francis Bacon, who pioneered the modern scientific method and also published numerous works of theology and made his own translations of the Psalms. There, too, was Blaise Pascal, an influential mathematician and the Christian apologist influential enough that his most famous argument is known in a kind of shorthand as “Pascal’s wager.” There were Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz; both independently developed differential calculus and both were well known to be deeply pious people. There is Antoine Lavoisier, the father of chemistry; Gregor Mendel, the father of taxonomy; James Maxwell, who first formulated electromagnetism; Hildegard of Bingen, the mother of medicinal botany; Virginia Apgar, the mother of modern obstetrics: All of these people were enormously important scientists and deeply faithful people. There is no contradiction: The perspective of the Bible and the weight of the history of our faith agree. People of faith ought to be deeply interested in science, committed to advancing it.

Peering beyond the basic appearances of nature, seeking after the laws that govern them, devoting an entire life to the search for what is true about the world: This is holy work. And it is in its own way a search for the face of God.

We are now, all of us, engaged in a kind of waiting game for deliverance from this terrible disease, deliverance that will only come from understanding the deep places of life, messenger RNA and the internal processes of the internal processes of the human body. For the deliverance that is just beginning, we have

to thank people like Dr. Katalin Kariko. She was the person who, in her life's work, pioneered the study of synthetic messenger RNA, the technology behind all of these vaccines, coding and decoding the virus genome. We have to thank people like Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett. She was the person leading the National Institutes of Health's study of all of these vaccines, to understand their efficacy and safety. These pioneering women: They have done their part.

And we ordinary people of good faith and good will, we have our part to play as well, publicly living out the ancient truth of our faith, that deep scientific understanding is holy. Advancements in science are themselves a blessing from God that flow from the fact that God has revealed God's own nature in the natural order. Before our nation can be set free, we must embrace this ancient truth, we must embrace this advancement. We people of faith ought to be there at the forefront, embracing the blessings of science, embracing the blessings of advancement in understanding the inner workings of the world. Because there we see revealed the face of God, who has made all of these laws. When we understand them, and embrace them, we shall know God and know our own deliverance. Thanks be to God for that indescribable gift.