

When Iranian Scientists Came to Worship God

Matthew 2:1-12

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist

Calvin Christian Reformed Church, Ottawa, ON

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Matthew 2:1-12 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ² "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'" ⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; ⁸ and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; ¹¹ and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, a divine announcement concerning the birth of the king of the Jews was given to gifted Persian clergy from the tribe of the *mog*, in Greek the magi, clergy who were also from among the most ancient scientists in the world. These Persian -- or as we would say today, Iranian -- scientists who used the powers of scientific observation that had come down to them through millennia of trial and error experiments. These observations had probably begun as cosmological speculations even before their tribe had left India during the great Indo-Aryan migrations, even before reaching their new homeland in Persia and were part of the cosmological lore that they brought with them when they, like so many Arian tribes, emigrated West just shortly after Abraham had left his own land and headed West.

Among the descendants of those ancient people of India were the members of the tribe from which those Iranian scientists of the 1st century came, those scientists who had seen an astronomical phenomenon, put their observations together, and concluded that an event of cosmic significance had occurred in the land of Israel, a land of almost no significance whatsoever in the wider, human scheme of things. These scientists went to see the event but above all they went to worship. Ironic isn't it: Iranian scientists kneeling at the bedside of the Jewish Messiah and worship him as a newborn king worthy of their worship?

But, how did they find the child? They knew enough to be led to Israel. But they did not know everything. Their journey started with a careful, rigorous observation of God's creation, not missing the significance of this once in a life-time event. But, they would not have made it to the house in which Jesus was had it not been for the specialists in the Law whom Herod, the supposed actual king of the Jews, had brought together when the representatives of the magi naturally showed up at his palace in Jerusalem thinking that that's where they would find the king of the Jews.

Isn't it interesting, though, that the specialists of the Law, who knew the Law revealed by God as well as the Iranian scientists knew the heavens, who knew exactly where to lead the scientists, did not know that anything had actually happened there? The Persians, who had come from hundreds of miles away, and who

were Gentiles, knew that God had done something of supreme importance, but Jesus' own people, the Jews, and particularly the specialists in the Law, had no clue that anything had happened. They knew where the birth of the Messiah was supposed to happen, but they didn't know that it had happened!

It's also interesting that when the Iranian scientists take their leave to go to Bethlehem no Jews, no specialists in the Law, or otherwise, went with them. At the baby's bedside, there were no Jews to be seen, except for his mother and his supposed father.

Why?

Well, we know why Herod and the specialists in the Law didn't go. Because this new born king was a threat to Herod and also to his establishment, including the Temple priests, puppets that Herod had put in place. Of course, Herod did eventually go to Bethlehem, but it was not to worship but rather to massacre all of the children about Jesus' age.

But, why did no other Jews go? An entourage of Iranian scientists, clergymen in their fine gowns, parading through the streets of Jerusalem, would surely have attracted some notice.

No, the reason that no one from among the Jews went was precisely because of who these scientists were, Gentiles. No self-respecting Jew of the first-century wants to go find a Jewish Messiah who is being sought after by Gentiles who want to go and worship him. Yes, ideally they should have, had they known the prophecies of Isaiah, which talked one day of the Gentiles streaming to Israel to worship. But, this is the first century. And this is Israel. This is a people who despises the Gentiles.

Had it always been this way? No, probably not, but for centuries it certainly had been. Over the course of time, this primitive people, a tribe that was nothing like the great peoples of the Egyptian, or Babylonian, or Chinese or Indian or Persian empires, a people not known for any greatness but known rather from the pages of sacred Scripture for their disobedience, their rebellion, and their fractiousness, had begun to think of themselves as something great. Rather than acknowledging their insignificance and that they were only what they were because God loved them and had made them custodians of truth until the fullness of time when the Messiah would be born, they had begun to think of themselves in fact as the most special people in the world. They had become convinced that when the Messiah, King David's greater son, would come it would not be to end their special relationship with God as custodians of the truth; rather when the Messiah would come, that's when God show Israel to be truly great God would raise Israel up above all the empires of the world where Israel could watch as God humiliated or annihilated all the other peoples of the earth, namely, the Gentiles. But was that God's plan?

Jonah was probably one of the best and most honest examples we have of the way Israelites thought about the Gentiles, and of the way God did not share their view. When God spoke directly to Jonah and told him to go to the Gentiles to preach to them so that they could repent and God would spare them, Jonah would have none of it. He tried to flee from God, only to get swallowed first by the raging sea and then by a sea monster. But even after God saved Jonah from death and put him back on the course that God had required of him, and Jonah reluctantly did what God told him to do, Jonah did nothing but complain and complain when he saw the Gentiles of the great city of Nineveh -- not too far from the homeland of the Iranian scientists -- repent and turn to God. Jonah shook his fist at God and said: 'That's not the way to do it God!' Jonah wanted the Gentiles to be annihilated.

We know that this was the same expectation in the days when Jesus was born. Here's a Psalm that was written to be read in the synagogue around the time of Jesus:

Behold, O Lord, and raise up unto [us, your] king, the son of David... that he may reign over Israel Thy servant. And gird him with strength, that he may shatter unrighteous rulers,. and that he may purge

Jerusalem from the Gentiles that trample (her) down to destruction... With a rod of iron he shall break in pieces all their substance, He shall destroy the godless Gentiles with the word of his mouth; at his rebuke the Gentiles shall flee before him ... And he shall gather together a holy people, whom he shall lead in righteousness... And he shall have the Gentile nations to serve him under his yoke. (Psalm of Solomon 17)

This is the language of a people who hope in a God who will exalt Israel and destroy the Gentiles or at least enslave them under Israel as Israel had been enslaved under them.

It is also the hope that we find expressed in Luke's Gospel, , though you may not realize it.

Luke begins his Gospel with wonderful stories of something amazing that God is going to do. But, in Luke, unlike Matthew, the people who are aware that God is going to do something amazing are Jewish people. They know exactly -- or at least think they know exactly -- what God is going to do in their day. It is going to be very much what Jonah hoped for.

There is Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, who knows that his miraculous son, John, is going to be "the prophet of the Most High", going before the Messiah to prepare His way for the glory of Israel. He knows -- or thinks he knows -- what his son, John, is going to do to prepare the way for the Jewish Messiah for he sings: ⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, ⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us; ⁷² to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath which he swore to our father Abraham, ⁷⁴ to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life." (Luke 1:68-75)

There is Elisabeth, John's mother, who knows – or thinks that she knows – who it is that has met her when Mary enters her house. Elisabeth's greeting to Mary, "Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:42) is one that has echoed in the ears of the church for centuries, but what many Christians don't realize is that this greeting was an echo of a refrain that echoed powerfully in the ears of Jewish women. It only occurs twice in Scripture, but those two times are quite instructive. The first time that the refrain was used was after Jael had pounded the tent-peg into the temple of the Gentile king Sisera in Judges 4: "Most blessed among women are you, Jael" (Judges 5.24). The second time the refrain was used was after Judith hacked off the head of the Gentile king, Holofernes: "You, Judith, are the exaltation of Jerusalem, you are the great glory of Israel ... May the Almighty Lord bless you among women for ever." (Judith 15:9-10). The fact that the refrain used by Elisabeth to praise Mary is one used by the people to praise Jael and Judith is no coincidence. Elisabeth, a fiery Middle Eastern woman, descended from a proud line of priests, sees Mary carrying within her the great hope of the people for vengeance on the Gentiles. But where Jael and Judith only carried out the vengeance on individual gentile kings, Mary through her child will bring down the kingdoms of the Gentiles. All of them.

Mary, the mother of our Lord, understands this as she sings her great hymn upon hearing Elisabeth's blessing: "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ... For behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me ... ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, ⁵² he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree;... ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever." (Luke 1:46-55)

All the hopes and fears of all the years were placed upon this child, who grew in secret, first in the womb, then in childhood, then in adolescence. And when he came to manhood and his public appearance, all these hopes that had been treasured by his kin and his mother came to fruition. Among Jesus' closest followers, his apostles and disciples, the hope burned most brightly: Jesus was spending his days in Galilee and on the

road just waiting for the real fullness of time. Then this warrior band, similar to the one that David had gathered together during his time of preparation, would miraculously be equipped by God like their Maccabean ancestors to ride up to the walls of Jerusalem where like Jericho, the walls would either fall down, or the doors would miraculously swing wide for them, and they would ride into Jerusalem, seize the Gentile Pilate and his puppet Herod Antipas by the throat, cut off their heads as Judith had done, and begin the conquest of the world ... exactly as Muhammad would see himself doing 6 centuries later. For Muhammad was to the Arabs everything that the Jews hoped Jesus would be for them.

But somehow, in Jesus' case, it just never happened.

In fact, even from the start of his ministry, Jesus had begun to raise doubts about what he was supposed to be doing to fulfill Israel's hopes. In his very first sermon in Nazareth, his home town, he spoke of the Scriptures being fulfilled that very day. The crowd in the synagogue went crazy listening to him, wondering how it was that this son of Joseph and Mary -- a home town boy -- was turning out to be the Messiah that all Israel had expected for centuries. And then suddenly Jesus said: But wait. Do you think that this is only for you? Don't you remember that it was in the days of Elijah -- remember the days of Elijah? -- that there was famine everywhere in our land, but God sent Elijah not to relieve the famine among the Israelites but to do so for a Gentile widow living in Lebanon? Don't you remember that it was in the days of Elishah, when there were many lepers living in the land of Israel, that God chose to heal Naaman, a Syrian general -- a Syrian general, who you probably think should have his head cut off? -- rather than any Israelites?

The synagogue crowd that had been going crazy when Jesus had started preaching suddenly stopped and in typical Middle Eastern style, became a mob that was so enraged that they took Jesus out of the synagogue and were going to throw him off the cliff.

Why? Hadn't they just heard the Messiah? Why now did they want to kill him? Because Jesus had not spoken about how God was going to destroy the Gentiles but rather about how God had shown himself more favourable to the Gentiles than even to the Jews. That's what the Spirit of the Lord had anointed Jesus to proclaim? This was not acceptable. Israel is all that matters.

Even after his crucifixion, two of his followers on the road to Emmaus spoke sadly to a mysterious stranger who had joined them on their walk. They told him that they were devastated because of what had happened to the one that they had been following, Jesus. They said: We had hoped that he would redeem Israel, but we were so disappointed in him. They weren't devastated by the death of the Lord; they were devastated by his failure to be what they had hoped he would be, the avenger of Israel and the destroyer of the Gentiles. There was really only one Israelite who caught a small glimpse of what God was really going to do in Jesus. At Jesus' presentation at the Temple, when Jesus was brought into the arms of his mother to the very heart of nationalistic Israel, the Temple, the place where all the hopes of the nation were focused, there they were greeted by an old man, Simeon. He took Jesus in his arms and said to God: "Now you can let me die in peace. For I have seen your salvation."

It is true: Simeon, like other Temple-observant Jews thought that Jesus would glorify Israel, but, in God's mercy, Simeon became a true prophet of what God was going to do, for He added: This child is also going to be a light to the Gentiles.

Translations often obscure the fact that Mary and Joseph were not only puzzled but bewildered by what Simeon said. It wasn't because they didn't expect great things of the child -- Mary had heard Elisabeth and even sung how much she expected of this child. No, they were bewildered because the great things that Simeon prophesied were not just for Israel but also were going to include ... the Gentiles?

Simeon must have seen their reaction, for after his blessing he said to Mary: "Behold, this child Mary. He is not just going to bring about the raising up of many in Israel but also the fall of many. Because he will be a

sign that is spoken against. In fact, Mary, a sword is going to pierce through your own heart. It will be through him that thoughts of the hearts of many people will finally be made known.” (Luke 2:34-35)

Simeon’s message to Mary, and to those who hoped in Jesus was this: Don’t be too quick to think that you know how God is going to use this child. In fact, you are going to be very disappointed in him. He has come to his own, but will his own receive him? We know that they did not. Scripture tells us that Mary herself even went to find her son in order to try and talk some sense into him because, we are told, she thought he had gone crazy.

My friends, let’s get one thing straight today. The mark of a saint is not that a saint is perfect. A saint does not say or do everything just right. A saint does not even know the full implications of what he or she is saying or doing.

The sign of a saint is that God uses that person’s imperfect intentions, even imperfect words or deeds, to transcend their human intent, doing far more with them than we can ask or imagine.

Saint Zechariah, Saint Elisabeth, Saint Mary, Saint John the Baptist... were not God. They were human vessels used by God for His purposes, like Saint Paul, whom we know was not perfect either before or after his conversion. These men and women did not always say or do everything right, and they most certainly did not understand everything about what was happening to them or why it was happening. They were creatures of their time and their culture. But in spite of that, God used them mightily. God the Holy spirit took their words and actions and inspired them, filled them with a meaning far beyond their hopes or their understandings. He does that with us.

This child, this man, Jesus, was indeed the hope of Israel, and he did bring about the fulfilment made to Abraham and to our fathers. But those hopes were not fulfilled in the way that Israel hoped they would be. They were fulfilled in the way that God had intended them to be from before the creation of the world... which was to be for the good of the whole world, not just Israel. Israel was a custodian of the truth of God until the time was fulfilled. In Jesus it was.

Because, my friends, our Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate, came into this world not just to save Israel but to draw all men and all women to Himself. If there is any destroying of any kingdom to be done, our Lord Jesus Christ would do through not through violence but through making all the kingdoms of this world into His kingdom, a kingdom of peace. The only violence that he would permit to be done was to Himself in order to bring that Kingdom into existence.

And that is the job that we are to continue to do in our lives here and now.

During Jesus’ ministry and after his death and resurrection, He entrusted to His church the continued mission of going into all the world and drawing all men and all women to Himself, especially through the dying of those who bore His name. When the church did so, people like Saint Paul found men and women around the world, who were already being drawn to a God whom they only vaguely knew, being drawn into a deeper, powerful, loving knowledge of God.

It is our job to continue to go to all men and women, despising none because somehow in our minds they are not worthy of the gospel or are beyond the pale of the gospel.

Perhaps the greatest sin of the Christian Byzantine empire over its thousand year history was to conclude that mission was not necessary to certain peoples because they didn’t deserve it. The Christians of the Byzantine Empire looked south, toward the Arabian desert, and they saw a bunch of poorly dressed, camel-riding thieves ... rug-riders in the words of a character in recent American novel. And so, Byzantine

Christians despised the Arabs and said: 'Who cares about these desert peoples. They are not worth our attention.' Muhammad saw what they did said: 'Unworthy are we? We'll show you what we can do.' They did, conquering all of Africa, and a good part of Europe, and destroying the Byzantine Christian empire.

And they haven't stopped. Today the conflicts with militant Islam around the world are the consequences of Christians who did what the Jews did in Jesus' day: they looked at those who were not like them -- Gentiles! -- and said: God loves us, but you are nothing in God's sight. God loves us and if you want to be like us, then come to us and we'll think about whether we want to welcome you or not. Imagine how different the history of the last millennium and a half would have been if the Byzantine Christians had understood Simeon's prophecy.

Thank God that the Church of Rome did not make the same mistake. It looked north to the primitive barbarians of northern Europe and did not despise them the way the Byzantines had the Arabs. If Rome had despised our ancestors, I can tell you for sure that you and I would not be here tonight. In fact, we might ourselves not be doing for the sake of our Lord but might instead be putting Christians to death, even as Muslims are to Christians in Nigeria.

Have we learned the lesson of Simeon? Are we the heirs of Jesus, and of Paul, and of the Church of Rome, which did not despise the Gentiles but went seeking after the lost sheep to bring them into the fold? Or are we the heirs of the Jewish people of Jesus' day and of the Byzantine Christians who despised those who were deemed unworthy, assuming that they will either come to us if they are worthy or be destroyed by God.

My friends, God did not wait for people to make themselves worthy to come to Him. God came to us in the person of His Son, while we were yet sinners. And so He commanded His church.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give commandment to the Apostles that they should go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature: Grant to us whom thou has called into thy Church, a ready will to obey thy Word; and fill us with a hearty desire to make thy way known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations – Jews and Gentiles; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.