

# Bethlehem

## Act One

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

*Matthew 2:1-2*

**D**OWNSTAIRS, TUCKED BACK ON A DUSTY SHELF in the storage room, sits the old cardboard box hand-labeled "NATIVITY SET." It has rested there for eleven months, seasonally ignored, just another bit of flotsam set adrift in a sea of seldom-used items stored in the dark.

But now it is December again. Now it is time to blow the dust from the aged cardboard box. I lift the box from the shelf, carry it up the stairs to the living room—to the broad expanse of shelf inside the bay window that will become the Nativity's stage.

Burrowing into the layers of wadded paper towels that insulate each piece from its neighbor, I retrieve the tall, well-dressed figure of a Magus.

The Christmas story is a rich drama filled with fascinating characters—actors

filling their assigned roles, proceeding with determination from their individual stations toward Bethlehem, to the climax of the play, and their meeting with the star of the show: the Christ Child.

In our home, the tradition is to make the focal point of the season's decorations not the tree, but the Nativity set. However, we do not set it up all at once. In our home we set the small figurines in place a few at a time, reenacting in miniature the drama played out at the Bethlehem crossroads approximately 2,012 years ago.

Many of us think of the Magi last, as they probably showed up some days—even years—after the birth of Jesus. But it is possible their journey began before the rest, since they certainly traveled the greatest distance. We don't know where they were



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from; we don't know whether they were mystics, magicians, religious scholars, prophets, or simply (to coin a phrase) "wise men." We don't even know their number; the tradition that there were three is derived simply from the recorded number of their gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.



As I set the tall, richly attired figurines in place, I think about these men's faith and single-minded devotion. Such faith! They picked up and left home, traveled a great distance to a foreign land. And why? Because their studies (and, perhaps, a whispering Spirit?) told them that this mysterious light suddenly appearing in the sky would lead them to a unique King. Just how they imagined this king, we cannot know, for surely they had seen royalty before. Yet they were convinced there would be something singularly grand about this one they pursued—something well worth the journey and expense.

What has fascinated me most about the Christmas wise men was their worship of the child. Steeped in the occult, the stars, the pagan religions of faraway lands, these men traveled a great distance, I believe, not just

out of curiosity, but out of *adoration*. They knew they were traveling toward something conclusive, something better than everything else—something final.

These men—these Magians, so worldly and well-read, their heads filled with images and concepts beyond the ken of common man—entered a mean abode and did something both simple and eloquent: they knelt on the earthen floor of the house, put their faces down onto the hardpan, and worshiped the child who was God.

After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

*Matthew 2:11*

And here we have the quintessential picture of worship: at first sight of the baby Jesus, they fell down and *worshiped*. Just inside the door, and they *knew*—they knew that this one before them was the object of their long quest. They knew immediately that this King was like no other king before or since.

And how odd it was—how extraordinary the role reversal. Here were distinguished men, men of stature and learning, men more accustomed to the deference and honor shown toward themselves. But here they were, bowed down in lowly, subservient posture, giving homage to a peasant newborn, extending to Him not only their adoration and reverence, but extravagantly expensive gifts.



O, that the act of obedient, selfless adoration were so ingrained in us that at the first sight, the first thought of our Lord, we would fall to our knees in abject, humble worship. That we would utterly, permanently remove all posturing, pride and arrogance, to simply fall prostrate before the one who lowered Himself to become flesh so that we might know the privilege of living with Him.



*Yea, Lord, we greet Thee,  
Born this happy morning,  
Jesus, to Thee be all glory given;  
Word of the Father,  
Now in flesh appearing;  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
Christ the Lord.*

