



# TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

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## PERPLEXING PASSAGES (6)

### SELECTED TEXTS

**B**ACK IN ISSUE 113 (JULY/AUG. 2018), WE BEGAN A NEW category of TOTT articles that combines the other two categories, a “tough text” (or important topic) and reader questions. This installment addresses four such matters.

#### The Magi and the Star at Jesus’ Birth

We all know the story of Jesus’ arrival in Matthew 2 and how the **wise men** were led to that event by **[Jesus’] star in the east** (vv. 1–2). Both of these have been subjects of debate and, sadly, misunderstanding and conjecture.

#### The Magi

First, one of several inaccuracies of the so-called “Nativity Scene” we see at Christmas time—Francis of Assisi is believed to have created the first one in 1223—is the presence of the “wise men,” but they clearly were not there. By the time they arrived, in fact, Jesus was about two years old (Matt. 2:11, 16).

But who were those fellows? The Greek is *magos* (English “Magi”), which does not refer to kings (as the Christmas hymn “We Three Kings” insists) or to men dressed in royal garb as depicted in nativity scenes. As one Greek authority details, in the Greek world, *magos* carried four meanings: “[1] a member of the Persian priestly caste. . . . [2] The possessor and user of supernatural knowledge and ability. . . . [3] Magician [who accomplishes] purification and expiation by magical means. . . . [4] figuratively, deceiver, seducer.” In Judaism, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo “accepts *mageia* [‘magic’] only as (scientific) research.” In Rabbinical writings, we find not only “the sense of magician” but also “the original sense of Persian priest.” It appears only once in the Septuagint (Dan. 2:2) and refers to “the possessor of the religious and magical arts of the Babylonian mediators between the higher powers and men.” Therefore, in the New Testament, these men were most likely “Babylonian astrologers . . . the possessor[s] of special secret wisdom, especially concerning the meaning of the course of the stars and its interconnection with world events.”<sup>1</sup>

In the Hebrew OT, then, the word occurs only twice, and even then only in passing (Jer. 39:3, 13 ) in reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s “princes of the king of Babylon,” one of whom is referred to as “Rab-Mag” (“Chief Magician,” or “Chief of the

Magi”). Philo describes the magi as “men who gave themselves to the study of nature and contemplation of the divine perfections, worthy of being the counselors of kings.” As another historian recounts, they had “a high reputation for wisdom, and among their own people an almost boundless influence. The Persian kings themselves became their pupils, and took no step of consequence without consulting them.”<sup>2</sup> This stemmed from their broad knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and the occult. So powerful were the magi, in fact, that historians tell us that two conditions had to met for a man to become king: he had to master the many disciplines of the magi, and he had to be approved by them. As it has been said about them, they were “kingmakers.”

Daniel, however, gives us more. He wrote that “in all matters of wisdom and understanding . . . the king enquired of them, [and] he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm” (1:20). Daniel, in fact, interceded for them with Nebuchadnezzar when they failed to interpret the king’s dream (2:24), and he was made their master, probably the aforementioned “Rab-Mag” (5:11).<sup>3</sup> We will come back to Daniel in a moment.

Returning to Matthew 2, the idea of “three kings” is again greatly in error. As one commentator puts it, “The line ‘We three kings of Orient are’ belongs to the same vast collection of legendary Yuletide lore to which belongs also ‘But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes,’ and many similar bits of fancy.”<sup>4</sup> These men were *magi*, not kings but “kingmakers.” Further, because they brought three gifts, it is assumed that there were only three magi, but that is another false assumption. Because of their status, they would have come in pomp and power riding on horses no camels, as Persia and Northern Arabia were know for their horses.

Further still, while Christian tradition has even given these three magi names—Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar—that is just more myth. Tradition and relic adoration has gone so far, in fact that, “In the cathedral of Cologne, visitors may yet see the supposed skulls of the three, set in jewels, and exhibited in a great gilded shrine. They are said to have been discovered by Bishop Reinald of Cologne in the twelfth century.”<sup>5</sup> Tradition goes so far to claim that “one came from India, one from Egypt, and one from Greece, that they were subsequently baptized by Thomas, and that their bones were dis-

covered by Saint Helena, were deposited in the church of Saint Sophia at Constantinople, were later transferred to Milan, and were finally brought to the great cathedral of Cologne. One must be gullible, indeed, to accept all this!"<sup>6</sup>

Still another tradition insists they are representatives of three families of Shem, Ham, and Japheth and, therefore, one of them is pictured as an Ethiopian. While many historians do believe they were Semites (Shem), that cannot account for Ham and Japheth. Why is it that Scripture never seems to be enough?

It is, therefore, no wonder that Herod was "troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" when magi, that is, kingmakers, came charging into Jerusalem asking, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." Actually, the Greek behind "troubled" is *tarassō*, which means distressed, frightened, anxious, and agitated. This was a direct political threat to the aged Herod, and the people were anxious about what his volatile reaction would be.

Turning to the magi themselves, it is important to note the phrase **we have seen his star in the east**. This does not mean they actually saw the star east of their location, for *they* were in the east, and the star was in the direction of Jerusalem to the west. The word **east** is *anatolē*, which comes from the verb *anatellō*, "to rise," and therefore refers to the day-spring or dawn when the sun first appears. This could, therefore, be rendered, "We, being in the East, have seen his star."

So why did the magi follow that star? It is extremely significant that the Persians were actually monotheistic (one God), while all other ancient religions were polytheistic (many gods). So, when the Persians conquered the Babylonians in 539 BC, under the leadership of Cyrus the Great (539–30), they found there an oppressed race, the Jews, who, like themselves, abhorred idols, and practiced a religion with which they could sympathize to a great extent. Cyrus, therefore, determined to restore them to their own country and allow them to rebuild their Temple, which he did by the edict recorded in the Ezra 1:2–4, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy (Is. 44:28). Since Daniel was a captive in Babylon when the Persians came, and since he had already highly impressed the magi with his knowledge, position, and interpretation of dreams (Dan. 2:24, 48), it was undoubtedly from him that the magi learned of a coming king. So, by the time of Jesus' birth, the magi had heard much about that King and Messiah from Jews who had remained there after the exile, which is why they asked, **Where is he that is born King of the Jews?** Since the appearance of a dramatic astronomical phenomena was considered to be a sign of some remarkable event, following it was virtually automatic for them.

There is one other observation we should make before turning to the **star**. Is it not significant and amazing that the first people to worship the Messiah were not *Jews* but rather *Gentiles*? Why? Because they saw more than just a king; they saw the Messiah that they had learned about from Daniel. How amazing that long ago God put Daniel in Babylon to plant a seed that would fully bloom in Bethlehem. (Notice further that they worshipped *Him*, not His *mother*.)

## The Star

*Second*, then, what about the **star** itself? Frankly, the ram-

pant speculation here is troubling. Whether the motive to "explain" this comes from a fleshly need to appear intellectually credible, or from a sincere (though misguided) desire to offer an apologetic explanation to give Christians peace of mind by assuring them of the Bible's authenticity, the cause is the same—it is the spawn of unbelief. Instead of taking the Word of God at face value, many have attempted to explain this by natural means.

Common "explanations" include a comet, for example, but this cannot be because its position would have changed as the Earth rotated and so would not have led them in a single direction. Worse, the idea that this was a meteor is absurd because it streaks across the sky, and it certainly could not have stopped and **stood over where the young child was** (v. 9). Others suggest this was a nova or supernova (a distant exploding star), but this would have left a discernable remnant, for which there is no evidence. Besides, this too would not have remained stationary as the earth rotated.

A popular view is that this was a "conjunction" between planets and stars. This phenomenon occurs when two or more celestial bodies appear to meet in the night sky from our location on Earth. Such can actually continue every night in a similar location for days or even weeks. So, it is suggested that the magi just followed the moment of conjunction and went in that direction.

Even more popular are the recent views (arrived at by computer technology) that this was the result of the alignment of celestial bodies, such as, Jupiter, Saturn, the moon and the sun in the constellation of Aries on April 17, 6 BC. Such a conjunction shines brighter than one normally sees in the night sky. Two other conjunctions around the same time have also been offered. One is the conjunction in 6 BC, between Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in the constellation of Pisces, and the other is the meeting of Jupiter, Venus and the star Regulus in the constellation of Leo on June 17, 2 BC. That latter one has been made very popular by Rick Larson's DVD presentation, *The Star of Bethlehem* (produced by Stephen McEveety, who also produced Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of Christ*), but, as one reviewer submits, Larson's theory is "deeply flawed" biblically, astronomically, historically, and chronologically.<sup>7</sup> But even more basic than that, let us ask, "Do we really need computer technology to verify Scripture even if the technology is accurate?"

We should also interject that there is actually not even the tiniest hint in the Scripture text that anyone besides the magi saw this event in the first place. Herod clearly did not see it, for he had to ask them **what time the star appeared** (v. 7). If this was some dramatic astronomical event, he and everyone else would have seen it.

So, what was this **star**? Is there anything in *Scripture* that even remotely gives us a clue? Yes, there is. Think back to when the Tabernacle was completed: "A cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34). So brilliant, so radiant was God's glory that not even Moses, who previously had a glimpse of God's glory (33:18–23), was able to enter the Tabernacle. That Shekinah<sup>8</sup> glory was there as a pillar of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and whenever it moved the people moved (Ex. 13:20–22).

While the wilderness wandering is another sad saga, the

people finally entered the land of promise and Solomon ultimately built the Temple, where God would have a permanent dwelling place among His people in Jerusalem. At the dedication, when the Ark was put in place, the Shekinah glory of God was again so brilliant that not even the priests could get near (1 Kings 8). And like the Tabernacle, it all pointed to the Christ who would come.

Alas, in spite of such blessing and privilege, the people turned to sin and even pagan idolatry. The prophets warned and warned and warned of coming judgment. They prayed, preached, and pleaded, but to no avail. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) went into captivity in Assyria in 722 BC, and those tribes ceased to exist. In spite of the object lesson this provided for the Southern Kingdom (Judah), she became even worse and was taken into Babylon beginning in 605 BC.

Far more tragically, His Shekinah glory was seen departing from the Temple by way of the east gate, the main processional gate (Ezek. 10–11). It then went over the center of the city and stopped over “the mountain which is on the east side of the city,” a reference to the Mount of Olives (2 Sam. 15:30; Zech. 14:4), the same mountain where Jesus, the Word Himself, would one day weep over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), from which He, the manifestation of the Shekinah, would ascend into heaven, and to which He will return again (Zech. 14:4). Perhaps the Shekinah stopped because it did not really wish to leave, but was compelled to do so, and in an instant it was gone. *Ichabod*—the glory is departed. God’s judgment and departure are always the end for those who reject the Word of God, the Word who would become flesh and dwell in human form among His creation.

What did Peter, James, and John see at Jesus’ transfiguration? They got a glimpse of God’s glory when His “his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” (Matt. 17:2). Just before Jesus spoke to him, Paul got a glimpse of that glory on the road to Damascus: “there shined round about him a light from heaven” (Acts 9:3), which he would later describe as “above the brightness of the sun” (26:13). Likewise, on the Island of Patmos, John saw Jesus’ face “as the sun shineth in his strength” (Rev. 1:16). He also saw what will illumine the future New Jerusalem: “he city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb [is] the light thereof” (21:23). And lest we forget, Jesus said of Himself, “I am the root and the offspring of David, [and] the bright and morning star” (22:16). In a foreshadowing of that reality, in fact, Numbers 24:17 declares of the coming Messiah: “there shall come a Star out of Jacob.”

Oh, how we need to think biblically! Is there any doubt that just as the Shekinah was present at the Tabernacle, in the wilderness, and at the Transfiguration, it was also over Bethlehem? Is there also any doubt that just as the pillar of cloud at the crossing of the Red Sea was darkness to the Egyptians but light to the people of God (Ex. 14:20), it was only the magi who saw that glorious light?

### Swear Not At All?

The Third Commandment of the Moral Law declares: “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain” (Ex. 20:7). By far the most common views about tak-

ing God’s name in vain are using it as a swear word and using it to take an oath. While those are certainly true as applications, the root meaning goes much deeper. Briefly,<sup>9</sup> God’s name, and *names*, are to be honored, revered, and adored. Just the depth of their meanings alone, besides who they refer to, demand this attitude. We are to revere God’s names because they are reflections of His nature and character. We are to say nothing that will in any way belittle Him or even one of His names.

In practical application, we can take God’s name in vain in several ways. It is used commonly today as an expletive or to pronounce a curse on someone. It is also common today to use His name in a way that is not reverent and sober, such as the so-called “Christian comedian” who flippantly uses God and spiritual things as a punch line to get a laugh. Another application we often overlook is “vain repetition,” as Jesus Himself declared in his introduction to the Model Prayer, “When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matt. 6:7). From the chanting of monks in a monastery, to reciting the Lord’s Prayer in a liturgy, to any unthinking ritual, to our mechanical preaching, and even to our own empty, routine prayers, we can act like pagans.

That brings us to one other application, using God’s name in oaths, vows, or promises, such as, “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” Leviticus 19:12 addresses this: “And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD.” Perjury is a serious crime in any law code, but it is far worse when God’s name is used in doing so. The Lord Jesus took the swearing of oaths very seriously and went further in His instruction on the issue (Matt. 5:33–37):

**Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.**

Oddly, commentators differ on what Jesus means. Some surprisingly insist that His point is, as one commentator puts it, “Swear not in any of the common and profane ways customary at that time.” In other words, don’t do it in the wrong way but do it in the right way. As another puts it,

In light of specific OT teaching approving oaths, in light of Jesus’ use of such phrases as “verily, verily,” and in light of God Himself making oaths that correspond to men’s (Heb. 6:13–17), it can hardly be correct, as many interpret this passage, that Jesus here forbids the making of any oath under any circumstance.

But that view truly shocked me because it ignores what the text actually *says* and then *adds* something that is not there. Our Lord’s words are clear and unambiguous. As one theologian rightly points out, which is the real key to the issue:

It was necessary that people should be forbidden to swear falsely, whether in the name of God or by any other form of words. . . . *But Jesus recommends a higher standard to his disci-*

ples. "Do not swear at all," He says; "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."<sup>10</sup>

Let us recall that throughout His sermon, Jesus first recounts the traditions of the Pharisees but then *states His own higher standard*, and that is what He does here as well. We find this same principle, in fact, in James 5:12: "Swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation." How much clearer can it be? As one commentator puts it:

The disciple is to be honest and trustworthy, making the swearing of an oath unnecessary. One's yes is to mean yes, and one's no is to mean no. Whatever is needed beyond this is because there is evil, for where there is honesty and trust there need be no more words . . . . Jesus calls for honesty without the oath. . . . [and] taught that swearing is unnecessary, irreverent, and ineffective in that it does not really change anything. The critical issue is truthful speech.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the word of the Christian should be trustworthy by his reputation, and people should be able to take us at our word. As another commentator adds, "Oaths should not even be necessary."<sup>12</sup> If we are known to have a scrupulous regard for truth, then what we say will be accepted without the support of any oath.

This is not mere theory; it is well established in experience. As the theologian I quoted earlier illustrates, one body of Jesus' followers, the Society of Friends, has persisted in applying Jesus' words literally. While we cannot agree on some of their Theology, their reputation for scrupulous integrity is beyond question. Most people, in fact, would more readily trust the bare word of a Friend than the sworn oath of any other person. Again, "Anything beyond this," Jesus said, "comes from the evil one." In other words, the idea that a man or woman can be trusted to speak the truth only when under oath (if even then) simply comes from dishonesty and suspicion and tends to weaken, not strengthen, others' confidence in what they "swear to." "No one demands an oath from those whose word is known to be their bond. A "solemn oath" on the lips of others can be taken with a grain of salt."<sup>13</sup>

So, as those who are committed to Truth, if people cannot take us at our word, it would not matter if we took an oath with our hand on a stack of Bibles. The Pharisees could not be trusted no matter what they swore to, whether it was **by heaven . . . by the earth . . . [or] by Jerusalem**. They did this to deceive and dodge the Truth, and people still do the same today.

### Did God Command Hosea to Marry a Prostitute?

The second verse of the book of Hosea immediately plunges the reader into the major debate concerning interpretation: **And the LORD said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the LORD**. Did God actually command Hosea to marry a prostitute? There has for centuries been three ways of interpreting this.

First, to sidestep the perceived moral problem of the holy God commanding His servant to marry an immoral woman,

some interpreters simply view this as allegory. For example, in his commentary on the book, John Calvin wrote, "The Prophet did not actually marry a wife, but that he was bidden to do this in a vision." Similarly, John Gill calls it a parable that "represent[s] the treachery, unfaithfulness, and spiritual adultery of the people of Israel."<sup>14</sup> Such interpretation, however, is again troubling, as allegory always is.<sup>15</sup> There is nothing in this plain, straight-forward narrative that suggests anything other than a literal occurrence.

Second, recognizing this situation as literal, some hold that Gomer was impure, perhaps a temple prostitute, at the time of the marriage. The problem here, however, is that it does not picture Israel, which is the whole point of the narrative. Israel (and Judah) *became* impure; she did not start out that way. Chapter 3, in fact, describes God taking her back after rejecting her for adultery, but such rejection simply could not have been justified if Hosea had married her with full knowledge of her impurity.

Third, the only view that fits is that she was lured into temple prostitution after the marriage, just as Israel had been lured into idolatry. That luring and Hosea's forgiving her perfectly pictures how God would forgive and accept back into a fellowship a repentant people. The phrase, **take unto thee a wife of whoredoms**, is therefore to be taken as anticipatory of the future. In other words, "You will take unto you a wife who will become impure."

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Kittel (Ed.). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964; reprinted 2006), Vol. IV, 356-58.

<sup>2</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization - I: Our Oriental Heritage* (Simon and Schuster, 1954), 372.

<sup>3</sup> *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, "Magi" entry.

<sup>4</sup> William Hendricksen, *Baker New Testament Commentary*, comment on Matt. 2:1-12.

<sup>5</sup> Cunningham Geikie, *The Life and Words of Christ*, Volume 1 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1884), 145.

<sup>6</sup> Hendricksen, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> See Colin Nicholl's masterful critique, "What Is Wrong with Rick Larson's 'Star of Bethlehem' DVD Documentary?" at: [www.uniontheology.org/resources/doctrine/jesus/what-is-wrong-with-rick-larsons-star-of-bethlehem-dvd-documentary](http://www.uniontheology.org/resources/doctrine/jesus/what-is-wrong-with-rick-larsons-star-of-bethlehem-dvd-documentary).

<sup>8</sup> Literally, "That which dwells." These words come from the verb *shakhen*, or *shakhan*, "to dwell," "reside." While the word itself does not appear in the Bible, the concept certainly does (Isa. 60:2; Matt 17:5; Luke 2:9; Rom 9:4).

<sup>9</sup> For a deeper study, see the author's new book: *God's Moral Law: The Ten Commandments, Their New Testament Counterparts, and the Combined Confrontation* (Sola Scriptura Publications, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Walt C. Kaiser (et. al.), *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, One-Volume Edition (IVP Academic, 1996), 361 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Preacher's Commentary* (Thomas Nelson, 1982-92), comment on Matt. 5:33-37.

<sup>12</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Cook Communications Ministries), comment on Matt. 5:33-37.

<sup>13</sup> Kaiser, 362.

<sup>14</sup> *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible*, comment on Hosea 1:2.

Another commentator writes: "The divine command did not contemplate an actual and outward marriage, but simply a symbolical representation of the relation in which the idolatrous Israelites were then standing to the Lord their God" (*Keil & Delitzsch Com-*

*mentary on the Old Testament*, comment on Hosea 1:2).

<sup>15</sup> For more on the subject of allegory, see TOTT Issue 118 (May/June 2019), "The Lessons of David and Goliath."

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