

***THE MAGI'S HANDBOOK***

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

***“When they had heard the king, they set out; and there,  
ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,  
until it stopped over the place where the child was.”***

Matthew 2:9

*Imagine a secondhand bookshop: a quirky sort of place — as so many  
secondhand bookshops seem to be. You’ve set out on a hunt for treasure: and on  
this day you truly find one.*

*You discover it on an upper shelf, squeezed between a couple of larger  
volumes. It’s been there a very long time, all but forgotten, even by the bookstore’s  
owner. You pull it out and examine the cover: a striking, old-fashioned design,  
intricately tooled with embossed stars, camels and palm trees..*

*As you opened it, here’s what you read...*

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*The Magi’s Handbook*

by Balthasar

Translated from the Ancient Persian

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TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

The provenance of this book is exceedingly complex, far more intricate than any other volume I have endeavored to translate. The facts of its publication are unknown. It is, in fact, a reprinting of a much earlier work, dating back to the time when books were not books at all, but scrolls. I chanced upon the only known copy in a bookseller's stall in the Bazaar in Marrakesh. I was not looking for anything of the sort, but was on a hunt for volumes of medieval Arabic poetry.

It was fortunate that the bookseller did not read ancient Persian. Had he been fluent in that tongue, he might have realized what a treasure he held in his hands.

Even so, he drove a hard bargain. After long minutes of haggling, during which I had to walk away and then come back again, I managed to acquire it for nearly all the silver dirhams I had in my pocket.

I have never regretted the purchase. As you, the reader, will discover, it is beyond price: a one-of-a-kind literary treasure.

Professor A.B.D. Murgatroyd  
Oxford, 1897

## INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

The wisdom in this book is hard-won. It is the product of a long and arduous journey, undertaken by myself and two companions over the course of three long years, during the reign of Augustus, Emperor of Rome.

The purpose of our journey was scientific: a survey of the stars as seen in the skies far to the west of our Persian homeland. Aided by a research grant from the Imperial Academy of Magi, we carried with us the finest astronomical equipment. Our little expedition — the three of us plus a dozen or so servants and retainers — had been provisioned through the generosity of the Shah himself.

We undertook the journey on an imperial commission, but I believe I speak for my colleagues Caspar and Melchior in saying there was more to it than that. We left our homes for reasons of the heart.

What is it that leads a man to forsake the comforts of home and family and wander far and wide over the face of the earth? It can only be described as a hunger — a longing for the unknown, the mysterious, the holy.

As we crossed the eastern border of the Roman Empire, we were accosted by a squad of soldiers — rough, frontier types in their leather armor. Their officer, whom they called “centurion,” was inclined to distrust us. I doubt if he had ever seen Persian clothing before. Fortunately, the Shah had equipped us with an ample supply of gold. A few gleaming coins in the palm was sufficient to soothe his suspicions.

It was at that border crossing that a certain misapprehension began: the mistaken impression that we were not scholars, but kings. That rumor preceded us

throughout our journey. Every town we entered, it seemed, already knew of our coming. The children ran ahead of us, calling out: “The kings have arrived: the three kings!”

The canny Melchior suggested we not contradict them: for it could be a useful fiction. Indeed, it proved to be exactly as he had predicted: the thought that we were kings from the mysterious East opened many doors for us.

### A WRONG TURNING

The further we progressed through the province of Judea, the conviction grew ever stronger in our minds. Our astronomical calculations had led us to the unmistakable conclusion that a portentous royal birth was soon to take place. The child to be born would be a model not only of wisdom, but piety. The deeper we rode into Judea, the more certain we became.

It was that mounting evidence that caused us to make the greatest mistake of our journey. We stopped looking for signs among the stars. As soon we drew the conclusion that the heavens were pointing us to a newborn king, we began to inquire where the seat of royal power was located. Surely an opulent palace would be the place where such a wise and virtuous king would be born. Why continue to study the stars for direction, when a paved Roman road serves the purpose just as

well?

What we discovered in the palace was a clever schemer by the name of Herod. He was a Greek-speaking Jew who ruled the province as king, but only because Augustus had set him up in that role. The Emperor found Herod to be a useful proxy, a buffer between Roman rule and the fractious Jewish people.

The three of us were by no means expert at the Greek language, but we had picked up enough of it along the road to get the gist of what the king was saying. Herod had not, in fact, heard of the birth of any royal child until we told him of the signs in the heavens. The king was an old man, long past the time when he could expect to father another child. He was keenly interested in what we had to say — a little too keen.

We realized, then, what a terrible mistake we had made. I am convinced to this day that we got out of there alive only because we promised the king that we would return and tell him where the child was.

Yet, had we not made for Herod's palace, we would never have learned the ancient prophecies about the messiah being born in Bethlehem. Even though the stars seemed to be guiding us there, we would not likely have trusted our astronomical calculations and would have bypassed that insignificant spot on the map. It seems even our wrong turn in Jerusalem had its divinely-appointed

purpose.

That is the first of many great lessons we learned along the road: that, in life, even wrong turns sometimes lead, in the end, to the right place. It is much like the Indian game that in the western lands they call “chess.” There is a character on the gameboard known as the knight, who moves in a strange and erratic way: two steps forward, then a turn to the right or the left. Although his progress across the gameboard is odd in the extreme, in the end even the knight gets to where he is going. There are times I think our lives, plotted by the inscrutable wisdom of the Almighty, are more like the movements of the knight in the game of chess than ever we realize.

## STARGAZING

I am led to reflect — now that our long adventure is ended and we have returned to our homes — how our journey to the Western lands was peculiar in another sense. Caspar, Melchior and I were making our way along a road that started out as little more than a dirt track, but, as we crossed into the dominion of Rome, it became a fine thoroughfare paved with flat stones: a marvel of engineering. Who could become lost traveling such a road as that?

*We* could: and we did.

You would think such a fine road as that would have been more than sufficient to guide us on our journey. Yet, that was not the case. The road we traveled led us to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem. Even the road itself seemed to bow down in obedience to the powers of this world.

It is like that in life. There is conventional wisdom that seeks to tell us how a human life ought to be lived: how the pursuit of wealth and power are naturally the highest of human goals, and how there is nothing better for us than to fashion a life for ourselves that is comfortable and filled with pleasures, large and small. Any of us need only look around, as we travel that smooth road, to see countless others making that same journey, following the same mile-markers as we.

That seems to be the way to travel a road — does it not? — eyes facing forward, seeking out the next reassuring landmark along the way.

Yet, that is not how people of wisdom make the journey — and I hope I am not being haughty in describing my two companions and myself as wise men. Caspar, Melchior and I found our true path not by picking our way along the selfsame road others had laid out for us, not by looking straight down the road, but by looking somewhere else. We looked to the heavens. We made the decision to fix our gaze not on milestones that were the product of a human stonecarver's craft, but rather on the stars which are the Creator's handiwork.

In the end, it was only the stars that could be trusted.

### DIVINE GIFTS ARE NEVER WASTED

Whenever emissaries journey from one nation to another, it is customary to offer gifts. This we did in the case of the baby boy, son of Mary and adopted son of her husband, Joseph. The gifts we carried with us, all those many miles, were gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Watching us present those gifts, there were some, surely, who thought them impractical, ill-suited to the needs of a little boy born into an impoverished family — to a mother and father who, at the time, had scarcely even a roof over their heads.

Yes, the gold could be traded for other commodities, but the frankincense and myrrh had no apparent purpose — none, at least, that Mary and Joseph could discern (nor even us at the time). Yet, even these were not wasted.

Frankincense is, for many in this world, the sweet aroma of worship: when set afire in a censer, it releases a pungent, sweet-smelling smoke that seems to transport worshipers into the presence of the Most High God.

As for myrrh, it is the burial spice: a reminder, to all of us, of our mortality.

It is the case, in this life, that gifts that come to us from God are never

wasted. How many of us, at some early time in our lives, felt with all the bright intensity of youth that we have a special, God-given purpose? Yet, how many of us, as year succeeds to year, have a way of letting that precious gift gather dust upon the shelf? The gifts God gives us may seem as wildly impractical and ill-suited to the real world as frankincense and myrrh. Yet, even they have their purpose, in the divine plan. The task for us is to simply trust the gift enough to open it and use it as the Lord intends. There is no more direct path to living a life of deepest joy than sharing our divine gifts with others, as God has ordained.

#### AFTERWORD

Such are the thoughts of one Balthasar, wise man from the East, as — from the perspective of old age — he recalls the great adventure of his life.

*Wrong turns often lead to the right place.*

*Stargazers end up with their feet on the ground.*

*And divine gifts are never wasted.*

Take it from him, for it is true what they say about him: he is most certainly a wise man.

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