



No Nativity without Al-Majous

The Wise Men's Celebration – Still Missing in the Festive Calendar of Palestine



By Andreas F. Kuntz



Everybody knows the Wise Men (also called Magi and in Arabic al-majous) who came from afar to Palestine around 2,000 years ago. They belong to Christmas celebrations, to Christmas-crib exhibitions, and are featured in many of the images that show the baby Jesus being worshiped. For Bethlehem, they mean even much more: A main street in the historic center is named after the star they followed. Star Street has been listed by UNESCO World Heritage as a pilgrimage route together with a centuries-old church, the Church of the Nativity.

But there are even more reasons why the Wise Men should have a place in Christian religious celebrations in Bethlehem. The Wise Men represent a special kind of pilgrim, coming from outside the Levant. The Gospel writer Matthew tells the story in ways that make it very clear that they had knowledge that enabled them to recognize the savior (Mt. 2). The Wise Men are a symbol for the gentiles – the people outside the covenant, the non-chosen people, the foreigners, who are to be included in the new covenant.

Moreover, they are the foreigners who refused to team up with the power that was ruling the country, embodied in this story by ruthless and paranoid King Herod. Or as one of my former students, who is now a tour guide in Bethlehem Old Quarters Walks, told the visitors: "They are like you, who have come here to look for the real story. And they were asked to collaborate..." The Wise Men found the Baby and, full of joy, venerated him and the Holy Family in Bethlehem. They experienced a transformation; they took a new way back home. And similarly all pilgrims can learn about Bethlehem and Palestine through a transforming experience of Palestinian culture – its creativity, its kindness, its hope.



St. Apollinaris Nuovo in Ravenna; the three Wise Men stepping forward with their gifts in outstretched arms.

The image of the Wise Men appears centuries after the birth when, in large churches of the imperial Christian Church, mosaics depict scenes of the history of salvation. The three Wise Men wore a specific dress known as the clothing of the priests of the Eastern cult of Mithras, a typical dress of representatives of Rome's strongest rival, the Persian Empire. A famous example in the West is found in one of the late capitals of the empire, Ravenna, Italy. In the church of St. Apollinaris Nuovo, we see the three men stepping forward with their gifts in outstretched arms. They look quite similar to each other, act rather as a group, all dressed in Persian cloth, their Phrygian caps in striking red. This image was common in the Roman Empire and can be found on precious ivory, sarcophagi, silver plates, and souvenirs from the Holy Land of that time.

In Germany, tradition dictates that the Three Holy Kings be celebrated on January 6 by children dressed in royal garments, who visit homes to sing Christmas carols, write a blessing above the entry doors, and collect donations for charities. The costumes are different but the story is the same.

Three kings from different corners of the world met on their way in search of the new king who, they believed, was indicated by the new star they had seen. Their interpretation had long been confirmed by Jerusalem's experts, the prophets, and thus they did not abandon following their star. In Cologne, Germany, the Three Kings were venerated after their relics had been transferred there via Milano, Italy, and theirs became the most important pilgrimage shrine in Central Europe north of the Alps. Their image was the one we have come to know as the three Holy Kings who came from different countries, even continents, had different ages, and a whole set of stories was developed around them. This is the image that came to Bethlehem and that has been used ever since as the image of the Wise Men in the olive-wood cribs.

When one of the famous museums in Cologne dedicated an entire exhibition to them, the curators called it "Die Weisen" – the Wise Men and The Magi. Beautiful artifacts of all ages showed the change from *al-majous* to the Holy Kings. The first images of the Wise Men as kings appeared in the tenth century, whereas

the Wise Men from the East in Persian clothes were still around for another two centuries. With the veneration of the shrine in Cologne, more elaborate stories of the three Holy Kings were told. The building of a huge new cathedral was started in 1248, but only in the nineteenth century was the Cologne Cathedral finished. The arrival of the relics is remembered to this day in a huge religious celebration and popular event in the city. In our days, the three Wise Men are a connector between the cities of Bethlehem and Cologne.

Isn't it time for Bethlehemites to celebrate the Wise Men traveling from far away, following their knowledge about stars? They played a crucial role as their image saved the Nativity Church from destruction: In the year 614, when almost all monasteries and church buildings of the Imperial Church throughout Palestine were ransacked, plundered, and burnt, the Church of the Nativity was spared. The Persians saw in the church a mosaic of the story of salvation, and when they recognized the garments of their ancestors, the Persian warriors stopped their attack on the Nativity Church. This event might be the most amazing miracle, among others, that has kept the church building standing. Indeed, it is a miracle that the Church of the Nativity is still standing – considering as well all the damage and destruction that has affected churches due to fire, earthquakes, and war. These miracles have enabled Bethlehemites to present today an impressive old church, built an incredible 1,400 years ago on foundations and walls that were built even 1,600 years ago. This old church is so dear to Bethlehemites that they tell stories about how it has survived all kinds of threats throughout history. One of them is about the Virgin Mary herself driving attackers out of the church towards Qos Azzarara, the vault where they were “pushed to the wall.”

The Wise Men have their day in the calendar of saints, and it is commemorated with a beautiful liturgy that celebrates God's decision to include all peoples in the plan of

salvation. The Wise Men are remembered for their exemplary faith, the long travel they undertook despite all the hardships, and their intuition and attentiveness to God, avoiding collaboration in an act of creative resistance: They took another way back home.

Is it time to invent a new souvenir to add to the Christmas-crib figurines that resemble those whose image rescued the Nativity Church? These days, we can find kings, but should these sets not include the Wise Men instead, the ones that once saved the Church of the Nativity from destruction? I suggested this to Jack Giacaman, a Bethlehemite and wood carver – like most members of his family. He is creative in inventing modernized sets of Christmas figurines. Jack asked his colleague Adel Said to join in the realization of this crazy idea. And Adel, from the Ta'amreh shepherds tribe, made his contribution by developing a first version of al-majous in olive wood. Maybe these three Wise Men, crafted in a Milk Grotto Street workshop, can become a model for Bethlehemite wood carvers, to pay tribute to the Wise Men who once helped preserve the Nativity Church and save it from destruction.

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