



WISE MEN
STILL SEEK HIM

Presented by

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The Denominational Broadcast of
THE REFORMED CHURCHES
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Australia and New Zealand

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Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East come to Jerusalem. . Matthew 2:1

On Christmas Eve, 1951, the NBC television! he ater presented the first performance of the winsome ond musically exciting one act opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. The words ond the music of this marvelous work are by Gion Carlo Menotti, and with it another legendary addition to the Biblical record of the Magi's visit to the Christ child was assured its place amid all the fascinating elements of Christmas.

I hope that you live in a community that is fortunate enough to have the story of Amahl presented during this special season, and I hope that, if you are a parent of young children, you will favor them with a visit to this heartwarming opera. The story of Amahl is the simple tale of a crippled boy and his mother who live in poverty among shepherds. And one night, the Magi, whom we often call the Wise Men or the three kings, stop at their humble hut on their way to pay homage to the Christ child. In the opera, the kings Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, describe the child they are going to worship this way:

"The Child we seek has the moon
and the stars at His feet.
Before Him the eagle is gentle,
and the lion is meek.
Choirs of angels hover over His roof

and sing Him to sleep.
He's warmed by breath,
He's fed by a Mother
who is both Virgin and Queen.
Incense, myrror and gold
we bring to His side,
and the Eastern Stars our guide."

The story of Amahl and the night visitors is a legend. It's not true. It's beautiful, but it's not true. Gian Carlo Menotti tells how the idea for this opera fell upon him as he walked through the rooms of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and saw Hieronymous Bosch's painting the "Adoration of the Kings," and he remembered his childhood in Italy. There, in Menotti's youth, the children knew nothing about Santa Claus. Their Christmas gifts were brought by the the three kings, Kaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, who appear in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

It is no wonder that the story (kings have excited men's imagination and that many stories and legends have grown up about them. But as we celebrate Christmas, one of the important elements in a proper celebration of this great festival is that we remind ourselves that there were actually men from an Eastern region who came to worship the Christ child, Magi, wise men, kings, whatever you wish to call them. Just how many there were, we do not know. But we do know that they were men of education, prestige, and wealth.

We associate their coming to Bethlehem to worship Jesus with the Christmas celebration even

though the Biblical record implies that they came with their unexpected adoration several months after Jesus' birth-most likely_ as much as a year afterwards. But come they did, and in their worship of Jesus we are able to see the full significance of the meaning of Jesus and of His coming to this world.

To refresh our memories, it is important that we review the record of their coming to Bethlehamas we find it in the Gospel according to Matthew. The story is simply told, without the embellishment of legendary elements. It is straightforward history through and through.

"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, '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.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:

"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."

"Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; 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.' 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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; 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" (Matthew 2:1-11).

That then is the factual account behind all the legends that have arisen about the three kings, or the Magi, and when we examine what actually happened when these men came and worshiped Jesus the Christ child, we discover that something so grand and so astonishing took place we can barely comprehend it. That these men came to Christ is the Bible's way of telling us that the faith which has Jesus Christ at its center is the religion for all the world. All other religions pale into insignificance when compared to the religion of Jesus Christ. As the Bible faithfully records the coming of the Magi first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem it is actually establishing a very audacious, and even unwelcome point. It is this: all religion must finally give way to the religion of Jesus. It is this, in addition: if you are trying to find religious fulfillment anywhere outside of Jesus, you should abandon your futile efforts and surrender to Him.

Many people would disagree with this. But if you examine the Bible, I think that you will agree with

me that this is exactly what the Bible is saying.

Begin by remembering that the Magi came from the East. Remember also that they were Magi, that is, they were men who were steeped in the lore of the East, fully familiar with its learning and its religion. They were in fact religious functionaries.

Now, when you read the many, many pages of the Bible that go before the New Testament, you will discover that the writers of the Bible were thoroughly familiar with the religion the Magi represented. Take Moses, for example. Moses had grown up in the court of an Egyptian ruler; he knew all about Egyptian religion. And before Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, all extremely important men in the Bible, as you know, had been well acquainted with this religion as well.

The religion of the Egyptians was part of a fascinating complex of religion that flourished for centuries in the part of the world which we now call the Middle East. If you have ever studied a course in comparative religion in college or high school, you are familiar with the elaborate myths that existed among the people in that area. For example, there were creation myths that spoke of deities with names like Marduk and Tiamat. The gods of the Canaanites, who lived in the land of Israel before the Israelites themselves possessed it, had such names as Baal, Ashtoreth, and Molech. In any case, the Middle East, throughout the centuries before Jesus was born, was literally throbbing with religious myth and mystery, and all the people who lived in that region were entirely

aware of the religious heritage of that part of the world.

In contrast to the religion that was found in the area we have just talked about, the religion of the people of Israel exhibited unique characteristics. At its center was the revelation of the one true God who spoke to His chosen people, delivered them from the land of slavery, gave them His law, and established His covenant with them. The God of the Hebrews was different from the many gods of the people who surrounded them. He hated idolatry and inspired the prophets to make clear to His chosen people that the gods of the heathen (the *goyim*) were worthless.

Psalms express the unique nature of the religion of the Israelites and its bold rejection of all other gods: "O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols; but the Lord made the heavens" (vv. 1-5).

Indeed, the God of Israel looked with disdain on the false religion that surrounded His special people, and the book which that special people produced under His guidance became a powerful attack upon what was considered false religion. The history contained in the opening chapters of the Bible, which reveal God's work of creation, was arranged by Moses so that it was a powerful

written against the bizarre creation myths the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Canaanites and the Babylonians had fabricated.

Now, the wise men who came to Jesus and worshiped Him were the representatives of the religion that surrounded the Hebrew people. Isn't it astonishing that they, of all people, would traverse miles to bring their adoration to the Christ child? How did it happen? What divine power broke into their lives and compelled them to deny the power of their own religion and come to the capital of the Jewish nation and find their way to the little town of Bethlehem to worship Jesus? In the answer to that question, we will be able to see how great the Christ of Christmas really is.

Remember how we noticed that the religion of the people of Israel and the religion of the people who lived in the Eastern region were opposed to each other? Well, the people of Israel were tempted again and again to participate in the religion of the people who surrounded them, and finally their unfaithfulness to the religion of the one true God brought the ultimate catastrophe upon their nation. They were carried into captivity and they were brought to Babylon, the seat of false religion. And there they were purified.

Special prophets arose there in the place of captivity and called the people back to God. Daniel was one. Nehemiah was another. Ezekiel was another. The Jewish people were purged of their interest in the false religion of the East, and the people of the East were exposed to the true re-

ligion, the religion of the Jews, as they had never been exposed to it before. Even strong rulers who persecuted the Jews finally had to acknowledge that the God of the Hebrews was superior to their own. Thus, there was born among the religious leaders of the Eastern religions a great fascination for the Jewish religion and a deep interest in the God of the Jews. By the time Jesus was born, the leaders of the religions of the East were waiting with great expectation for something great to happen among the Jews.

When God spoke to them through the mysterious star, they were ready to respond. When He used a star to summon the Magi to Bethlehem, He used a language they could understand perfectly, for they were students of the stars, and they assumed that exceptional heavenly events heralded works of God. When the star appeared, therefore, they did not connect it with something great in their own religion, but they connected it with the birth of the King of the Jewish people, the people who had been their captives several centuries before. When they saw it, they came to worship the God who had revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and the prophets, the God of David.

So, when the wise men came to Jerusalem and finally found their way to Bethlehem, what was really happening was that men who represented all the other religions of man recognized that Jesus was worthy of all praise and adoration.

This is the Bible's Christmas message, taken at its

fullest: the religion of Jesus Christ is worthy of your attention, your study, and your faith. Jesus Christ is the one religious figure whose significance is not restricted to a special people or to a special part of the world. This is the religion that can bring fulfillment to all men everywhere.

Few today accept this message, because most refuse to believe that we can find our deepest fulfillment through faith in Jesus Christ. They think instead that one religion is as good as another. The Bible contradicts this assumption. And I suspect that one of the reasons our world is corrupted by chronic chaos and our times are so uneasy and disjointed is that so many of us have refused to follow the example of the Magi. We often call them the wise men. They were indeed. They were, not only because they represented the flower of learning in that day, but they were also wise because they recognized the summons of God when they met it in the starry heavens. They expressed their towering perception when they abandoned restraints of their false faith and traveled with resolute earnestness to the place where they met the very Son of God.

Wise men still seek Him. You should, too. According to the Bible, the child of Bethlehem was the magnificent person who became Jesus the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was worthy of the Magi's worship, for He was born to be King. But the road to kingship became for Him the road of total sacrifice as He humbled Himself in obedience before His Father

in heaven and took the form of a servant and endured the torture of crucifixion and the crushing distress of hell itself so that all those who believe in Him could be saved. Through His sacrifice, He paid for human sin, and now all those who confess their sin and ask Him to cleanse them can participate in His salvation. Through the horror of rejection, execution, and death, Jesus Christ has been exalted to a kingship that is eternal.

If you are seeking for religious truth, for religious fulfillment, for the one religion that renders all others obsolete and unnecessary, seek no more. You have found it. Here it is: the religion of Jesus Christ. The Magi, heads full of religious lore, knew that they had finally come home when they found Jesus.

I invite you to be like them. Those who bow before Jesus Christ receive joy, liberation, and peace.

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The message printed in this pamphlet was heard over the Back to God Hour, which is broadcast every Sunday in co-operation with the Christian Reformed Churches of America, in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia, and by shortwave throughout the world.

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