

# A Magician, a Priest, and an Astrologer Travel to Bethlehem

A IGNATIAN GOSPEL STORY SAMPLER

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# INTRODUCTION

With great devotion Ignatius Loyola, the future founder of the Jesuits, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. After a month the Franciscans kicked him out.

Ignatius was recovering from a cannonball injury in his hometown of Loyola, Spain, when he resolved to begin a new way of life by making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It gave him great consolation to imagine walking barefoot through the Holy City eating nothing but vegetables. He wanted to see Nazareth, the Sea of Galilee, and all the holy places that Jesus visited during his time on earth. Walking the roads Jesus walked and seeing the sites he saw would be inspiring and would allow Ignatius to grow closer to Jesus. Ignatius traveled to Rome and received the pope's permission for the trip and then met a benefactor in Venice who provided passage to the Holy Land on a merchant vessel. Ignatius set sail with a small group of pilgrims, no money in his pocket, and complete trust in God.

The visit was as consoling as Ignatius anticipated. He resolved to spend his entire life in Jerusalem, constantly visiting the holy places and ministering to the pilgrims who would follow. Since the Franciscans oversaw all Christians who visited the Holy Land, Ignatius informed the provin-

cial superior of his intention to stay. The superior strongly advised against it because of the dangers faced by foreigners living alone. When Ignatius remained resolute, the superior ordered him to leave or face excommunication. He instructed Ignatius to be ready to set sail for Venice with a group of pilgrims the following day. The next morning Ignatius slipped away from the group for one last visit to the Mount of Olives. There he checked the footprints that Jesus left behind when he ascended to heaven. Ignatius wanted to confirm which direction the Lord's feet were facing at the time. No doubt, this parting act of devotion and sneakiness confirmed Father Provincial's concerns!

The *Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola* contains many wonderful stories about the founder of the Jesuits. The stories tell us much more than a detailed resumé ever could, capturing the spirit and personality of Ignatius and describing the sequence of events that led to the founding of the Society of Jesus. The account of Ignatius sneaking off to check the footprints captures something of how his pious devotion and sincere desire to defer to religious authorities would sometimes clash with his independence and strong will. Of course, the stories of Ignatius also tell us something about the spirit of the religious order he founded. The importance of those stories was the reason that the early Jesuits persuaded Ignatius to write his autobiography in the first place.

This book is a follow-up to *Jesus and the Barbecued Fish Breakfast* and offers another collection of stories from the life and teaching of Jesus. Gospel stories enable us to know Jesus more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him

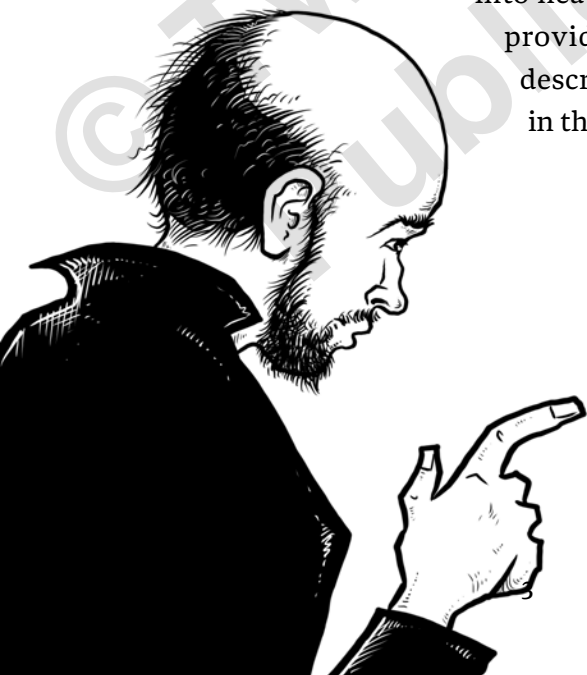
## Introduction

more nearly, as the prayer of Saint Richard of Chichester and the song “Day by Day” from *Godspell* would say. Stories capture the spirit, desires, and personality of Jesus better than a description or explanation ever could.

As before, I will tell the gospel stories in my own words and add a few details to help bring the stories to life. I will also offer a reflection on what those stories might mean for us.

Extra details can help. The gospel writers did not always provide an abundance of particulars in their descriptions. Carefully documenting the words of Jesus and the wondrous events of his life were more important concerns. And in the days of handwritten parchments, extra words came at a high price. Adding a few extra details can help bring the characters into sharper focus, amplify the interactions, and make the stories more real. The details were always helpful to Saint Ignatius. That is why he wanted to know what direction

Jesus was facing when he ascended into heaven. That is also why he provided some supplemental descriptions of gospel stories in the *Spiritual Exercises*.



In adding a few details, I try to be faithful to what we know about the Middle East of the first century and what we know and believe about Jesus. But, of course, the scenes might be imagined in some other way and these imaginings are not to be confused with inspired Scripture! I provide Scripture citations so you can check how the evangelists told the story.

Pictures bring stories to life, too. I am delighted that Thane Benson is once again partnering with me in presenting the stories. Pictures pack a punch. Twenty illustrations provide more rich detail than sixty pages of the best narrative and description! In the Catholic Church, images in frescoes, stained glass, and sculpture have long been used to communicate Bible stories. Generations of Christians have been invited into the stories of the birth, baptism, and miracles of Jesus through a wide variety of artistic representations.

I hope that you enjoy this gospel story sampler and that it provides a new opportunity to know and connect with Jesus.

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# A MAGICIAN, A PRIEST, AND AN ASTROLOGER

**Matthew 2:1-12**

Gaspar noticed the star just before dawn. He was up early preparing a healing spell for a family in his hometown of Damascus. He pondered what the star might mean as he intoned the words of the incantation. Deciding that the star was a sign from one of the gods, he made plans to travel to the spot marked out by it. Perhaps the stones or water from the area would have magical powers.

Melchior, a Zoroastrian priest from a small clan in northern Persia, noticed the same star as he approached the fire temple to recite his midnight prayers. He was convinced that the god of his people, Ahura Mazda, was announcing the birth of a king. So, the next morning, he obtained a letter of introduction from the clan lord, assembled a traveling party, and made plans for a trip to investigate the star's origin.

Balthasar was already heading to Palestine from his home in northwestern Arabia. A full-time farmer and part-time astrologer, he entrusted his property to the care of his brothers and began following a star that had suddenly appeared in the sky amid a constellation of stars that otherwise never changed.



So it happened that a magician, a priest, and an astrologer made their way to Jerusalem. Each of the magi was on a spiritual quest. Their insights into the spiritual world, imperfect as they were, got them quite close to the truth they were seeking. Balthasar arrived in Jerusalem first. He located an Arabic-speaking community within the city that provided lodging and shared with him the faith and tradition of the Jewish people. Melchior's traveling party arrived a short time later and arranged an audience with King Herod. Hearing Melchior's conjecture that a new king had been born, Herod called in the chief priests and scribes to consult on the matter. The religious officials explained to the king and the visitors that Scriptures foretold the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.

God was working in the lives of the magi. God managed to direct them to the truth first through their own customs and spiritual insights and then through the Jewish faith and tradition that was shared with them in Jerusalem. God was not suspicious of Gaspar's magic, threatened by Melchior's religion, or worried that Balthasar was spiritual but not religious. God recognized goodness in each of the magi and wanted to share with them the good news.

Gaspar and Balthasar met up with Melchior as he was leaving the city and together, they made their way to a simple home in the small town of Bethlehem, where they were welcomed by the holy family.

God was pleased that the magi made the trip to visit Jesus. God sent Jesus into the world not only for the people of Israel but for the whole human race in all its wonderful diversity.

The story has meaning for us today. First, the story tells us that God's heart is very big—big enough to hold people throughout the world. God cared about the people in Persia and Syria and Arabia, and God cares about them still. Persia has a different name today; it is called Iran. And Arabia includes present-day Saudi Arabia and Iraq. God loves the people in all those countries. God is certainly concerned about the violence and chaos in Syria and the conflict between ISIS and Iraq. God has high hopes for people throughout the world, whether they are Christian, Muslim, or Zoroastrian. The story of the magi reminds us of God's



big heart and invites us to allow our hearts to grow a little bit more.

The story also reminds us that God's grace is at work in the world both within the Church and outside it. The Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* speaks of salvation for non-Christians, for "those who sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive to do His will as it is known to them." The magi can serve as patron saints for all those seeking the truth in their lives, who grow close to God and serve in wonderful ways even without the gift of faith in God's Son.

Finally, those who encountered the magi can serve as examples for us. The residents of Jerusalem pointed the magi in the right direction, and Mary and Joseph welcomed the visitors when they arrived. Together they helped the magi discover the truth; they made it possible for Jesus to enter their lives.

Holy people in our own day are seeking the truth; they are trying to make sense of their lives and the world around them. Some of them have never heard the good news of the gospel. Perhaps some of us are called to share the good news with them. If so, we can follow the lead of Saint Francis Xavier. He entered worlds far different than his own with respect and appreciation for God's grace at work there, and he found ways to speak about the gospel that made sense to the people he met. Of course, there are other people who already know the story of Jesus but who have never heard it proclaimed in a clear and compelling way. They have given up on organized religion and have joined the ever-growing crowd of spiritual but not religious people. Maybe God will invite some of us to extend hospitality to them and to find

ways to help them to discover Jesus present in their world and in their lives.

We remember and celebrate the magician, the astrologer, and the priest who made their way to Bethlehem. We recall how the holy family welcomed these mysterious visitors from the East and how God was delighted that they came.

### **Questions to ponder**

- *How might Balthasar, the astrologer, have been impacted by the adventure that began with following a star?*
- *How might God be working in the lives of Iraqis and Iranians today?*
- *How do you proclaim the good news (in word or action) to those who are not interested in organized religion?*