

SPECIAL EDITION ( Epiphany ) January 2012

## T. S. ELIOT'S *JOURNEY OF THE MAGI*

In 1927, the American-born Thomas Stearns Eliot—residing and working in London—experienced a deeply personal transformation. Superficially, he became a British citizen, but far more significantly, he bowed before an altar in a country church, acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord. To mark his conversion, he created and published for friends a poem as a Christmas greeting, “Journey of the Magi.” Like any work of art, this poem stands on its own, but with this biographical background, it is perfectly reasonable to identify the voice of the narrator with the poet himself.

My explication that follows is adapted from an essay first published in *Christianity Today* ( December 7, 1962 ). I urge you to read the poem for yourself and celebrate your own “Journey.” The Rubens painting “Adoration of the Magi” stands in Kings College Chapel, Cambridge.

Nowhere is T. S. Eliot more explicit in delineating his Christian beliefs than in his short poem “Journey of the Magi.” Here his grasp of the inherent theological truth, that Jesus Christ was born to die, makes relevant the reading of this poem as Christmastide—when all the world concentrates on the manger, as if to blot out the cross—merges with Epiphany and the “showing forth” of the Savior-Redeemer.



In “Journey of the Magi” we hear the reminiscences of one of the Wise Men. Now an old man, he appears to be recounting his memoirs to an amanuensis. The words “but set down/This” are directed to the secretary, and the first five lines of the poem, enclosed in quotation marks, are a partial transcript of the record already written and being read back to him.

The aged man’s attitude toward his memories, shown in the first stanza, is important to observe. He recalls very little about the journey itself that could be considered pleasant, even in the romance of retrospection. The season was “just the worst time of year,” and the journey, “such a long journey.” The functionaries on whom he depended—the men who drove the camels—are remembered as having been “refractory.” The animals lay down in the melting snow, refusing to go any farther in their “galled, sore-footed” condition. Their drivers cursed and gambled and ran off, looking for liquor and women. Even the comforts of fire and human fellowship were denied the men from the East: “. . . the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters, / And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly / And the villages dirty and charging high prices: / A hard time we had of it.”

External forces opposed them in their quest for the newborn King. But the greater gnawing of dejection and doubt originated “with the voices singing in our ears, saying / That this was all folly.” Eliot’s ambiguity in the second stanza is pervaded by Christian symbols. A whole day, the most important of the journey, comes to the mind of the narrator. It begins at dawn in “a temperate valley”—where the travelers might well have been tempted to give up their search—and ends “at evening, not a moment too soon.” Discouragement at the length of the journey and the hardships involved would have resulted in resignation from their mission, had the Wise Men not reached their unknown destination when they did. Between the hours of sunrise and sunset much had been seen: “three trees on the low sky” that unmistakably forecast the scene at Calvary; “an old white horse” that gallops away into the meadow, possibly to await his Rider’s need for him ( Revelation 6:2 ). In the village, one of those already described as “dirty and charging high prices,” the Wise Men find their own Vanity Fair. It is a tavern in which three men are seen “dicing for pieces of silver, / And . . . kicking the empty wine-skins.” Filled as it is with incisive statements on the wasteland of this world, Eliot’s poetry has no more striking picture of man’s frustrated existence than this. Of course, there is no information available from anyone in the tavern concerning the whereabouts of the Christ-Child. One could scarcely expect men who grovel in greed to know or care about the coming of their King, and so the Wise Men continue their pilgrimage to find “the place” on their own.

After all their struggle, success seems anti-climactic. In this one respect Eliot differs from the sorty in Matthew’s account, which tells us that the Wise Men “rejoiced with exceeding joy.” What must be the understatement of all time is the old man’s only common upon that scene described in Matthew 2:11—“it was ( you may say ) satisfactory.”

How much more than merely “satisfactory” that experience was we may judge from the final stanza. First, the sight of the infant Redeemer did stamp a permanent impression upon the memory of the narrator, for although “all this was a long time ago,” he is certain that he would repeat the expedition. “I would do it again,” he says. Secondly, the significance of the Savior’s birth was not lost upon this Wise Man. In his years of pondering the strange journey that took him to the Child before whom he opened his treasures, one question has played in his mind. It is the key question to his whole understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation: “Were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?” In coming to know the truth about God manifest in the flesh, he has learned that Birth and Death are no different when the cross shadows the cradle.

Moreover, in this Birth the Wise Man found birth, and it too was compounded with death, for “this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.”

Much more must be seen in the worship by the Wise Men than a mere offering of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It was, in fact, the turning-over of themselves, their treasures, their kingdoms. In such a transforming, transcending act there was “hard and bitter agony,” as the lust for gold yielded before the Lord of glory. A death to self, to the coveting of possessions, is always painful. Yet, in the act of dying, the Wise Men found the possibility of new life.

The closing lines of Eliot’s poem bring the story up-to-date. Upon returning to their homeland, the Magi found themselves “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, / With an alien people clutching their gods.” Eliot’s pilgrims, having once seen their King, are not content in the City of Destruction to which they have returned. One senses the reason in the words “the old dispensation.” Like believers today, the Magi remained *in the world* but were not longer *of the world*. The old things had passed away; all had become new. Their countrymen appeared as strangers, “an alien people,” continuing their pagan worship. The transformation in the lives of the Magi—or, at least, in the life of this one particular Wise Man—had been complete, and it brought with it dissatisfaction with the old ways.

One thought, then, remains. It is Eliot’s final statement from the lips of the elderly narrator. “I should be glad of another death,” he informs us, and we note the wistful tone in his voice. In comprehending the paradox of Christian teaching, that spiritual birth and death are related, the Wise Man has also realized that physical death will again bring him before the King he once traveled so far to adore. This thought pleases him, and in glad anticipation of the close of his life, he contemplates again the eventful journey that so altered its course.

Contemporary readers may accept the poem as a sophisticated amplification of the familiar Bible story. Or we may interpret its symbolic message in the light of our own quest for salvation. We too must turn aside from the transitory pleasures that would prevent us from continuing our pilgrimage; we must reject the voices that cry “Folly” in our ears. We must overcome the base wallowing in sin that mires men in the tavern of this world. And we must be willing to seek him when there is no one who can lead us to where he is.

In seeing Jesus Christ, in offering him the treasure of our lives, we can be certain that his influence upon us will match his influence upon the Magi. We too shall see ourselves transformed, becoming new creatures as the old life dies and the new is born. But whether or not we sense an estrangement from the old ways depends upon how vividly we keep the image of Christ’s Lordship before us. Our Christmas and Epiphany devotion means nothing if we cannot honestly say, “I too should be glad of another death.”

**POSTSCRIPT FROM *Dismissing God* by D. Bruce Lockerbie ( p. 212 ): That same year [ 1927 ] Thomas Stearns Eliot . . . had made known his conversion to Christian faith and his confirmation as an Anglican. Throughout the English-speaking literary set there was not only skepticism but scoffing that such an urbane and secularistic voice as Eliot’s should be tuned toward Christ and the Church. For his part, Ernest Hemingway reacted with his smart-alecky humor, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want him for long,” referring to Eliot’s “temporary embracing of church by literary gents.”**

***D. Bruce Lockerbie, Chairman/Editor***



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