



# The Magi Supermix

Excerpts from

*Chad and Dave Read the Bible, Vol. 1*

*The Christmas Story*

and

*The Apocryphal Chapters*

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# **Putting the Pagans Back in Christmas: The Magi**

*Matthew 2:1-12*

*What is this pooping figurine doing in my Nativity set?!*

Unless you are from Catalonia, this would be a very good question.

But even if you've never discovered a caganer hanging out behind the shepherds,<sup>1</sup> your Nativity sets have probably been loaded down with some extra crap.

We've already walked through some of the historical inaccuracies of our Nativity sets, but it's time we tackle the late arrivals to the party, the

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<sup>1</sup> Or even sprinkled throughout this book – enjoy the search!

Magi. As most pastors have finally begun pointing out in the past few years, the Magi were most certainly not at the birth of Jesus.

*What are the Magi doing in my Nativity set?!*

If the pagans are to be believed (and we'll come back to that very important question shortly), the birth of Jesus could be pinpointed with relative accuracy. After accounting for travel time and the repeated bathroom breaks necessitated by Melchior's small bladder, Herod deduced that Jesus may have been as old as 2 years old by the time of their visit. On top of that, Matthew makes it clear that they found the Holy Family in "a house" upon their arrival. Because of this, many Christians and churches have adapted the tradition of keeping the magi at a distance from their nativity scenes until Epiphany, though I have yet to see a church transform the nativity into a house.

But beyond the timeline, there's another reason that the magi should strike us as peculiar nativity dwellers. We've already explored how shepherds made for odd nativity bedfellows, but the magi - described by one scholar as "Gentiles in the extreme" - take this up a notch. Throughout the Old Testament, the magi's particular line of work is described as detestable (Deut. 18:10-12), rebellious (1 Sam. 15:23), superstitious (Is. 2:6), fraudulent (Is. 47:11-15), and just plain evil (2 Ki. 17:17).

Much like the parable Jesus would go on to tell about the Great Banquet (Mt. 22:1-14), it seems as though the Gospel writers headed out to find some "star witnesses" and this was the best they could do: some stinky, untrustworthy shepherds and some pagan astrologers.

*What are pagan astrologers doing in my Nativity set?!*

If you thought removing your mother's magi during Advent was cause for discomfort, buckle up.

Few things make Christians less comfortable than other religions. We get squeamish around hijabs, oddly paranoid about yoga, and don't even get us started on the Catholics. Such discomfort perhaps explains why the Christian tradition has been so eager to rebrand these magi as "wise men" or "kings." (As for those of you who still sing "We Three Kings" every Christmas, I'll let John Calvin take it from here: "Beyond all doubt, they have been stupefied by a righteous judgment of God, that all might laugh at [their] gross ignorance.")

But the only description we actually get from Matthew about these mysterious visitors is this: “*magoi* from the rising” (aka “East”). The word *magoi* is simply the plural form of the Persian word *magus*, which pointed to a wide range of cultic and religious activities and is where we get our word “magic” from.

Putting together the historical pieces we have, there’s a good chance the magi were Zoroastrians (though I’m not ruling out Hufflepuffs). To put this in its shocking context, Barbara Brown Taylor helps us with this analogy: “In the case of the Persian magi, their appearance in Bethlehem is as surprising as a delegation of Methodist bishops arriving in Dharamsala to recognize the next incarnation of the Dalai Lama.”<sup>2</sup>

Beyond their mere appearance, however, what the magi actually do is just as confounding to our religious sensibilities. Upon arriving at the house of the Holy Family, the magi kneel and worship - or, more likely, pay reverence to - the baby. After offering some gifts, they return home (by a different route - floo powder, perhaps?), presumably to continue their detestable, rebellious, superstitious, fraudulent, and just plain evil maging.

What is incredibly disappointing is that Joseph didn’t even try to convert them, although that would have admittedly made for an amusing conversation:

**Joseph:** Do you know Jesus?

**Magi 1:** The baby, right? That’s kinda why we’re here.

**Joseph:** Do you know you’re a sinner?

**Magi 2:** Um, we just came to drop off some gifts . . .

**Joseph:** If you died tonight, do you know where you’d be going?

**Magi 3:** . . . . .

**Joseph:** Jesus died for your sins.

**Magi 4:** Pretty sure that’s not the smell of death coming from that diaper.

So what are we to do with these unconverted heathens who, just like the unconverted heathens in our own community,<sup>3</sup> keep showing up at our church every Christmas?

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (HarperCollins, 2018), 109.

<sup>3</sup> Looking at you, Brad.

Perhaps examining some Old Testament parallels may be helpful here. As we've explored throughout this book, Matthew is especially keen on making allusions to the Hebrew scriptures, whether they be in direct quotations or sidelong glances and winks. And it's possible that Matthew sees in this story echoes of other kings who were surrounded by magi and sundry wise men, such as Joseph in Pharaoh's court or Daniel in the employ of Nebuchadnezzar. And yet, if Matthew indeed is playing off these stories, his unique twist is almost unbelievable. Whereas Joseph and Daniel both represented faithful Jews exiled to a pagan king's entourage where God gifts them with abilities that surpass those of their pagan counterparts to curry the king's favor, in Matthew's infancy narrative, we find pagan astrologers straightening out a Jewish king.

We love to make jokes about the church members who only show up on Christmas and Easter, but here's the thing - when irregular guests show up in the Christian story, it's typically not because God has something to say to them, but because God has something to say *through* them. The presence of pagans is not a threat to the Gospel of Jesus, but an invitation. And the invitation, surprisingly, is not for them but for us.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Speaking of invitations, we'd like to invite you to check out our "Apocryphal Chapters," a special collection of bonus material for this volume that can be found at [ChadAndDaveReadTheBible.com](http://ChadAndDaveReadTheBible.com). Packed with further insight and humor, the "Apocryphal Chapters" includes an extended addendum to this chapter that tackles woke culture, nativity diversity gone wrong, and Jesus' one black friend.

[Ed. Note: This chapter was originally included in *The Apocryphal Chapters*, a set of supplemental chapters to *The Christmas Story*, which can be found on [www.ChadAndDaveReadTheBible.com](http://www.ChadAndDaveReadTheBible.com).]

## #BlackMagiMatter

*If your Christmas pageant involves blackface, something has gone terribly wrong.*

I am thankful to say - having not grown up in Germany<sup>1</sup> - that I have never seen nor been a part of a Christmas pageant that employed blackface. But even though I was spared from the guilt and embarrassment of that particular display of racism, there was another racially-coded display within my house every winter that begged the question:

*What is a black man doing in my Nativity set?!*

Speaking of surprising guests at the nativity (see our chapter on the Magi), have you ever wondered why there's always one black man among the magi?<sup>2</sup> As it turns out, traditions around the magi got super-symbolic around the Late Middle Ages and personalities began to develop in creative ways. Along with the development of the idea - not biblical! - that there

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1 Seriously. It's a thing.

2 In one notable exception, he is not black, but a cucumber.

## #BlackMagiMatter

were three magi, storytellers soon created personalities for all three, including names (Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior) and ethnicities (European, African, and Asian).

So, on one hand, Africanizing the infancy narrative was a little picture into medieval woke culture, right? Well, as John Oliver might drily note: “Cool.”

On the one hand, #RepresentationMatters. Between eggnog, Hallmark casting calls, and tender Tennessee Christmases,<sup>3</sup> it’s hard to imagine popular US depictions of Christmas getting any whiter than they already are. As one national news commentator even infamously reassured kids, even Santa and Jesus are white.<sup>4</sup> And for many white US households, this is unfortunately the only time they will ever invite a black man into their house.

On the other hand . . . well, let’s make this on, like, three other hands.

On the first other hand, the Africanization of Balthasar came with a few other descriptive details that contemporary nativity-hoarders may miss. Traditionally, Balthasar is dressed in ways that accentuate his “exotic” African pedigree, but he is also typically cast as the youngest member of the trio and positioned furthest from the Christ child. Why? As an illustration of the medieval European notion that Africa was the last civilization to become Christianized.<sup>5</sup>

[Contemporary Christian Missions Footnote: Does your faith tradition sometimes place a strange emphasis on Africa? Perhaps through supporting missionaries in African countries? Or maybe by promoting the adoption and/or sponsorship of children from “the dark continent”? If so, then you may want to spend careful reflection on some of this history and the way it has evolved into subtle white-supremacist varieties of missions and evangelism, especially among US Christians. In reality, there are more Christians in Africa than on any other continent in the world.]

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3 The only ones for me.

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVb6NKUW-Hs>

5 A notion that would have come as a great surprise to the Ethiopian Eunuch, Tertullian, Perpetua, Felicity, Cassian, Athanasius, Monica, Augustine, and so many other early African Christian saints.

On the second other hand, might this be a form of tokenism? Was a Holiday Diversity & Equity Committee established to insure that our nativity sets were marketable to multiple demographics?

Which leads us to the third other hand of our mutated argument, and a rather relevant question that you probably haven't asked yourself before . . .

*What are white people doing in my Nativity set?!*

By this point, I probably shouldn't have to say this, but I'll say it anyway: There's a good chance that "Magi from the east" were not white.

Neither was Jesus. Or Mary. Or Joseph. Or the little shepherd boy who somehow sneaks into every nativity (I always assumed it was David).

As the geographical center of Christianity shifted to Europe in the Early Middle Ages, the color of Christianity began to change with it, not just demographically but representationally. And as is often the case, the characters of the Christmas story began to transform into the likeness of the people who were telling the story, which is how we've almost universally ended up with a Holy Swedish Family presiding over our very white Christmases.

In some ways, such an enculturation of the Gospel narrative is not only normal but even healthy. The incarnation that takes its most striking cues from the story of Jesus' birth is the principle that God not only shows up with us ("Emmanuel") but that God shows up *like* us.

The problem, of course, is when we begin to make Jesus a little *too much* like us, particularly to the degree that we grant ourselves permission to say, "And, therefore, Jesus is *not like them*." That is when God Incarnate is transfigured into God Idolatrous, a tribal God who not only looks like us and talks like us, but also fears and divides and hates like us. Before you know it, our inns become closed to pregnant teens and black neighbors alike. And eventually, those Bible stories will have to be turned into something that fits a little better under our ornamental Christmas trees.

It would be easy to tie this up here with a nice little bow and say, "*What are any of us doing in the Nativity of Jesus?*" and universalize our collective falling short and need of a Savior, but some of us probably need to linger a bit longer with the discomfort of recognizing that we're out of place here. I propose that, when we pull out our nativities and polish off our Christmas

## #BlackMagiMatter

pageant scripts this season, we ask a simple but radical question:

Who's missing?

This practically begins with some narrative concerns. Why is Elizabeth never in our pageants despite her importance in Luke's infancy narrative? Why does Herod suspiciously get edited out of our worship services? And why aren't the Magi at the manger where I put them?!

But telling the story faithfully might also involve questions of representation. Why doesn't the Holy Family look Middle Eastern in our nativity set? Why do we always pick the young woman who really sweet and polite to play Mary in our living nativities? And why does Jesus have only one black friend (does that mean he was white?)?

And please don't misunderstand me. These are not simply the academic and trivial rantings of someone who is still trying to justify the years and dollars spent on theological education. Our stories have consequences, and the details shape destinies.

When your 8-year-old daughter sees a Middle-Eastern woman in a hijab in the airport security screening line, is she more likely to see a potential terrorist or a potential Theotokos?<sup>6</sup> The Christmas stories we tell may have something to do with that.

When you set out your nativity set during Advent, does the black magus stand out to you or the abundance of white characters? The Christmas stories we tell may have something to do with that.

And need we ask about the brown-skinned babies lying on shores and streets and detention centers throughout our world today? Do we dare suggest the Christmas stories we tell may have something to do with that?

Nativity stories matter.

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<sup>6</sup> "Theotokos" is one of the most significant titles bestowed upon Mary in the Christian tradition. Typically translated as "God-bearer," it might be more literally translated as "the one whose offspring is God."

# POSTLUDE

## About the Authors

*This is the point in the service where you leave, but not before shaking our hands and telling us how nice our sermons were, even though you slept through them.*



**Chad Hartsock** was raised in Bristol, VA (but does not like NASCAR). Educated at Virginia High School, Carson-Newman University, and the George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Chad earned his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies at Baylor University in 2007. He taught at Carson-Newman University for 11 years before moving to the Christian Academy of Knoxville. Chad is author of *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physical Features in Characterization* (Brill, 2008), along with several academic articles. Chad has also served as a student minister and itinerant preacher for many years, and he officiates high school sports on the side. He also once used a urinal next to N.T. Wright. Chad is also the founder of The REL Fantasy Football League, and the 2011 champion. Chad can be reached at [jchartsock77@gmail.com](mailto:jchartsock77@gmail.com).



**Dave McNeely** is a native Kentuckian, longtime Tennessean, and loyal Hufflepuff. Educated at Marilyn Moore's home preschool, Burlington Elementary, Conner Middle, Conner High, Carson-Newman University, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (R.I.P.), and Iliff School of Theology, he has published through various outlets, including contributing chapters to *Faith Forward: A Dialogue on Children, Youth, and a New Kind of Christianity*, ed. Dave Csinos and Melvin Bray (Woodlake, 2013), *The Exiled Generations: Legacies of the Southern Baptist Convention Holy Wars*, ed. Carl Kell (University of Tennessee Press, 2014), and *This Present Former Glory: An Anthology of Honest Spiritual Literature* (A Game for Good Christians, 2020). He is also featured in *Catmania*, a photographic tribute to University of Kentucky Wildcats basketball fans (true story). He was Champion of the REL Fantasy Football League in 2018. Dave can be reached at [cndavemcneely@aol.com](mailto:cndavemcneely@aol.com).

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