

The Story of the Other Wise Man

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A Retelling of the Story by Henry van Dyke

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Everybody knows the story of the three wise men. If you don't, you probably didn't listen to the hymn this morning. Most people don't know that there was a fourth wise man. His story is this morning's story for all ages.

I first heard this story over fifty years ago when my minister in Dallas took, not one, but two Sundays to read the original version to the entire congregation. He even cancelled Sunday School so that we kids could hear the story. I'm telling you this because our august worship committee is looking for ways of extending the reach of the worship program beyond the hour on Sunday mornings. A service with a reach of over fifty years might be worth its attention.

The fourth wise man was called Artaban, and he lived in ancient Persia, which is now Iran. He lived in the city of Ecbatana and was a member of a far flung community of Zoroastrian scholars known as *Magi*. Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion that survives to



this day. It's named for the prophet Zoroaster. Zoroastrians believe in the search for goodness and light.

Zoroastrians were big on astrology. The three wise men and Artaban had read the stars and the scriptures and deduced that a miraculous birth was about to take place, the birth of a savior destined to be king of the Jews. They planned to gather at a temple in Borsippa, a city in Babylonia (now Iraq) and from there set out together to witness the birth and bring gifts to the new king. Artaban acquired three precious jewels to set before the new king: a ruby, a sapphire, and an exquisite pearl.

He planned the journey from Ecbatana to Borsippa very carefully. He knew that it was a ten-day ride, so he set out ten days before the appointed time for the rendezvous. Across the Zagros mountains he rode, across the plains of Persia and, on the tenth day, he crossed the Tigris river with plenty of time to make it to Borsippa on the Euphrates.

He was riding hard down the final stretch when his little mare came to a dead stop. Artaban looked down and saw a lump, a large lump, in the middle of the road. He dismounted for a closer look and discerned that the lump was a body. With a sigh he started to drag the body off to the side of the road where the vultures could give it a decent funeral, but, as he did so, the body let forth a deep moan. The body was alive.

Artaban was not happy. He had an appointment to keep, and here was this nearly dead person on his hands. He thought to himself, "Well, the guy is going to die anyway. Maybe I'll just head on out and let nature take its course." Is that what you would do?

Artaban found that he could not leave the man in the road. He took out his water bottle and gave him some water. He had a stash of pills in his backpack, and he found a few that revived the guy enough that he could sit a horse. They rode into a nearby town and Artaban took the man to the emergency room where they waited around for quite some time. It turned out that the man was a Jew named Dave who had been exiled to Babylonia after the Babylonian conquest of Israel. When Artaban was pretty sure that Dave was in good hands, he turned to leave. Dave then said to him, "You have saved my life, and I have nothing to give you in return. I can, however, tell you this. The child you seek will not be born in Jerusalem like the other Jewish kings. Look for him in the town of Bethlehem for that is where our prophets say that he will be born."

Artaban thanked Dave for his advice and rode at top speed to Borsippa. Alas, when he arrived there, all he found was a note from his compadres that said, "Gone to Judea. See you there." Artaban was crushed. Here he was in Borsippa with the great Arabian desert between him and the newborn king, and nothing but a spent horse for transportation.

But Artaban was a resourceful guy. He sold the ruby and took the cash to the Avis Caravan Rental Agency. The sale of the ruby gave him enough cash for a caravan to Damascus and for a horse that could take him down the Jordan River valley and into the little town of Bethlehem.

In Bethlehem, the first person he ran into was a mother with a babe in arms. He asked her, "Is your baby the king of the Jews?"

She said, "Are you nuts? The king of the Jews is a full-grown man named Herod, who lives in Jerusalem. He's such a creep that if I were his mother, I wouldn't admit it."

"No, no," said Artaban. "You have a new king born in Bethlehem. Surely you must know."

"Oh," she said, "You're with those three guys that passed through here a few days ago. They came to visit some poor woman from Nazareth who had to give birth in a stable outside of town."

"Yes, yes. Where is this stable?"

"Just outside of town on the Jerusalem road, but they left here three days ago, all of them, the mom, the dad, the kid, and your three pals. The only thing you'll find in that stable is livestock."

Just then, a man came running up to them and said to the woman, "Jessica, get that child indoors right now! Hide him and don't let him make a peep. Herod's men are going house to house putting every boy baby to the sword."

Jessica ran into her house, and Artaban followed. Just as the man said, an Israeli soldier came to the door. Artaban, who was an imposing figure, blocked his path and said, "No one here but me, sergeant."

"Well bud", said the soldier, "If you don't mind, I'll just take a look for myself."

Artaban, holding out his sapphire said, "You don't understand. There really is no one here but me."

"Oh, right," said the soldier as he took the jewel, "There is no one here but you."

Artaban was cursing himself for his stupidity when Jessica slipped out of her hiding place and said to him, "Bless you, bless you. God will bless you a thousand times for saving my baby. I have nothing to give you for your kindness, but I can tell that the family you're looking for is headed for Egypt. You may be able to catch up with them if you start now because they had nothing but one donkey to carry them all."

So, Artaban set out for Egypt, but he never did catch up with the holy family. He wandered Egypt and the surrounding countries for years, always searching, never finding, but clinging ever to the last of his three gifts, the priceless pearl.

An old Hebrew scholar in Alexandria told him to look among the poor and the downtrodden for his savior for the king of the Jews was not destined to live like a king. So Artaban lived among the poor and the sick, doing the best he could to feed and heal them.

He even made it his habit to visit the prisons, where he made a good many friends among the prisoners.

After 33 years of searching, Artaban, then an old man, found himself in Jerusalem at the time of Passover. It was a time when every Jew who could come to Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday. Artaban fell in with bunch of Persian Jews who were in town for that purpose. One of them said, "Hey, come on. We're going to see the execution."

"Who's being executed?" asked Artaban.

"Two robbers and an itinerant preacher called Jesus. He told Pilate that he was king of the Jews and that was enough to earn him a death sentence."

"What?" said Artaban, "What did he say he was?"

"King of the Jews; that's what he said."

"King of the Jews, eh. At last I have found him. And I have here a pearl worth a king's ransom, and that's what I'm going to use it for."

"You'd better hurry. He's already on the cross."

Grasping the pearl in his hand, he made his way through the throng looking for anyone who would accept it in exchange for Jesus' life. As he was looking he saw a small girl running through the crowd with a troop of Greek soldiers in pursuit. She took one look at him, ran to him, grabbed him by the skirts and hung on for dear life.

As the Greek soldiers surrounded them, she said, "Please help me. You must."

"I can't right now. I'm on a really important, you might say "crucial," mission."

"Please, please, please. My father just died. Our family is in debt up to its ears, and I'm to be sold as a slave. I don't want to be a slave for the rest of my life."

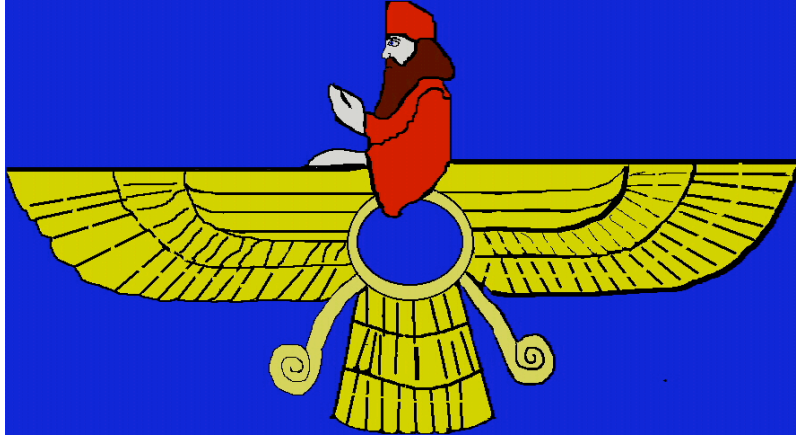
"Find someone else."

"No, no, you have to help me."

"Why me, kid?"

"We go to the same church, that's why," she said pointing to the Faravahar on his chest. This symbol is central to the Zoroastrian religion and represents to some the one god of that religion. Maybe Zoroastrians were the first Unitarians.

He looked at the child, and at the soldiers about to drag her away, and almost without thinking, pressed the pearl into her hand.



As he turned to make his forlorn way back down the hill, all hell broke loose. A terrible storm swept through Jerusalem shaking the very foundations of the buildings and sweeping the tiles off the roofs. On of these tiles struck Artaban. It should have killed him. In fact, it did kill him. But before he died, a strange thing happened.

A stranger approached him and said, “You’re Artaban, right? I believe you’ve been looking for me, and I just came by to thank you.”

“For what?”

“For feeding me when I was hungry and taking care me when I was sick and giving me comfort in prison.”

“You must have me mixed up with someone else. This is the first time I’ve laid eyes on you.”

“No, Artaban, you and I, we go way back. Here’s the way it works. Whenever you’ve fed the least of my brethren, you’ve fed me. Whenever you’ll cared for or comforted the least of my brethren, you’ve done it for me. We go way back, my friend.”

With these words, the stranger faded into the mist and Artaban’s life slipped away.