



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on December 23, 2019

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The Divine Message of Freedom

From the print edition of *The New American*:



It came to pass in the fullness of time that the sons of Seth grew wise in their understanding of the heavens, and having kept the traditions passed down to them through the many ages of man remained faithful to them. At the appointed time on the 25th of each month, they gathered at their Mountain of Victories, where they kept their treasures and their sacred mysteries, and where, their prophecy told them, the Messiah would be announced to them. And though many generations had passed without the fulfillment of the prophecy, they gathered faithfully, in the joy of hope that it would be they that would be chosen of all the generations.

And as foretold, so it came to pass that when they approached the sacred mountain a light came to them. And they saw “the form of an ineffable pillar of light descending.... And we were afraid and shook when we saw it. And we cannot speak about the brilliance of the star of light since its radiance was many times greater than the sun, and the sun could not stand out before the light of its rays. And just like the moon looks in the daytime in the days of Nisan, when the sun rises and it is absorbed in its light, so also did the sun seem to us when the star rose over us. And the light of the star, which surpassed the sun, appeared to us ourselves and the sons of our mysteries, but it did not appear to anyone else, because they were removed from its mysteries and its coming. And we rejoiced, and glorified, and gave unmeasured thanks to the Father of heavenly majesty that it appeared in our days and we were thought worthy to see it.”

And, as prophesied, the wise sons of Seth and their retinue set out to follow the miraculous star of light. “And we went forth in great joy, our hearts exulting to come to the place that was commanded to us, to worship the vision of the star of infinite light. And the star, our guide, our good messenger, our perfect light, our glorious leader, again appeared for us, going before us and upholding our whole caravan from all sides, and enlightening us by its hidden light. And we had no need of the light of the sun or of the moon, because their light became diminished in its sight, and by night and by day we walked in its light, exulting and rejoicing without distress or weariness.”

A New King

The foregoing is a summary and partial retelling of the gnostic fable, only translated to English in recent years, known as *The Revelation of the Magi*. It purports to tell more of the story of the Magi than



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is recorded by the Apostle Matthew in the Gospel account. Though the story of the Magi, or wise men, has never ceased to be a popular part of the Christmas story, it has long been doubted and dismissed by scholars as implausible at best. According to religious studies Professor Brent Landau, translator of *The Revelation of the Magi*, "Scholars have by and large concluded that there is virtually nothing of historical value in the infancy narratives of the New Testament. This judgement has been applied with particular vigor to the Magi story."

The modern bias against the historicity of the biblical accounts is a flaw not in the Bible itself, but only in the perception of scholars who doubt the accounts. It is easy for skeptical moderns to doubt biblical stories, however, because the Bible is not written as history. As Father Dwight Longenecker points out in his *Mystery of the Magi*, a study of the origins and historicity of Matthew's account of the wise men and the birth of Jesus Christ, Bible skeptics miss the point. "Everyone can admit that [the Gospels] were not written as strictly historical documents," Father Longenecker notes, "but neither are they fairy tales.... The gospels, following on the Old Testament and consistent with their Jewish origins, include much that is verifiable history."

That verifiable history is crucial to keep in mind, though doing so is very hard to the modern mind. Present-day Westerners, sadly including most Christians, have let themselves be divorced from the history of civilization, to such a degree that anything that happened beyond the memory of the oldest living generation has become the tiresome fable of an unknown country, irrelevant at best, and dull and tiresome to most.

Yet the stories of the Bible took place in the real world, a world of men and women, engineers and scholars, magicians and priests, rulers and conquerors. The New Testament tells of the birth, life, death, and salvific mission of Jesus Christ, something that takes place not in an anonymous backwater at the far ends of the Earth, but in a mighty and crucial province of the fledgling Roman Empire. The characters known from the Gospels lived and worked in that place and time, contemporaries of Julius Caesar, Marcus Tullius Cicero, Mark Antony, Cleopatra, Pompey the Great, and Octavian.

Within this milieu the story of the wise men who came from the East with gifts for the newborn King not only makes sense, but is nearly exactly what one who is familiar with the diplomatic and political traditions of the time and place would expect. After all, if a new king comes to a throne, existing rulers in that region would be expected to send emissaries. If the story of the wise men is taken seriously, it becomes an important part of understanding an important teaching that runs through both the New and Old Testaments. Specifically, that teaching is that it is the individual that matters and that collective action, specifically government, while allowed to exist, frequently breaks its proper bounds, and becomes through the temptation of power both the agent of and conduit for evil in the world.

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Genocidal Maniac as Ruler

Perhaps we would not have seen the genocides of recent memory had we taken the story of the wise men seriously, for it tells us much about the behavior of government.

For this, much thanks is owed to Father Longenecker, who has done admirable work in the thorough analysis he provides in his book *Mystery of the Magi*. His work quite strongly suggests that the wise



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men were Magi-diplomats from the Nabateans centered on the city of Petra and controlling land and trade routes running far to the east through northern Arabia, as well as south through the Arabian peninsula.

At this time, the Roman-supported ruler in Jerusalem was King Herod, known to history as “the Great,” but probably better remembered as “the Brutal” or “the Terrible.” A key to understanding this tyrant is the set of instructions he had left regarding what should be done with his wife while he was away meeting with Octavian. Paranoid, as usual, in his absence he sent his wife, Mariamne, and her mother off under armed guard, essentially imprisoning them in a fortress. In *The Antiquities of the Jews*, first-century historian Josephus noted that their guards were ordered “that if they should hear any mischief had befallen him, they should kill them both.” But living with Herod was no safe thing, and it wasn’t long after his return before his sister, the viperous Salome (not to be confused with her great-granddaughter of the same name), engineered a scandalous calumny against Mariamne that led to Herod overseeing her execution.

And so this was the jealous and unstable ruler who in his old age was confronted by the arrival of the wise men seeking the child prophesied to be a new king of the Jews. As the Gospel of Matthew recounts, “When Jesus therefore was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of king Herod, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. Saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and are come to adore him. And king Herod hearing this, was troubled.”

The king ordered the wise men to find Jesus and report back to him about his location so that he might “also come to adore him.” As Josephus noted, Herod was a man “of great barbarity towards all men equally, and a slave to his passions.” The character and reputation of Herod would have been well known to the wise men seeking Jesus, and they no doubt feared to reveal the location of Jesus to such a jealous tyrant. They would have known that the tyrant was always fearful of competition and would seek to eliminate anyone who he perceived was a threat to his rule. Not only was this normal behavior for rulers, especially at the time, but it was well known that Herod had eliminated what he had perceived as threats to his rule before. Thus, Matthew reports after delivering their gifts to Jesus, “they went back another way into their country” to avoid Herod.

This didn’t put off Herod from his murderous plans. Foiled in his ambition to kill Jesus, he now decided to kill the male children of Bethlehem, hoping in the process to kill Jesus among them. Warned by an angel before the slaughter, Matthew records Joseph and Mary fled with Jesus to Egypt. But Herod, “perceiving that he was deluded by the wise men, was exceeding angry; and sending [soldiers] killed all the men children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the borders thereof, from two years old and under.”

Government and Evil

The story of the massacre of the children of Bethlehem is only recorded by Matthew; it is not reported in the other Gospels, nor does it appear in the history of Josephus, leading many to conclude that the slaughter didn’t happen. But we shouldn’t dismiss the story outright. Herod was a bloodthirsty tyrant who executed his own wife and sons. The sad truth is that no one living under his reign would have been surprised at an order to carry out the murder of children if Herod thought the crime would protect his reign.

This tells us much about government, and not just of Herod’s. Jesus Christ’s birth and mission was not about establishing an earthly paradise by challenging the political system of His time or of any other



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time. His concern was not with collectivism, but with the transcendent. He came to teach, of course, but also to save mankind from eternal damnation and open the way, through Him, to heaven. Still, though he posed no threat to government, the kings of Earth sought repeatedly to kill him. We thus have in the Gospels both an affirmation of individual dignity and salvation through Christ, and a demonstration of the demonic evil of government.

The Old Testament warned of this. In the 1st Book of Kings (1 Samuel), the people demanded that a king be set up over them. God warns that by forsaking him in this way, the people will give up their freedom and be enslaved to another man. He warns:

This will be the right of the king, that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and put them in his chariots, and will make them his horsemen, and his running footmen to run before his chariots, And he will appoint of them to be his tribunes, and centurions, and to plough his fields, and to reap his corn, and to make him arms and chariots. Your daughters also he will take to make him ointments, and to be his cooks, and bakers. And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your best oliveyards, and give them to his servants. Moreover he will take the tenth of your corn, and of the revenues of your vineyards, to give his eunuchs and servants.

Your servants also and handmaids, and your goodliest young men, and your asses he will take away, and put them to his work. Your flocks also he will tithe, and you shall be his servants. And you shall cry out in that day from the face of the king, whom you have chosen to yourselves[;] and the Lord will not hear you in that day, because you desired unto yourselves a king. But the people would not hear the voice of Samuel, and they said: Nay: but there shall be a king over us. And we also will be like all nations: and our king shall judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles for us.

Thus does Yahweh warn that government is the means to enslave the people. This is echoed in the temptation of Christ by the devil in the New Testament.

The Gospel of Luke records the temptation:

And the devil led him into a high mountain, and shewed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time;

And he said to him: To thee will I give all this power, and the glory of them; for to me they are delivered, and to whom I will, I give them. If thou therefore wilt adore before me, all shall be thine. And Jesus answering said to him: It is written: Thou shalt adore the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

If Jesus gave in to this temptation, the devil promised to give Him the nations and the peoples of those nations, something that would lead Jesus into the idolatry of political power and that would cement the perpetual enslavement of the human race. But Jesus came not to enslave, but to free each person as an individual from eternal bondage and death. Moreover, as the economist Jesús Huerta de Soto points out, Jesus doesn't dispute the devil's contention that the governments of the world are his to give.

"Thus, according to the devil himself, all of the states on the Earth are under his command and depend on him. So, we can understand why they inflict so much harm," he said in a speech given on May 17, 2017 in Madrid to the Tenth Spanish Conference on Austrian Economics. From this, Professor Huerta de Soto argues "that the state is the true Antichrist."



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The Things of Caesar

If this is true, then it raises certain questions about a passage of the Gospel message that has long been used by statists to claim that Christians must support the state in all its workings. In the passage recorded by Matthew, the Pharisees attempted to trick Jesus into proving that he was a tax rebel:

Tell us therefore what dost thou think, is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not? But Jesus knowing their wickedness, said: Why do you tempt me, ye hypocrites? Shew me the coin of the tribute. And they offered him a penny. And Jesus saith to them: Whose image and inscription is this?

They say to him: Caesar's. Then he saith to them: Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God, the things that are God's.

Does this mean that Christians owe loyalty to the state, including the payment of taxes, as has long been argued? The answer lies in knowing the context of the situation at the time when Jesus was confronted with this question. In the case of coinage bearing the likeness of the Roman emperor, such likeness meant that the coin bearing the image was literally the property of the emperor. It may be temporarily held by someone else, but it remained the emperor's property.

This was a point made by Jacques Ellul, professor of Law and the Sociology and History of Institutions at the University of Bordeaux. He noted, with his answer, "Jesus does not say that taxes are lawful. He does not counsel obedience to the Romans. He simply faces up to the evidence. But what really belongs to Caesar? The excellent example used by Jesus makes this plain: Whatever bears his mark!" In other words, anything not bearing Caesar's mark belongs to God, and Caesar has no claim upon it. "First we have life," Ellul remarks concerning the things that are not Caesars. "Caesar has no right of life and death. Caesar has no right to plunge people into war. Caesar has no right to devastate and ruin a country. Caesar's domain is very limited," Ellul concludes.

Added to all of this, there is the apparent stumbling block of Romans 13, in which Paul seems to say that all earthly power comes from God and should therefore be obeyed:

Let every soul be subject to higher powers: for there is no power but from God: and those that are, are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God. And they that resist, purchase to themselves damnation. For princes are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good: and thou shalt have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to thee, for good. But if thou do that which is evil, fear: for he beareth not the sword in vain. For he is God's minister: an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

While this is often read as an endorsement of the state, such an interpretation is not quite right. Much as the correct order of operations is necessary when solving problems in mathematics, adherence to orders of primacy in this text are required for understanding. Paul notes, quite correctly, that power comes only from God. What then is done with that power matters greatly. The state should use its subsidiary powers for good, as should everyone. The state should not pervert or undermine the law. By the same token, citizens should not engage in armed resistance. To do so violates the rights and liberties of others, something seen when protesters engage in riots and damage and destroy the lives and properties of others as a result of their actions. Paul here is reminding us to live as Christ lived. His example, before Pilate, is the template for Paul's commentary. Jesus did not engage with the state when



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it confronted him, revealing to all the rapacious injustice of the state by His example and the state's behavior toward Him. He did not lead an armed resistance movement, though he certainly could have. To do so would have led to bloodshed and death and acceptance of the temptations offered by the devil.

Peace on Earth, and Goodwill Toward Men

The Holy Scriptures are quite clear in their insistence upon the value of the human person. After all, Moses delivered commandments from the Lord not for the formation of the state, but for the teaching and guidance of individuals and their behavior. For Christian believers, Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary as the Son of Man, taking the frail human form of an individual and refusing and opposing the powers of the state. His salvific mission was not to augment the power of the collective and set up a socialist or communist state, as so many moderns would like to believe, but to save the individual soul of each person from eternal damnation.

As we began with the Wise Men of old, so now we should end with one more modern in the form of Leo Tolstoy. After studying and reflecting upon the faith, the great novelist concluded that the message of Scripture is the message of individual freedom and love.

"Understand, all of you, that you were born neither to be slaves, nor to be masters," Tolstoy wrote; "that you are free men, but that you only become free and rational when you fulfil the supreme law of life. This law has been revealed to you, and you need only discard those lies which conceal it from you to be able to see clearly of what this law consists and in what your happiness consists. This law consists in love, and well-being is only found in the fulfillment of this law."

On Christmas, and the season of our great holidays, remember then the words recorded by Luke of the angel that appeared before the shepherds when Jesus was born. "I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people ... Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will."

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