

Film 'nativity 2' - danger in the manger – today we look at 'strangers at the manger'.

*I will draw on the work of Hannah Shapero to explain more about the Magi:*

*The Magi who were featured in the story would have been Zoroastrian, or some think, may have been practicing a syncretistic (mixed) tradition that included Zoroastrian and Mesopotamian elements and some elements of pagan traditions.*

*What, then, were they searching for?*

*One idea held by many scholars is that they were searching for the Saoshyant or "Savior," who was an ideal king-figure hoped for by both Persians and Jews.*

*What about the Star that the Magi were following? The Christian story is intended to recall the "star of Jacob" mentioned in Numbers 24:17 : "A star from Jacob takes the leadership..." A star was symbolic of a god, or a deified king, in the ancient Middle East - stars appear on carved signature seals and wall-carvings.*

*There are Zoroastrian legends about the Star of the Magi, that identify it as Tishtrya, or Sirius, the star whose rising heralds the coming of rain. Sirius first rises in late summer, just before dawn, and in winter nights around the solstice and Christmas it blazes in the sky in the early and middle evening. Tishtrya is a yazata or guardian spirit, now known as "Tir," whose festival, Tirgan, is celebrated in the summer with much splashing of water.*

*There are other factors in the Magi story which would be familiar to Zoroastrians, though it is doubtful that these were recognized by the Gospel-writers. The three kings, to a Zoroastrian, symbolize the Threefold Path of "Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds." Many other Zoroastrian symbols also follow this threefold symbolism, such as the three steps to the ancient Achaemenian fire-altar or the three windings of the kushti cincture. Some Christians interpret the three kings as Trinitarian, one to adore each Person of the Trinity. The frankincense which the Jewish/Christian authors interpreted as honor to Christ's divinity is also part of Zoroastrian worship: known as loban, frankincense is sprinkled on the embers of the Sacred Fire as a fragrant homage to the bright symbol of Ahura Mazda.*

*Zoroastrians are rather proud of their presence in Christian story, even if their Magi adore a Christian God-incarnation. Zoroastrians have almost always been tolerant of other religions. As Dr. Jahanian says in his article, "So, it appears, the Zoroastrians were the first to recognize the birth of Jesus Christ." This sacred story thus gathers together elements from three great monotheistic religious traditions. Hannah M.G. Shapero*

Zoroastrian – stars – deity star – seekers – wide concepts of truth – now proud of their association with the Christmas story – the original ‘strangers in the midst’ –

What is God telling us by having these strangers from another faith, another religion, another place, another culture, being amongst those who first recognise who Jesus is? How does that challenge us? Do we recognise Jesus?

How do we deal with the ‘stranger at the manger’ – the ‘stranger’ coming to find Jesus?

God puts a star in the sky for people he knows look to the skies – God makes it easy with a massive shining light – for people to see, for people to find Jesus.

Do we make it easy? Do we make ourselves accessible? Easy to understand? Easy to access? Easy to be with? Giving people space but welcome? Are we like a shining light for God, making it easy for people to find Jesus?

And if you are someone who finds it difficult to find Jesus, someone who regularly or sometimes feels lost or stuck – be encouraged: God wants you to find Jesus, God will have put a light for you too. I encourage you to keep looking, don’t give up, life CAN change, God IS near, there IS a light for you...