

The Christmas Story

from

Gaspar Another Tale of the Christ

by

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Introduction

Since I was a young man, I have always considered Pilate's question to Jesus "What is Truth?" to be the most profound and important question ever asked. Jesus never responds to Pilate in John's Gospel. In *Gaspar*, he does. I wrote *Gaspar, Another Tale of the Christ* because I believe Jesus' response to Thomas at his final dinner, "I am the way, the truth and the life." *Gaspar, Another Tale of the Christ* is the story of one man's search for truth. It might be your journey, it might be mine.

The Christmas Story from Gaspar occurs early in the book, the second of fourteen chapters. The book begins with the young Gaspar – the narrator and protagonist – in India, a student of the old and wise Vajrabodhi, a Buddhist master. After years of mentoring the young Greek, Vajrabodhi requests that Gaspar, twenty-years old now accompany him on a journey to follow an unmoving star that has mysteriously appeared in the western sky, never rising, never setting. As they journey across the northern part of the Arabian Desert, Vajrabodhi tells his young protégé, "You are the one, Gaspar. I am not he. It has been revealed to me. The quest is yours and yours alone ... I am called home. Follow the star." That evening, they are accosted by a band of desert brigands, and the thieves murder Vajrabodhi. With the help of the Nubian captive Shabaka, Gaspar escapes and does his dead master's bidding. He continues the quest. And here we pick up his narrative, *The Christmas Story from Gaspar*

T

ime does not exist in the desert. The sky and the denizens that inhabit it are my companions. Without them, I would be lonely. My only breathing cohort, the camel seems ever bored with my presence. He does not despise me, but he does not like me. He tolerates me. If I fail to wake in the morning, his life will go on as it always has. It will be easy for him to find a new master, but we cross paths with no one, only the wind that sings its lonely song as it shifts the eternal sand that surrounds me.

The wind speaks to me in ancient tongues. It is cooler now, even cold. I huddle close to the camel at night to steal his warmth. It is cool enough that I no longer travel by night, rather by day. I awake one morning to find myself dusted with cold whiteness that disappears quickly when the sun rises.

The star leads me west, ever west.

On this evening as Helios stables his chargers, a dim glow on the distant horizon catches my eye. It is directly beneath the star, but it is no heavenly body. It is of this earth. I am too tired and exhausted to change my direction to avoid it. As I near it, I can smell smoke from a fire made of desert scrub. It is oddly sweet.

The fire illumines a single rider and his camel that lie beside it, and the man warms his hands over the flame. My camel snorts. The wayfarer's shoulders stiffen for an instant, then relax.

"Peace, brother," he calls into the cold night air.

It is a good way to welcome a stranger.

"Peace to you as well," I call back. "May I share the warmth of your fire?"

"Fire belongs to no man, but to all men," he replies. "Come sit with me."

The wind sings a soft and pleasant song and the fire crackles. He adds sticks to it.

I soothe my parched lips with a quaff of water. He has yet to look at me, but stares heavenward at the star.

A bell. In the distance – and so barely perceptible that another man less attuned to silence would never hear it – a small bell rings with a delicate jingle. The other nods. He hears it, too. It grows louder. Maybe there are two bells, or maybe two riders. It approaches from the south.

My host does not look up, but I do. In the gray light cast by the star, another rider on a camel takes shape. He is flesh and blood and enters the glow of the fire. The small bells hang from the camel's bit.

"Peace, brother," my host calls out as he did to me.



“Peace to you as well,” the traveler replies in a deep voice. “*Koosh*,” he breathes and the camel kneels and sits. He dismounts and takes a seat beside us, extending his arms to warm his hands at the fire.

We watch the star in silence until the Big Bear lumbers slowly towards it. Finally, the fire starter speaks. “I am Melchior from Nineveh, the city of Nimrod. While some say the place no longer exists, they are wrong. I come from the north and the stars speak to me. They tell me to follow that one.”

“Melchior. That is a good name,” the newcomer responds. “I am Balthazar from Sana’a, the city of Shem. I come from the south. I, too, know the stars, and that one cries for me to follow it.”

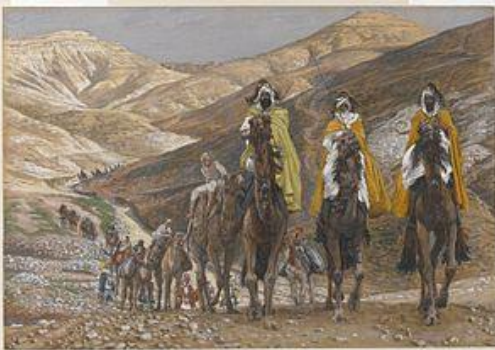
I am ashamed. I have neither the heritage nor the knowledge of the stars that these two men claim. I fear that they will send me on my way as a foolish charlatan meant to deceive them. Still, my master begs me from his grave to always speak truth, and so I do. “I am Gaspar the Hellene, and I travel this way from Kanheri far beyond land and water to the east. My master, Vajrabodhi – dead now – bid me take up his quest to follow that star.” I bow my head in resolution, prepared to face any verdict these two care to pass upon me. Whatever they say, they cannot prevent me from completing Vajrabodhi’s instructions. ‘You are the one,’ he told me with his final breath. ‘The quest is yours.’

Silence is their response until Melchior speaks, “If your master knew the stars and knew to follow this one...”

Balthazar joins in “And if he is dead now and passed the labor to you, then you must do it. We welcome you, Gaspar.”

Melchior bows to Balthazar, then to me. He smiles. “You are very young, not much more than a boy, but we welcome you as one of us now. You do not have to be old to be wise.

“Rest, for our destination is nearer than you might think.”



The following day, we meet a caravan traveling west and bound for Yerushalem, the religious center of Judea, now under Roman domination like the rest of the world. Judea is ruled by a king named Herod that the Roman governors refer to as ‘King of the Jews.’ Could this man Herod’s queen be the mother of the child Vajrabodhi sends me to find? Is this the one we have traveled so far to behold?

Like merchants the world over, these traders are knowledgeable about many things and they know Yerushalem and the people who abide there.

“Is this King Herod’s wife with child?” Melchior asks.

“No,” a fat one in a striped robe replies.

“Are there any rumors of birth in the royal court?” Balthazar inquires.

“No,” another answers. “Curious questions, but the answer to both is no. The king and queen expect no child and none are rumored in the royal court.”

As we approach the rugged Judean foothills with the caravan, the star is nearly above us, but it is slightly to the south. Balthazar determines we must part with the column of traders. "If we continue to Yerushalem, we will not find what we seek. Look. With every step we take, the star moves farther to our left. It is time to make our own way. The object of our quest is not Herod or of his line."

A group of soldiers, eight Romans and two Jews accompanies the caravan, and when we rein up our camels to follow a rocky path that leads south, one Jewish soldier gallops after us. His fellow Jew and the Romans wait for him at the top of the hill.

"Halt," he calls out and quickly overtakes us. "I know of the questions you ask the men in the caravan. You are looking for a king, are you not?"

No one answers. His horse is restless.

"If you find this king," he says, "Herod would be pleased if you return to Yerushalem and tell us of his whereabouts so that we may welcome him to this world in a manner that befits him. He will make it worth your trouble, for that is his way of our good and gracious king."

Melchior stares wordlessly at the soldier and then prods his camel forward. Balthazar and I follow.

"Remember," the soldier calls after us, "Herod will be pleased."



The night is very clear and unusually cold. We are so near to the star that its light banishes the darkness that tries futilely to extinguish it.

A small village twinkles in the foothills that rise before us. The cry of a lost sheep cuts the night like a blade and a shepherd boy not much younger than I am scampers across the path before us to bring the lamb back to its fold.

"Peace to you, brother shepherd," Melchior calls out. "Can you tell me the name of that village?"

The boy hauls the sheep over his shoulders. "That one over there?" he responds with a nod of his head. "That is Bet Lehem, the house of bread. Why should men of greatness such as you travel to Bet Lehem? I think you made a wrong turn. Yerushalem is that way, to the north. Who are you?"

"We are *magi*," Melchior answers. "We know the night skies and have come from faraway lands." He points to the star. "It speaks to us of great things to come and guides us to this village."

The boy shakes his head as if we are madmen. "Then you are here," he concludes and wanders off toward his grazing flock.

Balthazar and his camel with the tiny bells lead us to the village. Bet Lehem is a small town with few homes. An old man holding a candle steps through the door of the first house we approach. He holds the stick high to get a better look at his visitors. When he sees our manner of dress, he falls to his knees. “Great kings,” he exclaims. “I am at your service.”

“Rise, dear man, we are no kings,” Melchior responds. “We have no need of service, only information.”

“Ask then, your highness.”

Melchior leans as low as he can over the camel’s neck. “Can you tell me, sir, have any women birthed here this night?”

The old man scratches the stubble on his unshaven chin. “No, sir, they have not, and I would know, for as you can see the town is small and we are well known one to the other.”

Melchior rises in his seat. The wind moves the bells on Balthazar’s camel. They chime, as if to announce a new sound, a baby’s cry. The old man and Melchior look at each other, astonished. “Is that not the voice of a crying baby?” Balthazar questions.

“What, ho!” the old one exclaims. “Ah yes! Earlier today, my nephew arrived with his wife to register as the law commands. He is of the house of David, and this is his place of birth. It is true. His wife is very pregnant. Perhaps...” He hesitates for an instant. “Here, come with me. Perhaps it was her time.”

The camels kneel and we dismount. The uncle leads us behind his house, through the animal stalls and into a small cave. The sour smell of dung and sodden straw assaults us. Uncle raises his candle for a better look; it is more a grotto because it does not extend far back into the hillside. The man uses the enclosure as a stable.



Movement to my right startles me as a cloaked man – his back to us – stands and turns to face us. He holds a piece of wood in his hand and waves it in a threatening manner. “Who is it?” he calls, “and what do you want?”

The man stands aside when the child cries again. A young maiden with a dirty, sweat-stained face and disheveled hair holds the baby in her arms. Her dress is bloodied. The smudges on her face cannot hide her innocent beauty.

“Do not be afraid, Joseph. It is your Uncle Amos, and with me are three kings though they claim not to be royalty. Judge for yourself.”

We step forward into the shallow light and bow humbly before Joseph and his exhausted wife.

“The child is not one hundred breaths old,” the father explains. “It is a boy, and I think he is hungry.” The baby bawls. The girl’s strength is sapped from the birthing ordeal, but she will do whatever she must do to protect her child. Her power is in her eyes. I turn aside as the mother extends her small breast.

“Forgive us,” Balthazar says. “Have we your permission to return in a while?”

Joseph eyes us suspiciously, but when Amos nods his head, he answers, “Yes. In a while.”

We negotiate the animal droppings in the stalls and find our camels resting in front of Amos’s thatched-roofed cottage.

“Have you a wife?” Melchior politely inquires.

“Dead. Ten years now.” He offers no further explanation.

Suddenly, I stop and place my hands on the shoulders of my companions. “Wait. Something is different.” We stare at one another with wrinkled brows unsure of what it is.

Before we can determine what has changed, what has happened, the shepherd boy races up the path from his pasture. Several others are with him. “Do you see!” he exclaims. “The star is gone! It has vanished!”

The darkness is so obvious that the disappearance of the star passed unnoticed while we were in the grotto. The night is moonless. The sky is thick with stars, but the one we followed to this tiny village is gone. Its absence dispels any doubts that we are where we are supposed to be.

“After our brief encounter, I returned to my flock and I found my brothers speaking to another stranger. ‘Too many strangers in one night,’ I told myself. What can it mean?”

“This one was dressed in a white robe with his hood pulled over his head. ‘You are brothers?’ he asked. Then he told us a child was born this night in our own village, a man who will bring peace to the world.”

“Peace is good,” one of the brothers says.

Another responds, “I am tired of the Roman legionnaires. They are cruel men and have no respect for us.”

The shepherd boy continues his narrative. “At first, I believed him to be another odd one such as I first thought you to be. He knew what I was thinking. The man pointed to the star and said, ‘Glory to God.’ With his words and a single blink of my eyes, the star was gone, and the others that were hidden by its brilliance emerged once more to fill the darkness with light.

“We fell to the ground, fearful and unsure of his intention. If he could make the star disappear, he could do with us whatever he wished. Then he removed his hood. He was a handsome man. He smiled, and he told us not to be afraid. ‘This is good news,’ he said. ‘Tell everyone you meet that in this town, a baby is born who will bring peace to the earth. Go and see for yourselves.’

“We gazed up the path toward the village. I was eager to ask him more questions, but he vanished, disappeared, much like the star. That, sirs is what happened.”

“Calm yourself, boy,” Balthazar speaks in his deep, soothing voice. “Something miraculous has happened. Accept it as that.”

“But what of this child the man in white told us about? Is he here? Have you found him?”

Melchior reminds me of my old master when he answers, “In time, shepherd boy and his brothers, in time.”

“Sit,” Amos commands. “I will bring you water and bread, though I suspect you cannot be gone long from your sheep. There are wolves about.”

“Indeed there are, Amos, but we had to come see as the man bid us do.”



While Amos feeds the shepherds, Melchior, Balthazar and I check on our camels. I take the small chest of myrrh from my bag, and note that my companions bear gifts of their own. The evidence is clear that we are where we are intended to be, although it seems unlikely to me that one who would change the world would be born in such squalid conditions as this man's smelly stable.

When the boys have had their bread and water, Amos says, "I think we may return to the grotto. Enough time has passed for the mother to suckle the infant."

We follow him through the stalls. He has prepared a candle for each of the boys to carry to illuminate our way and to give light and some warmth, meager as it might be to the family. Amos instructs the boys where to place the candles. The soft light bathes the young girl who has wrapped her baby, now sleeping, in swaddling that she has created from her torn dress. The blood has dried, and the clothes will keep him warm as she holds him to her breast.

"The night is cold," Joseph remarks. "Have you wood to build a fire, uncle?"

Amos directs the boys to a pile of sticks and wood. They are skilled in building fires and work quickly to light one at the entrance of the cave. Meanwhile, Amos drags a small crib filled with straw near enough to the fire to receive some of its heat without fear of flame. There is enough dry straw to bring comfort to the sleeping child.

The mother is too weak to rise, and her husband gently takes the baby and places him carefully on the bed of straw. The shepherds have birthed many lambs, but they have never seen a human baby as young as this one. They kneel close to the crib and stare with wide eyes through the spaces between the slats.

"And he is special?" one whispers.

"That is what the man said," the other replies.

"He looks as weak and helpless as a newborn lamb."

"Believe what you will, but there is strength in faith, young shepherds," Amos offers. "Each of us is born with it, though some forget."

"And here is the only proof you need," Melchior proposes. He steps forward, bows first to the father, and then kneels before the child's mother. He places a wooden box at her dirty feet. When he lifts the lid, he reveals a large coffer of gold that reflects the dancing light from the candles throughout the stable. The parents stare wide-eyed; the shepherd boys gasp. They have never seen so much wealth!



"Gold for your boy," Melchior proudly proclaims. "With it, I announce and honor his kingship on earth and the virtue with which he will rule."

Melchior steps aside and clasps Joseph's hands, "Teach him well, young man."

"I will teach him," Joseph responds, "but I have no ambition that he will be anything more than my son. I am but a carpenter, and that is the trade he will inherit from his father."

Balthazar bows to Melchior, then to Joseph and kneels before the mother. He, too places a box beside the one Melchior has positioned at her feet. When he opens the lid, the room is filled with a sweet fragrance.

"I offer your son frankincense," Balthazar is careful to restrain his deep voice so as not to wake the child. "With this incense I acknowledge what has been foretold in scripture since the beginning of time: this boy will grow to be more than a man. May

this perfume envelope his divinity.” Balthazar’s words are cryptic and mysterious, but no one has the courage to ask him for an explanation.

Balthazar embraces Joseph. “Do not be afraid.” The father and the tired mother force weak smiles, not certain what he means, but there is trust in their eyes.

My companions urge me forward. I follow their example. I have no idea what to say, so I close my eyes, breathe deeply and intone “OM!” No one hurries me. For how long I stand in contemplation, I cannot say, but I step forward, bow to Joseph and then kneel before his wife with the wooden chest I have carried from Barigaza.

I open the box to reveal the pieces of myrrh that appear to be small rocks but are not. Like the frankincense, they are fragrant, and the aromas meld to dispel the smell of urine, dung and wet, moldy straw.

I trust that the words that flow from an unknown source within me are true. “As he is divine, so, too is he a man of flesh and blood, and he will suffer, more than any man who has ever breathed or who will breathe. When the time comes, anoint him with the fragrance of this gift and know that when he cannot stand, he will be carried in the arms of angels.”

The mother wipes the single tear that escapes her eyes.

I rise and stand before the father.

“When?” he asks me with a worried look.

“In time,” I answer. “In time.”

When we wake the following morning, I ask Melchior, “What now? Where will you go?”

“I will return to Nineveh, but I will not pass through Yerushalem.”

“And I likewise to Sana’a,” Balthazar says. “What about you, Gaspar? You are closer to home than you have been in some time. Will you return to Hellas, or will you make your way back to this land you call Kanheri?”

“I am undecided,” I answer. “I will think on it.”

“Do not delay,” Melchior advises me. “Remember what the soldier told us about their King Herod. I think he is a jealous and insecure man who feels threatened by the stories his priests tell him about a new king. He will be hunting for us. I feel it in my bones.”

We secure what little baggage we carry on our camels and come together a final time. We grasp forearms to make a circle. Balthazar bows his head; I raise mine and close my eyes. Melchior speaks. “We three have been witness to a great thing. This birth heralds a new age. We may be the only ones who know it at this moment, but the world will never be the same again. Remember what we have seen and done here. The child’s gratitude will endure forever.”

We climb on our camels and salute each other. “We never asked what name they will give the child,” I comment.

“Nor the name of his mother,” Balthazar adds.

“Someday we will know,” Melchior concludes.

I smile. “In time.”

The *magi* echo, “In time.”

The one heads north, the other south. And me? I choose east.