

The Wiseman Returns

SYNOPSIS

A quarter century after he first saw the star in the east, one of the three famous magi, Melchior of Alexandria, returns to Judea to find out what has become of the prophesied Messiah. Melchior's life has been difficult and his faith has suffered, yet he always hoped that the child he once knew, now a man, has taken his place on his throne as king of the Jews.

Those long years ago, after giving his gift of myrrh to a young mother who wept with gratitude, Melchior grew concerned for the family's safety. So he brought Joseph and Mary back to Alexandria, Egypt, the greatest city in the world. When Herod died a few years later, Joseph and his family bid Melchior goodbye and boarded a ship back to their homeland.

Now, many years later, his own life drawing to a close, and hearing nothing of the king of the Jews, Melchior decides to embark on one final journey: to return to Judea and seek counsel from Jesus. But he finds another man ruling in Jerusalem instead: Pontius Pilate, who knows nothing of a Jewish "king." Melchior fears for his life and escapes by night, heading north, toward Galilee.

In the seaport of Ptolemais, Melchior hears rumors of an itinerant preacher and miracle-worker, also named Jesus. He heads inland, toward Nazareth, from where Joseph hailed. On the road he hears about a great prophet whom the provincial governor, Herod Antipas, has beheaded. Sick with dread that the murdered man is Jesus, Melchior races to Nazareth, where he meets an old woman who directs him to Joseph's grave. There Melchior collapses in misery at the loss of his friend. Seeing his distress, the woman approaches, and after a short exchange, a smile lights her face. "Jesus is not dead," she says. "That was his cousin, John, who was a great prophet. Jesus yet travels the roads of Galilee, teaching and healing all who have faith."

Elated, Melchior continues his journey. At Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee,

he meets a Roman centurion who tells him how Jesus healed his servant. The road is packed with pilgrims—devout Jews traveling to Jerusalem for Passover. “The Messiah is there,” says the centurion.

On the road along the lake shore, finding refuge with other travelers from a rain storm under a tree, Melchior overhears two women talking about a man who walked on water and stilled the waves that threatened to capsize his followers’ boat. Melchior is doubtful, but as a stranger, he is reticent to approach the two women to question them about the story.

Further down the lake, Melchior meets a herdsman, who tells him how Jesus cast an evil spirit out of a man. The spirit then entered the herdsman’s pigs, who ran down the hillside, throwing themselves into the lake and drowning.

Melchior is thoroughly confused. This is not the Messiah he expected. Nor is Jesus the Messiah the Jews are expecting, a military leader who will free them from Roman bondage. His remarkable doctrine: “love your enemies,” is contrary not only to scripture, but to common sense as well. And the enemies he is making! Melchior shivers in fear for the young man, who has grown into a powerful, perhaps even reckless, adult, a man whose actions might well draw the unwanted attention of Rome herself.

Taking a short-cut through Samaria, Melchior is attacked by robbers and nearly killed. A Samaritan traveler finds him and takes him to an inn where he is nursed back to health by a woman who once met Jesus at a well, and whose life was dramatically changed by his simple words.

Though he is now half-blind and lame, Melchior vows to find Jesus in Jerusalem. On the Temple mount, he literally bumps into Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, who, upon hearing his travails, apprises him of recent events. Just four days ago, Jesus entered the city, greeted as the Messiah by throngs of people, much to the consternation of the Temple priests.

For the next three days, Jesus taught on the Mount, each day moving closer to the Temple, until just yesterday he challenged the priests on the very steps of the Sanctuary itself. There were even rumors he had prophesied the destruction of the Temple!

Nicodemus, a believer in Jesus' message, is searching for Jesus, for he has not returned to the Mount today. Melchior volunteers to ride to Bethany, where friends of Jesus reportedly live, while Nicodemus searches the city of Jerusalem.

In Bethany, Melchior meets Mary and Martha, who introduce him to their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus reputedly raised from the dead. Melchior is suspicious—are they lying? Are they joking? Perhaps they are ignorant dupes. But no, they are sincere, and their story is compelling. “Jesus is not here,” says Lazarus. “He is celebrating the Passover meal in Jerusalem.”

It is after dark when Melchior returns to Jerusalem. He joins Nicodemus's family for the Passover meal until the ritual turns to the condemnation of the Egyptians, who once enslaved their ancestors. Offended, Melchior leaves the table abruptly and heads out into the dark, wet streets, his mind awirl. There he meets a man clutching a sack of coins, suffering great regret and anxiety. When Melchior mentions Nicodemus, the man tries to give the money to him, but he refuses it and the man stumbles away, sobbing.

Returning to Nicodemus's home, Melchior learns that his host has been called to a late-night meeting of the Sanhedrin. Collapsing wearily into bed, Melchior sleeps until he is roughly awakened the following morning. “They've taken him!” says Nicodemus breathlessly.

They hurry across town and enter the Antonia Fortress, which abuts the Temple Mount. The Chief Priest Caiaphas is present, along with many members of the Sanhedrin. Seeing the powers arrayed against Jesus, Pilate suspects a trick. He wants to set Jesus free, but the crowd roars its opposition. “He has blasphemed!” shouts Caiaphas.

“What is that to me?” says Pilate.

“He calls himself a king!” says Caiaphas. “We have but one king! The Emperor!”

Pilate turns to Jesus. “Are you a king?”

Jesus is silent.

When a crown of thorns is placed on his head and Jesus does not rise up in power and throw it off, Pilate realizes that Jesus is no sorcerer or prophet, but merely a charlatan and an illusionist. “Crucify him, then,” he says, dismissing the crowd with a wave of his hand.

During this time, Melchior has attempted to move to the front of the crowd, but his age and injuries prevent him. When the scourging begins, Melchior is overcome and faints. Minutes later, revived by a follower of Jesus, Melchior looks about at the empty square. “Where is he?”

“Golgotha,” says the young man.

Melchior makes his way to the Place of the Skull, where, standing at the foot of the cross, he finally comes face to face with Jesus. But Jesus, approaching death, can only look down silently at his old friend. Melchior’s hopes are dashed. Is this what it has come to: the murder of a man whose only sin was teaching people to love one another?

To one side he sees Jesus’ mother, Mary. Notwithstanding the circumstances, her face radiates hope. “It is God’s will,” she whispers. Unconvinced, Melchior turns away and stumbles down the hill. The sky is dark with clouds, as if the sun has hidden its face from man’s wickedness. Melchior wanders back into the city and eventually to the Mount, where he wearily collapses on the Temple steps. He is joined by Peter, who pours out his heart, relating the events of the previous night when he denied his master three times, just as Jesus had prophesied.

Suddenly, a great earthquake knocks them off their feet. A great crack opens up in the ground, and a chasm yawns, running from the Temple entrance to the inner Sanctuary. Lightning illuminates

a scene of fire, smoke, and collapsing stone walls. Melchior and Peter slowly make their way into the Temple and finally reach the Sanctuary, the most sacred precinct in all Judaism. The great floor-to-ceiling veil has fallen, exposing the Holy of Holies. It is completely empty.

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We find Melchior once again on the road along the Sinai shore, heading back to Egypt. He is weary and completely disillusioned. The Messiah is dead, his followers scattered, his teachings repudiated. Soon, even his memory will be lost.

Camping at a small oasis, Melchior has a dream in which he sees his first visit to Judea. He sees the escape from Judea and the journey across the desert. He sees young Jesus walking in the hypostyle hall of the Karnak Temple of Thebes and standing atop the immense Pharos lighthouse in Alexandria. He sees the tearful parting when Joseph and his family board the ship returning to Judea. He sees Jesus as a young carpenter traveling the dusty roads of Galilee, his toolbox slung over his shoulder, his donkey plodding beside him. He sees Jesus baptized in a river, and hears a piercing voice declare the young man's true parentage. He sees Jesus turn water into wine at a wedding; sees him gathering disciples; sees crowds of people listening, some believing, some doubting, some angry. He sees Jesus raise a man from the dead. Then he sees himself at the cross, looking up. Tears come to Melchior's eyes. "Why?" he whispers. "Why did he come to this evil world?"

Then Melchior sees a stone rolling away from a tomb, and a woman entering and then running quickly back out. She approaches a man and asks where they have taken her master's body. The man turns. She falls to her knees—Jesus stands before her, risen from the dead.

The vision fades and Melchior is once again alone at the tiny oasis. He scans the sky and finds a new star near the western horizon. "Now I see," he says, finally understanding. "My journey, like yours, is not yet over. Long ago, I followed another star. Now I will follow *you*."