

The Star... an excerpt from The Exile of Gaspar

by E.S. Kraay

Time becomes meaningless to me. The sky would be lonely were it not for the star. My only cohort, the camel seems ever bored with my presence. He does not despise me; 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. I cross paths with no one.

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 whiteness that disappears quickly when the sun rises.

The star continues to lead me.

On this day as Helios stables his steeds, a bright glow catches my eye. It is directly beneath the star, but it is not made of a heavenly body. It is of this earth. I am too tired and exhausted to change my direction to avoid it. It is a fire made of desert scrub. As I near it, I can smell the smoke. It is oddly sweet.

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

"Peace, brother," he calls into the cold night air. It is a good sign.

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

"Fire does not belong to any man," 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 warm 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. My new companion nods. He hears it, too. It grows louder. Maybe there are two bells, or maybe two riders. Could it be an angel? It approaches from the south.

While my host refuses to look, I do. In the gray light cast by the star and the rising moon, another rider on a camel takes shape in the darkness. 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.

"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. He extends his arms to the fire to warm his hands.

We sit quietly for a long while, each with his eyes on the star. Finally, the firestarter 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 dead 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. Finally from Melchior, "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.”

Finally, Melchior turns to look first at Balthazar, then at me. He smiles. “You are very young, not much more than a boy, but you are 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 join a caravan traveling east. It is bound for Jerusalem, the capitol of Judea, now under Roman rule like the rest of the world that these men know and ruled by a king named Herod that the Roman rulers call ‘King of the Jews.’ Could this man Herod's queen be giving birth to a son? Is this the king we have traveled so far to behold?

We have time enough to ask these questions of the traders in the caravan who know Jerusalem and the people who abide there. No, we learn, the king and queen do not expect a child.

As we climb into the rugged Judean foothills, the star is nearly above us, but it is slightly to the south. Balthazar determines it is time for us to part with the caravan. “If we continue to Jerusalem, we will not find what we seek. Our king is not Herod or his line. Look. With every step we take, the star moves farther to our left. It is time to make our own way.”

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 Roman contemporaries wait for him at the top of the hill.

“Wait,” he calls out and quickly catches up to us. “I know of the questions you ask the men in the caravan. You are looking for a king, are you not?”

Not a one of us answers. His horse fidgets nervously.

“If you find this king,” he says, “Herod would be pleased if you return to Jerusalem 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.”

Melchior is the first to prod his camel forward, and 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 to our east. 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. Jerusalem 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 leads us to the village. *Bet Lehem* is a small town with few homes. An old man holding a candle steps to 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 all know each other.”

Melchior rises in his seat. The wind blows the bells on Balthazar's camel. They chime, and then above the sound, we hear

a baby's cry. The old man and Melchior look at each other, astonished. "That does sound like a crying baby, does it not?" 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, and the uncle uses it as a stable.

There is movement to my right 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 as a weapon. "Who is it?" he calls, "and what do you want?"

The child cries once more, and the man stands aside. A young maiden with sweat-stained face and disheveled hair holds the baby in her arms. Her dress is bloodied.

"Do not be afraid, Joseph. It is your Uncle Amos, and with me are three kings though they claim not to be."

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

"The child is not one hundred breaths old," the father explains. "It is a boy, and I think he is hungry." The baby cries out again. The girl's strength is sapped from the birthing ordeal, but she will do whatever she must do to protect her baby. 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 simple house.

“Have you a wife?” Melchior asks politely.

Amos shakes his head. “Dead. Ten years now.” He offers no more explanation.

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

Before we can determine exactly what he means, 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!”

The darkness is so obvious that the disappearance of the star passed unnoticed as we visited Joseph and his family in the grotto. There is no moon this night. It is so dark that even the farthest star shines its light to bathe the earth. 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.

“When I returned to my flock after our paths crossed, 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 and wore his hood over his head. ‘You are brothers?’ he asked. Then he told us a king was born this night in this very village, a king who will bring peace to the world.”

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

The other 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 in the highest.’ With those words, the star vanished instantly, and the others that you see adorning the darkness emerged in its place.

“We fell to the ground, fearful that he might be a vengeful man. If he could make the star disappear, he could do with us whatever he wished. Then he smiled, and he told us not to be afraid. ‘This is

good news,' he said. 'Spread the news to everyone you see 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 to 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 king 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, boys," 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 move to 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 to me unlikely that a great king 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 are welcome to return to the grotto. Enough time has passed for the mother to suckle the hungry 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 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 have one lit 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 warmth. There is enough dry straw to bring some 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 a king?” one whispers.

“That is what the man said,” the other replies.

“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 smile appreciatively; 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.”

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 unclear, but no one has the courage to ask him exactly what he means.

Balthazar embraces Joseph. "Do not be afraid." When he says the words, the parents smile. They trust him.

My two companions look to me and nod. I have no idea what to say. 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 in my hands from Barigaza.

I open the box to reveal the pieces 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 straw.

"As he is divine," the words flow from an unknown source, but I know what I say is true, "so, too is he a man of flesh and blood, and he will suffer, more than most. Anoint him with this and trust 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 step to the father and kneel before him as well. "When?" he asks me.

"In time," I tell him. "In time."

"Where will you go?" I ask Melchior when we wake the following morning.

"I will return to Nineveh, but I will not pass through Jerusalem."

"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. "This King Herod will be hunting for us. I feel it in my bones."

When what little baggage we carry on our camels is secure, we come together a final time and 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 rise on our camels and bow, one to the 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.

