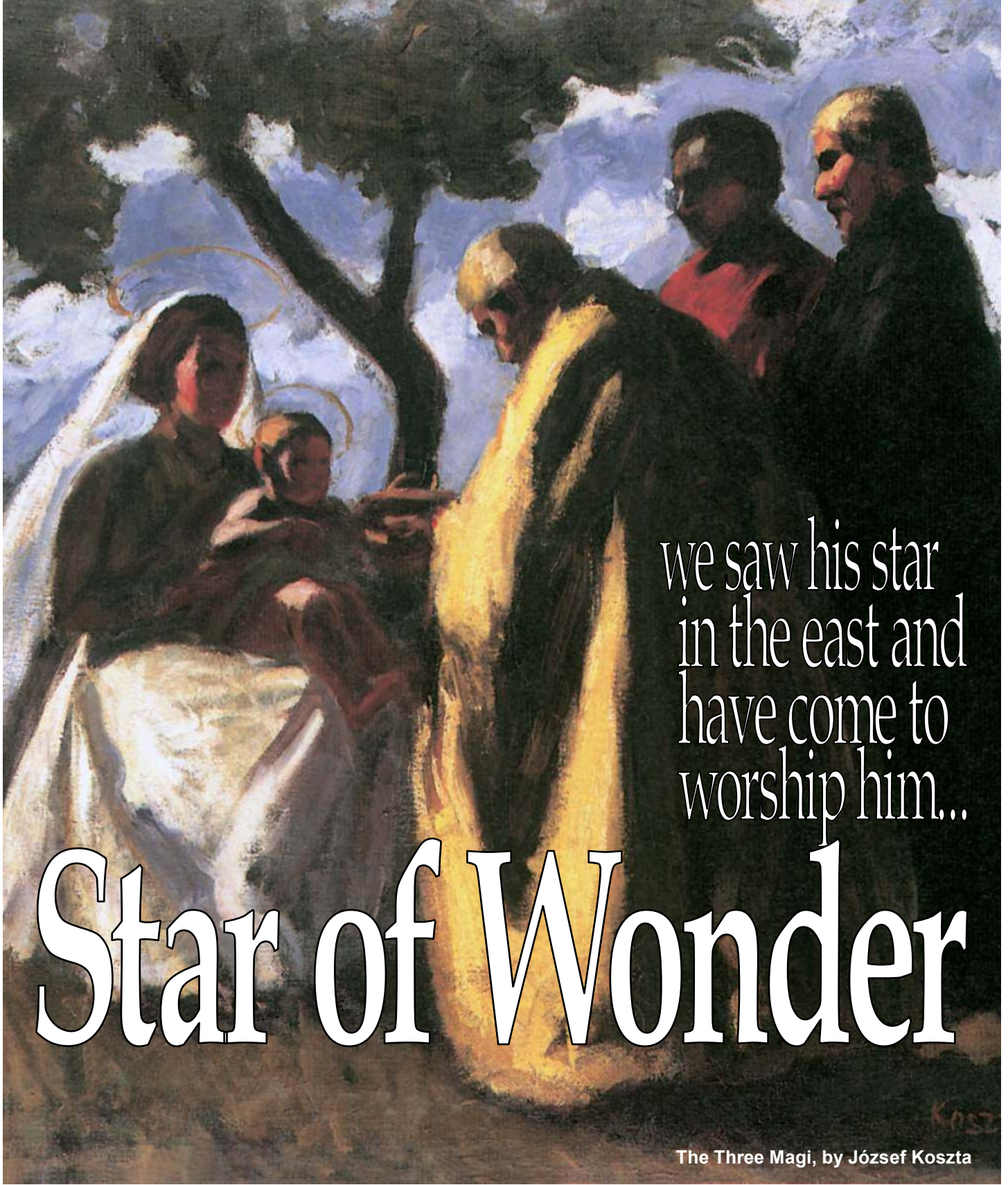


The Barnabas Letter

a newsletter from
The Barnabas Center,
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in Charlotte, NC

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Christmas 2006



we saw his star
in the east and
have come to
worship him...

Star of Wonder

The Three Magi, by József Koszta

a Telescope for Christmas

By Roger Edwards

For the first time, I wasn't searching the toy section of the Sears and Roebuck Christmas catalogue. The year was 1968, I was 12 and had my sights on an unusual Christmas gift. Instead of a baseball glove, bike, or BB gun, I wanted a telescope.

I was browsing when the telescope caught my eye. The black and white photo looked technical, expensive and seemed more tool than toy. At \$50, it would have to be a combined Christmas and birthday gift. So I almost selected something else, something on the color pages. But the image of that telescope raised to the moon drew me. I reread the description: "200X Refractor Telescope with 75mm objective lens. Precision ground objective mirror. 35mm...." I didn't understand the terms, but I felt the promise.

Who knows, I thought? I might discover something previously unknown—something important and celestial. I'd be out in my back yard one night observing Saturn, adjusting one of the knobs and then, 'Wow! What is that?' And eureka! I would have discovered a new planet.

"What will you name it," the NASA astronomers would ask? "Me?" I'd say. "Yes," the white coats would say in unison, suppressing jealousy while preserving protocol, "You discovered it – you must name it." "Hmmm," I'd say, rubbing my chin, "Let's see, Venus... Neptune... Say, aren't most of the Roman god's names already taken?" They nod thoughtfully. Then a small bald-headed man in the back suggests that I name it after myself. "Aw, shucks," I'd say. But the scientific men, putting their clipboards under their elbows would applaud, officially welcoming the newest member of the solar system – the 10th planet: *Rogierius*.*

It was decided. I was getting a telescope.

In the nights before Christmas, I lay in bed, gazing out past my cowboy curtains at the stars. I could envision myself standing out on that slight rise of field behind my house. Silhouetted against the backdrop of a glittering Milky Way, bent under my slender instrument, I would make for the heavens. Each night, a longer voyage. First Mars, where I'd soar above massive, swirling dust storms. I'd zigzag

through the asteroid belt's silent grey boulders. And then I'd pass under Jupiter's cycloptic red eye and on through his multiple moons. After that, who knows? Perhaps I'd seize a comet by the tail and hitchhike the galaxy.

Fantasizing about my Christmas present was a pre-holiday tradition of mine. I'd been Davy Crockett with a wooden gun and General Patton with a plastic army. But these dreams were different. They felt both serious and mysterious. Was my telescope a scientific instrument to examine data from the stars? Or an enchanted looking glass to reveal their secrets? I was in-between two worlds, suspended between physics and metaphysics, between fact and faith. The tension raised me aloft.

By night, I'd wander outside, hands clasped behind my back, divining for the brightest star. By day, I hand-copied, into a spiral notebook, the planetary tables from the World Book Encyclopedia; circumference, distance from the sun, number of moons, length of orbit. My mind was filled with numbers, large and astronomical, but my chest was filled with verse. Though aiming at constellations, I kept veering toward heaven.

Christmas Morning

On Christmas morning, there was no mistaking it. A four foot slender box, wrapped in green paper was lying under the tree. The 21st Century had arrived in Siler City. Ripping off the paper revealed a heavy cardboard box with a tabbed lid. Inside, black and white components were wedged carefully in individual compartments

of molded Styrofoam. There was an instruction manual, four sized lenses, and a special cleaning cloth. It was sleek and surgical ... and definitely not Mattel.

Hours before nightfall, I set up my 'observatory', consisting of telescope, notebook, lawn chair and able dog-assistant. When the stars appeared, I chose the most powerful lens in the box, rotating it into place with German precision. This was a historic moment – 'going where no boy from Chatham County had gone before'. I was about to witness the fiery surface workings of a far-away sun. I bent and peered through my remainer-tube. For 15 minutes I peered, yet my eyepiece remained totally dark. There were



from the 1971 Sears & Roebuck Wish Book

*Pronounced: rä-`ger-ē-is

plenty of stars visible, but I couldn't locate even one. I wrote in my notebook; *'Observation #1: Outer space is mostly space.'*

I said, "Hmmm," several times, but it didn't help. So I went inside, where it was warm, to read the instruction manual.

"See anything?" my mom asked.

"I'm working," I said.

"Maybe you didn't take that lid thing off," she said, referring to the lens cap.

"Aww, mom!" Did she think I was stupid?

I waited a few minutes, then went out to check the lens cap. Hah! I had too taken it off. I tried swiveling more slowly. There! Something flashed past. I retraced my arc. And there quivering in my circle of optical power, was a solitary star. That star, I knew, was tens of millions of miles away. But through my telescope, it looked only... millions of miles away. *'Observation #2,'* I wrote, *'To the naked eye, stars appear as little dots of light. But through a powerful Sears and Roebuck telescope, they are transformed into ... slightly larger dots of light.'*

My telescope wasn't nearly as powerful as I had imagined it in my mind. Even at 200X, my star revealed little detail. I saw no spots, solar flares, or color. I was disappointed, but not disillusioned. My star was too small to be catalogued, but large enough to be undeniably real. I, boy scientist, had captured a star.

Or had I? Perhaps it was I who had been captured. Bringing that star a little bit closer magnified how far away it truly was. From reading, I knew that the starlight touching my lens had been traveling for many years. As I looked across vast stretches of space outwards, I was literally seeing into time backwards. The sheer proportion silenced me. But it was the near connection that so deeply stirred me. I was experiencing the presence of haunting beauty, mathematic and aesthetic, immense and timeless. And I'd been standing underneath it all along with neither the eyes nor soul to see it. Materialists would term my experience 'intrigue'; philosophers might call it 'deep religious sentiment'. But a Christian mystic would name it: 'wonder'. No, I had not captured a star; I'd been struck by one.

The Magi

Wondering upon a star is an old Christmas tradition. I'm not the first to study the sky at Yuletide. Long ago, there were other stargazers, learned men, meticulous men, men who, outstanding in their fields, observed an extraordinary star. So taken by their star - they took to their camels. They were the Magi, the legendary three kings who sought the meaning behind the Bethlehem Star.

These men of arts, I am told, lived in a period of history when there was little division between science and religion. Their study of astronomy (the movement of stars) and their practice of astrology (the meaning in stars) presented them no dichotomy. They believed the 'up there' could enlighten the 'down here'. This was the ancient pagan's intuition. But

not entirely pagan. It was at least pointed in the right direction. For the problem with astrology isn't that it's too far out, but that it isn't far out enough. Astrology seeks enlightenment in the stars, when true illumination lies behind them.

I was looking, even at 12, for enlightenment too. I wanted to find it with my telescope. But there was a dark side to my search. I didn't want to merely find meaning, I wanted to capture it. Like a conquering Roman god, I wanted to plant my flag onto it and name it so I could make a name for myself. All my life, I've been trying this - using some tool or technique to catch a star thinking that this would make me one. This is the modern pagan's intuition. But it isn't entirely pagan either.

It isn't pagan to gaze out past your cowboy curtains in the middle of the night. It isn't pagan to stroll underneath the starry host with your hands clasped behind you. It isn't pagan to be smitten by beauty. God intended it, sowing wonder across the creation like He sprinkled stars across the sky. God is light. And His brightness breaks into reality through every aperture; the green on the blade of grass, the shimmer on water, the twinkle in a child's eye. This filtered light rouses wonder and wonder stirs desire for God.

But it is pagan to think we can capture light in a box. And foolish too, for once the lid is shut, you're left holding only so much darkness. You cannot harness mystery with a science kit, or hoard glory in a bank account or barter for beauty. These spiritual realities cannot be acquired by commerce or conquest. True meaning, if you are to have it at all, must come to you freely. Enlightenment is a grace, and grace can only be gained as a gift.

We've been thinking through the wrong end of the telescope. We aren't the great space explorer. We're the lost planet. We don't discover God; He discovers us. It is God, like mighty Orion, who pursues. Across vast stretches of space and eternity past, He advances to redeem you, lodge His banner of grace into your heart, and claim sovereignty over your life. It is He who christens you.

The Bethlehem star turned the Magi's paganism upside down. Their vocation was to coolly decipher remote codes, but then this one extraordinary night, they receive a warm personal message. This was no mere celestial alignment, they discerned; it was the approach of God. He was coming Himself. Suddenly, the meaning behind the stars had a face - and ten fingers and toes.

Christmas turns all paganism upside down. Christmas turns the universe upside down. The High and Holy comes near and lowly; the transcendent becomes immanent; God comes to us; Emmanuel. The God who made those distant stars isn't far away. He's so close that He walks up behind us. So close that the magi of the East had to turn West. So close, that their 'seeking' ended with the delightful surprise of being 'found'. Perhaps we need to turn also - turn and look! Christ is here! Come for us.

Observation # 3. Eureka! I've been discovered.

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