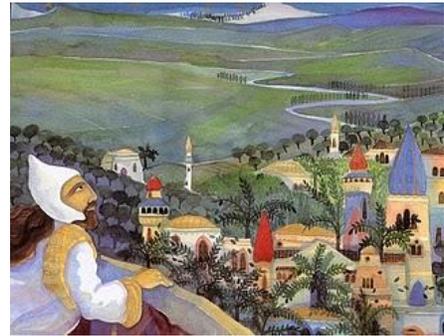


Story of the Other Wise Man
By Henry Van Dyke
Abridged for use in worship by Ann Hatfield

The Story of the Other Wise Man, by Henry Van Dyke, is the fictional story of a fourth wise man, named Artaban, who lived in Persia in the days when Augustus Caesar was master of many kings and Herod reigned in Jerusalem.

We pick up Artaban's story just as he is preparing to catch up with his three fellow magi who have departed ahead of him, bearing their rich gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Artaban is carrying gifts of his own – three precious stones: a ruby, a sapphire, and a pearl, which he hopes to present to the Christ child.



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All night long Vasda, the swiftest of Artaban's horses, had been waiting in her stall, pawing the ground impatiently, as if she shared the eagerness of her master's purpose. As Artaban placed himself upon her back, he said, "God bless us both, and keep our feet from falling and our souls from death." For Artaban knew he must ride swiftly to join the other magi.

Under his encouragement, each day his faithful horse measured off the allotted proportion of the distance. On the eve of the last day, they approached the outskirts of Babylon, the appointed meeting place. In a grove of palm trees, Vasda sensed some danger and slowed her pace. Suddenly, she stood still, quivering in every muscle, before a dark object in the shadow of the last palm tree.

Artaban dismounted. The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying in the road. His humble dress and haggard face indicated he was probably one of the poor Hebrew exiles, who still dwelt in Babylon. His pallid skin bore the mark of the deadly fever that ravished the marshlands at this time of year. The chill of death was in his lean hand, and, as Artaban released it, the arm fell limply on the man's motionless breast. However, as Artaban turned to go, the brown, bony fingers closed upon the hem of his robe.

Artaban's heart leaped to his throat – not with fear – but with resentment at a possible delay in his plans. If he stayed to care for the man, he would miss the appointed meeting time. His companions, thinking Artaban had abandoned his journey, would go on without him. He would lose his quest to see the Christ Child. But how could he leave this man to die alone? If he stayed, life might be restored.

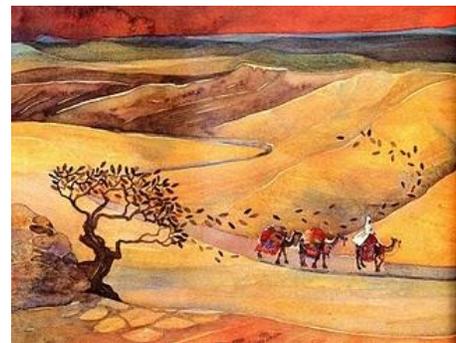


“God of mercy,” Artaban prayed, “direct me in the holy path of wisdom which only you know.” With renewed faith, Artaban turned back to the sick man. Taking off his robe, he brought water from a nearby canal and started caring for the man.

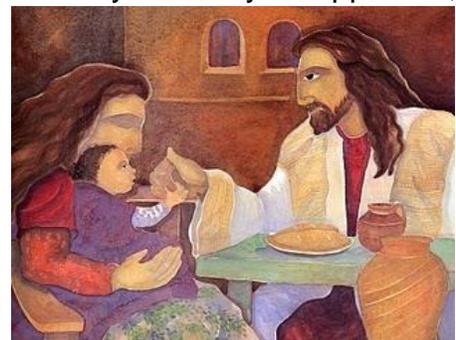
When the patient regained consciousness, Artaban gave him the remainder of his bread and wine, and some healing herbs. In return, the Hebrew said, “I can tell you where the Messiah must be sought, not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. May the Lord bring you safely to that place, because you have shown mercy.”

Although Artaban rode with the greatest haste the rest of the way, he arrived too late. His friends were nowhere to be seen, but they had left a message on a piece of parchment: “We have waited past midnight, and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert.”

In despair, Artaban collapsed on the ground. “With no food and with a spent horse, how can I cross the desert?” he wondered. “I must return to Babylon, sell my sapphire, and buy a train of camels and provisions for the journey. I may never overtake my friends. Only God knows whether or not I shall lose my purpose because I tarried to show mercy.”



After buying supplies, Artaban set out again. When he arrived in Bethlehem, the streets seemed deserted. It was rumored that Herod was sending soldiers, presumably to enforce some new tax. From the open door of one cottage, Artaban heard a mother singing a lullaby to her child. He knocked at the entrance and introduced himself. The woman told him that it was now the third day since the three wise men had appeared in Bethlehem. They had found Joseph, Mary, and the baby, and they had laid their gifts at his feet. Then the magi had mysteriously disappeared, and Joseph had secretly fled in the night with his wife and child. It was whispered they were going far away to Egypt.



As Artaban listened, the child in her arms looked up and smiled. His heart warmed at the sight. Then suddenly, there was a cry from the street: “The soldiers of Herod are killing the children.”

Artaban went to the doorway. The soldiers came hurrying down the street with bloody hands and swords. The captain approached the door to thrust Artaban aside. “I am alone in the place,” Artaban stated.

In his hand, he revealed the giant ruby. Artaban said, “I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent man who will leave this house in peace.”

The captain, amazed at the splendor of the gem, took it and ordered his men: “March on, there are no children here.”



Then Artaban prayed, “O God of truth, forgive my sin! I have lied to save the life of a child.”

But the woman, weeping for joy behind him, said softly, “Because you have saved the life of my child, may the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord be kind and gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

Then Artaban traveled on to Egypt, seeking everywhere for traces of the family that had fled from Bethlehem.

In Alexandria, he sought counsel of a Hebrew rabbi, who told him to seek the King, not among the rich but among the poor. Artaban searched from place to place. He saw hunger and famine, plague-stricken cities, imprisoned and enslaved people. Though he found no one to worship, he found many to serve. As the years passed, he fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick, and comforted the captive.



Thirty-three years of Artaban’s life passed away, and he was still a pilgrim. His hair was now white as snow. Worn and weary – but still looking for the King – he had come for the last time to Jerusalem.

It was the season of Passover, and the city was bustling with visitors. But on this day, there was a singular agitation visible in the multitude. A crowd was moving toward the Damascus gate.

Artaban inquired where they were going. One answered, “We are going to the execution on Golgotha, outside the city walls. Two robbers are to be crucified, and with them another called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who has done many wonderful works among the people. But the priests and elders have said that he must die because he claims to be the Son of God. Pilate sent him to the cross, because he said that he was the ‘King of the Jews.’”

Artaban’s heart beat quickly. He wondered, “Could it be the same one who had been born in Bethlehem thirty-three years ago, at whose birth the star had appeared? Could it be that my pearl, my last treasure, is just in time to ransom him from death?”

But just then, Artaban saw a troop of Roman soldiers coming down the street, dragging a girl with a torn dress and matted hair.

As Artaban paused, she broke away from her tormentors and threw herself at his feet. “Have pity on me,” she cried, “and save me, for the sake of the God of purity. My father was also of the magi but he is dead, and I am to be sold as a slave to pay his debts.”



Artaban trembled, as he again felt the old conflict arising in his soul – the one that had come to him in the palm grove of Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem. Twice the gifts that he hoped to offer the King had been drawn from his hand to the service of humanity. Would he fail a third time? One thing was clear – to rescue this helpless girl would be a true act of love.

He took the pearl from his pocket. Never had it seemed so luminous and radiant. He laid the pearl in the hand of the slave. He said, “Daughter, this is your ransom. It is the last of my treasures, which I had hoped to offer the King.”



While he yet spoke, the darkness of the sky thickened, and shuddering tremors ran through the earth. The walls of the house rocked, and stones crashed to the ground. The soldiers fled in terror. Artaban sank beside a protecting wall. What had he to fear? What did he have to live for? He had given away his last treasure. The quest was over, and he had failed.

As one lingering tremor of the earthquake quivered beneath him, a heavy tile, shaken from a roof, fell and struck Artaban on the temple. He lay breathless and pale. The rescued girl bent over him, afraid he was dead. Then a sound came through the twilight, very small and sweet, like distant music. The notes were clear, but the girl could not understand the words.



Then the lips of Artaban began to move, as if in answer, and she heard him say, “Not so, my Lord: For when did I see you hungry, and feed you? Or thirsty, and give you water? Or naked, and cloth you? When did I see you sick or in prison, and visit you? Thirty-three years have I looked for you; but I have never seen your face, nor ministered to you, my King.” As he stopped speaking, the sweet, musical voice came again. She heard it, very faintly and far away. But now she understood the words: “Truly, I say to you, inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.”

A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the pale face of Artaban, as one long, last breath exhaled gently from his lips. His journey was ended. His treasures were accepted. The Other Wise Man had found the King.

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In the midst of this Christmas season, may you find hope, light, and life in the smallest acts of love. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and forgive each other. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.



May this season continue to fill you with joy!

Merry Christmas!

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The Story of the Other Wise Man, by Henry Van Dyke, was first published in *Harper's* magazine in 1893, and in book form in 1896. It is the fictional story of a fourth wise man, named Artaban. The full text of the story, which is in the public domain, may be found online at Project Gutenberg:
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10679>