

Relating to Ataban, the ‘Other Wise Man’

In my pre-Christmas reading I came across Henry Van Dyke’s story of the ‘Other Wise Man’. He published the story in 1895 and Hallmark Hall of Fame adapted it for TV in 1953. It was also made into an opera in 2000.

It is an interesting story, all about Ataban, the fourth Wise Man (assuming the tradition is true that there were three Wise Men in the original Christmas story). Like the other Wise Men, in the Gospel story, Ataban sees signs in the heavens proclaiming that a King has been born and, like them, he sets out on a long journey to meet him and give him presents. Ataban’s presents were a sapphire, a ruby and a high value pearl. His aim, as he sets off, is to meet up with the others and travel, with them, to find the newborn King.

Setting off in haste, he stops along the way to help a man who is dying and this makes him late for his meeting with the other three wise men. Unfortunately as he is still alone he cannot travel the desert with only a horse and so he has to sell one of his treasures to buy camels and supplies. He carries on and reaches Bethlehem, only to be too late to see baby Jesus, as his parents, Joseph and Mary had escaped, with him, to Egypt. Ataban, therefore, misses out again. He saves another person’s life, this time a child, and then travels to Egypt in search of Jesus. Here he continues to perform many acts of kindness. After thirty-three years, Ataban is still a pilgrim, still wandering around in search of the King. He arrives in Jerusalem just at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion only to miss seeing Jesus because he was spending his last treasure on paying helping a woman by paying a ransom to prevent her being sold into slavery.

At Jesus’ death, there was an earthquake and, in the middle of it, Ataban is fatally struck on the head by falling masonry. As he is dying Ataban is convinced he has completely failed. Every time, he has missed out on finding Jesus and giving him his presents. Each time he was late and each time, he gave away the presents he had for Jesus, to help someone in need. The story ends with a quiet voice whispering assuring words to Ataban that, actually, he had seen Jesus on so many occasions and Jesus had seen Ataban too. As a result: ‘A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the pale face of Ataban like the first ray of dawn on a snowy mountain-peak. One long, last breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips. His journey was ended. His treasures accepted, The Other Wise Man had found the King’ (*Henry Van Dyke 1895*)

Can we relate to Ataban and his story? In Matthew’s Gospel we read Jesus’ words: I’m telling the solemn truth: whenever you did one of these things (feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, visit some sick or in prison) to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me – you did it for me.’ (*Matthew 25:40 The Message*). It seems Henry Van Dyke wanted his story to show us that although Ataban had missed seeing Jesus (he was late every time), because of the way he had helped so many people, he had consistently been with Jesus all along his pilgrimage but hadn’t realised.

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