

My Christmas in Isfahan, Iran

In the mid-1970s I joined an Armenian-Iranian friend and his family in Isfahan, Iran, during the Christmas season. I had lived in Iran for several years but had never visited the city of almost 2 million people often referred to “as half of the world.”

During my visit, I attended service at the Vank, or Holy Savior Cathedral, built in 1606 and enjoyed the live Santa Claus who continuously strolled around the snowy scene set up outside the cathedral. I kept waiting for the arrival of the three substitute wise men and their camels, imagining what I would do and say if I had the opportunity to greet and interact with them. Could they truly represent the Magi, or kings who visited Jesus at birth and were made famous in the Gospel of Matthew? My imagination ran wild when thinking about a possible conversation with the modern-day Magi, but the kings never appeared.

I left the scene disappointed and with questions. How much would the substitute Magi really understand about the baby Jesus in the manger? Was their participation in the annual celebration a symbol of local Christian-Islamic unity? Did the substitute Magi, at least 1 of the 3, agree that the gold that one of the original kings offered acknowledged Jesus’s royal standing? Answers to the questions, of course, remained elusive.

One early morning, two days after Christmas and my visit to the Holy Savior Cathedral, my friend and I bade his family adieu and started the four-hour-plus drive back to Tehran. After approximately two hours on the road, we entered the large desert area that extends several hundred miles and encompasses both Tehran and Isfahan.

As far as the eye could see only sand and pebbles covered the

ground. No grasses or shrubs were evident. The extreme summer heat prevents land cultivation. Camel and sheep breeding represents a main source of living for the few inhabitants of the desert. Even in December, the sun shone brightly and demanded the use of sunglasses.

Suddenly, three camels, sometimes referred to as "ships of the desert," attracted my attention. Aboard each camel was an adult, whom we assumed was a male. Rather than facing the west, they faced the east as if they had delivered their gifts to Jesus and were returning home. Their movement was slow but deliberate.

Even glancing at the camels and their passengers brought back the thrill of Christ's birth and the original Magi's visit to Bethlehem. The camel riders could have already delivered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, paid tribute to the King of kings and been returning to their homes. Perhaps these three substitute Maji had declared to themselves and to the world the brightness of Jesus' dawn and had unknowingly continued a major Christian tradition of spiritual significance to all believers. They furthered my devotion to Christ and the Christian tradition. {eoa}

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