

The Epiphany of our Lord

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Is 60.1-6,9; Mt 2.1-12

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“... Behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.”

Well, this really is one of the weirdest stories in the New Testament, isn't it? Pagan priest-*slash*-astrologers divine (so to speak) by some odd confluence of stars and planets they have observed in the night sky that a King is to be born. And they further divine (again, so to speak) that this King will be the King and Messiah of the Hebrew people, some of whose sacred texts they have been reading in their leisure time.ⁱ

And further, so confident are they in the perspicacity of their divination, so limpid are the stars, that they hie themselves off to Palestine from their Persian homes. No small thing, either: some few months of hard and dangerous travel. Maybe you remember T.S. Elliot's poem, which likely catches something of the reality:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the winter sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory...ⁱⁱ

It is such a strange story. Remember that in the ancient world one of the things that made the Jewish people so odd and peculiar, even reviled and mocked, was their refusal to engage in, and their prophets prolonged polemic against, any and all attempts to divine history's unfolding path by astrology or hepatoscopy or tea leaves or cheiromancy or chicken entrails or even looking for Indians on Tootsie Pop wrappers (that's how we did it when I was a boy) or any of the other 300 or so ways listed on the Wikipedia “methods of divination” page – methods by which we desperate human beings have attempted to arm ourselves against “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” God's people are against all that, because we know that we are not in the hands of capricious fate or childish godlings or blind chance, but in the hands of the Sovereign God who, as it happens, made the sun and stars, “the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south,” as the book of Job has it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Incidentally, all this is clinching evidence for the authenticity of this story – that it really happened. Because it is just unbelievable that ancient Jews or Christians or Jewish Christians would have invented a story for themselves and public consumption in which astrology actually proves effective.

Which leads us to ask, why does it work for these Wise Men, these curious Magi? It is a strange story, and it leaves us wondering just what they saw in the sky that was so clear to them but apparently so opaque to everyone else?

It's natural to wonder about such things, and so it is all the more surprising to notice that St. Matthew betrays *absolutely no interest in the matter whatsoever*. Which is maybe a clue that this story, as much as we love it, is not really about the Magi at all, curious about them as we may be. No, for Matthew the story is not about Persian magi, nor their materials, methods, and measures. Rather this story we love so much finds its meaning and significance in the larger story of the God whose coming Kingdom arrived in Bethlehem through the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that Kingdom enfleshed in the Babe and King these magi travelled so far to adore. That is the story Matthew is telling, and it is the story that you and I are living.

The magi – pagan, superstitious, “fluttered folk and wild”^{iv} – are signs not just *for* us, but actually *of* us, of you and me and every Gentile “wild olive shoot” grafted on to the “nourishing root” of Israel’s tree.^v

We *are* the story’s magi, but the main actor was and is God Himself, who when he called Abraham promised that through him “all the families of the earth” would be blessed,^{vi} and who spake by the prophet to say of his Anointed,

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes round about, and see; they all gather together, they come to you...

No, the story here is not the cleverness of the Gentiles, but the searching heart of God, who in love and mercy reached down and grabbed these magi by the superstition and dragged them from Persia to Palestine to see and greet and worship their Salvation – their “King and God and Sacrifice.”^{vii}

That is the story Matthew is telling and we are living. The same searching heart of God has reached down by the Holy Spirit and grabbed us – who knows how? – by the circumstances of our lives; by the tender care of loving parents; by the examples of the saints; by our own weird and superstitious ideas about life, the universe, and everything; maybe even... perhaps... as unlikely as it might seem... by the “folly of preaching”^{viii} – he has grabbed us and dragged us here to this Bethlehem, this “House of Bread,” to see and greet and worship – even to eat and drink our Salvation, our “God and King and Sacrifice.”

That is the wonder of Epiphany and our life’s great joy and privilege. As John Betjeman, another Anglo-catholic poet had it,

No love that in a family dwells,
No caroling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single truth compare –
That God was mine in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine.^{ix}

Come, and with the Magi, let us adore him.

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ⁱ Some, but only some; Balaam’s oracle in Numbers 24 (“a star shall come out of Jacob”) seems to be behind their search, but they are apparently unfamiliar with the Bethlehem prophecy of Micah (Mch 5.1-3).

ⁱⁱ T.S. Elliot, “The Journey of the Magi.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Job 9.9; cf. Job 38.31 & Am 5.8. Re divination, see Lv 19.26; Dt. 18.9-14; Is 47.12-14; Jer 10.1-3

^{iv} Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden.”

^v Rom 11.11-24

^{vi} Gen 12.1-3

^{vii} H 128, “We three kings of orient are”

^{viii} 1 Cor 1.21

^{ix} John Betjeman, “Christmas”