

January 6, 2013  
The Feast of the Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6  
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
MATTHEW 2:1-12

## THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN

Some people are very hard to give gifts to. I suspect many of us have been faced with this over the last month. I don't mean people who have a hard time *accepting* gifts, but the people who, to us, seem to "have everything" and/or don't seem to "want" anything more. Yet if you *want* to give such a person a gift, what do you give?

The very first people to face this problem at this particular "holiday season" were some "wise men from the East" who, in fact, *invented* the custom of giving gifts around the time of Jesus' birth. It has been humorously suggested that if the "wise men" had been "wise women" they would have arrived on time -- and brought more practical presents than gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But the joke misses the point of the presents. If you or I can get stumped trying to come up with a present for someone who *seems* to have everything, what exactly do we give to the One who really **does** have everything? After all, God *owns* the whole universe -- there is nothing we can "give" to God which isn't *already* God's.

So, those gifts the wise men brought were not "things that Jesus needed" -- but *gifts which showed that the givers knew Who the recipient was.*

Traditionally, the interpretation of the gifts goes like this: gold was a gift "fit for a king" -- tribute, in fact, such as a vassal would give to a superior. Giving the newborn Christ gold was a way of recognizing his status as "the King of the Jews", as they referred to him.

Frankincense was used (and still is used in some churches, including ours at the 10:30 service today) in *worship*; to give Christ frankincense was to acknowledge his *divinity*.

Myrrh was used to anoint bodies of deceased loved ones in preparation for burial. A gift of myrrh acknowledged Jesus' *mortality* -- that he was a human being who would die.

All this is put memorably and in rhyme in the ever-popular hymn "We three kings" we'll sing today. Which leads to my first quiz of the new year:

How many wise men were there? We'll, if you'll look closely at the Gospel reading printed in your service leaflet, you'll see that the Bible *doesn't say* how many there were. All we know is "wise men", plural -- more than one. Popular interpretation of these fascinating and mysterious 12 verses has deduced three wise men from the fact that three gifts were given.

How many of them were kings? Well, according to the Bible, none of them. Royal status was attached to them by popular legend within only a couple of hundred years, however, in keeping with Psalm 72:10 (which we just read) which was interpreted as a prophecy of their coming to offer gifts. Certainly, the motif of foreign kings bowing down to pay homage to Jesus as King of Kings (not just King of the Jews) fits with Christian thinking.

What were their names? Well, again, the Bible doesn't say, but that didn't stop the weavers of legend who did come up with names: Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar in Western Tradition (reflected in The Hymnal 1940, among other places), other names in Middle Eastern and African traditions. Extensive biographies were also composed for these mysterious travelers, whose bones (according to credulous medieval dealers in relics) became even more well-traveled than they.

We may smile at the efforts of our Christian ancestors to fill in many more details than the Bible provides, but we should be aware that mysterious visitors from the East *did* appear within the Roman Empire in those days, often bringing tribute to far, far less worthy persons than Jesus -- like the notorious King Herod himself and the vicious Roman Emperor Nero. Such a visit as Matthew describes would have been quite plausible to that Gospel's first readers.

That is especially true when we ponder what "wise men" or magi *were*. There were no borders between science and superstition in those days, so the

magi were likely well-versed in both what we call astronomy and what we call astrology. This is why they could have noticed an astronomical phenomenon from hundreds of miles away and attributed significance to it while astronomically ignorant King Herod and the Jewish scribes in Jerusalem (who were as close to Bethlehem as we are to Piscataway) could be totally oblivious.

Oh, the “star of wonder.” WAS there something which might have made three expert star-gazers mount their camels and travel -- perhaps from Persia (what is now called Iran -- you can never tell where good guys will come from), Iraq or Arabia -- just as modern astronomers will travel far to see an eclipse?

The ancients were fascinated by the stars, and we have, in fact, a fair amount of information to help us. But first, we have to consider the calendar. Under the Roman Empire years were not, of course, counted from the birth of Christ -- Joseph’s carpenter shop in Bethlehem did not hand out as Christmas presents to his customers calendars for the Year 1. The years were dated from the supposed date of the founding of Rome. The medieval Christians who created *our* calendar calculated that Jesus was born 753 years after the founding of Rome (we would say that Rome was founded in 753 B.C.) The only problem is that both Matthew and Luke say that King Herod still ruled Judea when Jesus was born -- and Herod died in the year of Rome 749 (what we call 4 B.C.).

Given that, according to Matthew, Herod killed all the little boys in Bethlehem under the age of two, and that the infant Jesus escaped to Egypt with Joseph and Mary and sojourned there for a period of time before Herod’s death, it’s likely that Jesus was born around what we call 6 B.C. Yes, it really is later than you think; this year is 2019.

So...to find a historical basis for the “Star of Wonder” we’re looking for something visible from the Middle East *and significant to Middle Eastern peoples of the time* around the year 6 B.C. -- and perhaps something meaningful only to the trained eye.

What about a nova or supernova? That can create a spectacular, short-lived stellar display from a long-distant exploding star. Supernovas can sometimes be brighter than the moon and visible in the daytime. Sorry, there are records of these occurrences -- the Chinese were very good astronomers and

kept excellent records -- and none happened just before Jesus' birth. Besides, even *Herod* would have noticed *that*.

What about a *comet*? Haley's Comet appeared in 12 B.C., which is too early, and besides it appears once every 77 years (as was known in antiquity). It was neither unusual nor unprecedented in ancient records. Also, comets were usually held in antiquity to be harbingers of *doom*, not of the birth of a Savior.

What about a *planetary conjunction*? This is the least dramatic of the possibilities to a lay person, but let's consider this. Jupiter takes 12 years to orbit the sun and Saturn takes 30 years; when they "pass each other" from our viewpoint they are said to be in conjunction. As Raymond Brown relates in his wonderful book *The Birth of the Messiah*, "The three high points of the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn were in May/June, September/October and December of **7 B.C.** -- a rare triple conjunction...Mars passed early the next year." It is only once every 805 years that the *three* planets look as close together as they did early in 6 B.C.

Also, "This 'great conjunction' of Jupiter and Saturn took place in the Zodiacal constellation of Pisces...a constellation sometimes associated with the last days and with the Hebrews, while Jupiter (an object of particular interest among Parthian astrologers) was associated with the world ruler and Saturn was identified as the star of the Amorites of the Syria-Palestine region."

BINGO. It is quite possible to conclude that Parthian astrologers would see this rare planetary conjunction (dramatic to them but not to non-astronomers) and conclude that a World Ruler of the End Times would soon be born among the Hebrew people in Palestine. THAT would certainly have been enough for them to mount their camels, travel far and kneel down to pay him homage, giving those deeply symbolic gifts.

But there's more than that in this story, for we have to remind ourselves that *the religious and political establishment of Jesus' homeland was hostile to him from the moment of his birth to the hour of his death, and beyond.* King Herod was not thrilled to hear someone *else* besides himself referred to as "King of the Jews", and he shortly, according to Matthew, ordered mass murder to try to eliminate the newborn King. Hearing the title "The King of the Jews" referring to Jesus has an ominous ring to those who have read Matthew's Gospel through:

the next time that title appears in Matthew it will be on a plaque over Jesus' head -- on the cross. Being "King of the Jews" was the charge for which he was executed as a threat to Roman rule.

So at his birth, the Establishment is dismayed and already plots his death, while outsiders come to him. Luke portrays shepherds, representing ordinary Jewish working people, as the first to visit Jesus. Matthew describes the magi coming: they represent *foreigners*, pagans, Gentiles.

Matthew describes foreign, pagan magi -- WIZARDS if you wish, any fellow Harry Potter fans -- seeking and kneeling before Someone far superior to them. To find the Savior of the World, they studied God's revelation in Nature -- in the stars, in their case. That was enough to make them *seekers* in theological (not Quidditch) terms. But nature (science *or* astrology) was not enough by itself: they *also* needed the Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) to find God. Literally.

And when they got there, *they showed the kind of people they were by the gifts they gave*. For Someone who seemed "impossible" to give a gift to, they gave gifts that showed they knew who Christ was: King, God and mortal. To find him, they used their own training and skills -- and (unlike some men) were willing to ask for directions, directions from the Hebrew Scriptures. Finally, they refused to be pawns of the powers-that-be, but returned to their own country "by another road", the first foreigners to see the Savior of the World. But not the last.

These "wizards" were smart enough to know the limits of their "wizardry", and who the Supreme Power was. They were the first of hundreds of millions of "foreigners" -- i.e. non-Jews -- who would come to believe that the King of the Jews was their King as well. **Fellow "foreigners", we are among their heirs, wherever we are from.**

So now, what gifts to we offer to Christ to pay him homage as we begin this new year? What do we give to the King of Kings, the owner of the world? The words of a poem which form a beloved Christmas hymn are most apt: "What I have I give him, give him my heart."

This is the best gift for any of us to give to the King of Kings, the Lord God incarnate, the mortal Messiah who died "taking the rap" for our sins and for the

sins of the whole world: to love him with all our hearts, souls and minds, and our neighbors as ourselves. Nothing less will do.

Unlike these wise men, we don't have to travel far to offer these gifts. Unlike these wise men, we give our gifts not just once but every day, as thank-offerings for the awesome gifts of **God's** love, forgiveness, guidance, healing and promise of eternal life. The bumper sticker says, "Wise men still seek him." Wise women too. *Wherever we* journey in our lives, may we welcome Him as our guide, our companion, *and* our *destination*.

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