EpiphI (2024)

**Announcements:**

*“O GOD, who by the leading of a star….”*

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Yesterday/Today was/is the Feast of our Lord's Epiphany. The Epiphany, or “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles” as our PB calls it, was recognized on the church calendars in Britain and France as early as the 400s. In the Orthodox realm January 6th is the beginning of Christmas.

St. Matthew's account of the three Wise men, or Kings, visiting the Christ child is traditionally attributed to his mother Mary. This is logical given that Matthew obviously was not there when they arrived, and Jesus himself would have been an infant, and Joseph, the other adult witness to this incredible moment, is presumed to have died before Jesus even began his ministry.

"Epiphany" is Greek and means manifestation or “showing forth”. I thought we might take a look at this last Christmas manifestation of the arrival of wise men **to** visit our newborn Lord.

The arrival of the Wise Men would have been a most memorable moment. Imagine being in your humble abode (much less a barnyard) with your new infant when suddenly three impressive, powerful, strange looking men in unusual, fine clothing arrive and beg to see your child! Then, to add to the excitement they **bow** down before him **and** then give him incredible presents! No parent would have problems remembering such a moment for the rest of his or her life, and it is safe to assume that Mary never forgot the moment.

Who were these wise men, these Magi? They appear to have part of the people of the Medes who revolted against the Persians, and lost. Seeing that their opportunities for secular success in government and business now were, well, “constrained” they developed into the intellectual class of that Empire. They were in charge of most of the religious rituals, and studied medicine and the skies. In today's world they would have been doctors, professors, priests and scientists. By the time of Christ's birth they were at the zenith of the influence.

The Roman author Seneca wrote in the first Century that at the time of Christ's birth belief was common among those who studied the heavens that a great earthly king was soon to be born. And, most believed the place of this king's birth would be...in Judea. These educated Magi certainly would have held this expectation too.

We might remember from the lessons for the Circumcision on New Year's day that the shepherds had come to Bethlehem to see the Christ child after hearing from an angel and seeing the strange and glorious light: "the glory of the Lord shone round about them".

Shepherds in that area of Judea very near Jerusalem itself almost certainly would have been Jews. Their **uneducated** faith brought them to "check out" the situation, the stable or cave.

In contrast to the Three Wise Men, the shepherds would have been poor, almost outcasts of their proper society, since they would have had trouble tending flocks and also keeping all the hygiene laws and religious observances. Thus, we have the manifestation, or showing forth, of the Messiah first to the illiterate poor of the Jewish world and then, as a contrasting bookend, the showing forth of the newborn king to the intellectual and powerful of the non-Jewish, or pagan, gentile world.

We will recall that Christ's later ministry among the Jews had its greatest success with those who were the downtrodden of Jewish life such as the poor, the lame, and lepers. They followed Christ’s light. Almost all of the rich and powerful Jews though were offended by him.

Conversely, from the time the Gospel began to be preached to the gentiles it was warmly received even among their well to do, especially among wives who saw in it an end to their husbands sexual promiscuousness. Members of the church in Rome to whom Paul addressed his Epistle are believed to have included members of the Imperial household!

The wise men's journey, following **another** strange and glorious light above, to bring presents to a poor child they did not know, shows a strong desire to endure a trek which would have been costly, lengthy and arduous, even life threatening. We might remember that King Herod was displeased that the Magi had mocked him by not coming back and which led him to order the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. The fact that this trek was undertaken by such influential people, such as respected scientists, shows a recognition that something very big had happened in the world.

These educated magi were not moved by faith but a deep “intellectual” perception. They understood what the sign, the starlight, meant. For these Magi this mighty king that their ***intellect*** reasoned was soon to come... had in fact been born. They may not have understood the concept of a savior, but they knew a unique moment in world history had arrived.

One sees this in their presents of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now gold is fairly customary as a sign of affection or respect, or *memorable-ness*. Couples have golden anniversaries. At retirement folks used to get gold watches. (Back when gold was under $500 an ounce.) We speak of the golden years or of a golden moment.

But the other two gifts essentially manifest Christian theology. They offered Jesus a type of incense, frankincense, which your pastor used at *All Saints*.

Incense was and still is burned in offerings to God, or gods. Thus they were addressing Jesus as a god. They also offered him myrrh symbolizing death. Given that gods don't die, only humans, they were manifesting their belief that Jesus was divine and human. This has been Christian teaching since earliest days.

So, as we remember in the Gospel for Epiphany, they, these three Magi, acting alone and not as representatives of all the Magi, came and **worshiped**. Given the agnosticism of much of our intellectual class today this is a powerful sign of God's determination and plan that ALL **eventually** will worship him, even all intellectuals.

The Star of Bethlehem called these powerful men from outside Judaism to **come** a long way to Christ, just as the angel shortly before had called the simple Jewish shepherds a short distance **to** Christ. The twin manifestations themselves manifest God reaching towards people in ways they understand. Simple Jewish shepherds rejoiced at angels telling them, most likely in Aramaic, that a savior or messiah had been born.

While simple faith drew the shepherds to the stable, God used reason to reach the intellectual class of the gentile world. "Different strokes for different folks", we would say. Together the angels in Bethlehem and the Wise Men from Persia serve as bookends to the Christmas story announcing the birth of mankind's redeemer. The moment God **lept** into human history to give back to us what we lost in Eden**:** a chance to live together forever with him in **Paradise**.

Neither the shepherds nor the Magi would not have known all that was to happen from Jesus being born. But the wise men anyway certainly showed that they knew that their whole world was changing and that this newborn boy would have a major role in it.

These **intellectuals**, these three Magi, may have become the first gentile converts. Afterall, they came **personally** to witness; they did **not** send a representative. Indeed, given all that these intellectuals endured and that they came and bowed down before Jesus, they might be second only to John the Baptist as the very first **Christians**.

AMEN.

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