

“God is Manifested to the Gentiles”

“In the time of king Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews.’” Matthew 2: 1.

The Background

On Tuesday of this week and in some churches on next Sunday, we in the Western church will commemorate the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem of Judea. Although the tradition is varied and has many problem, it is our way of beginning the third season of the Christian year, Epiphany in celebration of the manifestation or showing forth of Christ to the gentiles-to you and me. The season of Epiphany may last from four to nine weeks dependant upon when Easter is celebrated. May this extension of Christmas be a blessed one for each and all of you.

1. There are problems with the date of Jesus’ birth. Was he born in 4 B.C. as Matthew seems to indicate by linking him to Herod the Great or ten years later in 6 A.D. as Luke ties him to Quirinian census or three years earlier in 7 B.C. as some astronomers seek to link his birth to the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of Pisces? Despite the problems with the dating, the fact is that Jesus lived, died and was raised from the dead for my salvation and for yours.

2. There are problems with the names and number of Magi. Were there three as the three gifts seem to infer? Matthew does not tell us. Were they named Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar as celebrated in the West or are the Ethiopians, Armenians or Syrians correct with their different names? Did St. Helena, the mother of Constantine find the bones of the Three Magi in Jerusalem in the later part of the Third Century and carry them to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople? These relics were later moved to Milan, Italy in the fifth Century and now rest in the Cathedral of Cologne since 1163 A.D. The answer to my query is, “Probably not!” Nevertheless, Jesus Christ was manifested to gentiles and Jews, rich and poor and great and small alike.

3. There are problems with the location of Bethlehem. Micah predicted that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah in Galilee. Matthew definitely locates Bethlehem in Judea, five miles south of Jerusalem where king David was born. The fact is that Jesus was born in human history.

4. There are problems with the Magi or astrologers coming to acknowledge Jesus’s birth. Magi were worshipers of the Zoroastrian religion. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not accept the story because they take literally the injunction coming from Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Isaiah that sorcery and divination should be rejected. What the coming of the Magi does represent is that humans, following the best they know, should come to acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior.

5. There are problems with the status of the Wise Men. By 500 A.D., the church changed their status from Magi to Three King from the East, perhaps Persia. As to the prophesies surrounding the paying of homage to the Messiah, you may find such references in several passages of Hebrew scripture (Numbers 24:17, Psalm 68:29, Psalm 72:8b-11, Isaiah 60:2 and Micah 5:1-3).

6. Finally, there are problems with the close association of Herod and the Sadducees and Pharisees of the Sanhedrin in 4 B.C. Herod and the Sanhedrin were at odds all of the time. However, such a close association will take place again at Jesus' death and evil often make strange bed fellows.

You may be asking now, "Why is he telling us all of this?" Well, I think that as informed Episcopal Christian, we should also be knowledgeable beyond our scriptures because we often encounter persons who have all of the above information and more. But, we must remember that in the Bible, we are dealing with Salvation History not documented or chronological history. The Bible is the story of God's dealing with his people in human history.

I. Salvation history tells of the Messiah's coming-Jeremiah 31:7-14

In regards to salvation history, sometime near the end of the Assyrian domination and the coming of the Babylonian, Jeremiah comforted his people with the fact that God was in charge and God enters human history. Jacob, the people of the Northern kingdom of Israel could rejoice, because the time was coming when the exiles would be collected by God from the farthest corners of the world and returned to Israel. This prophet, poet classically foretold that the "*blind, and the lame, those with child and those in labor together; a great company ..shall return ...with weeping and with consolations...*" Once again, the produce of the land shall flourish and the people shall rejoice. He continues, "*Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and old shall be merry.*" The Lord said, "I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will give the priest their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty."

This is the kind of comfort that priests and lay Eucharistic ministers will and do carry to our Sick-and-Shut-Ins, to our bereaved and to those in need of counseling. Such comfort is not always about the present condition. It is rather about the faithful loving kindness of a just and caring God for all times. It is about the trust that people of faith have in times of trouble. The psalmist writes, "*Weeping may last for the night but joy cometh in the morning.*" Psalm 30:5b. This is what we celebrate the acknowledge that God is with us at all times with the coming of the Magi on the twelfth day of Christmas.

II. Salvation History Brings Encouragement and comfort-Eph. 1:3-6, 15-19

In later years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul comforts the Ephesians with a recounting of the salvation history and the significance of the coming of the Christ in Jesus of Nazareth. God, our father and the father of Jesus Christ, has through Him blessed us with every spiritual blessing. God's plan before the foundation of the world, even though he knew that we would be disobedient, was to destine us to be his adopted sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. This adoption would not be according to our goodness but because of God's gift of love and salvation freely bestowed upon the believer.

The Ephesians are well on their way to responding in an appropriate way to God for his love and goodness. They have faith in Jesus Christ, love toward all the saints and they have

Paul, remembering them always in his prayers. His prayer, among other things, is that a spirit of wisdom and revelation would abide with them as they come more and more to know Jesus Christ in their lives. He prayed that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened, that they may learn the hope of their calling and that they may receive the riches of God's glorious inheritance among other saints. And, finally Paul prayed that they may come to know the immeasurable greatness of God's power among all those who believe.

The Three Wise Men came to demonstrate to us that there is greatness and power in Jesus Christ. The Babe born in Bethlehem of Judea is available to you and me even today as we face our trials and tribulations.

III. Salvation History Comes Full Circle in Bethlehem-Matt. 2:1-12,13-15, 19-23

And so now, we have come full circle back to Bethlehem of Judea, sometimes in the far distant past. Magi or kings of the East, searching deeply into their profession of star-gazing have sensed a unique occurrence. They have followed the Star of Bethlehem to the place where the Babe lay. They have come to witness and honor God in the child who was the incarnate essence of God on earth. As they gaze upon his visage, they remembered the prophesy told of old about a ruler, the shepherd of his people Israel. And so they bow down before him and present their gifts of the finest fare to the Babe of Bethlehem. You and I are called this morning to do no less-to give to God our very best.

I shall close with the fictional words of Henry Van Dyke from his 1895 work entitled, *The Story of the Other Wise Man*, as I invite you to come even to Bethlehem to pay God homage in the Christ Child. He writes:

“Hear me, then my father and my friends,” said Artaban, very quietly. “While I tell you of the new light and truth that have come to me through the most ancient of signs...The stars...In the years that are lost in the past, long before our fathers came into the land of Babylon, there were wise men in Caldea, from whom the first of the Magi learned the secret of the heaven. And of these Balaam the son of Beor was one of the mightiest. Hear the words of his prophesy: ‘There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall arise out of Israel.’” From the *Story of the Other Wise man* by Henry Van Dyke, 1895.

Let us pray. O God of the true light that came into the world at Bethlehem: help us not only to see that light but to be guided by it to the places where the Christ of God abides. We pray this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Interesting Information about The Wise Men

Astrologers of the Persian Zoroastrianism religion

Caspar-Europe,
Melchior-Asia
and Balthasar-Africa.

Meanings attributed to the gifts

Gold, precious metal = kingship virtue
Frankincense, perfume = Priesthood prayer
Myrrh, anointing oil = A symbol of death, suffering

Scriptures and a Reference that Predict the Paying of Homage to the Messiah

Numbers 24:17 *“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh; a star shall come forth out of Jacob, a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the head of Moab, and break down the sons of Sheth.”*

Psalm 68:29 *“Because of thy temple in Jerusalem kings shall bear gifts to thee.”*

Psalms 72 and 127 are dedicated to Solomon. They bless him to *“have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts May all kings fall down before him, and all nations serve him.”* 72:8b-11.

Micah 5:1-3. *“Now you are walled about with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they will strike upon the cheek the ruler of Israel. But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore, he shall give them up until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth; then the rest of his brethren shall return to the people of Israel.”*

Isaiah 60:3 *“And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”*

You may also Google: The Three Wise Men for more information.

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January 4, 2009