

This Sunday's Readings – Epiphany of the Lord – The Feast of the Epiphany is traditionally celebrated on the 12th day of Christmas. In some Southern European countries as well as the Churches of the Eastern rite, this Feast takes precedence over Christmas. It is sometimes known as “Little Christmas” and gifts are exchanged instead of on Christmas.

Today's first reading is taken from the Book of the prophet Isaiah (3rd Isaiah, which was written shortly after the return from the Babylonian Captivity or approximately 500 BC). This section emphasizes hope, joy, and the rise of the new Zion. It also emphasizes that Yahweh is faithful to His promises, which is the message that we have read throughout Advent, Christmas, and now the Epiphany. This particular section manifests or shows Yahweh's glory, which is the meaning of the word epiphany. Webster's Dictionary describes epiphany as “an appearance or manifestation”. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* very simply ties this first reading to the Gospel reading – “This passage is from Third Isaiah. The first part (vv. 1-3) announces the return of the exiles in language taken over from Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55). The second part (vv. 4-6) foretells the eschatological pilgrimage of the Gentiles to the restored city of Jerusalem. The first part is typological of the birth of Christ; the second part, of the visit of the Magi. Although Matthew (curiously, in view of his special interest in quoting Old Testament prophecies) does not cite this passage, it has clearly influenced the Magi narrative, as the reference to gold and frankincense in verse 6 shows”.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read the time-honored story of the Magi, who came from the East, most probably Babylon, when they saw his “Star in the East”. The Magi were most probably astronomers/astrologers from Persia and also priests of a very ancient monotheistic religion, Zoroastrianism, which was as old as Judaism and which is still practiced today. The journey would have taken approximately one and a half to two years, so Jesus would not have been an infant when they arrived. The Magi (Gentiles) announced the birth of the newborn King of the Jews and worshiped Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Again, the epiphany or manifestation of the Son of God) This fulfilled the prophecy from Isaiah that we read in the first reading. The three gifts were also symbolic – gold represented kingship, frankincense, priesthood, and myrrh, death. Myrrh also had medicinal properties and represented physicians. Thus, Jesus was a king, a priest, and a healer. The main theme of Matthew's Gospel is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah and that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies regarding the Messiah.

So what was the Star of Bethlehem? To adequately answer this question, two other questions must be answered – Who were the Magi and why do we celebrate Jesus' birthday on December 25th. It should also be noted that the Greek word for star can also mean a configuration of celestial objects. To answer these questions, I will be quoting Michael R. Molnar, an astronomer and former manager of the Physics Instructional Labs at Rutgers University, who has done extensive research on this subject. The quotes are from his web site <http://www.eclipse.net/~molnar/>. Let's begin:

“Who were the Magi?” Magi originated from a caste of Zoroastrian priests. During Roman times they were recognized as physician-astrologers who healed the sick, interpreted dreams, and cast horoscopes. Their art included “magic” - a word derived from their name. They were considered to be “Wise Men” who were truly knowledgeable. Most importantly, they were well known for practicing astrology. (p. 33, 36-37).

From where did the Magi come? Magi were known throughout the Near East: Mesopotamia, Parthia, Syria, Persia. We have no firm evidence about their specific origins. (p. 33) I notice that the Romans depicted them in Parthian garments, so the Magi may have been from there. But no one knows for sure.

How did the Star lead the Wise Men to Bethlehem? The Star, namely Jupiter in the east, was in Aries the Ram. This along with the other important astrological aspects showed astrologers that a king was born in Judea, Samaria, Palestine, Idumea, or Coele Syria. Not knowing the precise location they went to the capital of these lands which was Jerusalem. King Herod’s advisors told the Magi that the prophecy said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So, the Magi went there. (p. 46-47).

What was the Star? On April 17, 6 BC two years before King Herod died Jupiter emerged in the east as a morning star in the sign of the Jews, Aries the Ram. The account in Matthew refers twice to the Star being in the east with good reasons. When the royal star of Zeus, the planet Jupiter, was in the east this was the most powerful time to confer kingships. Furthermore, the Sun was in Aries where it is exalted. And the Moon was in very close conjunction with Jupiter in Aries. Modern calculations suggest that this was close enough to be an occultation (eclipse). But the Sun’s glare would have hidden that event. Saturn was also present which meant that the three rulers of Aries’ trine (Sun, Jupiter, and Saturn) were present in Aries. Saturn and Jupiter were said to be attendants on the rising Sun, another regal aspect for astrologers. By modern expectations this is trivial, but for ancient stargazers this configuration was truly awesome. (p. 96-101).

Why do we celebrate December 25 as Jesus’ birthday? Early Christians did not know the birth date so they adopted and converted a pagan holiday, the birthday of Sol Invictus, the Unconquerable Sun. As I explain in the book it was not the Roman Saturnalia that was converted into Christmas, but the birthday of the pagan sun god. (p. 55-57)”.

The page numbers reference Michael R. Molnar’s book *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* published by Rutgers University Press. (ISBN: 0-8135-2701-5). This is really a benchmark work on the Star of Bethlehem. Another excellent reference is the PBS DVD *Mystery of the Three Kings*. Both of these references are available from Amazon.com.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these additional comments on the Magi – “Since all people are born more or less equal, ancient biographers like Plutarch regularly “created” special origins and extraordinary circumstances for the great people whose lives they narrated. Though it is a very

complicated issue, scholars agree that Matthew has similarly embellished and probably created stories about the birth of Jesus who was put to death presumably for claiming to be “king of the Judeans” (Matt 7:37). This story of the Magi illustrates the plausible mixture of fact with literary creativity.

MAGI IN THE EAST

The Greek word *magoi* in this story has been translated in modern times as “wise men” (too generic), “kings” (incorrect), and “astrologers” (partially correct but confusing because of modern connotations). The revised New Testament of the New American Bible restores the word “Magi.” In the cultural world of Jesus, Magi were a caste of very high ranking political-religious advisers to the rulers of the Median and then the Persian empires (roughly equivalent to the modern countries of Iran and Iraq). History notes that Magi also resisted the imperialistic designs of Philip the Macedonian and Alexander the Great to conquer the ancient Near Eastern people. The Greeks viewed the Persians as decadent and weak. The Persians obviously resented that. Indeed, Persian prophecies similar to Daniel’s vision of four kingdoms each more decadent than the preceding (Babylonian, Median, Persian, Hellenistic) yearned for a restoration of true Persian kingship. This historical event was burned into the memories of everyone in the first-century Mediterranean world (webmaster note: see p.17 of original article). Clearly the Magi had enormous influence as advisers to Eastern kings. Matthew was undoubtedly familiar with the story.

MATTHEW’S MAGI

In the hypothetically recreated “original” story of the Magi and Jesus, the Magi chart Jesus’ horoscope, discover and follow his star, find and worship him, and leave. How does Matthew reshape this event to fit into the birth story of Jesus? Drawing inspiration from the Tiridates story, Matthew puts a very appropriate political spin on Jesus’ story. Known for their centuries-old opposition to Western (currently Roman) imperialism, the Eastern Magi travel to submit to Jesus, a new “king of Judeans.” The Magi proclaim a message that resounds beyond the confines of Israel to the entire ancient Near East. Here in this babe is the new King of Kings. Here begins the restoration of true Eastern kingship. That Roman bootlicking, murderous, and tyrannical puppet-king, Herod the Great, has every reason to squirm. To add insult to Herod’s injury, the gospel story interprets the visit of the Magi as saying that liberation from foreign domination and restored Eastern kingship has come not from the elite but rather from the poor and humble in a hamlet (Bethlehem) of a rather insignificant principality (Judea). Christian tradition and liturgy have overlaid the visit of the Magi, Jesus’ “epiphany,” with engaging symbolism and rich interpretations. We do well to remember that at the heart of this story as in all the stories of the Bible lies plain history, real politics, and human effort viewed through an ever-changing assortment of lenses”.

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