

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

THE THREE KINGS

their separateness, like rolling hills as the dawn brightens, only by the light of her Spirit. In her the Word grows. She is the soil.

Sermo currat et clarificetur.

ALEX. JONES

*Upholland College,
Wigan*

THE THREE KINGS

(Mt. II. I-12)

One could sometimes wish for the simple faith of a child, which takes the story of the Three Kings quite normally and naturally, and is not disturbed by the questions which occur to the mind of the inquiring student. What about these names Caspar, Melchior and Baltassar? Were there only three of them? Were they kings? Where did they come from? What exactly was the star? Did it really lead them to Bethlehem? How did they know what it meant? . . . The child is quite content with his picture of camels and crowns, pageboys and guiding star. It is only the inquiring student who will find that there is hardly anything in the text to answer his questions for him, and that all he can do in most cases is to make a good guess.

The names, anyway, date only from the ninth century A.D. and are nothing but a guess. And so too is the number, deduced probably from the number of the gifts they brought, although in fact the oldest pictures of the episode make the number anything from two to twelve. Even less can be said for their promotion to royalty, and there seems little point in making up our own occupation for them when St Matthew has told us they were, quite simply, "magi". Although the word originally denoted a sect of Persian priests, it had come by New Testament times to mean "astrologer", and was understood as such by the first commentators of St Matthew's Gospel. Simon "Magus" followed the same profession, and our own derived word "magician" still bears witness to that meaning. Does this shock us, that we should not be dealing with holy wise men at all but with fortune-tellers, star-gazers who thought that horoscopes were written in the skies? Yet God had used odder material still in the Old Testament to lead men to himself.

About their country of origin we are on surer ground. To us the "East" suggests Persia, India or China. But to get to these countries from Palestine you have to start by going northwards, and they were reckoned as the North. In the Bible the East is Transjordan and Arabia, and it is there that we must place our magi. The "star" offers

more difficulty, and we must go back to guesswork. Quite clearly it was something out of the ordinary, or else the magi would never have bothered to start on their journey. It may have been a special star created for the purpose, and commentators have even offered "the Holy Ghost appearing in the form of a star" as a plausible explanation of the phenomenon. But God is not in the habit of performing a miracle where something perfectly natural, like a meteor, would do just as well; and the word translated "star" is wide enough, especially in popular usage, to cover a number of other possibilities. Père Lagrange, who was not one to jump to facile conclusions, saw Halley's Comet in Palestine in 1910, and was so impressed by the fact that it came from the east, faded while it was above and "reappeared" as it set two days later that he was convinced that it was either this (according to Chinese records it appeared in October 12 B.C.) or something very like it that the magi saw. Far nearer to the date of Christ's birth in 6 B.C. was the conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars, which was observed for the first time in 1606 by the famous astronomer of Weilderstadt, Kepler, and was calculated by him to have occurred before in 7 B.C. It is true that such a conjunction could not have moved in the way the text has generally been understood: "the star went before them till it came to rest"; but such a description might well be accounted for by the apparent motion of any heavenly body to a traveller moving parallel to it, and by its apparently "stopping" as soon as the direction is changed to approach it.¹

Either of these two natural phenomena would have been sufficiently extraordinary to an astrologer of that day to make him conclude that something remarkable had happened—a war started, a victory won, a king born or dead. If we ask why that should have made the magi move towards Jerusalem, we must return to our guesswork, for St Matthew does not tell us. It is again possible that they had received a special revelation from God on the point, although this does not tally very well with the questions they are to ask later. Nor is it very likely that Balaam's prophecy about the "star" which would "arise out of Juda" had anything to do with helping them plan their itinerary. To start with, it is most unlikely that they would ever have heard of this oracle, which according to Num. xxiv was uttered 1,200 years beforehand. Even if they had, it would hardly have impressed them very much; after all it had been forced out of an unwilling Balaam, and he was a fellow-countryman of theirs. And even if it did, they would have known that the "star" was simply a metaphor for a king, and that it referred to David for whom it was probably written. No purpose in looking for a further fulfilment of that. What is far more

¹ Suggested by Fr. Corbishley S.J. in *Scripture* April 1948, p. 52.

probable is that they knew something of the religious beliefs of the Persian Zoroaster, which were so widespread in the Middle East at the time, and consequently of the hopes for the coming of the "Truth Incarnate" who would fight for Ahuramazda, the "Lord of Light", and bring happiness to the earth. Nor, in their minds, would this have been distinguished from the Messiah so ardently expected by the Jews, who also had, for the last five hundred years, been spreading their religious beliefs in the hellenistic world of the East. Might this have been the series of natural causes of which God condescended to make use to lead the magi to Christ ?

With so much as a preliminary inquiry into the episode, let us now look at it again and try to fill in the gaps in St Matthew's telling of it. The story, then, starts in Arabia, with an unusual phenomenon appearing in the eastern sky, Kepler's conjunction or Halley's Comet or something similar. A group of astrologers, who study the heavenly bodies to read destinies in them, take this as a sign that some great event has happened, and connect it with the widespread Persian and Jewish belief in the coming of a Saviour. They accordingly make their way across the Jordan to Jerusalem, not because the "star" leads them like a travelling searchlight, but simply because if this is to be the King expected by the Jews then Jerusalem is the place in which to find him. At the capital they naturally expect the Jews to know all about the great event, and ask in all innocence for details of the newly born King. They might even have expected him to be a new son of Herod's. But Jerusalem has seen no recent birth of a king, and the Jews, even more in the dark than they, are rather surprised that strangers should come and tell them of the birth of their own Messiah. Most surprised is Herod, the foreigner who has grabbed the Jewish throne by political cunning, and has spent the last thirty years surrounding it with blood to stop anyone else doing the same. If this is another Jewish pretender there will be trouble, and the whole of Jerusalem knows it.

And yet it is from Herod that the magi get their next clue. It might have been simply a desire to humour these strangers that makes him call for the Jewish Sanhedrim, and ask their opinion on the expected birthplace of the Messiah. After all, what could he fear from a recently born child ? Yet a suspicious nature like Herod's may well have been afraid that the magi were on to something. Not that he would put much store, in any case, by the findings of the Sanhedrim, from whom he took away all effective power as soon as he came to the throne. But their reply might represent the popular beliefs, and it would be as well to be forearmed. His last interview with the magi is a private one—no point in giving the court the impression that

he is being credulous—with a request for some more exact information on the appearance of the star. If it was as remarkable as they said, it presaged *something*, even for Herod.

That the Sanhedrim should reply with a text from Micah is odd, but then so many of the Old Testament texts quoted by St Matthew in these first two chapters are odd. In fact this is the only record we have (apart from Jn. vii.42) of Jewish ideas on the infancy of the Messiah. Otherwise their speculations were centred on his adult life; of his early life they knew only that that he would remain hidden until his sudden appearance and anointing by Elijah. The quotation of the text is odd from another point of view too. That it referred to the Messiah nobody could have doubted, for Micah could not have made himself clearer. But one would not have thought it likely that the text should, *a priori*, be taken as an indication of his birthplace. After all, if Micah spoke of him as “coming out of Bethlehem” he was saying no more than all the prophets said, that the Messiah would be a descendant of David, stemming from the same Bethlehem family or clan as the great king himself. And the prophecy would have been fulfilled even if Christ was born in Jerusalem or Nazareth. If the Sanhedrim eventually light on this text to help them out of their difficulties, it is not because they have the answer pat but because there is nothing else in the whole Old Testament that they *can* quote.

So the magi leave Jerusalem for the two-hour journey to Bethlehem. And to confirm their mission they see again the “star” which sent them off on their strange quest. A conjunction of planets would in any case reappear as the sky darkened, or cleared after cloud. A comet would be visible even in the daytime, as it began to set in the southern sky. Nor need we imagine that the celestial body, whatever it was, leads them to Bethlehem, any more than it has led them to Jerusalem. They are going to Bethlehem in any case because they have been told to go there, and if the phenomenon “goes before” them it is perhaps only because the comet disappears over the Bethlehem skyline, or because the planet continues to “travel” as they move parallel to it and then “stops” as they change their direction towards it. St Matthew’s phrase “where the boy was” is vague enough to refer to the whole town, without making it necessary to imagine a star fastening itself to the door of the dwelling.

St Matthew promised back in chapter 1 to tell us the details of Christ’s birth, but all he has managed so far is the three subordinate clauses, “of whom Jesus was born” in 1.16, “until she had borne a son” in 1.25 and “when Jesus was born” in 11.1. He has mentioned Bethlehem but has told us nothing of the cave-stable, which is St Luke’s

contribution to our knowledge of the first Christmas. Consequently he finds no need to answer the question in the mind of the inquiring student at this point, whether Joseph was still using the cave as a dwelling (not unusual accommodation for the poor in Mediterranean countries, even in modern Rome) or had managed to find more permanent lodgings in a house in the town itself. It makes little difference, for Herod has told the magi to "search diligently" for the child, and this is no doubt what they have to do. It is not the "star" but their inquiries about the recently born child that leads them finally to him. And there, at journey's end, they fall on their knees, not to "worship" the child as their God but simply to offer the customary salaam to a person of rank, such as the "star" has told them this child must be. Nor should we read too much symbolism into their gifts, as if they give him incense because they know he is God, or myrrh because they know he will be crucified. To greet a king it was customary to bring a gift from one's country, and they bring these particular gifts because their country is Arabia where resinous perfumes come from (it has been suggested that the "gold" too is a Greek mistranslation of another Arabian resin). If they had come from distant Ophir, they might well have travelled by quinquireme and brought ivory and apes and peacocks.

How soon precisely after the Nativity this visit took place we do not know. How long the magi stayed in Bethlehem we do not know. How much they realised of what the Child was we do not know. What happened to them after they had received the angel's warning to return home by an alternative route we do not know. Plenty of room here for more guesswork by the inquiring student. The magi make their exit from St Matthew's pages as suddenly and as silently as they made their entrance.

Have we rationalised the story too much, as if our only concern was to cut out the supernatural at all costs? Have we robbed the episode of all meaning by making it possibly nothing more than the series of chance weather conditions, chance questions and chance answers that eventually led a group of obscure pagans to the crib? But why talk of chance when we know that it was God who led them there, as surely by the interplay of circumstances, mentality and environment as by miracle? And is it not already something prodigious that pagans should come to honour the Christ whom his own were to refuse? Are we to look for the significance of a Gospel episode merely on the historical plane?

The liturgy commemorates the event as the Epiphany or Manifestation of Christ, and has made of it a feast higher in rank than Christmas itself. It surely has pointed to the full significance attached

to the event by St Matthew who has recorded it. St Luke, for all the sublime magnificence of his introduction to the Infancy Narrative (the Angel in the Temple, the *Benedictus* and *Magnificat*, the Annuntiation to Our Lady, the pervading sense of gradual climax, the constant repetition of the "fear" which fell on men at this impact of the supernatural on the world), nevertheless gives us our first picture of Christ lying in a manger and surrounded by shepherds. And that is typical of his whole homely Gospel, which insists so much on the humanity of Christ, on a compassionate Christ who brings joy and peace and forgiveness to the world. It is significant that all the five Joyful Mysteries are taken from his Gospel. But St Matthew is concerned with "the Messiah, the Son of David" (1.1), and the glorious mystery he wishes to put on record is that of the universal Messianic King to whom the Old Testament had looked forward. Consequently the first picture that *he* gives us of Christ is of his acknowledgment as king by the pagan world, a Christ making his "epiphany" as other kings of the time did, by appearing before his people in magnificence and splendour to receive their homage. And if it was the common conviction of the time that astronomical portents heralded kings and heroes, then the sky of 6 B.C. would also be pressed into service to form a background for that picture. St Luke has given us 25 December, the feast of God become a child. It is St Matthew who has given us 6 January, the feast of the Child showing himself to the world as its God. *Ecce venit Dominator Dominus, et regnum in manu eius, et potestas et imperium.*

The Old Testament had spoken more than once of kings coming from Sheba and Tarshish bringing gold and incense to Jerusalem (*cf.* Ps. LXXI.10-15, Is. LX.1-6). It was a picture of the whole pagan world, from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, offering tribute to the Messiah and participating in the glory of the Messianic age. That is surely the picture that St Matthew had in mind when he wrote of the magi at the feet of Christ. Such is the Jesus he wants to present in the very first chapter of his Gospel. Not as if he imagined, as we sometimes do, that the prophecy was simply a piece of history told before it happened, and the fulfilling of it something merely automatic. But in the visit of the magi he saw that prophetic hope beginning to be realised. The wonder is that he did not quote the prophecy, when through the rest of these two chapters he is so keen on finding all the Old Testament parallels he can lay his hands on. Perhaps he was too conscious of the fact that they were not kings.

H. J. RICHARDS

*St Edmund's,
Ware*