

The Epiphany

January 6, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Isaiah 60:1–6, 9; Psalm 72:1–2, 10–17; Ephesians 3:1–12; Matthew 2:1–12

The first words spoken in this gospel are words from the Magi’s lips. In the first century of the Christian Era, a Magus could be an astronomer who studied and recorded the movement of stars and planets. It could refer to astrologers, who claimed to be able to understand the meaning of motion in the heavens for the lives of human beings. It could also mean “wonder-workers”—magicians.

The presence of the Magi surprises because the Hebrew Scriptures and the developing Christian tradition have few kind words for those who claimed to be able to find meaning in the movement of stars and planets, much less wonder-workers.¹ That said, in his commentary on Matthew, Daniel Harrington tells us that there is “a Jewish text from the first century B.C. that accepts astrology as compatible with Judaism and climaxing in the Messiah’s coming.”²

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 112.

² Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 42.

Arriving in Jerusalem, the Magi ask, “ ‘Where is the one having been born King of the Judeans?’ . . . we came to ‘lie with [our] face[s] on the ground in adoration [and] submission’³ before him”⁴—in other words, worship.

For Matthew, it’s not just King Herod who is disturbed by these words but “all of Jerusalem with him.”⁵ He consults the chief priests and scribes about where the Anointed One—and to translate the verb here literally—“is being born.”⁶ And this he does in secret. We learn soon enough the evil Herod will bring: “A voice was heard in Ramah . . . Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.”⁷

In the background of Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth, one finds an echo of the story in Numbers of Balak, the king of Moab, who sent for a Babylonian or Mesopotamian diviner—a seer. He wanted Balaam to curse the Hebrews who had crossed the Jordan and

³ “Prostrate.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prostrate>, (accessed 6 January 2021).

⁴ Matthew 2:2.

⁵ Matthew 2:3.

⁶ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/12/the-child-king-messiah-shepherd-child.html>, (accessed 5 January 2021).

⁷ Matthew 2:18.

defeated the Amorites. This story includes a tale of Balaam’s donkey speaking to him when the donkey can see the angel with a sword blocking their way, and Balaam does not. In the end, the seer can only do what the Lord wants him to do, and that is, to bless Israel.⁸ God intervenes to send the Magi to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They worship Emmanuel—“God with us.”⁹ It was God who protected them from Herod. It was God who saved the Holy Family, sent them to Egypt, kept them from their house in Nazareth, and brought them to Bethlehem.

In addition to the visit of the Magi, his baptism and first miracle at Cana are celebrated as epiphanies, that is, to use the secondary title for today’s feast, “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.” In the Prayer Book tradition, no account of Jesus’ baptism was included by Thomas Cranmer in the Prayer Book. No account of Jesus’ baptism was read at a celebration of baptism. Mark’s account was read at Morning Prayer on the First Sunday after Christmas Day—but not as a celebration of Epiphany. That changed for Episcopalians with the 1928 Prayer Book. In 1928, the First Sunday after the Epiphany retained the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus going with his

⁸ Numbers 22:1–24:25.

⁹ Matthew 1:23.

parents to the temple. The story of Jesus' baptism in Mark became the gospel of the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, the wedding at Cana, the Third Sunday.

It's worth noting the antisemitism here at the beginning of the Good News according to Matthew. It is only in Matthew that the crowd of people before Pilate cries, "His blood be on us and on our children!"¹⁰ In Matthew's story of Jesus' birth, the evangelist writes that Herod and "all Jerusalem was troubled" by the news of the Messiah.¹¹ These are hard words to hear in our time, to quote the words of the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, "in living memory of the Holocaust."¹²

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁰ Matthew 27:25.

¹¹ Matthew 2:3.

¹² <https://rabbisacks.org/people-dwells-alone-balak-5778/>, (accessed 6 January 2021).