

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Matthew's account of the coming of the magi (wise men in the ESV) to the one "*born king of the Jews*" presents us with a bit of a challenge, if we want to harmonize it with Luke's account of the birth of Jesus and subsequent events like His circumcision and presentation. Suffice it to say, the magi were surely not there with the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth, worshipping with them the Christ child lying in a manger, as many of our nativity scenes depict. I think Dr. Jeff Gibbs' commentary presents a reasoned harmony and timeline of the two infancy narratives, but no such attempt is without its difficulties, and so you're free to disagree.

Of course, everyone wants to focus on the star that rose up and prompted the magi to come to Jerusalem — what might it be? Was it a comet? Was it a conjunction of planets Jupiter and Saturn that made for a magnificent heavenly display? But that's really focusing on the wrong thing. Suppose for a moment that special visitors came to your home? Would your focus be on the visitors, or on the GPS that led them there?

Besides, none of the natural explanations, it seems to me, accounts for the behavior of the star. None of them explains why only the magi notice the celestial light show. No, Matthew describes the rising of the star as something only their eyes saw and its behavior as a miraculous event. I agree with the holy evangelist.

Led by this star, then, the magi came to Jerusalem. But who were they? Surely not kings, as the famous Christmas carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are" proclaims them to be. Nor, by the way, do we know how many actually came to worship Jesus — the number "three" surely comes from the three kinds of gifts that are named in Scripture — gold, frankincense, and myrrh; there could have been more visitors than three ... or fewer. And we surely don't know their names — Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, as other lore has it. Nevertheless, other than that first stanza that calls the magi kings and numbers them as three, that carol is not bad.

The magi surely were not kings, but rather servants in the courts of kings, as they were in the book of Daniel to King Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel chapter 2, magi along with the pagan magicians and sorcerers were summoned to the King to tell him his dream and interpret it.

In Daniel 2:2, the Hebrew word gets translated to the Greek as magi and in the English Standard Version as "*enchanters*"; in verse 27, this grouping of the king's courtiers are together called "*wise men.*" Indeed, they may have been the king's advisors, but they didn't show themselves to be all that wise. They were unable to

do what the king asked, and in anger, he ordered them all killed. Were it not for the intervention of Daniel, they all would have been destroyed.

So, they were not kings, and not all that wise, so it seems. What drew them to Jerusalem? Did they know Balaam's oracle prophesying the coming of a king to Israel who, at the time of the prophecy, had no king: "*I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel*" (Num. 24:17)? Did they see the rising of this light as signaling the coming of the child who was to be "*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,*" a child born to sit as king "*on the throne of David and over his kingdom*" (Is. 9:6-7)? Did they see themselves as the Gentile "*nations [coming] to [Jesus'] light ... [and] to the brightness of [His] rising*" as Isaiah foretold?

It doesn't appear so. It seems, rather, that they saw this unusual phenomenon in the sky, were drawn to it and led by it to Jerusalem. It's not clear that they knew any of these prophecies, and they certainly didn't know the prophecy of Micah telling of the place where the ruler would be born.

Something was going on; they knew that. The star signaled that. But there were pieces of the puzzle missing. For those pieces the magi needed to look not to the sky, but to God's word, and they needed the help of Herod's "*chief priests and scribes.*" "*[Y]ou, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah ... from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.*"

Armed with this knowledge, Herod sent them on their way to find the one born king. Miraculously, the star appeared again, this time to lead the magi to the child king. They found Him, worshipped Him, gave Him gifts, and departed for home without reporting back to wicked king Herod, who had his own plans for this upstart king.

So, what is the Epiphany to us today? We Gentiles are like the magi of old. We have been given much knowledge about our God. The creation is a bright star pointing us to God our creator. As St. Paul teaches: "*what can be known about God is plain to [us], because God has shown it to [us]. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made*" (Rom. 1:19-20). To be a disbeliever in God's existence is inexcusable.

But natural revelation is insufficient for knowing the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God (Rom. 11:33). Science is a wonderful thing, but it's not by peering into telescopes or squinting into microscopes that we discover the depths of these riches and wisdom and knowledge. Rather, like the magi, we must look to God's word.

And there one is led to the truth of “*the manifold wisdom of God*” ... first, that we are wretched creatures, manifest sinners; and second, that Christ Jesus is that “*wisdom from God*” (1 Cor. 1:30). What a contrast between God’s wisdom and the wisdom of the world! In Christ, God chose the folly and weakness of incarnation and cross to shame the wise and the strong (1 Cor. 1:27). “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15), that is, to save us.

There in God’s word we find “*the unsearchable riches of Christ,*” not the treasures that we give Him, but “*the gift of God’s grace*” in Christ Jesus, worth more than all the gold and frankincense and myrrh in the world. God’s grace gives us the priceless gift of everlasting life.

There in God’s word He reveals to us His plan of salvation for the world, a plan begun in “*the eternal purpose*” of His mind before the foundation of the world, a plan cloaked in “*mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things,*” a plan that was “*realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,*” God’s Son begotten of the Father from eternity, and Mary’s son, born in the likeness of men, realized in Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God, come down from heaven to be sacrificed on the altar of the cross to take away the sins of the world.

None of this is revealed by the bright light of God’s creation. One cannot discover this knowledge of God in science textbooks or by observation in a lab. It is revealed rather by an even brighter light, “*the prophetic word*” — “*a lamp shining in a dark place*” through which the Holy Spirit causes the day to dawn and the morning star to rise in our hearts (2 Pet. 1:19). God Himself shines “*in our hearts*” by His Word and His Sacraments “*to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*” (2 Cor. 4:6).

In the radiance of this light, we see clearly, and we are led to our king, not just “*the king of the Jews,*” but the “*King of kings, and Lord of lords*” (Rev. 19:16), our Savior. May this light cause our hearts to “*thrill and exult.*” And thus illuminated, may we offer to Christ our own “*gold and frankincense.*” May we sing His praises, and share His “*good news*” to the glory of our King and of His kingdom.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.