

Sunday 6th January, 2019

Epiphany of the Lord

Gold or White



Collect

O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: mercifully grant that we, who know you now by faith, may at last behold your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Isaiah 60:1-6 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Future Glory of Israel

60¹ Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ²For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. ³And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. ⁴Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult,^[a] because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.

Footnote: a. Hebrew *your heart shall tremble and grow wide*

COMMENT: It cannot be repeated too often that the writers of the Gospels were well acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures. This passage from the unknown prophet of the Babylonian exile, styled as “Deutero-Isaiah” (Second Isaiah) may have guided the framing of Matthew’s story of the visit of the Magi bearing gifts for Israel’s new born king. The modern depictions of that event and the carol, “We Three Kings of Orient Are” also take their basic elements from this passage

Matthew 2:1-12 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Visit of the Wise Men

2¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying,

“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose^[b] and have come to worship him.”³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:⁶ ““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.””⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Footnotes: a. Greek *magi*; also verses 7, 16. b. Or *in the east*; also verse 9

COMMENT: Matthew tells quite a different story about the birth of Jesus than did Luke. His source material would have been the Christian traditions within his own community. The framing of his Gospel shows that he was writing for a Jewish audience late in the 1st century AD. The issue with which the early church had wrestled for several decades was the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian community founded by Jews. Foreigners, as the magi certainly were, came seeking the newborn king of Israel whose signal star they had been following for some time. They could not have been Jews for they asked Herod questions which a Jew would have already known. Legend has it that they came from the east, but that cannot be proven from the story's details. The phrase “from the east” could just as well be translated as “at its rising.” That would mean that they could have approached from the west, since stars only rise in the east. The astrological event that led them to Jerusalem could one of several known astronomical occurrences - a supernova; a bright conjunction of two planets, Saturn and Jupiter, within the astrological zone of Pisces, the sign of the Jews (this occurred three times in 7 BC); Halley's comet also visible in 7 BC; or a very bright morning star like Venus or Mercury. But these are all speculative. We shall never know for sure what they saw or who the magi really were. Later generations assumed that the magi were kings when they may instead have been Zoroastrian priests who spent a great deal of time observing and interpreting the stars so vividly seen in the Middle Eastern nights of that era. Of course, they could also have been priests and kings, as monarchs frequently were in those days. It is conceivable that Matthew also knew of a delegation of Parthian magi going to Rome to pay homage to Nero at Naples in AD 66. They are said to have

gone home “by another way”, perhaps a model from which to shape the Gospel. Matthew related this story to draw the conclusion that the prophecies being fulfilled were about foreign nations coming to Jerusalem to worship Israel's God. This note of spiritual universalism is prominent in many parts of the OT, but especially in Isaiah 40-66, a collection of prophetic poetry with which Matthew would certainly have been familiar. As Christians we may fervently hope that the meaning of the story will not be lost on modern audiences at a time when religious traditions seem to clash rather than coalesce around the worship of the God whom we know in Jesus Christ. But who is to say that within the new millennium on which we have so recently ventured, God will not bring about the reconciliation through love for people of all religious traditions? Does that not seem impossible at this point in time? As we start this year of our Lord 2012, we would do well to recall that, as our ancestors believed, each year is a twelve month period of God's infinite and eternal grace.

Psalm 72: 1-15 *Deus, iudicium* Grail Psalter

℟ All nations shall fall prostrate before you, O Lord.

¹ *Of Solomon.*

O God, give your judgment to the king,
to a king's son your justice,
² that he may judge your people in justice,
and your poor in right judgment. ℟

³ May the mountains bring forth peace for the people,
and the hills, justice.

⁴ May he defend the poor of the people,
and save the children of the needy,
(and crush the oppressor). ℟

⁵ He shall endure like the sun and the moon
from age to age.

⁶ He shall descend like rain on the meadow,
like raindrops on the earth. ℟

⁷ In his days shall justice flourish
and peace till the moon fails.

⁸ He shall rule from sea to sea,
from the Great River to earth's bounds. ℟

⁹ Before him his enemies shall fall,
his foes lick the dust.

¹⁰ The kings of Tarshish and the sea coasts
shall pay him tribute. ℟

The kings of Sheba and Seba
shall bring him gifts.

¹¹ Before him all kings shall fall prostrate,
all nations shall serve him.

✠ All nations shall fall prostrate before you, O Lord.

¹² For he shall save the poor when they cry
and the needy who are helpless.

¹³ He will have pity on the weak
and save the lives of the poor. ✠

¹⁴ From oppression he will rescue their lives,
to him their blood is dear.

¹⁵ (Long may he live,
may the gold of Sheba be given him.)
They shall pray for him without ceasing
and bless him all the day. ✠

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: Here again we find elements of the popular rendition of the Christmas story. Probably written to celebrate a king's coronation or birthday it emphasizes the prophetic image of a just and effective monarch who receives honour and tribute from many nations.

Short Preface

And now we give you thanks because, in the incarnation of the Word, a new light has dawned upon the world, that all the nations may be brought out of darkness to see the radiance of your glory.

Post Communion

Lord God, the bright splendour whom the nations seek: may we who with the wise men have been drawn by your light discern the glory of your presence in your Son, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Blessing

Christ the Son of God perfect in you the image of his glory and gladden your hearts with the good news of his kingdom; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among *you*, and remain with *you* always. **Amen.**