

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72 (71); Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

The Magi come from the East, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh

Matt 2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'

Matt 2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The readings from the Infancy Gospels bear an unusually close link to narratives

in the Old Testament. Again, the writer is exploring the identity of Jesus, using citations and re-written narratives. It all may seem strange to us, but the original hearers—Jewish Christians—would have had no trouble picking up the resonances and going straight to the meaning expressed in the stories.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a kind of *haggadah*, a Rabbinic style of writing which explores and expounds meaning by a resonant acoustic of echoes, thereby creating devotional and uplifting literature. Everything is in some way symbolic, the star, the magi, the king, Bethlehem and the gifts, pointing to the identity of Jesus and the inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) *Behind the story of the magi—wise men—lies the story of Balaam from Numbers 22-24. In the Book of Numbers, an evil king of Moab tries to use the seer/magus Balaam to bring disaster on the people of Israel "because they were so numerous". Against God's will, Balaam obeys the king, but at the point of cursing Israel, Balaam utters an oracle of future hope. This oracle was read in later times as a Messianic promise.*

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near—a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel;" (Num 24:17)

The author takes from this story the narrative of an evil King (Balak / Herod), trying to bring disaster (on Israel / on the Messiah), by means of Balaam (a seer / the Magi). The star in the story comes from Numbers 24:17 above and alerts the reader this time to Messianic fulfilment.

(ii) *The gifts offered by the magi call to mind a universalist text in Isaiah:*

"A multitude of camels shall cover you,

Thought for the day

In our deepest selves, each of us is a mystery: Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? How should I live? The risk in our present culture is to sleepwalk through life, to be satisfied with a merely material existence. But the human "project" is much greater. Each of us is really on a pilgrimage, or better on a quest—a quest to become my true self, in the image and likeness of God. My truest self is found by being open to God, in whom we live and move and have our being. By following that star, by listening to our conscience and inner selves, we come home to God.

Prayer

You are the mystery at the heart all that exists: draw us to yourself, O Lord, that knowing you we find our true selves, and finding our true selves, we may come to know you.

the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." (Is 60:6)

It was concluded from this text as well that the mode of transport of the magi was camels, although Matthew supplies no such detail.

(iii) The Magi as a symbol of the Gentiles comes from an echo in Psalm 72:

"May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." (Psa 72:10-11)

(iv) *Bethlehem, the city of David, is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament, unlike Nazareth. The proof text provided was, at the time, read as a messianic prophecy.*

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." (Mic 5:2)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Matthew's Gospel reflects the historical memory that Jesus did not himself directly evangelise the Gentiles, at least initially.

"These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt 10:5-7)

(ii) Nevertheless, in Matthew's Gospel and community, the Gentiles are an important audience of the Good News (15-6-13-5).

[a] *At the start of the ministry:* "Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt 4:12-17)

[b] *During the ministry:* "When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope." (Matt 12:15-21)

[c] *At the close of the Gospel:* "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.""

(Matt 28:16-20)

ST PAUL

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 16:25–27)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Once the Old Testament correspondences and the Gospel anticipations have been uncovered the text practically comments itself. Nevertheless (!):

Verse 1 This is King Herod the Great, who died in 4 BC. The "wise men" are literally "magi". Magus, a Persian loan word, covers a range of meanings: wise man and priest, who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts. From the East: traditionally, the source of wisdom.

Verse 2 The Gentiles identify universal hope in the Jewish Messiah and king.

Verse 3 The historical Herod was quite paranoid about usurpers and even had some of his sons killed. Augustus said of him: "I would prefer to be his pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*)." This was after Herod put his two favourite sons, Aristobolus and Alexander, to death (he had already executed their mother, his favourite wife Mariamne). He was a particularly dangerous spouse and parent.

Verse 5 Matthew has Bible experts (like himself) identify the birth-place of the Messiah, with a proof-text from Micah. "Shepherd" reminds us of David, the great symbol of God's faithfulness through time.

Verse 7 The (f)rank hypocrisy of Herod links this symbolic tale with the massacre of the innocents to follow.

Verse 10 Joy comes back in Matthew 28:8 at the empty tomb. For other uses, see Matt 2:10; 13:20, 44; 25:21, 23; 28:8.

Verse 11 Fulfilling Ps 72 and Isa 60, as noted above.

Verse 12 With no further narrative use for them, the Magi are taken "off stage" somewhat peremptorily.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What is the star (the vision, hope or purpose) which lights up your journey?
2. Like the wise men, our life journey is not one we travel alone. Who are the people who share your life journey now?
3. The wise men travelled bearing gifts. What gift do you bring with you on the journey?
4. At times the wise men lost sight of the star. What clouds have obscured your star?
5. Who, or what, might be Herod for you now? What forces, within or without, could subvert the dream or goal?

PRAYER

Lord God of the nations, we have seen the star of your glory rising in splendour. The radiance of your incarnate Word pierces the darkness that covers the earth and signals the dawn of peace and justice.

Make radiant the lives of your people with that same brightness, and beckon all the nations to walk as one in your light.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 60:1-6

The ingathering of Israel is expanded here to all those who search for God. It is a thrilling reading, which has enriched how we imagine the Magi.

SECOND READING

Eph 3:2-3, 5-6

Who is called into relationship with God? All of us, every human being without distinction. The revelation in Christ is an unveiling of God's longing for us.

GOSPEL

Matthew 2:1-12

How can we discover or rediscover God and Christ? Only by recognising that "you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until the come to rest in God." The human condition may be summarised as "the heart in pilgrimage."

This mystery has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit

Eph 3:1 *This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—* 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5 In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In liturgical tradition, the epiphany embraces no fewer than three Gospel stories: the Magi, the Baptism and the Wedding Feast at Cana. Each of these is a kind disclosure or revelation. The feast, then celebrates something “being made known” and the reading from Ephesians is thus especially fitting.

KIND OF WRITING

It can be tricky to follow the sequence of prayer and digression in Ephesians. In the view of many, Eph 3:2-13 forms a digression on the origin of Paul's gospel and apostleship. That is apparent from the abruptness of v. 2. V. 1 itself is an attempt to pick up a much earlier intercession from 1:16-19. But then 3:1 is itself then subject to a digression, and the prayer will be completed only in 3:14-19. It may help to see recomposed sequence as follows:

Eph 1:16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18 so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. Eph 3:1 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— Eph 3:14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom

every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18 I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

As noted elsewhere, there is a discussion about the Pauline authorship of this letter. A common solution is that the text was written by a disciples of Paul, after the apostle's death, to bring his teaching to bear in new and later context. The reasons for doubting Pauline authorship include the vocabulary, the theology and the unusual relationship with Colossians.

RELATED PASSAGES

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph 2:13-18)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The writer begins a prayer but it continues with the same words from v.14 onwards.

Verse 2 The word commission can be found also here: as a *plan* for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 1:10) and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; (Eph 3:9) Thus, Paul's ministry is part of

a wider commission or plan. This commission was given to Paul for others. It is presumed the hearers are familiar with Paul.

Verse 3 Mystery is used in different sense across the Pauline corpus and is evidently more common in the deutero-pauline letters: Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:1, 7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Eph 1:9; 3:3-4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:7; 1 Tim 3:9, 16. It refers to the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the one people of God, already firmly established by the time of writing. See the important Eph 2:13-18 above. For revelation see Gal 1:11-12, 15-16. Daniel 2 is also part of the background.

Verse 4 Omitted in the lectionary for the sake of clarity, this verse sends the hearers back to the whole Pauline mission and theology. This grasp of God's plan, entrusted to an individual, is then discerned and appropriated by the church as whole.

Verse 5 This amounts to a denial of a pattern found widely in the NT and in Paul, that is, that the Scripture *foretell* and Christians then *confirm*. For our author, the revelation is new and made through the spiritual agents of the Christian community. Cf. *I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints.* (Col 1:25-26)

Verse 6 This verse compresses what has been said more fully in 2:13-18. Note the vocabulary of heirs, body, promise and gospel, all genuine Pauline expressions. Cf. Eph 2:19. “In” means “by means of;” an instrumental use.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Disclosure and wonder are both present, inviting reflection on my own moments of revelation and awe.

PRAYER

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

(Rom 11:33-36)

Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you

Isa 60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

2 For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

3 Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

6 A 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 proclaim the praise of the LORD.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

As even a cursory glance will reveal, the reading is extremely well chosen. Firstly, because of the symbolism of light (more below). Secondly, because of the gathering / coming together of all the faithful. Following a very early intuition based on this text and Ps 72, the reading adds pictorially both the *royal* status of the Magi and their mode of *transport*. The mention of gold and frankincense probably inspired the imaginative filling in of these details. Notice also that *three* places are mentioned.

KIND OF WRITING

The writing is poetry and in this case it is almost a textbook example of “parallelism”, whereby the second line repeats the first, but in more concrete, sometimes more elaborate vocabulary. For example, vv. 1 and 2 or v.5.

Our excerpt comes from a longer section (60:1-62:12) and even within that the subsection 60:1-22 offers a poem on the light of the Lord. This is in response to Is 59:9-10, which reads: *Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.* (Isaiah 59:9-10)

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Isaiah 60 comes from Third Isaiah, a prophet or prophets writing in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem, but reflecting a much later situation after the return from the exile in Babylon.

RELATED PASSAGES

For the sake of brevity, only the references are given: Isa 58:8, 10; 59:9; 60:1, 3, 19-20 (all from Third Isaiah).

BRIEF COMMENTARY

To illustrate the theological integrity of this composite book, it may be sufficient to observe that there are many echoes, in the whole of 60:1-22, of earlier passages in Isaiah.

Verse 1 This text presumes that the Temple has been rebuilt and that all peoples will come there to worship. Here it is no longer God who will be their light: they themselves are light and they should shine. Cf. Mt 5:14-15.

Verse 2 After 2a, the repetition in 2b refers the shadow of death or deadly darkness. The Lord's glory is not so much his splendour as the full presence of God.

Verse 3 Notice the delightful evolution of the poetry: not just nations but also kings; not just light but also the bright-

ness of your dawn.

Verse 4 Cf. Is 40:10-11. At this point, the addressees seem to be at home in Jerusalem, perhaps in the Temple. Very young children are envisaged.

Verse 5 V. 5ab expresses the spontaneous joy, even exhilaration, at the prospect of salvation. V. 5cd might seem rather greedy, but it is an echo from the book of Exodus, reflecting the despoilment of the Egyptians before departure (Ex 12:13-36). In any case, the bringing of gifts fits the feast. Midian is associated with the Gulf of Aqaba, as is Ephah. Sheba is in south west of (modern) Arabia. In any case, a substantial distance is imagined.

Verse 6 Cf. Is 40:5. This is where we get the idea that camels are part of the story! The gold and frankincense of 6c are intended for worship, as 6d makes clear. Frankincense is a resin, mentioned in both the OT and NT as a highly desired and esteemed product. The trade collapsed in the 5th century AD, after the Moslems forbade its use at funerals.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Although the passage is indeed about light, it does acknowledge the need of light as we experience darkness. Not only do we need light, we are to be light as Matthew 5 puts it.

2. The reading is exuberant, to a degree we might find hard to rise to, and yet, joy is truly part of our faith experience.

3. It all culminates in praise of the Lord, that spontaneous gratitude towards God who has loved us so much as to be one of us, the great mystery of Christmas.

4. The sense of pilgrimage, homecoming is very much part of the reading and, of course, part of Christian imagination. Think only of Pilgrim's Progress. Reflect on your one journey of faith, until today.

PRAYER

We praise you, God, for the gift of light in creation, sunlight and moonlight, illuminating all you have made.

Above all we thank you for the light of Christ, that you have shone in our hearts. May we welcome this light and become bearers of your light to all around us.