

Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem

Babylon, whose religion was then deeply colored by Astrology.⁴ Their superstitious understanding of an heavenly event in the midst of Pisces brought them running to find what their holy book, the *Avesta*, had prophesied.

Unfortunately, almost all of the *Avesta* has been lost. The source of the Zoroastrian prophesied beliefs is no longer clear. Today the *Avesta*'s teachings survive in a brief précis.

The early church believed that the visitors were Zoroastrian priests. The pointed red caps in the 5th-6th century cover illustration are also found in 2nd century catacomb frescos.

FOR PRAYER: There is a charming interpretation of the Magi that is food for meditation. Imagine the magi as three scalawags who, with mumbo jumbo and incense clouds from burning myrrh, pretend to turn yellow frankincense into gold. They sell the process to the "rubes" and hurry out of town with their ill-begotten gains; but when they meet the infant Jesus they are converted. They surrender the tools of their dirty trade and become new men in Christ.

Epiphany Seasonal Blessing

May Almighty God, who led the Wise Men by the shining of a star to find the Christ, the Light from Light, lead you also, in your pilgrimage, to find the Lord. Amen.

May God, who sent the Holy Spirit to rest upon the Only-begotten at his baptism in the Jordan River, pour out that Spirit on you who have come to the waters of new birth. Amen.

May God, by the power that turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, transform your lives and make glad your hearts. Amen.

And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you for ever. Amen.

Please prepare St. Mark 1:4-11 for next Sunday.

⁴ The religion today counts some 200,000 adherents. Most are in the USA, Iran and India.

The Feast of the Epiphany



The Magi Come to the Christ Child

Basilica di San Apollinare Nuovo

Ravenna, Italy (late 400's - early 500's)

Ravenna was the Imperial Roman Capital from c. 400 - 751. Basilica di San Apollinare Nuovo was originally the cathedral of the heretical Arian sect that denied the Holy Trinity, a heresy had many followers in the Germanies. Theodoric the Goth built the basilica. He in turn was attacked by another German usurper, Odoacer. After an extended siege of 3 years there was a truce in 493. Theodoric and Odoacer signed a treaty that assured both parties would rule over Italy. At the peace conference banquet Theodoric *personally* murdered Odoacer and became sole King of Italy.

Some 50 years after it was built the basilica was re-consecrated in the name of the Trinity and became a Roman Catholic parish church.

The nave of the church is decorated with a long frieze of mosaics. Among the most celebrated is that of the Magi. Look above the heads of the Magi. You may be able to read their names. Note the unusual hats which indicate the believed homeland and profession of the Magi. See pages 2-3

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Today's Gospel Matthew 2:1-12 [Year A,B,C Epiphany]

✠ IN THE TIME OF KING HEROD, AFTER JESUS WAS BORN IN Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "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.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.' 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. [© NRSV]

Notes for Epiphany

What everybody knows about the magi:

First, there were three kings. One was Black, one was White and one was Asian. They had strange, wonderful names and were of course very wealthy. They brought handsome gifts to the Christ Child. One carried myrrh, another frankincense and the third brought gold. They had looked up into the heavens and seen a new star shining in the East. Understanding its prophetic meaning they set

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out on a journey which first took them to Jerusalem to inquire of their fellow king, Herod the Great, whose scholars gave them directions to Bethlehem. They followed the new star to come to the stable which lay directly under star. They gave their gifts, and, as we hear in the Gospel selection, *having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

Except, what everybody knows is largely untrue:

First, common reason should indicate that the line, *they left for their own country* shows that they were not kings. Three kings ruling over a single county would be at least an anomaly, if not the precursor to civil war. ¹ They are *magi* ², not *kings*. We have called them kings because of a pious attempt to find a psalm whose theme gives material for reflection on the Epiphany readings. The psalm is today's psalm, 72, and the lines we select from it include:

10 The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay him tribute,*

And the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.

11 All kings shall bow down before him*^{*}

And all the nations do him service.

15 Long may he live and may there be given to him gold from Arabia, etc.

Second, there is their diverse racial origins. Nothing of that is mentioned the Bible nor do we find any of the wondrous names that Christian legend gave them.

Third, rather than a new star, astronomers tell us that in February 20, 6 BC ³ Mars, Jupiter and Saturn were aligned in the constellation Pisces in the Eastern sky. In those days each of the constellations was believed to be associated with certain political states. The Holy Land was identified with *Pisces*, the fish. The brightness in the sky would have been noticed by many people but especially by *Magi*, the title of the Zoroastrian priests, the clerics of

¹ Read again about Theodoric in the illustration caption on page 1.

² The word is the source of our word *magician*.

³ Jesus' birth date was estimated incorrectly by Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Little or Dennis the *Short*, meaning *humble*) (c. 470 – c. 544) a sixth century monk born in Scythia Minor, in what is now the territory of Dobruja, Romania..