

## Commentary to the Epiphany of the Lord

### Shining star - Light for all peoples

#### Introduction

A land of passage, the subject of disputes, a crossroads of peoples, cultures, races and language! Palestine was invaded and occupied in turn by Egyptian Pharaohs and princes of Mesopotamia.

The desire to take revenge against the oppressors was cultivated for a long time by Israel (Ps 137:8-9), but retribution, retaliation and revenge do not enter into God's plans. An anonymous prophet of the 3rd century B.C. instead reveals what God's dreams are. Here they are: "On that day the Egyptians and the Assyrians will worship the Lord together. Israel will be a third party with Egypt and Assyria—a blessing on earth. And Yahweh will bless them saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my creation, and Israel my heritage'" (Is 19:23-25).



A surprising, unheard and incredible prophecy: Israel is destined to be a mediator of salvation for her two historical enemies, the Assyrians and the Egyptians.

A century before another prophet had announced: "The Lord will bring all the foreigners to his holy mountain and will give them joy in house" (Is 56:6-7).

The dream of God came true when a star appears in Israel, Christ the Lord, as the Lord has promised (Nm 24:17). His light drives away the darkness created by ancestral hates and convokes all the people in one family. This is the message of hope of the Epiphany, the feast of light.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“His light will make justice flourish, and peace abound while the moon shines.”

## **Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12**

From the earliest days of the Church, the Magi have aroused keen interest among the faithful. They were one of the favorite themes of the early Christian artists: sarcophagi and paintings appear more often with the same scene of the Nativity.

Christians were not satisfied with the limited information that can be found in the Gospel text. Too many details are missing: where they came from? How many were there? What were their names? What kind of transport did they use? What did they do after returning to their home countries? Where are they buried?

To answer these questions, many legends were born. It was said that they were kings. They were three: one came from Africa, one from Asia and one from Europe, and that one was black, one yellow and one white. Guided by the star, they met at the same point and then they walked together on the last stretch of the journey to Bethlehem. They were called Gaspar (the beardless youth and colorful) Melchior (the hoary old man with long beard), Balthazar (the mature man with beard). They were clearly the symbols of the three ages of life. They were served by camels and dromedaries for the trip. After returning home, when they had already reached the ripe old age of 120 years, one day they saw the star again. They departed and found themselves back together in a city of Anatolia, to celebrate the Christmas Mass. On the same day, they were happy and they died. Their remains went round the world: first in Constantinople, then to Milan until 1162, when they were transferred to the cathedral of Cologne, Germany.

It is about pleasant and touching stories, but must be kept accurately distinct from the Gospel story as not to compromise the message that the sacred text wants to communicate.

So let us begin to clarify some details that in our minds are closely linked to the figure of the Magi, but which have nothing to do with what Matthew narrates.

First of all, it was not said that there were three, and that they were magi, not kings. They had to belong to the category of diviners, astrologers, well known and appreciated people in antiquity for their wisdom, ability to interpret dreams, predict the future and read the will of God through the ordinary or extraordinary events of life.

There is no wonder that Matthew has introduced the magi in his story. He has chosen them as a symbol of all the pagans that, before the Jews themselves, opened their eyes to the light of Christ.

With respect to the star, it was widely believed that the birth of a great person was accompanied by the appearance in the sky of his star: big for the wealthy, tiny for the poor, blurry for the weak. The appearance of a comet was thought to be a sign of the advent of a new emperor.

## **But did the wise men really see a comet?**

Many astronomers have devoted time and energy to check if two thousand years ago, there appeared in the heavens a very bright star in concurrency with the birth of Jesus. They found that in 12-11 B.C. the comet 'Halley's' passed. Then in the year 7 A.D. three times the conjunction of Jupiter (the star of kingship) with Saturn (the star of the Jews—according to Tacitus) was verified.

They were admirable for their efforts. However, carried out in this way, the search of the comet of Bethlehem reminds me of the expedition to Ararat to find the ark of Noah.

Reading the text of Matthew astronomers should easily realize that the evangelist does not allude to an astronomical phenomenon. The wise men saw the star that precedes them while they are going from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, then a star ... from north to south. Really strange! All the celestial bodies move from east to west.

The star referred to by Matthew is not to be found in heaven, but in the Bible.

The evangelist writes for readers who are familiar with the Old Testament for centuries and are waiting to see the appearance of a star mentioned in a mysterious prophecy in the book of Numbers.

In Numbers 22–24 there was a curious story of Balaam and his talking donkey. Balaam was a soothsayer, a magus of the East, just like the ones mentioned in the Gospel today. One day he unwittingly makes a prophecy: “I see it but it is not an event that will happen shortly; I behold him but not near. A star shall come forth from Jacob, a king, born of Israel, rises... One of Jacob will dominate over his enemies” (Num 24:17-19).

So Balaam, “the man of penetrating eye” (Num 24:3) spoke, about 1200 years before the birth of Jesus. Since then, the Israelites began to anxiously wait for the rising of this star that was none other than the Messiah himself.

Presenting to us the wise men of the East who see the star, the evangelist wants to tell his readers: from the descendant of Jacob the expected deliverer rose. It is Jesus. He is the star.

Should we then remove the comet from our cribs? No! Let us contemplate the star and point it also to our children, but we must explain to them that the star is not a star in the sky, but it is Jesus. He is the light that enlightens every person (Jn 1:9). He is the brilliant morning star (Rev 22:16).

Matthew writes in the 80s A.D. and what does he verify? He notes that the heathens entered en masse in the church. They recognized and adored the star, while the Jews, who were waiting for so many centuries, refused him.

The story of the Magi is therefore a “parable” of what was happening in the Christian community at the end of the first century. The pagans who sought the truth with honesty and perseverance have received from God the light to find it.

Matthew highlights another particular: the magi (the symbol of the pagan peoples) would never have

come to Christ if the Jews, with their Scripture, had not shown them the way. Israel may not have followed the star but accomplished her mission. She was the mediator of salvation for all peoples.

Now we try to connect today's gospel with the first reading. The prophet said that when in Jerusalem the light of the Lord shined, all nations would be on their way to the holy city, bringing their gifts. With the story of the Magi, Matthew is telling us that this prophecy is fulfilled: guided by the light of the Messiah, the Gentiles (represented by the Magi) make their way to Jerusalem, to bring gold, frankincense and myrrh. The popular piety applied to each of these gifts a symbolic meaning: gold indicates the recognition of Jesus as king, incense represents the adoration in front of his divinity, myrrh recalls his humanity—this fragrant resin will be remembered during the passion (Mk 15:23; Jn 19:39).

Even the story of the mounts was not invented for nothing. It is still the first reading today that speaks to us of “a troop of camels and dromedaries” that come from the East (Is 60:6). Unlike the shepherds who contemplated and rejoiced in front of the salvation that the Lord had revealed to them, the magi prostrated themselves in worship (v. 11). Their gesture recalls the court's ceremony—the prostration and kissing of the feet of the king—or kissing the ground before the image of the deity. The pagans have therefore recognized as their king and their God, the child of Bethlehem and offered him their gifts.

They have become the symbol of people around the world who are led by the light of Christ. They are the image of the church, made up of people of every race, tribe, language and nation. Entering the church does not mean giving up one's identity. It does not mean submitting to an unjust and false uniformity. Every person and every people maintain their cultural characteristics. With these, they enrich the universal church. Nobody is so rich as not to need anything and not so poor as not having anything to offer.

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