

Epiphany Of The Lord, Year B

Epiphany means “manifestation” or the showing forth of God’s glory. This reading stresses the manifestation of God’s glory and the universal scope of salvation. It is a hymn of Jerusalem restored, a vision meant to encourage those who had returned from the exile in Babylon, who were struggling to rebuild the temple, the city and the nation. The Church understands this text as pointing prophetically to the Adoration of the Magi which we celebrate on this feast.⁶

Isaiah 60:1-6

1Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.

Whenever the phrase, “the glory of the Lord shines” appears, (the Mosaic Tabernacle, the Temple of Solomon, and descriptions of messianic Jerusalem) it always signals an extraordinary illumination as though God, by his presence within the city, radiates a dazzling light.³ This light stems from the glory of the Lord, who has made the city’s temple his dwelling-place.²

2See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; Darkness is the element of chaos, evil and disorder.⁴ but upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory.

3Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. The city acts as a magnet for all the nations, not only because it instructs them by means of the Law and by the word of God, but also because they are in awe of its splendor.²

4Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses. The sons and daughters would seem to be Gentiles now attached to God as his very own children. From the wealth of the nations flowing into Jerusalem, we realize that these foreigners, up till now outside “the assembly of God,” make a unique contribution, enriching the messianic, “ecumenical” kingdom. They are full-fledged members, sons and daughters of God.⁵

5Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow, for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you. The pilgrimage described here comes from all corners of the earth. It is made up of people who were scattered throughout the known world, and not just those exiled in Babylon. Those from the west come by sea, bearing the sort of goods normally transported by sea, particularly by Greek and Phoenician merchants. Those from the east, from the Arabian peninsula and further afield will travel in caravans bringing precious commodities typical of the area — silver, gold, etc.²

6Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba These three are descendants of Abraham and as such they receive their ancient patrimony.³ shall come bearing gold and frankincense, The three Kings bear gifts which are in themselves prophetic. The gold prophesies Jesus’ Kingship and the frankincense his Divinity and his Highpriesthood.¹ and proclaiming the praises of the Lord.

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

Ephesians is to the epistles what John’s Gospel is to the Gospels: the most mystical, profound, and universal of them all. Written by Paul when he was in prison in Rome while awaiting trial before Nero around A.D. 60 or 62, this work seems to be a circulating letter for all the churches in the region of Asia Minor.⁽⁷⁾

Brothers and sisters: What led to Paul's imprisonment were JEWISH charges that he had preached against the Law and had brought Gentiles into the temple (they thought Tophimus, a citizen of Ephesus, was a Gentile). He did not mind so much the chains or the imprisonment or the Romans being his judges and jailers: what he wanted to make clear was that HE WAS IMPRISONED FOR PREACHING TO THE GENTILES the salvation won by Jesus Christ.⁸

2You have heard of the stewardship (or task) of God's grace God's favor was shown to Paul not for himself but for others. **that was given to me for your benefit,**

3anamely, **that the mystery was made known to me by revelation.** Paul is clearly referring to the vision he had on the road to Damascus where he was going to persecute disciples of the Lord, when suddenly a light flashed around him that seemed to come from heaven. He was challenged by the Lord to stop persecuting Him and to come follow Him. Paul did and his whole life changed. This encounter with the risen Christ is the origin and basis of Paul's grasp of God's eternal plan, which is the "Mystery" to which he refers.⁸

5It was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: In the OT the promise made to Abraham revealed that in his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed but HOW this would happen was not revealed. The Jews always thought that it would come about through their exaltation over other nations. Through the revelation Jesus made to him, St. Paul discovered that God has chosen another way—that of bringing the Gentiles into the Church, the body of Christ, on equal terms with the Jews. This is the "Mystery", the plan of God as revealed by the mission Christ gave his apostles or envoys, of whom Paul is one.⁸

6that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. The inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation was one of the earliest struggles faced by the church, which was made up mostly of Jews. It took some years before this aspect of Christ's mission was fully understood and the Church realized that God's promise to Israel had been a universal promise from the beginning. The first covenants were, after all, universal. The covenants with Adam at creation, and with Noah after the flood, were intended to extend to the whole of the human family. It is not until Abraham that God chose one people to mediate His covenantal love to the rest of mankind. At every step of salvation history, God's overtures to his creatures were frustrated by human sin. Finally, he sends his only Son who can act as the perfect Mediator between God and man because Jesus IS both God and man.¹

Matthew 2: 1-12

Matthew's purpose in telling this story is the same one that governs his entire gospel: to demonstrate that every prophecy and promise of old has come to fulfillment in Christ.

1When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Bethlehem is a small village about 7 miles south of Jerusalem. Its Hebrew name means "house of bread",¹⁰ which gives us food for thought when we consider the "Bread of Life" who was born there. The present Church of the Nativity is built on the site of the church built by St. Helena, the mother of Constantine about 327 A.D. It is interesting that this is considered one of the best authenticated of all the holy places in Palestine. The door to the Church is very short and narrow so that none may enter on horseback and all must bow as they enter the birthplace of the King of Kings. Most churches were destroyed during the Persian invasion of the 7th century but the Church of the Nativity was saved from desecration because of the mosaic then on the façade of the church. The three Wise Men who came to pay homage to the baby

Jesus were depicted wearing Persian clothing. It is believed that this stopped the Persians from destroying the church.¹² In the days of King Herod, Herod was the ruler of Palestine. He was part of a non-Jewish family that held political favor with Rome. He was extremely harsh and inflexible and enjoyed little favor with the Jews since he remained loyal to the Roman emperor.¹⁰ Behold, magi from the east Matthew wrote his Gospel for a Jewish audience so it is likely that he assumed his readers would know the story of Balaam, a Magi (Magi were found only in Iran¹¹) in Numbers 24. The wicked King of Moab hired Balaam to use his magic to curse Israel, but every time Balaam attempted to curse Israel, he uttered a blessing instead. The Spirit of God came upon Balaam and, in blessing Israel, he prophesied that one day a star would come out of Israel signifying the coming of a great king. Many believe that the prophecy of Balaam was passed on by his descendants— fellow Magi—and, eventually, on to at least one of the three who visited Jesus.¹ Because of their interest in the extraordinary “star”, some have speculated that at least some of them may have been astrologers from Persia. At any rate, these men were the first Gentiles to recognize the kingship of Jesus.¹⁰ We should also mention the reference in Psalm 72:10-11 that kings from the East would come and give homage to the Messiah and give him gifts such as gold. The three men may have been Magi or kings or wisemen or they may have been all three.¹ **arrived in Jerusalem, saying,**

2“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising The story reflects the popular belief that each person is represented by a star, which appears at his birth.³ **and have come to do him homage.”** Herod’s spies brought word that sages from the east were in Jerusalem inquiring about a king of the Jews, most certainly not he! They seemed to be talking about a newborn baby. They spoke of an extraordinary astronomical sign, probably the recent conjunction of three planets in the constellation Pisces during the preceding winter.¹¹

3When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, The prophecy of Balaam not only predicted “a star shall come forth out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”, but the same oracle foretold disaster for Herod the Edomite for it continued, “Edom shall be dispossessed.”¹⁰ **and all Jerusalem with him.**

4Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

5They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:
6‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” This is a combined citation of Mic 5:2 and 2 Sam 5:2. The mention of these OT texts by the “chief priests and scribes” indicates their close association with messianic expectations during NT times.¹⁰

7then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance.

8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.” Herod did not want to adore the child, but to dispose of him!¹³

9After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.

10They were overjoyed at seeing the star,

11and on entering the house This setting suggests that they were no longer staying in the cave with the child in the manger.¹⁰ **they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage.** The Council of Trent quotes this passage when it underlines the veneration that ought to be given to Christ in the Eucharist: “The faithful of Christ venerate this most holy sacrament with the worship...which is due to the true God....For in this sacrament we believe that the same

God is present whom the eternal Father brought into the world, saying of him, 'Let all God's angels worship him.' It is the same God whom the Magi fell down and worshipped and finally, the same God whom the Apostles adored in Galilee."¹³ **Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense,** This certainly reminds us of the prophecy from Isaiah in our first reading. **and myrrh.** Myrrh was an oil of anointing used to consecrate Levitical priests and it was also a burial ointment. St. Irenaeus pointed out that the gifts of the Magi signify the mystery of Christ incarnate: gold, a symbol of royalty represents the kingship of Jesus. Frankincense, used in the worship of God, points to his divinity. Myrrh, a burial ointment, signifies the humanity of Christ, especially in his Passion and death.¹⁰

12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way. When Herod found out that he had been tricked by the wise men, he fell into a fearsome rage and ordered the slaughter of all the male children two years old or under in Bethlehem and the surrounding region. The Church of Christ has honored these Holy Innocents through almost all her history as the first martyrs who gave their lives that the King might escape and live.¹¹

Some of the material for this commentary is taken from: (1) The Commentary Notes of Tim Gray, (2) "The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets," (3) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (4) "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (5) "The Book Of Isaiah Chapters 40-66" by Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., (6) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Lawrence E. Mick, (7) "You Can Understand The Bible" by Peter Kreeft, (8) "The Navarre Bible: Captivity Epistles," (9) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Aelred R. Rosser, (10) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew," (11) "The Founding of Christendom" by Warren H. Carroll, (12) "A Pilgrim In The Holy Land" by Fr. Godfrey O.F.M., and (13) "The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew."

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.