

1Kings 10:1-13
Psalm 68
Galatians 3:23-28
Matthew 2:1-12

The Magic of the Magi
January 6, 2007 Epiphany Sunday

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First some thoughts on the first reading: If Solomon was as wise and prosperous as the Queen of Sheba perceived, then why did the United Kingdom break into two separate kingdoms at the time of his death as a result of a rebellion? Assuming for the moment the historical basis of the passage, because the Queen visited early in Solomon's reign when wisdom and prosperity were qualities of the monarchy? Or perhaps because the Queen's perception was colored by her state in life? As another wealthy ruler, she might well be impressed by Solomon's learning and possessions without regard to the state of the people Solomon ruled.

The psalm seems to refer specifically to the events described in the first reading. It refers to Sheba paying tribute to Israel and also Arabia. Ophir, mentioned in the first reading, is believed to have been located in Arabia. It claims "all rulers will pay homage to and serve the ruler, the anointed one, of Israel. But it also describes the expectations that evolved regarding a monarch, an anointed one, in Israel: pity on and rescue of the poor and oppressed in Israel.

One might at least argue that when there was no more monarchy in Israel, the law ruled Judean cultural and religious life. For those, like Paul, [who interestingly was from Tarshish, a place also mentioned in the Psalm] who accepted Jesus as the anointed one of Israel, the kingdom was one that leveled all believers into one class: children of God. Henceforth, all are equal: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female.

Which brings us to the Magi. As many of you no doubt already know, the word magi can be translated in various ways. It can mean political ruler, such as Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. It can refer to a member of the Persian priestly caste; it can mean the possessor of occult knowledge and power; it can mean magician; it can mean astrologer. Modern scholars favor the last interpretation. The gifts they bring suggest the wealth of political rulers, but political rulers rarely travel without their entourages and rarely travel together.

The story in Matthew, part of Matthew's version of the events surrounding Jesus' birth and infancy [a version so different from that of Luke] is probably a midrash on various passages from the Scriptures. Midrash is a distinctive type of Jewish writing found in both the Hebrew Bible and the Jesus scriptures. It's a way of seeking meaning in a sacred text from the Torah for the purpose of edification. There are no parallels for this type of writing in Greek or Latin literature. It's an edifying meditation on an earlier Biblical utterance or the construction of a fictitious episode based on a Biblical utterance in order to reveal a relevant insight, application, or truth.

The story of the magi is likely Matthew's midrash on the star of Jacob [Nm 24:7]; the coming of the ruler of Judah [Gen 49:10]; the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem [Mi 5:1-3]; the gifts from rulers [our Ps from tonight, Ps 72]. The purpose of the story is not only to edify the reader with the "magic" of the fictitious episode, it is to edify the reader theologically. In Matthew's gospel, the only visitors to the newborn Messiah are these 3 magi. No one else. And, although not specified, it is clear from the context that they are not Jews. They are Gentiles. The totality of the story recalls the prophecy of Is 49.6 regarding the role of the one who will restore Israel as "the Light to the Gentiles", so that "[God's] salvation might reach to the ends of the earth", a passage Luke quotes in Simeon's prayer in Luke's infancy narrative. In this story, Matthew conveys to the reader that Jesus, this newborn Messiah, this newborn ruler, is not just for Israel but for all peoples who seek him. Jesus *is* the star of Jacob, the light to the world. Thus, at the very outset of the gospel, Matthew takes a stand on the meaning of Jesus as Messiah, on the inclusion of Gentiles in the early church, and the value of Jesus and Israel's God to the Gentiles, symbolized by the extravagant gifts.

Subsequent Christians made, without realizing it, a midrash on Matthew's story. We converted the story from one about magi to one about three magi; we made the magi "kings"; we gave them camels on which to travel as they followed the star [which our modern mentality insists must have been an astrological event of the time]; we gave them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar and invented their connections with certain countries. None of these details have a biblical basis. If we treated our midrash as midrash, instead of historical events, we would be more self-aware and more appreciative of the important role of imagination in religious experience.

One can't help but notice the similarity between the English words Magi and magic. And Matthew's story is magical in the sense that it conjures up a silent, but beautiful and exotic scene that can stir the religious imagination. On this feast of Epiphany, Matthew's story reveals to us the need of all – ourselves included – for spiritual enlightenment and the inestimable value of spiritual enlightenment in human life.