

01-06-24 Feast of Epiphany

Fr. Joseph

Today the Church Universal celebrates the beginning of Epiphany. One of the principal emphases of Epiphany is the manifestation of the Lord as Lord, and specifically to us Gentiles and the extension of God's covenant with Israel to include all other peoples, as well. For that reason, the season of Epiphany always begins with the story of the Three Magi, three non-Jews recognizing the kingship of Christ and bringing symbolic gifts to acknowledge the young King.

In the reading from the New Revised Standard Version which you heard this morning, you heard one of the more glaring mis-translations in the entire New Testament. There were no "wise men." There is, in fact, no way to get "wise men" or, for that matter, "three kings" from the original Greek text. This is, in fact, an honest-to-God coverup, where the translators did not want you, the reader, to know who these three Gentile persons from the east really were.

The word is "magi." The word means "sorcerer." In ancient times, if you were a sorcerer, you were also an astrologer. Aside from the fact that the original text identifies them as sorcerers, the fact that they are watching the heavens and following stars to find the new king is also a clue. Obviously, the idea that pagan astrologers were the first to seek out the Christ by following the stars conflicted with the translators' own sense of orthodoxy, so they just changed it ... to "wise men."

I understand why they did it. When I was growing up, I was told that astrology was a pagan practice, pagan practices were all of the devil, and thus, astrology was of the devil. That was partly correct. Astrology did originate in what we would think of as pagan religions. Indeed, ancient Sumer, from which the later Babylonian civilization and Zoroastrian religion evolved, had an extensive system of charting the stars. Over the millenia, as empires and civilizations rose and fell, the knowledge of astrology was

passed down and continued to be developed. In Jesus' day, if you spoke of a magi or astrologer, you were talking about spiritual adepts belonging to an ancient monotheistic religion from the far eastern lands of Iran, Iraq, and even India. Today, we know their theological descendants as Parsis, Yazidis, and Zoroastrians.

If, at the heart of your orthodoxy is the belief that you have to be a baptized member of the one true Church to be saved or to enjoy God's guidance and spiritual blessing in your life, having Zoroastrian sorcerers be the first folks to recognize the Christ is kind of a problem. The easiest way to solve that problem is to cover it up: 'Let's just call 'em "wise men" or, at least, let's just leave the word "magi" untranslated, shall we?'

The Magi have been a problem for the Church from almost the beginning. It was Origen who suggested that there were three of them - Matthew doesn't tell us how many there were. Origen says that, since there were three gifts,

there must have been three givers. Other early Christian writers put the number of magi at 12 and even 20.

Some early Christians were also not happy that the visitors were identified as “Magi”. As magic and astrology came to be officially disdained in many parts of Christendom, so were the Magi. Some said they all perished in hell because of their evil pagan ways. Others said they must have converted and given up practicing the astrology that led them to Jesus. Somewhere in the fifth century, some Syriac Christian fan-fiction writer suggested they must have been kings rather than magi and went further to identify them as Melkon, King of Persia; Gaspar, King of India; and Baldassar, King of Arabia. That tradition stuck. Since the fifth century we’ve identified the 12-20 sorcerers from the east as “three kings of orient”.

But what happens if we take Matthew at his word? If we accept the teaching of the scriptures as originally written, it is apparent that God is at work, not only among the orthodox Jews, but also among other religious traditions,

here, even Zoroastrians. It certainly changes our view of who is in and who is out, doesn't it?

God's initial covenant Abraham promised him a place to live, a family, and a purpose: to become "a blessing to all the families of the earth." The prophets had long foreseen that God would one day open the blessings of that covenant to people of every nation and tribe. Here, in the story of three Zoroastrian astrologers, following the path laid down for them in their astrological lore to discover the light of heaven resting upon the baby Jesus, we see that promise beginning to be fulfilled.

In fairness to the translators, it is true that, in that day and age, astrologers were considered "wise" as they sought to discern how the aspirations of people and kings meshed with the designs of heaven. They were also considered "spooky." These mystical folk are more than just foreigners, non-Jews; they are people who are perceived as strange, whose company makes most people uncomfortable.

Far from being unimportant to the story, I suspect that this was part of Matthew's point. The first people to recognize the divinity of Jesus Christ were not the learned priests and scholars in the Temple. They were not the wise and respected philosophers of Greece. They were not "three kings of the orient" (though I still think that's a great song with words worth reflecting upon). They were the kind of folks that most people then and today would think to be "pretty weird," and they came from a place and a religious tradition where no one even suspected that God might also be at work.

And that is the point: We human beings often look at other human beings as strange, different, or other, or as foreigners -- Monotheist or Pagan, Jew or Gentile, Moslem or Christian; but God never sees any human being that way. In Luke's story, he makes a similar point when God reveals the Savior's birth to shepherds, people who were at the lowest end of the socio-economic scale in Palestinian society. In Matthew's story, the divinity of the

Christ child is revealed to people who stand outside of any respectable social circle. But all of this is keeping with the theme of the song that Mary sang when she met her cousin Elizabeth:

He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat, *
and hath exalted the humble and meek.

Apparently, the proud who had their worldview shattered by this story includes modern translators, offended by the idea that pagan astrologers found Jesus by following the stars.

The problem is, if you change the story so that the magi are kings or wise men, you make them seem far more respectable, far more normal than they really are. But Jesus didn't come to assure the respectable, or give the normal a pat on the back. Jesus came to save sinners, to call the outcast, the lepers, the tax collectors, the

prostitutes, and yes, even the weirdos.

There is a challenge for us who appear normal in this story. Are we able, as our Lord was, to welcome those who don't seem so normal? What about welcoming people from other religions like these magi, not just as guests or visitors, but as members of our spiritual family? As fellow beloved Children of God?

If we pay attention to the real story being told here, it seems you don't have to believe the right things to get into heaven. You don't have to belong to the right religion to get into heaven. You just have to seek God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength and effort, just as these Zoroastrian travelers from the east did. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. Ask and you will receive.

Do what the pagan astrologers did: Seek Christ. You will find him.

