

THE MAGI

Epiphany is a Greek word meaning a manifestation, and the Epiphany is the sequel to Christmas. You will recall that immediately after Our Lord was born, the shepherds were summoned to the cave by heavenly messengers. They obeyed, little realising that they were serving a providential purpose. They were to represent the Jewish people; they were brought to welcome the King for whom the nation had been waiting ever since Redemption had been promised. In the divine plan the Magi fulfilled an analogous part; they were summoned after the shepherds for the purpose of indicating the calling of the Gentiles, that is *ourselves*.

The story of the Magi and their mission is told in the Gospel, but it is very briefly told, too briefly, for we crave for detail of this tremendous picturesque drama. Tradition and tale have filled in many a detail, and it is partly on these that I am going to draw.

WHITE, YELLOW AND BLACK

At the moment when the shepherds were crowding into the stable to pay homage to the Babe, a kingly retinue was pressing on towards the same objective. They were still far off. They too were coming to see the Babe. They had seen His star in the east, they said, and were coming to adore Him. The leaders of that expedition were the three Magi or Kings. With them was a goodly band of attendants, because in those days it would have been impossible for people to travel otherwise than in groups on account of the wild animals, brigands and marauders, which abounded. So we may take it that a fair number of people were in that retinue. According to tradition, they used camels, though in pictures we sometimes see an elephant portrayed, which may be an allusion to Africa. Actually it is most likely that they used the ship of the desert as the camel is called, and the more so as they would probably have had to travel through the desert after Babylon, thus saving themselves three hundred miles.

Who were those Magi? Their skulls, venerated in Cologne Cathedral, are crowned with gold and they are called the three Kings of Cologne. But others say that they were priests or wise men or philosophers. The Crib always shows one as a negro. This strikes a keynote. Those Magi were representatives of the Gentiles, and probably God would carry that notion into very deep detail. We know that God does go into infinite detail; we are told that the very hairs on our

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heads are numbered! One of the joys of Heaven will be to contemplate the intricate wonders of God's works. And so we might expect to find one of the three a negro. Then surely the yellow and white races would be represented by the other two. We may regard this as most likely. For we must bear in mind that mankind was descended from the three sons of Noah. The Aryan or white peoples came from Japhet; the Mongolian, that is Indian and Chinese, from Sem; and the race from Cham. God, who thinks of everything, would most certainly have had that in mind.

Tradition gives us a wealth of particulars about the Magi. It declares that the White King was old; that his name was Melchior; and that it was he who offered the gold, the symbol of royalty. Balthasar, a powerful man of middle age, gave myrrh, symbol of humanity and death, for it was used for embalming purposes. Caspar was young and handsome. His gift was frankincense, symbol of divinity. The holy ones of the past also say that their very ages were to represent the time of youth, maturity, and age, and the qualities proper to those periods.

Now a number of mysteries present themselves. If the Magi were of those three different races, why were they all in the east? The white race had already spread to Europe, so why was Melchior not summoned from the west? God had not been content to let the shepherds stand for all mankind. He called in other men to represent the Gentiles. Would he not make them typical of the great natural divisions of the human race? So we may venture to think that Melchior, though in Asia, was of the same stock as the European peoples. If Melchior did not represent the white race, who did? It is true that the Romans were in Bethlehem at the time taking the census. But they certainly were not there to adore or to believe!

THE STAR

Now we will consider the Star. It certainly was not the ordinary kind of star that meets the eye as you look up into the firmament, for such could not indicate a place or stand over a place. Such stars are millions of miles away from the earth. If they were to come closer, they would overwhelm the earth and burn it to a cinder. So what is at stake here is not a true star but a portent, and it would have been quite close to the earth. The Magi believed that its appearance synchronised with the coming of Christ, and we know that Herod thought so too. But how could they have any idea of what its coming meant? And how did they know what they were meant to do? Did any of the old prophecies tell them, or did the Magi know of those prophecies? For these were really reserved to the Jewish people. Balaam had said that "A Star shall rise out of Jacob and a sceptre spring up from Israel." But this is too indefinite. It is very doubtful if from the Magi could reason that they were to start off on this amazing enterprise. It is more

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probable, I think, that they were told in sleep or by an Angel that the Star would appear and what it indicated.

Were the three Magi widely separated at the time when the Star presented itself? Did they see it at a great height so that it could be observed by all of them, then descending to bring them together? Was the greater part of their journey performed together? Where did they come together? How long did their journey last? It may have taken months and it entailed fording rivers, climbing mountains and crossing deserts. For there were no roads through most of the Continent at that time.

ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM: HEROD

As the journey proceeded, we can imagine the excitement, in which the attendants shared. It grew greater as the days went by. Just imagine their overwhelming expectation. They were about to see with their eyes and pay supreme homage to a miraculous King whose birth the very Heavens proclaim. At last the long leagues have been put behind them. The Star has led them to Jerusalem. But where else would they expect to find the King of the Jews? We know that the Star withdraws itself at this point, and they enter the great city. We can imagine their surprise at the lack of excitement; no crowds, no rejoicing; no *knowledge* even of the event which has moved Heaven itself? So they start to enquire and to seek, announcing their mission: "We have seen His Star in the east and are come to adore Him."

As soon as the Magi had announced their purpose, we can imagine what fevered talk began among the people. This would quickly reach the ears of Herod. Holy Writ tells us of his reaction: He was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. Why? Because *he* was the king of the Jews himself and a new king would most certainly be a rival and might easily mean Herod's death. In addition to the tidings of the Magi, news of what had happened to the shepherds on Christmas night would have reached Jerusalem, because Bethlehem is only six miles distant from the city. There must have been numerous rumours floating around, and in Jerusalem these would find good soil because of the fact that the Redeemer was due. You may ask: how in view of those remarkable circumstances could there be so much apathy? I cannot answer better than by pointing to the Eucharist. Why is there no commotion about that surpassing fact! Even we who believe do not work ourselves up into a ferment about it, and those outside the Church are completely unmoved.

On hearing the tidings, Herod convoked the Sanhedrin, the Council of the Jews, composed of the priests and scribes, and of them he diligently enquired where Christ was to be born. And the answer came: "In Bethlehem of Juda. For it is written by the Prophet; 'And thou Bethlehem, the land of Juda, are not the

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least among the princes of Juda. For out of thee shall come forth the Captain that shall rule my people Israel.”

Of course, Herod would put the supplementary question: “When?” And they would reply quickly enough, for we can assume that their minds would have been running on that topic. The Book of Daniel had defined the time in words not clear to us but plain to the priests and scribes. The prophecy talked of “weeks of years” - but it boiled down to the fact that the time was now.

So Herod sent for the Magi and received them in state befitting their rank and dignity. Concealing the fear which filled him, he asked the time of the first appearance of the Star. And they told him. Herod was not apathetic about what he heard but stirred to the depths of his being. His decision was instantaneous. The Child must die! But the Magi were not to know his mind. Dissembling, he told them to proceed to Bethlehem and then refer back to him so that he might also go and pay due homage to the Child.

THE GENTILES ADORE

So once again the Magi caravan assembles and sets out. Immediately the Star reappears and moves with them, no longer as a guide but as a demonstration. Finally it comes to rest. What sort of place was it over which the Star remained fixed, and which held the Babe? The conventional Crib shows a sort of cave, with the shepherds and the Magi assembled together. This is historically incorrect. For it was not in the cave that the Magi found Our Lord. Scripture says that they found Him in a house. It is most probable that on Christmas day the Holy Family had left the stable or cave and had found lodging in Bethlehem, now practicable because the taking of the census was over and most of the visitors would have left the place, unaware that it had just entered into everlasting history.

When actually did the Magi arrive? The Feast of the Epiphany is on the 6th January, about a fortnight after the birth of Our Lord. But that is not the time of their arrival. Most authorities believe that the Purification of Mary and the Presentation in the Temple took place before the arrival of the Magi, which would not have been less than forty days after the Birth. Let us consider this point for a moment. You will realise what a storm of excitement the coming of the Magi would occasion. It would be impossible after that for the Holy Family to go into Jerusalem for they would be followed and pointed out. We can therefore be fairly sure that the Magi did not arrive sooner than that, and in this there is some tremendous symbolism; the Gentiles only coming on the scene after the completion of the purely Jewish ceremonial connected with the Birth.

Entering the house, the Magi found the Child with Mary, His Mother. The Child is never found in any other way. What was the reaction of those men (and

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their followers) to what they saw? Did they get an unpleasant shock? Could we be surprised if they did? Where now is the kingly state and style? They have come all those miles to greet a king, and lo, what do they find? Just a poor girl and her baby in a shabby abode! And nobody bothering their heads about either of them. Is this what all that mighty journey has ended in? Was there then perplexity, disillusionment and even anger? What about the servants? Would they be jeering and cursing?

FAITH AND GIFTS

No, nothing of the kind is suggested by the Divine narrative. It is indeed evident that those people were quite satisfied with what they saw. Their supreme anticipations were met. Their eyes, their hearts, and their faith were filled by what they found and joy welled up in them. "And falling down, they adored Him." O great was the faith of those men! You know the account of the Centurion at the foot of the Cross. He confessed: "This was indeed the Son of God." St. Bernard, speaking of that, asks if there was ever faith as great. And then he exclaims that the faith of the Magi was even greater. The faith of the Magi was infinite.

Then they opened up the treasures which they had lovingly carried with them all the length of the long way, and they gave their symbolic, prophetic offerings: gold to the King; frankincense to the God; myrrh to the Man who was to give life by His death. Then Mary told them (as afterwards she told the Apostles and St. Luke) the story of the Annunciation and the Birth and showed them in detail the fulfilment of the prophecies. She promised to send them an Apostle later on to tell them the sequel and to bring them the fruits of Redemption. Then she lifted up the Baby-God over them and gave them His Benediction.

It is said that the Magi arrived in Bethlehem in the evening. Their stay was very short. On retiring to rest that night, they got a notification in sleep that they were not to return to Herod but to go back by another route to their own country. This they did.

SLAUGHTER, ESCAPE, FLIGHT

Herod was waiting, not very patiently, for news. The days passed and still the Magi did not return. Here we have to do a little supposition of our own. Herod must have been desperately worked up by this occurrence. So it is more than probable that he would not be prepared to wait until the Magi came back to satisfy his anxiety. What would he be likely to do in the circumstances? He would send agents or spies along with the Magi, either as guides or as a courtesy escort. And they would be under orders to hurry back and tell him all. For Herod's system of espionage was as good as that of the Communists in China

today. That being so, why did not those spies come back and tell Herod? Obviously the Magi would now be alive to the situation. What use would it be to go home by a different route if they let the spies report to Herod. Of course they would prevent that. Being very gentle men, they would not cut the agents' throats but they would certainly take them along with them for a portion at least of their homeward journey.

A couple of days would show Herod that his scheme had failed. Realising that, his rage was only equalled by his hatred. He saw his misgivings justified. We know what he did. He sent his soldiers to Bethlehem with orders to kill every male child under two years of age. Why two years? Herod was making sure; the Magi were certainly not two years on their journey. Also Daniel had foretold the year of birth, but not closer. Moreover, soldiers at such a moment of confusion could not be expected to estimate exactly the age of children. They would have to act on rough and ready principles. Herod judged that the age of two years allowed ample margin for all these circumstances. And so the Massacre of the Innocents was accomplished. But it availed Herod nothing.

He whom Herod sought was not included after all. For immediately after the Magi set out on their return journey, the Angel of the Lord appeared in sleep to St. Joseph, saying: "Arise and take the Child and His Mother and fly into Egypt: and be there until I shall tell thee. For it will come to pass that Herod will seek the Child to destroy Him." Straightaway St. Joseph obeyed; they set off at once, but here is something really astonishing. Why did not the Angel give that instruction simultaneously with the Heavenly warning to the Magi, and so allow the Holy Family to travel in security and reasonable comfort with the Magi caravan? Instead of this, they had to travel alone, exposed to all the dangers, misery and agony of that long and dreadful journey. For they would be afraid to attach themselves to any other party or person for fear of discovery and betrayal to Herod. Their thoughts all on the Babe, they trembled at every sound; hid at every sign of life; hurried on in momentary expectation of pursuit and capture.

PERILOUS JOURNEY

In addition to the peril from Herod, there were the wild animals. In those days, the lion, the panther, the leopard, the bear, and the wolf abounded. And brigands swarmed. Do not compare their journey to one through rural territory today. There were no roads through that vast and terrible unknown. At best there would be tracks, but would it be safe to keep to them? St. Joseph (what would have happened but for him?) walked. The little donkey trotted beside him, carrying Our Lady. Mary held Him Whom, even already, people were trying to kill. There would have to be expenses on the way; doubtless these would be met out of the

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gold given to them by the Magi.

It was to Egypt and not to Asia that the Family was to go. Such was God's design, arranged far in advance. For does not the Scripture foretell it: "Out of Egypt have I called my Son." Therefore we know that infinite meaning lay in that exile of the Holy Family - perhaps it was mystically connected with the long captivity in Egypt of the Chosen People thousands of years before.

When the soldiers came on murder bent to Bethlehem, the frantic fathers and mothers must have tried to defend their children by talking. They must have explained that the Wonder Child was gone. The soldiers might or might not believe that, but in any case it would not save the children. They had their iron order which they would not dare to vary. They would kill every child they found or the right age, but we may be sure that they would notify Herod of the alleged flight of the Child and that Herod, now thoroughly alarmed, would lose no time in organising pursuit of the Holy Family. Fear of that pursuit would be present to Joseph and Mary. As they made their slow progress, the thought of those fast-travelling camels would harass them.

After their departure from Bethlehem, the Magi disappear from the inspired Record. But tradition supplies a continuation of the story. It is said that years later St. Thomas the Apostle came to them and told them all that had happened in the interval and baptised them. Some accounts declare that they took part in the evangelisation of Asia and that they were martyred. As I have already stated, their relics are preserved to this very day in Cologne.