

THE JOY OF KINGS

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A KING HAD BEEN BORN! They had seen the herald of these tidings majestically crossing the heavens towards the west. The king of the Israelites had come at last—the Messiah about whom the prophets had sung and for whom even the Jews of Arabia had been waiting these long centuries. For years the Magi had searched the heavens in their quest for knowledge; now they were to receive knowledge far surpassing their expectations. For this heavenly star was to lead them to wisdom Himself.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Juda, there came the Magi from the East to Jerusalem saying, "Where is He born king of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him." ¹

Saint Matthew's account of the Wise Men is unique in its presentation, since Saint Luke gives no mention of them. However, joining these two narratives of the Infancy, a definite order is witnessed in the manifestations of Christ's birth. The very night of the event it was made known to the shepherds, (*Luke 2:8-15*); then, to the Magi, (*Matt. 2:2*); and finally to the righteous Simeon and Anna in the Temple, (*Luke 2:22*). As later in His public ministry Christ was to pour forth His grace first upon the Jews and later upon the Gentiles, so too, His birth first was announced to the shepherds and afterwards to the Magi. Saint Augustine reflects, "The shepherds were Israelites near to Him; the Magi, Gentiles far from Him, yet both hastened to Him as to the cornerstone." ²

The infamy of magi-astrologers led the early Christians to imagine the Magi as Persian priests. However, Saint Justin in the second century and Saint Epiphanius in the fourth, both natives of Palestine, assert that the Wise Men came across the Dead Sea from that land known as Arabia. The gifts which they brought confirmed their kingship for Tertullian, who recalled the words of Solomon, "The kings of Arabia and of Saba shall bring Him gifts." ³ Pop-

ular tradition offers their names as: Melchior, stately representative of the Semitic people; Gaspar, for the Caucasians; Balthasar, royal representative of the negro race.

Israel's Messianic hopes were well known in Arabia where the Jews were quite numerous. Without doubt, the prophecy of the Arabian, Balaam, was uttered frequently, "A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall spring up from Israel."⁴ Ever since the era of this Moabite prophet all Israel, tenaciously holding to the belief in a Messiah whose advent would herald in the glorious reign of Juda, unveiled their hope before the ancient world. The appearance of a new star, which was considered indicative of a royal birth, would proclaim the birth of Israel's king. In their search for knowledge these Sages of the East were diligently studying the heavenly bodies when just such a star of incomparable brilliance seized their attention. Perhaps they were unaware of Divine intervention, nevertheless, they were certain of the birth which this star heralded. For they prepared to travel the star-drawn route through the desert and across the Jordan to Palestine.

Saint Augustine exclaims, "O my soul, if thou dost diligently seek, thou wilt show this in signs. First, thou must seek the light, lest thou be blinded in darkness; secondly, inquire from those who know, lest in seeking you go astray; thirdly, rest in no place until you have found the Beloved."⁵ The Magi fulfilled these three signs testifying to the diligence with which they sought the Lord. They searched the heavens until at last they found the star whose rays would lift the darkness and light the way. Then, when the star was hidden from their view on entering Jerusalem, they inquired of those who knew and through Herod they heard the resounding words of the prophet Micheas:

And thou, Bethlehem of Ephrata, art little among the thousands of Juda,
out of thee shall come forth for Me one that shall be Ruler in Israel,
his goings forth are from of old, from far-off days.⁶

Immediately the Wise Men renewed their search, never resting. They desired to know the way; the star shone; joy filled their souls!

Herod had urged them to "Go and diligently inquire after the Child." Within a very few hours they spanned the distance separating Jerusalem from the city of David, which silently held the Salvation of the world in its embrace. With their hearts afire they shadowed the course run by the shepherds, who two weeks before had also inquired where the Child rested. The kings found Him vested in "swaddling clothes," reigning from His manger, the Queen Mother

at His side with His court—the beasts of burden. They saw a man and acknowledged a God, “And falling down they adored Him.” In the silence of the Gospel we hear them exclaim with Augustine:

“O Infancy, which even the stars obey! Whose supernatural glory and magnitude is this, that even the angels rejoice at Thy swaddling clothes and kings fear and wise men adore? Who is this that is so worshipped and so great? I see swaddling clothes and behold heaven. I am inflamed with love when I see Thee poor in a manger and resplendent above the stars of heaven. May faith help us, O Lord, where reason fails us!”⁷

The Magi could conceive of no greater gifts for the new-born king than those treasures of their lands, coveted by all the nations of the world: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This spontaneous offering, their manifestation of good-will, solicited the symbolic explanation given to these gifts by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church.

Gold, treasured for its permanency of color and lustre, is the ancient symbol of purity and value, being compared to the *Torah* and its observance by the Psalmist.⁸ In its pure state it is resplendent, its unquestionable excellence portrayed by its frequency in palaces and temples. The Gentiles placed their gold at the feet of human kings; Israel's shone in the Temple of *Yahweh*, the Divine King. The Magi had carried this precious metal from their distant lands as their subscription to a king. But there in Bethlehem they fulfilled the two-fold tradition of the Gentiles and the Jews. For they found before their offering the Son of *Yahweh*, the king of heaven and earth. This gift was far more than any earthly treasure; it was the treasure of heaven. Gregory the Great recalls the proverb, “A treasure to be desired is in the mouth of the wise” and he perceives the symbol of wisdom in the gold of the Magi.⁹

Asli, the second gift, was purest frankincense imported from the depths of Africa by Arabian kings for its medicinal and sacrificial applications. This substance, too, is seen in the Temple of *Yahweh*, for in the Book of Exodus we read:

And the Lord said to Moses: Take unto thee spices: stacte, onycha, galbanum of sweet savour, and the clearest frankincense. All shall be of equal weight.¹⁰

This compound is the incense described by the Lord as “pure and most worthy of sanctification.”¹¹ Saint Gregory symbolizes with David, “Let my prayers rise like incense before Thee.”¹² The bright white flame of frankincense evidences the prayerful gratitude of the Wise Men, who in ignorance sought knowledge and through knowledge received Wisdom.

Myrrh, the "onycha" prescribed by Yahweh, completed their offering. Pope St. Gregory the Great sees the symbol of mortification in this gift. This unguent perfume, the product of a small tree, reminds all of Christ's mission, the salvation of the human race. A tree supported Him in His final agony; a tree provides the unction for His suffering. Passively a tree participated in His Passion, but actively, the Magi participated through the unction of promised mortification—the way marked by the Way, the Wisdom of the Father.

These three gifts, though magnificent in themselves, were far surpassed by the greatest treasure of all, the Magi's priceless manifestation of their liberty—their voluntary self-offering. Through faith they knew; through charity they became one with Christ. Loving Him they willed Him their choicest possessions, their intellects with all their knowledge and their wills with all their love. Their love for wisdom became love of Wisdom, in Whose friendship is great delight.¹³ They knew spiritual joy; for, like the Apostle, they found, "the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but *justice and peace and joy* in the Holy Spirit."¹⁴

FOOTNOTES

¹ Matt. 2:1-2

² Sermon on the Epiphany

³ Ps. 71:10

⁴ Num. 24:17

⁵ The Humanity of Christ

⁶ Micheas 5:2-3

⁷ op. cit.

⁸ Ps. 18:10

⁹ *Homilia in Evangelium*, i, 106

¹⁰ Ex. 30:34

¹¹ *ibid.* v. 35

¹² Ps. 140:2

¹³ Wis. 8:18

¹⁴ Rom. 14:17