

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

God in His Embodied Appearance The Epiphany of the Lord Sunday, January 5, 2014
10:45 AM Is 60:1-6; **Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13**; Eph 3:2-3a, 5-6; **Mt 2:1-12** (Jesus is exposed for all the world to see the Light of God, to accept it or reject it by accepting or rejecting what they saw in Jesus: what he said, what he was, what he did.)

The story of the magi is one of the best-known stories from the New Testament.

Unfortunately, it's not one of the best-understood ones. Matthew, the evangelist, was a master storyteller, and the last thing he intended was to say this happened and this happened and this happened. That's not what the **Bible** is about. **It's about meaning.** Matthew tells us this story to proclaim something about Christ, who he is. In the story he talks about these three magi, and the word he uses is "**magi.**" **It means magicians.** But don't think about Harry Potter. It's not that kind of a magician. Magicians in the past were real people, **real men who studied the esoteric arts.** What they were **concerned about was the human soul and how it could understand its destiny.** Now many believed that you could find keys to human destiny in the stars, and so they were also **astrologers**, but again not like in the modern newspapers, not that kind of astrology. **This was psychological work; it was psychotherapy actually.**

Many people think that these three men were kings. The Christmas carol says they were kings. That comes from Psalm 72: "The kings of Tarshish shall bring gifts." That is part of the background of the story because Matthew had that psalm in his repertoire, and that does have something to do with the meaning of this, which I will explain in a few moments. But the point is **we do not take this story literally.** That is not a way to take anything really in the Bible. It is possible that there was a great star. Some think that about that time a super nova exploded, and that would explain unusual light in the sky. Others, such as some of the scholars at the Chicago planetarium, believe that there was a strange juxtaposition of planets and stars at that moment

that would have appeared very bright in the sky—possibly. What is not possible is that people could follow a star and find a house; that cannot happen.

Matthew is using a creative story to make a point about Christ. Jesus is the Light, and he is visible even to unbelievers. That’s why these magi are there. They are from Persia. They are not part of the Jewish family. St. Paul says, now the gentiles are included. By “gentile” he meant those outside the Jewish family. But it’s a relative word. Later on Thomas Aquinas will call gentiles those outside the Christian family. So really “gentile” means outliers, people who don’t belong, people who are not part of the in-group. **The point is there is no more in-group and there is no out-group; there is just one humanity to which is manifested the Light, who is embodied in Jesus.**

A perfect example of this is Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi heard the Christian gospel, but he declined to join the Christian Church. He was not impressed with Christians. But he was impressed with Christ, and he believed that Jesus really knew the way, was the way to a better world through the practice of nonviolence. Gandhi’s method of nonviolence, by which he defeated the British Raj in India, he said, was based on Jesus’ teaching and practice. We are used to people praising Jesus, but then not following what he said. But Gandhi was just the opposite. He is like a magus, a magician, who saw the Light and followed it. This is what Matthew was getting at. **Jesus is exposed for all the world to see the Light of God, to accept it or reject it by accepting or rejecting what they saw in Jesus: what he said, what he was, what he did.**

Second, there is this idea of the gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The nature of these gifts has puzzled many authors, including St. Augustine. Again, Psalm 72 comes to mind. We have to keep in mind though **to whom are these gifts being given in Psalm 72? They are given to God, Yahweh, the Lord. So by bringing gifts to Jesus, Matthew is saying he is the**

embodiment of Yahweh, the Lord God. But to make it even more clear he puts three gifts down which are not in the psalm: gold, frankincense, myrrh. Why gold and frankincense and myrrh? Well, because you take myrrh and frankincense and you burn them in a gold censor in a temple. That's a typical gesture in temples of the ancient world to signify veneration, worship, honor to the deity represented in the temple in some way. **Matthew's point here is that we are to offer veneration and respect to God in the flesh** rather than God represented in sacred spaces or images or objects. Our father **St. John Chrysostom** followed this point in berating the people of his day for competing with each other to bestow the most expensive and most elegant gifts upon the basilica, while ignoring the plight of the poor in the street. He **said that there is Christ, in the street. Honor him there first; then bring your gifts to the basilica.**

The magi brought their gifts to the poor child, which means they honored God in his embodied appearance, from which we get the word "epiphany," appearance. We continue the magi's veneration when **we care for the distressed and homeless children** in our own world and try to serve God in those who are hurting and vulnerable. We have to keep in mind the question Matthew wants us to ask ourselves: **What kind of worship does God really want?** And Matthew wants his readers to notice, at the very beginning of the gospel, that **God is doing something very new, and it is going to require a very new kind of response.**