

Our Lord, like anyone, had encounters with many people and events in His life. Of all of these various encounters and events, only a handful are recorded in Sacred Scripture. These are not passing events, then, they are not just stories. They are serious teachings on who to be, how to be, what to be; things that our Lord Himself willed to be written down, read, studied, and mulled over by every generation until the end of time. They are given to us to bring us light about God Himself, His will, His work, who He is and how we are meant to be. They are teachings we need to get to Heaven. The Epiphany, the visitation of the wise men is not only one such event but this particular event is held up with special significance in His Church, calling particular attention to it. Furthermore, the word Epiphany means a great and sudden enlightenment, insight, or understanding – a manifestation. So what is the Epiphany of the 3 wise men? We will draw heavily from Pope Benedict XVI in answering this question.

Perhaps it is worthwhile to start by noting the prophecies fulfilled by the Epiphany. Matthew is the only Evangelist (Gospel writer) who recounts the visit of the wise men but Matthew does not call them kings, he calls them Magi. So how is it that they came to be called kings? Well actually the Old Testament readings for the feast of the Epiphany answers that question. The first reading from Isaiah says:

“Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses.”

When the Old Testament speaks of “the nations” it means the Gentile (non-Jewish) nations. Then the Psalm for the Epiphany says the following:

“The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay him homage, all nations shall serve him.”

It was thus prophesied – 700 to 800 years before the birth of our Lord – that kings of “the nations” would come and visit him and pay him homage. It was recognized very early on, by the Church Fathers, that the visit of the Magi was a fulfillment of these prophecies.

The visitation of the Magi was just one prophecy. The star was also prophesied a number of times, in a number of ways. Balaam (around the times of Moses, thus even earlier than Isaiah) gave one of the most direct prophecies of the star: “A star shall come forth out of Jacob.” It is worthwhile to note that Balaam was not even a Jewish prophet. In fact, he was something more like a pagan soothsayer. He was hired by one of the Gentile kings to go put a curse on the Israelites as they were about to cross over into the Promised Land but God forced him to prophesy truthfully instead, he actually blessed Israel rather than cursing them.

The Gospel for the Epiphany also recounts the prophecy of the birthplace (Bethlehem) of the coming Messiah. Finally recall again the first reading for the Feast of the Epiphany. Even the *specific* gifts brought by the kings/Magi were prophesied/foretold.

To summarize the things foretold, and that were *written down* centuries before the birth of our Lord, were: 1) that the kings would come and pay Him homage, 2) not only that they would bring gifts but the specific gifts they would bring, 3) the birthplace of our Lord, 4) they would come from the east, 5) they would pay Him (the newborn King of the Jews) homage, and 6) the presence of a star. Imagine having an ancient book where all of these specific predictions are made, centuries before the events occurred, and then you see them all fulfilled. How do you explain that? It’s not possible that Mary & Joseph sent out invitations, they didn’t cause this (and these are just prophecies related to the visitation of the wise men; there were many others as well). How do you explain this? Exact predictions like this that come to fulfillment are well beyond human power. There is only one thing we can say: there is a God (*something* well beyond human power) and Jesus must be Him. The prophecies are far from trivial, especially in our own times where faith is so often mocked and ridiculed. **When these feasts come up, take time to sit around and tell your children about these prophecies to build and protect their faith.** Wow them with these tangible, concrete, and undeniable realities.

Let us turn now to the question of: who are these Magi? Their identity as kings has already been touched on – it was prophesied that kings would come (from the East) and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews. They are also called wise men, which is basically the meaning of the word Magi. But a person might wonder: well, which were they? Wise men or kings? Or, for that matter, were they astrologers or astronomers? These things are not necessarily mutually exclusive; in other words, they could have been all of these things. In the ancient world especially, it was not uncommon to expect that kings would have real wisdom. Plato (one of the ancient Greek philosophers), for example, argued that the wisest of men of a country should be the ones who govern it. Solomon, the wisest of all men and who succeeded his father David as king, is a prime example from Israel. Astronomy was also a common area of study in the ancient world and in fact an area of study engaged in by many of the ancient philosophers (wise men). Magi were also “priests” – ones who offered sacrifice – in some of the ancient cultures. Pope Benedict cited sources indicating that in Greek culture “Magi” were *rulers* of a distinctive religion with Greek philosophers (wise men) as their students; with this we see all of the various titles – wise men/Magi/philosophers and kings wrapped up into one. For the sake of completeness – to avoid possible confusion in the future – it should perhaps be mentioned that, as in any walk of life or any “profession” there were good ones and evil ones, good and evil Magi. The main reason for mentioning this is because in the Acts of the Apostles there were sorcerers (Magi) who were condemned by the Apostles.

All of this points to one thing – the Magi who came to see our Lord were wise men who would have been well regarded in their native land. They would have been highly respected in their native places and would have held solid, stable positions – positions of influence – in their homeland. They were set for life, in the material sense. Any yet, they leave all that behind to go and pay homage to some King of the Jews, a foreign king. Why?! They might even be risking their positions, acceptance, and respectability in doing so. There are perhaps 2 distinct questions here: 1) what information did they have that would prompt them to go, and 2) what sort of a person would it take to respond to that information, what was in their interior that would lead them to go on this journey to seek out the newborn king of the Jews?

The question of what information prompted them to go is really one of: how did they know about the prophecies (they were not Israelites) and how much did they know? The Israelites did not really do a lot to spread to other nations the revelations that God had given them through the prophets and patriarchs (the Old Testament). It was generally believed, after all, that this was just for them. So how did the wise men know about this prophesied King of the Jews? No one really knows for sure but recall the prophecy of Balaam – the Gentile sorcerer who was supposed to curse the Israelites but ended up blessing them. Balaam spoke the prophecy he received to Gentile kings and that prophecy almost certainly circulated around at least some Gentile circles. But still why would they go unless there was something special about this newborn King of the Jews? Well Balaam prophesied more than a star, he prophesied an all-powerful (divine) King of the Jews.

So this newborn King of the Jews was to be some sort of divinity but there had to be something in them, some interior disposition, that led them to go seek Him when they saw the star. Notice that even the Jewish Scripture scholars, who knew all of the prophecies so well, whose own king, indeed the Messiah, is being prophesied did not themselves go and seek Him even after the wise men stopped at the palace asking where He was to be born and telling them that they saw His star. So what prompted *these* men, pagans, to go? This is perhaps the most important thing to come to – one of the most critical questions, one of the great teachings of the Epiphany, something our Lord wants to bring to the fore of our attention. And Pope Benedict states it in perhaps the most simple yet striking way. Pope Benedict said that they would not have set out on this journey *unless*...

They were **people of unrest**, people of hope, people on the lookout for the true star of salvation.

This, I believe, is the most important teaching of the Epiphany. We will have to take up the meaning of this next week.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.