

2. The Magi are proof of the fulfillment of the Divine prophecies. They knew enough of what the Scriptures promised to be aware that when the star shone it betokened the birth of the promised King of the Jews. Their knowledge of the prophecy must have been gleaned either through contacts with the Jewish diaspora, and or knowledge handed down in Babylon and Persia from the time of the Prophet Daniel. From Daniel magi may have learned about the prophecy of Balaam about the star shining forth from Jacob (Num. 24:17). Whatever the source of their knowledge, and however limited its scope, the three 'kings' are examples of faithfulness for us, because they believed and acted on God's word. Moreover, they themselves fulfilled prophecy. The Prophet Isaiah foretold the adoration of Christ with gold and frankincense (Isa. 60:6), and the Magi are a type for the rulers who would come and worship Him (Isa. 49:7; 60:3).

3. The Magi stand for the triumph of light over the darkness of superstition and magic. Yes, the Magi were astrologers and magicians, and neither Scripture nor the Church countenance such practices. However, God knows how to reach people in ways they understand, and He used their interest in the stars to attract them to Himself and to equip them for their important mission. Indeed, through a star the three 'kings' were delivered from the false worship of stars and horoscopes.

Writing to the Christians of Ephesians, the first-century martyr, St Ignatius of Antioch, describes the star of Bethlehem in the following terms:

...no words could describe its luster, and the strangeness of it left men bewildered. The other stars and the sun and the moon gathered round it in chorus, but this star

outshone them all. Great was the ensuing perplexity; where could this newcomer have come from, so unlike its fellows? Everywhere magic crumbled away before it; the spells of sorcery were all broken, and superstition received its death-blow. The age-old empire of evil was overthrown, for God was now appearing in human form to bring in a new order, even life without end.

St Ignatius saw the star as the great sign of the defeat of magic and dark superstition. The star outshines the natural bodies, because it heralds a new creation. It causes perplexity, because Satan and his age-old empire are overthrown. Christ, the Light of the world, the One through whom the cosmos was created, has come to reclaim and redeem mankind. Magic must crumble, for death itself, and the fear of death which has held men captive, will be defeated by the death and resurrection of the Child born in Bethlehem. Thus it is that magicians—the Magi—come and surrender themselves at the manger, and by gifts, adore the Light of the world, worshipping the One True God. Should not we follow their example?

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, has shone upon the world with the light of knowledge: for thereby they who adored the stars through a star were taught to worship Thee, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know Thee, the Dayspring from on high.

(Nativity dismissal hymn)

St Patrick Russian Orthodox Church

Corner Way Street & Brooklyn Tce., Kilburn SA 5084

www.stpatrickrococor.com

ph. 0466 720 088

The Three Kings

Fr Peter Hill



An old favourite at carol sing-a-longs is “We Three Kings”:

We three kings of Orient are

Bearing gifts we traverse afar.

Field and fountain, moor and mountain,

Following yonder star.

O star of wonder, star of night,

Star with royal beauty bright,

Westward leading, still proceeding

Guide us to thy Perfect Light.

(John Henry Hopkins, 1857)

Part of the carol's appeal is exotic. Kings from distant, romantic lands, on a quest clouded in the mists of ancient history. Imagination is reinforced by Christmas card scenes, with silhouettes of noble, crowned figures, riding

camels across some Arabian desert, set against the backdrop of a vast night sky in which a star shines brightly.

That star, which came to hover over the Bethlehem stable where Christ was born, has been a source of constant curiosity. What was it? Haley's Comet has been suggested, as have the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, and other astronomical phenomena. However, given that it was a miracle, there seems little point in seeking a naturalistic explanation. Better is the explanation given by Blessed Theophylact, who considered the star to be an angelic power, because "it shone even by day...it moved as [the kings] moved, and stood still as they rested; also it moved from Persia in the north to Jerusalem in the south."

Who were the kings?

But what about these 'kings', who were they? In the Gospel of St Matthew (2:1-12), we discover that the 'kings' of the carol were in fact Magi from the East (three of them in Holy Tradition). They came to Jerusalem, following the marvellous star in their search for the newborn King of the Jews, whom they desired to worship.

A report of this reached Herod the Great, king of Judea at the time. Herod was an Idumean, not a Jew, who held the throne by leave of Rome. He had tried to win popular support, but maintained a ruthless grip on power, even to the extent of having murdered his wife, three sons, and others whom he regarded as rivals.

On hearing that the Magi sought a king, he was troubled. Probably his first thought was that a plot was being hatched to support a rival claimant to his throne. But it soon became clear that the Magi were talking about the long-

awaited Messiah. Consulting the priests and scribes, Herod discovered that Christ (the 'Messiah') was to be born in Bethlehem according to the Scriptures. So he sent the Magi to that town, with the hypocritical request that once they had found the child, that they let him know the place, so that he also might worship Him. Of course, Herod was being false. Had he really believed the Scriptures, he would have humbled himself to truly worship the King of kings. Instead, in his pride and insecurity he hardened his heart and planned to kill the child once the Magi located Him. As it eventuated, after they found and worshipped Christ at Bethlehem, the Magi were divinely warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Enraged, Herod ordered the slaughter of all the infant boys, two years and younger, in the Bethlehem area, in a vain attempt to dispose of the child who so deeply troubled him (Mt. 2:16-18).

In the Gospel the Magi are never referred to as 'kings'. The term *magus* (*magi* is plural) can refer to sages, wise man, astrologers, or to magicians and other sorcerers. The sorcerer Elymas who attempted to oppose the Apostle Paul was a *magus* (Acts 13:6&8) The Book of Acts (8:9-13), also mentions Simon, "who previously practiced sorcery" in Samaria, but then falsely professed faith in Christ. This man is remembered in history as Simon Magus. St Justin the Philosopher reports that later Simon Magus went to Rome, became a notorious cult leader, and promoted heresy and occult practices.

The Magi or 'kings' who adored Christ were the successors of a class of sages and astrologers, who originated in the ancient Median Empire. The Greek version of the book of Daniel describes such persons in the Babylonian court (Dan. 1:20;

2:2, 10, 27; 4:7; 5:7, 11, 15). By the time of Christ's Nativity, the Median and Babylonian empires had come and gone. But *magi* survived, and people in their idolatry and superstition, continued to look to astrology and the stars for meaning and guidance (as some also do in our day).

Still, the Magi were 'kings', in the sense that they were representatives of an ancient class of power brokers. And the three 'kings' in the Gospel offer the infant Jesus royal gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The significance of the three kings

The really important point is the significance of the three 'kings'.

1. The Magi testify that the child of Bethlehem, Jesus Christ, is the Saviour of the world. St. Matthew wrote his Gospel for his own people, the Jews. He dearly wanted them, and us, to understand that Christ's Nativity was in accord with the Old Testament prophecies. That the lord Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Israel; He is the glory of Israel, the Seed of Abraham in whom all the nations will be blessed (Gen. 22:17-18). You might think, then, that the Gospel would begin with lots of rejoicing on the part of Israel. No so. Rather than the Jewish priests and Bible scholars making a beeline to Bethlehem, and rather than Herod the ruler of the Jews serving the Messiah, it was the Gentile (non-Jewish) Magi who (with the humble shepherds in St Luke's Gospel) lead the way in worshipping the newborn King. It was not easy, it put them to great trouble, but still they came led by the star. They are the first of many who have and will come from every nation to worship Christ and find everlasting life in Him.