



ST. STEPHEN'S
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The Feast of the Epiphany, Sunday, January 6th, 2019
✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Most people – theologians, included – tend to view the Three Wise Men as exotic characters who add color to the drama of Jesus' birth, but who aren't actually essential to it. The way they're portrayed in pictures, plays and movies underlines this. More often than not they look more like extras from *Lord of the Rings* than personages from the Gospels.

But if they aren't essential to the Gospel, why do we celebrate their arrival in Bethlehem as one of the most important feasts of the Christian Year? After all, the Feast of the Epiphany marks Jesus' revelation of himself not solely to the Three "Wise Guys" – as one of our young acolytes in New York called them – but to all mankind, Jews and gentiles.

The descent of the Holy Spirit at his baptism in Jordan was an epiphany, as was his youthful teaching session in the Temple; so, too, his Transfiguration on the mountain, and so on. But Jesus' revelation of himself to the Wise Men is our primary celebration, the one foremost in our minds when we think of the Epiphany.

Some claim the reason we celebrate the Wise Men is they – like most of Christians of the Western Church – are gentiles. The Feast is an important reminder of God's grace and loving kindness to all mankind, including those who, by genes and geography, were excluded from his initial covenant with his chosen people.

But there is more to it than that. If it was simply a question of finding a suitable gentile to celebrate there are plenty of other candidates no

less deserving of the accolade. For example, there was the Centurion who told Jesus "Lord, I am not worthy thou shouldst come under my roof . . ." He, in many respects, is an equally laudable candidate.

The Wise Men, however, are unique in at least one important respect. Unlike the Centurion who had met Jesus as an adult, face to face, and had heard him teach and was to some degree acquainted with Holy Scripture, the Wise Men were brought to Christ solely by divinely-inspired intellectual endeavor.

The men, whom we think of as magicians, were in fact, by the lights of their times, cutting edge scientists. If they lived today they wouldn't be shuffling around in mysterious caves dressed in silk robes and pointy hats, they'd be wearing baggy tweed jackets with leather patches at the elbow, winning Nobel Prizes and teaching young skulls full of mush at Ivy League universities.

Their scientific theories might seem quaint, or even bizarre, to us today, but we have the benefit of two millennia of Western Christian enlightenment behind us. They didn't. They had no special revelation of the one true God and his purpose in creation. They simply had their own human intellects to rely on.

They were astronomers and astrologers. While this might sound strange to us, they had little else to go on. God had not spoken to them from the burning bush. He had not given them the Tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai. But they had deduced that because creation was so ordered, so

logical, there had to be an intelligence behind it. And they used the best scientific instrument yet devised – the human brain – to analyze and explore that discovery.

Careful observation over centuries – millennia, in fact – demonstrated that the Sun and Moon exert immensely powerful influences on the earth. For instance, the Sun dictates climatic conditions and weather – hence times of plenty and time of famine. The Moon governs tides.

Thus, it didn't take a great leap of logic to figure that, if the Sun and the Moon influence the physical world, they exert a similarly powerful influence on human beings. It also seemed no less reasonable to conclude that other heavenly bodies exerted similar – though perhaps not so easily divined – influences on creation.

The Wise Men were scientists engaged in analyzing the heavens in order to predict what was coming down the pike for mankind and, then, attempting to manipulate their findings to forestall baleful outcomes and produce happy ones. In short, their goals were not so different from those of many scientists today.

Astronomers today report a most unusual conjunction of stars and planets occurred in 6 BC that appeared to the human eye, rising in the east, as an extraordinarily bright morning star.

In those days, the NASA of the ancient world was located Mesopotamia and Persia. And astronomer/astrologers, like the three wise men, analyzed the shifting patterns of heavenly bodies to divine their meaning.

Here's an example of analysis they would have applied to what they observed: Sun, moon, Jupiter and Saturn were all in Aries, while Venus was next door in Pisces. Mercury and Mars were on the other side in Taurus. And, at the time, Aries was the location of the Vernal Equinox. The presence of Jupiter and the Moon signaled the birth of a ruler with a very special destiny. Saturn symbolized the giving of life, as did the presence of Aries in the vernal equinox. And as Aries was also the constellation associated with Judea, it signified the baby would be the God-given Jewish king and Messiah.

The Three Wise Men, therefore, saddled up their camels, the First Century answer to Humvees, and launched an expedition to test this hypothesis. Arriving in Judea, being conventional sorts of folk, they looked for the child in a place one might expect a world leader to be born – the king's palace.

Then, following the directions of Herod, a man they by no means trusted, they headed off for Bethlehem, a one-horse town in the boondocks, where they came face to face with what appeared to be an unremarkable married couple who had set up house with their new born son in a converted stable.

At this point most scientists, ancient and modern, would have probably thrown in the towel and headed for home to recheck their data. The remarkable thing about the three men is that they recognized the child of that unremarkable couple as the object of their quest. And they offered him the tokens of divine leadership they had brought with them – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The Wise Men understood God is not obliged to conform to human preconceptions – something many of us today do not grasp. Their recognition of the baby in that obscure stable as the savior of the world is an epiphany as that granted to St. Peter in response to our Lord's question "Who think ye that I am?"

Peter, probably much to his own surprise, blurted out: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus' reply to Peter applies equally to them: "Blessed art thou . . . for flesh and blood hath not revealed it to the, but my Father which is in heaven." *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever.