

## FIRST READING – A/B/C EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!  
For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the Lord will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.  
Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.  
Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Midian = MID-ih-uhn

Ephah = EE-fuh

Sheba = SHEE-buh

Pause for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## SECOND READING – A/B/C EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:

Surely you have already heard  
of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you,  
and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation.

In former generations  
this mystery was not made known to humankind  
as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets  
by the Spirit:  
that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs,  
members of the same body,  
and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Pause for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## GOSPEL READING – A/B/C EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

*Glory to you, O Lord*

In the time of King Herod,  
after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,  
wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking,  
“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?  
For we observed his star at its rising,  
and have come to pay him homage.”  
When King Herod heard this, he was frightened,  
and all Jerusalem with him;  
and calling together  
all the chief priests and scribes of the people,  
he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.  
They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea;  
for so it has been written by the prophet:  
‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”  
Then Herod secretly called for the wise men  
and learned from them the exact time  
when the star had appeared.  
Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,  
“Go and search diligently for the child;  
and when you have found him,  
bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”  
When they had heard the king, they set out;  
and there, ahead of them,  
went the star that they had seen at its rising,  
until it stopped over the place where the child was.  
When they saw that the star had stopped,  
they were overwhelmed with joy.  
On entering the house,  
they saw the child with Mary his mother;  
and they knelt down and paid him homage.  
Then, opening their treasure chests,  
they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.  
And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,  
they left for their own country by another road.



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

## SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

The feast of Epiphany originated in the East, where it was primarily a commemoration of the Lord's baptism. This was the first of his "epiphanies," or manifestations. Further epiphanies, such as the miracle at Cana, came later.

When this festival spread to the West, it assimilated some of the associations of the Western Christmas and became primarily a commemoration of the visit of the Magi.

This interpretation of Epiphany, however, remained peculiar to the West. In turn, the visit of the Magi came to be regarded as a manifestation to the Gentiles, as in the collect of the Roman Missal and the Book of Common Prayer: "Deus, qui hodierna die Unigenitum tuum *gentibus* stella duce revelasti . . .," and in the choice of the epistle for the day from the letter to the Ephesians.

Later still, especially in Lutheranism, Epiphany became the day to emphasize the Church's missionary work.

The current Lectionary shows an attempt to restore the primary emphasis to the revelation of God in Christ and to relate all those secondary features to this primary theme.

### Reading I: Isaiah 60:1-6

This passage is from Third Isaiah. The first part (vv. 1-3) announces the return of the exiles in language taken over from Second Isaiah (chs. 40-55).

The second part (vv. 4-6) foretells the eschatological pilgrimage of the Gentiles to the restored city of Jerusalem. The first part is typological of the birth of Christ; the second part, of the visit of the Magi.

Although Matthew (curiously, in view of his special interest in quoting Old Testament prophecies) does not cite this passage, it has clearly influenced the Magi narrative, as the reference to gold and frankincense in verse 6 shows.

Other features from this passage, not noted by Matthew, were added by popular legend to the story of the Magi, namely, the fact that the Magi were Gentiles, to say nothing of the camels in verse 6!

In its original context, the first part of this reading hailed the fulfilment of Isaiah 40ff.—the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. The light has now come and the glory of the Lord has been revealed.

The second part predicts the eschatological pilgrimage of the Gentiles to Jerusalem that will follow upon the rebuilding of the city.

This reading is doubly suited to Epiphany when given a christological interpretation.

First, the Incarnation replaces the return from Babylon as God's great act of salvation. In the revelation of God in Christ, the light has indeed shone in the darkness, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon the world.

And as the Gentiles respond to that revelation, a response symbolically prefigured in the journey of the Magi, the eschatological pilgrimage of the Gentiles to Zion is fulfilled.

This Old Testament passage has clearly colored the narrative of the Magi in Matthew 2 (gold and frankincense!). It also continued to influence the development of popular legend by adding details from the Old Testament ignored by Matthew (kings and camels, for example).

### Responsorial Psalm: 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

This psalm was originally a coronation hymn, composed for kings of the Davidic dynasty. Christian faith sees its fulfillment in Christ, for it emphasizes the "pastoral" aspects of kingship, such as the establishment of justice and compassion for the poor. The psalm also brings out a feature absent from the first reading—the figure of the messianic king.

We may suspect that this psalm, like the first reading, also influenced the Matthean narrative of the Magi. Once more we note the lack of any explicit quotation, yet the psalm speaks of the pilgrims bringing gifts and falling down in homage before the messianic king. Like Isa 60, the psalm has also contributed something to the legend of the Magi, namely, their identification as kings. That they were three kings was an inference from the three gifts specified by Matthew.

Christian faith sees Psalm 72 appropriately fulfilled in the coming of Christ as the messianic king who brings justice and compassion for the poor (fourth stanza), and in the universality of the acknowledgment accorded to the messianic king ("all nations" in the third stanza, echoed in the refrain).

This psalm was probably composed as a coronation hymn for a Davidic king.

Expressive of the genius of Hebrew monarchy at its best, and in marked contrast to the brutal tyrannies of many Oriental potentates, the hymn depicts the king as the source of justice and compassion for the poor.

In all fairness, however, it should be noted that a similar portrait of monarchy characterizes the Code of Hammurabi.

The exaggerated language of the third stanza, with its picture of kings coming from afar—in fact, all kings and nations coming to do homage to the Davidic king of Judah—is simply a poetic expression of Judah's hope that under the new king it will become the top nation as it was in the reign of David.

## Reading II: Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

This reading is an explicit theological statement of the two themes adumbrated in the first reading: the revelation or epiphany of God in Christ (v. 3) and the universality of messianic salvation (v. 6).

Many modern scholars regard Ephesians as the work, not of Paul himself, but of a member of the Pauline school looking back, after the Apostle's death, upon his achievement in maintaining the unity of Jew and Gentile in the one Church.

The choice of this reading is intriguing (the old Roman Missal had Isaiah 60:1-6), for it is the same passage that Cranmer appointed for Epiphany; in the Book of Common Prayer, though in longer form (vv. 1-12).

The reading combines the same two themes found in the first reading: the revelation or epiphany of God in Christ ("the mystery . . . made known to me by revelation") and the participation of the Gentiles in the messianic salvation ("the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise").

The letter to the Ephesians was written, whether by Paul himself or by one of his closest disciples and successors, at a time when the Apostle's work was complete and the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church, for which he had striven throughout his apostolic career, was an accomplished fact.

Matthew, too, was a beneficiary of this achievement (even if his view of the Law is very different), and it is precisely because of Paul's success that this evangelist can use the story of the Magi to symbolize the universality of the gospel.

## Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12

Many different elements have gone into the shaping of this familiar story.

(1) There is the primitive Christian kerygma—of Jesus' birth from Davidic descent, which would qualify him in Jewish eyes for messiahship. The kerygma is further expressed in the tradition that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David (a tradition about which, as we have already noted, Matthew and Luke agree).

(2) There is the tradition, also common to Matthew and Luke, that Jesus' birth took place near the end of the reign of Herod the Great.

(3) There is a folk memory of Herod's character and of his psychopathic fear of usurpation during the closing years of his reign.

(4) There is the widespread Hellenistic belief in the East as the source of wisdom.

(5) There is the motif of the star as symbol of the Messiah. It is surprising in this connection that Matthew makes no use of Numbers 24:17. This text played a prominent role at Qumran, and it must have shaped the Magi story before it reached Matthew.

(6) The same failure to cite obvious Old Testament texts applies to the mention of the presentation of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which, as we have seen, is based on our first reading and the responsorial psalm (72). Again we must suppose that these Old Testament passages influenced the formation of the story, and that Matthew for some reason did not see fit to quote the passages in question.

Only the formula quotation from Micah can be attributed to the evangelist with any degree of certainty, although it is unusual for such quotations to be placed on the lips of the *dramatis personae*.

The thought that the Magi were Gentiles, underscored at least as early as the Gregorian Sacramentary (see the collect of the day in the Roman Missal, quoted above), is not at all emphasized in the narrative itself, though it is certainly present in the Old Testament Scriptures that lie behind it.

Reginald H. Fuller,  
Daniel Westberg

This pericope gathers together early Christian traditions from different sources.

1. The primitive kerygma had affirmed Jesus' Davidic descent (Rom 1:3). According to Jewish expectation, this qualified him for messiahship. As a Christological affirmation, Jesus' Davidic descent explains the importance attached in the infancy narratives to his birth at Bethlehem.

2. A tradition common to Matthew and Luke dates the birth of Jesus in the reign of Herod (d. 4 B.C.). This dating is plausible and may well rest on fact.

3. There is the folk memory of Herod's cruelty, and especially the pathological fear of assassination and usurpation that marked the closing years of his reign.

4. The star was regarded as a symbol of the Messiah. It originated in Num 24:17 and was given a messianic interpretation as early as the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. Matthew's failure to quote Num 24:17 is again surprising.

5. The gifts presented to the Christ child were suggested by our first reading and the responsorial psalm, although, again, Matthew does not cite them.

6. There is the testimonium from Mic 5:2 cited in verse 6. This passage was already interpreted messianically in Judaism (see John 7:42 and the fact that, unusually for Matthew, it is placed here on the lips of the scribes). It seems likely, therefore, that it was used as a testimonium before Matthew, though the structure of the pericope suggests that it was first inserted into the story by the evangelist.

7. Finally, although Matthew does not emphasize it, there is the tradition of Gentiles coming to see the messianic salvation, from the First Reading and Psalm 72.

All these factors contributed to the shaping of the Magi story. The only certain historical facts behind the narrative are the names Jesus, Joseph and Mary; the dating of the birth; and perhaps the location of the birth at Bethlehem, although that tradition may have originated from Mic 5:2 and Jewish expectation about the Messiah, The significance of the story is almost entirely symbolical.

Reginald H. Fuller