

In the last Christmas card Dr. Fox sent before his passing, he asked in what the true meaning of Christmas lies, without the date, the tree, the gifts, and Santa Claus. Christmas is what we make it. Its meaning lies in the spirit with which you celebrate it, in a spirit that focuses on Christ. Today we will learn about what the Magi made of the first Christmas. If we respond to Christ's coming as they did, we will better understand the meaning of Christmas. We'll see that the meaning of Christmas is that Christ came to us as the King, and the only proper response is joyful worship and unreserved devotion. This should be our response to His first coming, and our response when He comes again.

Epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, as represented by the Magi. This should hold meaning for us Gentiles. But who were these Magi? They were not kings. The word "Magi" is the plural of the Greek word *magos*, which comes from a Persian word indicating membership in a priestly class. This word describes the types of pagan wise men mentioned in Exodus 7:11 and Daniel 2:2. They are not wise in God's eyes, but in man's. They specialize in interpreting dreams and astrology. Even though they were pagan, God still used them for His work. They came from the east. Since they seem to have had some knowledge of messianic prophecy, they may have been Babylonians, given the exposure of the Babylonians to the Old Testament during the exile. In terms of their number, there may have been three, each bearing one gift, but the Bible is not clear. It is evident from Matthew 2 that they did not visit Jesus right after His birth, but perhaps months or even a couple of years later. They would have taken a while to travel to Jerusalem, and by then Jesus was living in a house rather than a stable, and is described as a boy, rather than a baby (v. 11). Based on the time that had elapsed since Jesus' birth, Herod ordered that all boys two years old and under be killed (v. 16).

So what did they see in the star that prompted them to go to Jerusalem? At that time, astrological signs were often associated with political events, such as the birth of kings. This is evident in Herod's reaction to the start in vv. 3, 7. Both the Magi and Herod knew what the star meant. The interpretation of the star comes from Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:15-19. The description of a star arising from Jacob is the same wording Matthew uses in vv. 2 and 9. And

we know this prophecy was read in a messianic way from rabbinical texts and the Dead Sea scrolls. The Magi interpreted the star knowing it represented the promised King of Israel. And the gift of myrrh, which is associated with burial, hints that they also knew to some degree about Jesus' salvific work, which was also prophesied in the Scriptures.

The Magi were more than just foreign dignitaries visiting another ruler out of respect. If this was their only role, they wouldn't have so boldly defied the wishes of the extremely cruel Herod. The Magi knew the significance of the coming of Jesus. Matthew goes to great lengths to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's history, as the true King in the line of Abraham and David. Jesus is the new Moses, the fulfillment of the Law as described in the Sermon on the Mount. The Gentile Magi realized Jesus' importance, but Israel did not. Israel's leaders, who knew the Scriptures, still rejected their King and put Him to death, which is foreshadowed by the Magi's gift of myrrh. The Magi represent the Gentiles that would come to Jesus after Israel's failure to accept Him. We see the prophecy in Isaiah 60:1-6 fulfilled in Matthew 2. The nations come to the Lord. Jesus is King of not only Jews, but also Gentiles. And all nations will come and worship Him when He comes again.

Do you have a solid grasp of Jesus' coming? Let us meditate on His coming in the past, hope for His coming in the future, and also experience how He comes to us in the present, through the sacraments, through His word, through daily worship and obedience, and through our neighbors, all of whom Jesus identifies with. In the church we are the body of Christ in this world, in the present. So this season, meditate on Christ as you prepare for Christmas. The lights remind us of Jesus' light that came to illuminate this dark world. The evergreen tree in winter reminds us of the eternal life He brings to those dead in their sins. The presents remind us of the gift of God's grace; and giving reminds us of His love, which we should share with others. The stress of planning reminds us of the broken human condition that Jesus saves us from. We wanted to become God, and so mankind fell. But God became man to save mankind, so that we could be raised with Him as children and heirs of His kingdom. Our response should be to praise Him, as the crowds did in Matthew 21:1-9. For He is truly worthy of our worship and obedience.