

The Epiphany 2008
January 6, 2008
St. Augustine of Canterbury, Wiesbaden
The Three Wise Men? —Mt. 2:1-12
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I saw a cartoon in *Die Welt* of a man dreaming of three fellows in Babylonish costumes and wearing crowns, two white and one black, bearing gifts...of a jerrycan and two barrels filled with oil.

With the price of gasoline in Europe, especially in the U.K., one can understand the point, especially since today is the Feast of the Epiphany, when we sing “Star of Wonder, Star of Light, Star of Royal Beauty Bright.” In some countries this day is more important than Christmas—indeed, Epiphany once was the feast of Christ’s birth.

Who were these *Heiligen Konigen*, as they are called here, the three Kings? They weren’t kings, and we don’t know that there were three, just that they brought three royal gifts, not petroleum, but gold, frankincense and myrrh. Some people call them the Three Wise Men. However, showing up at the court of Herod the Great—notoriously paranoid and swift to murder even his own children—blabbing about an alternate monarch being born cannot possibly be called “wise.”

Calling Jesus’ visitors “The Three Stupid Rich Guys” might have been more appropriate.

Since the story appears only in Matthew’s Gospel and is not mentioned anywhere else, the trend among Bible scholars for decades has been to say that the whole thing is an invention of the Gospel writer. The theory is that Matthew is writing for a Jewish Christian church which is beginning to deal with Gentile converts—which many thought impossible at first. The point of the story is to set Jesus up as the Messiah, royal son of King David, son of God. And there is an overtone of the circumstances of Moses’ birth. You’ll recall that Pharoah had ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill any boy born to a Hebrew mother. Add in the fact that the visitors are Gentiles, and you are validating the idea that non-Jews can also be worshippers of Jesus.

But I want to disagree, because I think the story has more importance to us than a literary device. There is some fact here too, although Matthew is telling the story in a “stained-glass style.” What I mean is, look at St. Augustine of Canterbury over there in the window. (I really like our windows here, by the way.) Do you think Augustine would recognize himself? No, but we do. So Matthew is re-telling this story, but in “stained glass,” as it were. He keeps telling us that this or that happened in order to fulfil some prophecy or another. But this does not have to mean he is making the whole thing up.

First let us correctly identify the visitors. They are called in the original “magi,” from which we get the word “magic” and “magician.” They are from the East, we are told, which means that the visitors are not sleight of hand artists, but astrologers and soothsayers, pagan priests. The ancient Babylonian magi had an extraordinary knowledge of astronomy, which was not surpassed until the mid-1800s. But they did not know stars were mighty fusion reactors; they thought they were gods and goddesses. So when they say they have seen the star of the new-

born King of Israel, the first listeners would have understood that these pagan priests thought an angel was guiding them.

And so when the Rich Guys go to see Herod, everyone understands they are the Stupid Rich Gentile Guys From Far Away. Just because they are magi doesn't mean they know anything about politics. And the fact that they are pagan priests, to a good Jew of Matthew's day, would have meant they were especially impious Gentiles among impious Gentiles.

And stupid, too. When Herod hears this, of course he is going to order the destruction of the baby boys of Bethlehem. He had his own sons killed when he thought they were plotting his overthrow. Worse, he was a phony Jew, actually an Edomite, an ancient enemy of Israel, who played at being Jewish so as to placate the people.

But what is shocking about the story is what we have lost through all our Christmas pageants, etc. If the Star, an angel, guides the impious stupid rich pagan priests close to Jesus, even having an important clue to his true identity, this must mean that it was God's will, not their silly astrology, that brought them. And it is richly ironic that Herod, the false Jew, gives them the truth from the Scriptures, that enables them to locate Jesus and Mary and Joseph.