

The light that leads to 'Bethlehem in Judea'

A Reflection on the Epiphany of the Lord

The Christian festival of the Epiphany, in the West, primarily celebrates Christ's 'manifestation' to the Gentiles as depicted in the biblical story of the Magi. [1]

In Matthew's Gospel (2:1-12) the Magi embark upon a journey seeking the 'infant king of the Jews'. They are foreigners 'from the east' amidst a story awash with Jewish characters, symbols, texts.

For example, the Magi are led to Jerusalem, the cultic centre of Jewish life. Navigating a dangerous encounter with King Herod, their enquiry takes them to Bethlehem (about 8km south of Jerusalem). These directions come via the Jewish priests and scribes who know that, according to a prophetic tradition of Israel,[2] the messianic child is to be born 'in Bethlehem in Judea'. Bethlehem is the birthplace of King David (1 Samuel 16:4). And Judea was the focus of a number of messianic prophecies circulating in the ancient world at the time. At Bethlehem the Magi find a little family of Jews: 'the child with his mother Mary'. Interpreted through the lens of the Hebrew Scriptures, reference to 'gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh' perhaps alludes to Isaiah 60:6 which speaks of God exalting over a renewed Jerusalem and the (gentile) nations being drawn to its light. The guiding star can be interpreted as a symbol of the emergence of the dynasty of King David. [3]

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 528) we read:

The magi's coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations. Their coming means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Saviour of the world *only by turning towards the Jews* and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament. [4]

This text is remarkable for the way it places the story of Israel front and centre. Attuned to the Second Vatican Council's renewal of Catholic teaching on the Church's relationship with Judaism, it presents the story of the Magi in a manner that implies an ongoing challenge for gentile Christians: to be awake to what God has done, and is doing, through the Jewish people.

Cardinal Jean Marie Lustiger [5] once wrote:

Pagans, even when they become Christians, are constantly tempted to refuse the particularity of history and divine election. They are tempted to make Jesus the projection of the ideal man that each culture and civilisation creates within itself. . . . Christ himself, the figure of Christ in its reality, can assume every face of humanity, but that can happen only because he is first of all the individual who was born in Bethlehem of Judea. [6]

Every year at Christmas time, the scriptural reading of the story of the Magi proclaims Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world; and it also reminds us that this universal gift comes into the world by way of a particular people—their story, history, sacred texts, land. For the Christ-child adored by the Magi is a Jewish child, born 'in Bethlehem in Judea' (Mt 2:5); and 'the special position of Israel'[7] in salvation history continues to hold and shine forth for all times. [8]

In a Christmas reflection that affirms the pivotal role of Judaism and its continuing light to the world, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) wrote:

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Abraham, father of the people of Israel, father of faith, thus becomes the source of blessing, for in him ‘all the families of the earth shall call themselves blessed’ (Genesis 12:3). The task of the Chosen People is, therefore, to make a gift of their God — the one true God — to every other people; in reality, as Christians we are the inheritors of their faith in the one God. Our gratitude, therefore, must be extended to our Jewish brothers and sisters who, despite the hardships of their own history, have held on to faith in this God right up to the present, and who witness to it . . . [9]

In our struggle to fully grasp of the mystery of the Incarnation, we gentile Christians are, in a sense, still journeying to that place where Christ was born. We are still enquiring, still exploring, still ‘searching into’ the Church’s mystery as we grow in understanding of our irrevocable ties to Judaism and our indebtedness to the Jewish people. For, as the Second Vatican Council declared,

‘theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh’ (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. [10]

Notes:

[1] In the East, where this ancient feast originated, the focus is primarily the theophany at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The miracle at the wedding feast of Cana is also associated with Epiphany.

[2] The name ‘Israel’ has multiple meanings. In this article it is a theological reference to the Jewish people, from their origins in history to their ultimate destiny in accord with God’s design.

[3] With reference to Numbers 24:17: ‘a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel’ - a messianic text in Jewish thought.

[4] Emphasis added. On the significance of this text for Christian identity and interfaith relations, see Achim Buckenmaier, ‘Not Just Any Child, But That Special Child’, *Jewish-Christian Relations: Insights and Issues in the Ongoing Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, 30 April 2016, accessed at the website of the International Council of Christians and Jews, <https://www.jcrelations.net/articles/article/not-just-any-child-but-that-special-child.html>

[5] French Cardinal, 1926-2007, Jewish by birth.

[6] J.M. Lustiger, *Choosing God – Chosen by God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 64. Quoted in Achim Buckenmaier, ‘Not Just Any Child’.

[7] See Joseph Ratzinger, *Israel, the Church, and the World*, in *Catholic International* 5 (1994), 309-314, quoted in Achim Buckenmaier, ‘Not Just Any Child’.

[8] This statement (and this article) is framed by Christian credal convictions. Some elements (e.g., the historical fact of Jesus’ Jewish identity) find common ground with Judaism. Belief in the messianic identity and divinity of Jesus is a clear point of departure between the two religions.

[9] Joseph Ratzinger, ‘The Heritage of Abraham: the Gift of Christmas’, *L’Osservatore Romano* (c. December 2000), accessed at the [Dialogika](#) online library maintained by the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations and the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia.

[10] Vatican II, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, 28 October 1965, 4.

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