

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

The “glory of the Lord” referred to in the first verse of this passage is a very specific phrase that is not often sufficiently explained. It is not just a bright light that shone over the shepherds outside Bethlehem. The glory of the Lord, or *shekinah* in Hebrew, is the physical presence of God himself. It is described as a fiery pillar of cloud in Exodus as it led the Hebrew people through their journey to the Promised Land. It entered the Temple in Jerusalem during Solomon’s dedication (1 Kings 8). What Isaiah is promising in this week’s passage is that the physical presence of God will return to the land of Israel; a promise that was fulfilled outside of Bethlehem in Luke 2: 9.

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

It is important to note that Matthew’s first words, “In the time of King Herod”, do not denote a period of time as much as they describe a condition. He is telling us much more than the fact that Jesus was born between 37 and 4 B.C. He is telling us that Jesus was born during a time when the ruler of the country had gone insane. Herod had executed three sons, one wife, many other family members, and a high priest, as well as anyone else who was perceived as a threat. Matthew is saying that Jesus was born in dangerous times; in a world where a king could order with impunity the slaughter of a village’s children.

We do not know who the wise men were, how many of them there were, or where they came from. Despite legends and traditions, all we know is that there were more than one and that they came “from the East”. Everything else is speculation. They came to Jerusalem because it was the capital of the nation and was the logical place for a new king to be born. It is most likely that the star they followed was not an unusual phenomenon such as a supernova but that their study of the sky as astrologers revealed an unusual alignment of stars and planets that was interpreted by them as a new “king of the Jews”. In that case, we have all seen the “Star of Bethlehem”; we simply did not know we were seeing it.

We do not know how long after Jesus’ birth that the wise men came to Bethlehem. There is speculation that the two years in Herod’s terrible order is the proper time frame but that is only a theory. The twelve days marked by our celebration of Epiphany is traditional and not based on any biblical information.