

**THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST, DECEMBER 25/JANUARY 7, 2007**

**GAL. 4: 4-7**

**ST. MATTHEW 2: 1-12**

by

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**Gospel:** *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,*

*Saying, Where is He that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen His star in the east and are come to worship Him.*

*When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*

*And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.*

*And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,*

*And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.*

*Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.*

*And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young Child; and when ye have found Him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.*

*When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood where the young Child was.*

*When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.*

*And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshipped Him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.*

*And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.*

...

You must understand why it is that the Word of the Father, so great and so high, has been made manifest in bodily form. He has not assumed a body as proper to His own nature, far from it, for as the Word He is without body. He has been manifested in a human body for this reason only, out of the love and goodness of his Father, for the salvation of us men. [St. Athanasius (+373), *On the Incarnation* (New Edition, revised), St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, Crestwood, N.Y., reprinted 1993 (original edition 1944), p. 26.]

The Nativity of Christ –

St. Matthew mentions Herod the Great so we might learn that the Judean rulers and kings had failed, thus came Jacob's prophecy about "the Expectation of the Gentiles":<sup>1</sup>

A ruler shall not fail from Juda, nor a prince from his loins, until there come the things stored up for Him, and He is the expectation of nations.<sup>2</sup>

The Adoration of the Magi –

The Adoration of the Magi is "a story about the 'epiphany' or manifestation of Christ to the pagans".<sup>3</sup> Christ came because the rulers and kings of Judah had failed, so He came "of necessity". The Magi, pagan idolaters, came to Jerusalem to find the Lord Jesus and worship Him.

Why did they come?

Blessed Theophylact, following the Fathers, explains that, basically, there were two reasons; first, the Magi by *believing* and coming condemned the Jews: "For if the idolatrous Magi believed, what defense could the Jews give?"<sup>4</sup> They came from the east, a great distance. The Jews are condemned again because the Magi came from such a distance to worship the Saviour; yet, despite the Lord being in the midst of the Jews, they persecuted Him:<sup>5</sup>

For if the wise men, who were idol-worshippers and alien to the covenant, believe and worship (Him), what more can the Jews say in their defence since they have the *Law* and the *Prophets* and the *true faith*, yet they spurned and rejected the Lord; in truth, therefore, they are worthy of great reproach and condemnation (all emphases supplied).<sup>6</sup>

Second, they came so Christ's glory could shine forth even more because their witness had previously "been subject to the demons"... and they "were enemies of God".<sup>7</sup>

## The Star

Even though it is difficult for contemporary people (like us) to understand what follows, we need to do so. The Star in the East that the Magi followed is not merely a star as we know it. It was “a divine and angelic power that appeared *in the form of* (emphasis supplied) a star”.<sup>8</sup> Such an appearance through a star would have been familiar to the Magi who, after all, were astrologers from the east “(Persia or Babylon)”.<sup>9</sup> They expected the King to be born because of a prophecy by Balaam indicated a star “in the spiritual sense” would appear in the sky signaling the Event.<sup>10</sup>

The Magi knew it was not an ordinary star; it shone both day and night, moved, then “stood still” when they did the same, and moved from north to south, something the Fathers state stars never do.<sup>11</sup>

Herod was troubled –

Herod the King was very troubled as were the Jews. It made no sense for the Jews not to *rejoice* at having a king the Persian kings would pay homage to, but “evil is indeed a senseless thing”.<sup>12</sup> Herod gathered the chief priests and scribes and asked them where the Child would be born. It was God’s Will that these were the men who, when asked, would tell the truth “and by this confession be condemned. For those who crucified Him had first confessed Him”.<sup>13</sup> They told Herod the birth would be in Bethlehem of Judea as prophesied by the prophet Micah:

And thou, Bethlehem, house of Ephratha, art few in number to be *reckoned* among the thousands of Judea; *yet* out of thee shall one come forth to me, to be a ruler of Israel; and his goings forth were from the beginning *ever* from eternity.<sup>14</sup>

Why Bethlehem?

According to the Fathers, Bethlehem was despised because it was small.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps this is similar to modern-day city dwellers’ sometimes expressed disdain for rural folk! But, in Bethlehem’s case she was to become a great spiritual star in her own right derived from the renown of being Christ’s birthplace: “For all people from the ends of the earth come to venerate this holy Bethlehem.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet, Scripture is clear that the Lord was not to remain there, but to leave and preach His message elsewhere, spending most of His time in Nazareth: “*For out of thee shall come a Governor*” (emphasis supplied).<sup>17</sup> Notice the emphasis is on the Lord’s leaving.

Two Beginnings –

You and I have only one beginning, one birth. The Lord has two “goings forth,” a “double genesis”.<sup>18</sup> The first is His begetting from the Father

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, *begotten of the Father before all the ages* (emphasis supplied);<sup>19</sup>

Christ is of the Essence of God. The Father is not born from anyone or others, and “the Son of God was born from God the Father *before all ages* (emphasis supplied)... **“God, the Holy Trinity, is eternal and unchanging.”**<sup>20</sup> Thus Christ, although taking flesh and becoming man, has existed before the time of this world!

His second is His Nativity, where He took flesh in the beginning from the Theotokos. Christ comes to “shepherd” His people Israel, meaning anyone who believes in Him, including Gentiles:

‘Israel’ means ‘seeing God’, so all those who see God are Israelites, even those who are Gentiles.<sup>21</sup>

The Troubled Herod –

The highly-troubled Herod met secretly with the Magi and learned from them the exact time the star appeared. Bl. Theophylact follows St. John Chrysostom’s view that the star appeared well before the Lord’s birth allowing the Magi to worship Him while still in swaddling clothes.<sup>22</sup>

I think the star must have appeared a long time before, since it was a long time which the Magi had to spend on their journey.<sup>23</sup>

The devious Herod sent them to Bethlehem with express instructions to search for the child. He hated (ragged against) Christ as is clear from his not using His name, but rather “Child”.<sup>24</sup> The Magi didn’t understand Herod’s meaning and purpose and went on to Bethlehem. When they had departed from Jerusalem, the star appeared and guided them. This was a clear sign of Divine power. The star stopped where Christ was and descended from the heights closer to the earth so they could see the location of the Infant Jesus. In fact, Bl. Theophylact notes “Neither could this star have pointed out where Christ was if it had *not* (emphasis supplied) descended and all but stood over the head of the Child”.<sup>25</sup>

The Magi Worshipping Christ in the House: their Offerings -

Christ had been born earlier in a manger within a cave. Mary and Joseph could not find a house in which she could give birth. Bl. Theophylact, following the Fathers, believes it “likely” that subsequently and before the magi’s arrival, they had found a house. The Magi saw and worshipped our Saviour there.<sup>26</sup> The Magi, thirsting to throw off the old man, fell down and worshipped Him offering as gifts “gold and frankincense and myrrh”. They were offered for specific purposes – the gold because it was paid as tribute to the kings to whom we are subject, frankincense (incense) because we burn it to God, and myrrh “since He would taste of death. For the Jews would prepare the dead for burial with myrrh to preserve the body from corruption”.<sup>27</sup>

See how the Magi demonstrated their faith! Balaam’s prophecy *alone* taught that the Lord “both God and King would be born for our sake:<sup>28</sup>

He reclined and rested as a lion, and as a young lion; may they be blessed that call Thee blessed.<sup>29</sup>

In the prophecy, the lion represents kingship, and reclining, death. Divinity, alone, has the “power to bless”.<sup>30</sup>

God’s Warning -

God guided them by the star, and He spoke to them through the prophet Micah that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. The Father then sends His Divine warning by His angel in a dream that they should not return to Herod. So they left for their country “another way”.<sup>31</sup> Another way to look at this is once we have come to know Jesus, we cannot return by the same path.<sup>32</sup> They were full of the spiritual power of the newly-born Saviour:

Thus they were true witnesses and confessors.<sup>33</sup>

Tradition records their names as Melchior, Gasper and Balthasar, and we celebrate them today on the Lord’s Nativity, His second genesis.

Although the Magi had been pagans, they were led to the newly-born Christ by the star. They showed their faith by following Balaam’s prophecy to our Saviour’s humble door. Picture that – they just ‘got up and went’, never deviating, always sure of their spiritual destiny. Their journey was long, and surely, it was hard. We can learn a lot from them as we strive toward the goal of Orthodoxy – deification; love the Lord with all your hearts and souls and never deviate from His Way. It’s as simple as that to understand what has to be done. It will take us a lifetime of struggle to achieve it. May the Lord bless us to persevere...

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Bl. Theophylact's *Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Matthew Vol. I* in the series, Bl. Theophylact's *Explanation of the new Testament* (tr. from the original Greek by Fr. Christopher Stade), Chrysostom Press, House Spring, MO, 1997, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 49.10 (The Septuagint, LXX).

<sup>3</sup> Bishop Alexander (Mileant), *The Nativity of Christ*, p. 4 at <http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/nativity.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> *id.*

<sup>6</sup> Hieromonk German Ciuba, (tr. from the Slavonic into English; tr. from the Greek into Slavonic in the year 6851, A.D. 1343), *The Gospel Commentary*, Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ (Old Rite), Erie, PA, 2002, p. 705

<sup>7</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> *id.*, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Bishop Alexander (Mileant), *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *id.*

<sup>11</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> *id.*

<sup>13</sup> *id.*

<sup>14</sup> Micah 5. 2 (The Septuagint, LXX).

<sup>15</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> *id.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> *id.*, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> *id.*

<sup>19</sup> *The Creed*, Second Article.

<sup>20</sup> Archpriest Seraphim Slobodskoy, *The Law of God*, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N.Y., 1996, pp. 432, 436 and 432-436 for a full discussion of the Second Article of The Creed.

<sup>21</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> *id.*, and see fn 8 on p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, Hom. 7, P.G. 57:108 (col. 76), cited in *The Orthodox New Testament*, Volume 1, *The Holy Gospels, Saint Matthew*, Holy Apostles Convent/Dormition Skete, Buena Vista, CO, 2000, fn 6, 2:1 at p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> *id.*

<sup>26</sup> *id.*, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> *id.*, the dry myrrh desiccated the body thus preventing worms breeding.

<sup>28</sup> *id.*

<sup>29</sup> Num. 24:9.

<sup>30</sup> Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

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<sup>31</sup> Slobodskoy, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>32</sup> *The Orthodox New Testament, St. Matthew, op. cit.*, see fn 11, 2:12 citing Saint Gregory the Great, p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> *Bl. Theophylact, op. cit.*, p. 28.