**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-004. THE FIRST-FRUITS OF THE GENTILES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæ¡ in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, 2. 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. 3. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. 5. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judæ¡º for thus it is written by the prophet, 6. 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. 7. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. 8. 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. 9. 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 over where the young child was. 10. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. 11. 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. 31. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way."*

*Matthew 2:1-12*

Matthew's Gospel is the gospel of the King. It has a distinctly Jewish colouring. All the more remarkable, therefore, is this narrative, which we should rather have looked for in Luke, the evangelist who delights to emphasise the universality of Christ's work. But the gathering of the Gentiles to the light of Israel was an essential part of true Judaism, and could not but be represented in the Gospel which set forth the glories of the King. There is something extremely striking and stimulating to the imagination in the vagueness of the description of these Eastern pilgrims. Where they came from, how long they had been in travelling, how many they were, what was their rank, whither they went,--all these questions are left unsolved. They glide into the story, present their silent adoration, and as silently steal away. The tasteless medieval tradition knows all about them: they were three; they were kings. It knows their names; and, if we choose to pay the fee, we can see their bones to-day in the shrine behind the high altar in Cologne Cathedral. How much more impressive is the indefiniteness of our narrative! How much more the half sometimes is than the whole!

**I. We see here heathen wisdom led by God to the cradle of Christ.**

It is futile to attempt to determine the nationality of the wise men. Possibly they were Persian magi, whose astronomy was half astrology and wholly observation, or they may have travelled from some place even deeper in the mysterious East; but, in any case, they were led by God through their science, such as it was. The great lesson which they teach remains the same, however subordinate questions about the nature of the star and the like may be settled. The sign in the heavens and its explanation were both of God, whether the one was a natural astronomical phenomenon or a supernatural light, and the other the conclusions of their science or the inbreathing of His wisdom. So they stand as representatives of the great truth, that, outside the limits of the people of revelation, God moved on hearts and led seeking souls to the light in divers manners. These silent strangers at the cradle carry on the line of recipients of divine messages outside of Israel which is headed by the mysterious Melchizedek, and includes that seer who saw a star arise out of Jacob, and which, in a wider sense, includes many a poet of their own and many a patient seeker after truth. Human wisdom, as it is called, is God's gift. In itself, it is incomplete. It raises more questions than it solves. Its highest function is to lead to Jesus. He is Lord of the sciences, as of all that belongs to man; and notwithstanding all the appearances to the contrary at present, we may be sure that the true scope of all knowledge, and its certain end, is to lead to the recognition of Him.

May we not see in these Magi, too, a type of the inmost meaning of heathen religions? These faiths have in them points of contact with Christianity. Besides their falsehoods and abhorrent dark cruelties and lustfulnesses, they enshrine confessions of wants which the King in the cradle alone can supply. Modern unbelieving teachers tell us that Christianity and they are alike products of man's own religious faculty. But the truth is that they are confessions of need, and Christianity is the supply of the need. At bottom, their language is the question of the wise men, Where is He? Their sacrifices proclaim man's need of reconciliation. Their stories of the gods coming down in the likeness of men, speak of his longing for a manifestation of God in the flesh. The cradle and the cross are Heaven's answer to their sad questions.

**II. The contrast of these Gentiles joyful eagerness to worship the King of Israel, with the alarm of his own people at the whisper of his name, is a prelude of the tragedy of his rejection, and the passing over of the kingdom to the Gentiles.**

Notice the bitter and scornful emphasis of that Herod the king coming twice in the story in immediate connection with the mention of the true King. He was a usurper, caricaturing the true Monarch. Like most kings who have had great tacked to their names, his greatness consisted mainly in supreme wickedness. Fierce, lustful, cunning, he had ruled without mercy; and now he was passing through the last stages of an old age without love, and ringed round by the fears born of his misdeeds. He trembles for his throne, as well he may, when he hears of these strangers. Probably he does not suppose them mixed up with any attempt to unseat him, or he would have made short work of them; unless, indeed, his craft led him to dissemble until he had sucked them dry and had used them to lead him to the infant rival, after which he may have meant to murder them too. But he recognises in their question the familiar tones of the Messianic hope, which he knew was ever lying like glowing embers in the breast of the nation, ready to be blown into a flame. His creatures in the capital might disown it, but he knew in his secret heart that he was a usurper, and that at any moment that smouldering hatred and hope might burn up him and his upstart monarchy. An evil conscience is full of fears, and shrinks from the good news that the King of all is at hand. His coming should be joy, as is that of the bursting spring or the rosy dawn; but our own sin makes the day of the Lord darkness and not light, and sends us cowering into our corners to escape these searching eyes.

Nor less tragic and perverted is the trouble which all Jerusalem shared with Herod. The Magi had naturally made straight for the capital, expecting to find the new-born King there, and His city jubilant at His birth. But they traverse its streets only to meet none who know anything about Him. They must have felt like men who see, gleaming from far on some hill-side, a brightness which has all vanished when they reach the spot, or like some of our mission converts brought to our Christian country, and seeing how little our people care for the Christ whom they have learned to know. Their question indicates utter bewilderment at the contrast between what they had seen in the East and what they found in Jerusalem. They must have been still more perplexed if they observed the effect of their question. Nobody in Jerusalem knew anything about their King. That was strange enough. But nobody wanted Him. That was stranger still. A prophet had long ago called on Zion to rejoice greatly because thy King cometh; but now anxiety and terror cloud all faces. It was partly because self-interest bound many to Herod, and partly because they all feared that any outburst of Messianic hopes would lead to fresh cruelties inflicted by the relentless, trembling tyrant. So the Magi, who represented the eagerness of Gentile hearts grasping the new hopes, and claiming some share in Israel's Messiah, saw His own people careless, and, if moved from their apathy, alarmed at the unwelcome tidings that the promise which had shone as a great light through dreary centuries was at last on the eve of fulfilment. So the first page on the gospel history anticipates the sad issue: They shall come from the east, and from the west, and you yourselves shall be thrust out.

**III. Then followed the council of the theologians, with its solemn illustration of the difference between orthodoxy and life, and of the utter hollowness of mere knowledge, however accurate, of the letter of Scripture.**

The questions as to the composition of this gathering of authorities, and of the variations between the quotation of Micah in the text and its form in the Hebrew, do not concern us now. We may remark on the evident purpose of God to draw forth the distinct testimony of the ecclesiastical rulers to the place of Messiah's birth, and on the fact that this, the most ancient interpretation of the prophecy, is vouched to us by existing Jewish sources as having been the traditional one until the exigencies of controversy with Christians pushed it aside Notice the different conduct of Herod, the Magi, and the scribes. The first is entangled in a ludicrous contradiction. He believes that Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, and yet he determines to set himself against the carrying out of what he must, in some sense, believe to be God's purpose. If this infant is God's Messiah, I will kill Him, is surely as strange a piece of policy gone mad as ever the world heard of. But it is perhaps not more insane than much of our own action, when we set ourselves against what we know to be God's will, and consciously seek to thwart it. A child trying to stop a train by pushing against the locomotive has as much chance of success. The scribes, again, are quite sure where Messiah is to be born; but they do not care to go and see if He is born. These strangers, to whom the hope of Israel is new, may rush away, in their enthusiasm, to Bethlehem; but they, to whom it had lost all gloss, and become a commonplace, would take no such trouble. Does not familiarity with the gospel produce much the same effect on many of us? Might not the joy and the devotion, however ignorant if compared with our better knowledge of the letter, which mark converts from heathenism, shame the tepid zeal and unruffled composure of us, who have heard all about Christ, till it has become wearisome? Here on the very threshold of the gospel story is the first instance of the lesson taught over and over again in it, namely, the worthlessness of head knowledge, and the constant temptation of substituting it for that submission of the will and that trust of the heart, which alone make religion. The most impenetrable armour against the gospel is the familiar and lifelong knowledge of the gospel.

The Magi, on their part, accept with implici confidence the information. They have followed the star; they have now a more sure word, and they will follow that. They were led by their science to contact with the true guide. He that is faithful in his use of the dimmest light will find his light brighten. The office of science is not to lead to Christ by a road discovered by itself, but to lead to the Word of God which guides to Him. Not by accident, nor without profound meaning, did both methods of direction unite to point these earnest seekers, who were ready to follow every form of guidance, to the Monarch whom they sought.

**IV. Herod's crafty counsel need not detain us.**

We have already remarked on its absurdity. If the child were not Messiah, he need not have been alarmed; if it were, his efforts were fruitless. But he does not see this, and so plots and works underground in the approved fashion of kingcraft. His reason for questioning the Magi as to the time was, of course, to get an approximate age of the infant, that he might know how widely to fling his net. He did it privately, so as to keep any inkling of his plot secret till he had secured the further information which he hoped to delude them into bringing. Like other students and recluses fed upon great thoughts, the Magi were very easily deceived. Good, simple people, they were no match for Herod, and told him all without suspicion, and set off to look for the child, quite convinced of his good faith; while he, no doubt, breathed more freely when he had got them out of Jerusalem, and congratulated himself on having done a good stroke of business in making them his spies. He was probably within a few months of his death. The world was already beginning to slip from him. But before he passed to his account, he too was brought within sight of the Christ, and summoned to yield his usurped dominion to the true King How different this old man's reception of the tidings of the nativity from Simeon's! His hostility, in its cruelty, its blundering cunning and its impotence, is a type of the relations of the world-power to Christ. The rulers take counsel together, ... against His anointed... . He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh.

V. We have next the discovery of the King. The reappearing star becomes the guide to the humble house. It cannot have been an ordinary star, for no such could have pointed the precise house among all the homes of Bethlehem. The burst of joy at its reappearance vividly suggests the perplexity of the recent days, and the support given by its welcome beam to the faith which had accepted, not perhaps without some misgivings caused by the indifference of the teachers, the teaching of the prophecy. Surely that faith would be more than ever tried by the humble poverty in which they found the King. The great paradox of Christianity, the manifestation of divinest power in uttermost weakness, was forced upon them in its most startling form. This child on His mother's lap, with none to do Him homage, and in poverty which makes our costly gifts seem out of place,--this is the King, whose coming set stars ablaze and drew us hither. Is this all? Their Eastern religions were not unfamiliar with the idea of incarnation. Their Eastern monarchies were splendid. They must have felt a shock at the contrast between what they expected and what they found. They learned the lesson which all have to learn, that Christ disappoints as well as fulfils the expectations of men, that the mightiest power is robed in lowliness, and the highest manifestation of God begins with a helpless infant on His mother's knee. These wise men were not repelled. Our modern wise men are not all as wise as they.

VI. Adoration and offering follow discovery. The worship of the Magi cannot have been adoration in the strict sense. We attribute too much to them if we suppose them aware of Christ's divinity. But it was clearly more than mere reverence for an earthly King. It hovered on the border-line, and meant an indefinite submission and homage to a partially discerned superiority, in which the presence of God was in some sort special. The old medieval interpretation of the offered gold as signifying recognition of His kingship, the frankincense of His deity, and the myrrh of His death, is so beautiful that one would fain wish it true. But it cannot pretend to be more than a fancy. We are on surer ground when we see in the gifts the choicest products of the land of the Magi, and learn the lesson that the true recognition of Christ will ever be attended by the spontaneous surrender to Him of our best. These gifts would not be of much use to Mary. If there had been a practical man among the Magi, he might have said, What is the use of giving such things to such a household? And it would have been difficult to have answered. But love does not calculate, and the impulse which leads to consecrate the best we have to Him is acceptable in His sight.

This earliest page in the gospel history is a prophecy of the latest. These are the first-fruits of the Gentiles unto Christ. They bear in their hands a glass which showeth many more, who at last will come like them to the King of the whole earth. They shall bring gold and incense; and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord. There were Gentiles at the cradle and at the cross. The Magi learned the lessons which the East especially needed, of power in weakness, royalty in lowliness. Incarnation not in monstrous forms or with destructive attributes, but in feeble infancy which passes through the ordinary stages of development. The Greeks who sought to see Jesus when near the hour of His death, learned the lesson for want of which their nation's culture rotted away, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone So these two groups, one at the beginning, the other at the end, one from the mysterious East, the other from the progressive and cultured West, received each a half of the completed truth, the gospel of Incarnation and Sacrifice, and witness to the sufficiency of Christ for all human needs, and to the coming of the time when all the races of men shall gather round the throne to which cradle and cross have exalted Him, and shall recognise in Him the Prince of all the kings of the earth, and the Lamb slain for the sins of the world.