

THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT
Sunday After Christmas
STEPHEN the PROTOMARTYR

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Revision E

GOSPEL: Matthew 2:13-23
EPISTLE: Galatians 1:11-19

This Gospel lesson for Christmas Day in the East is the visit of the Magi, which is used universally in the West for Epiphany. The Gospel for the Sunday after Christmas in the East is the Flight into Egypt, which is used by some Churches in the West for the Sunday after New Year's Day.

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Review of the Visit by the Magi

The subject of the visit of the Magi is an extraordinary chapter in the history of the people of God. Coming from a culture that was one of the world centers of idolatry, they came to know God. They had very little information to go on, but they made the most of what they had. Coming a long way to worship a Baby indicates that they had a good measure of faith. From the gifts that they offered, we can understand that they recognized the Baby as God. Who were these extraordinary people that visited Christ as a Baby? For more details on the visit of the Magi, see the Study for Christmas Day.

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The Visit of the Magi

This Gospel lesson for Christmas Day in the East is used universally in the West for Epiphany. The subject of the visit of the Magi is an extraordinary chapter in the history of the people of God. Coming from a culture that was one of the world centers of idolatry, they came to know God. They had very little information to go on, but they made the most of what they had. Coming a long way to worship a Baby indicates that they had a good measure of faith. From the gifts that they offered, we can understand that they recognized the Baby as God. Who were these extraordinary people that visited Christ as a Baby?

Who Were the Magi?

According to tradition, the Wise Men or Magi came from Persia. They were descendants of the Prophet Daniel and knew something about God from Daniel's writings. Daniel had predicted that there would be 483 years from the command to rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah came (i.e. 69×7 years; Daniel 9:25). Having access to the records in Babylon, they knew about what year to expect Messiah.

As a result of Daniel, there was a ruling class of Magi in Persia who ran the government, appointed the kings and performed the religious functions. Three of these Magi led the entourage over the 800 mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. According to Western tradition, their names were Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar; in later centuries, the relics of these three Magi were very highly honored both in Constantinople and later in Medieval Europe. According to Syrian tradition¹, the names of the Magi were Larvandad, Gushnasaph and Hormisdas.

The Star That the Magi Followed

The Magi claimed to be following a star all the way from the East (Matthew 2:2). This was no ordinary star, and the Magi knew it! As the star moved, they moved; finally the star stopped over the house that Mary and Joseph and Jesus were living in (Matthew 2:9). Some people have tried to link this star with several planets; I'm not sure that's possible (due to Matthew 2:9). Many of the Church Fathers suggested that the star was supernatural: a very luminous angel.

The Prophet Balaam (15th century BC), from Babylon, had prophesied concerning a star in connection with the coming Messiah (Numbers 24:17). That the Magi made the connection between the star they followed and 15-century-old prophecies indicates that their enlightenment was quite advanced.

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, they must have known they were close. But the star had disappeared for a while (either intentionally or due to cloud cover); otherwise Herod's soldiers could have followed the star also. John Chrysostom reached² this conclusion also.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi.

² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VI, 3.

After leaving Herod's palace, the Magi "rejoiced with exceedingly great joy when they saw the star" again (Matthew 2:10). This indicates that the star reappeared to them.

The Gifts That the Magi Brought

The treasures the Magi gave to the baby Jesus were gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). It was common for kings to present gifts to other kings when they visited, where there was often some significance to the actual gifts presented. When the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon, she was very impressed by all he did and by his wisdom. Therefore she presented him with 120 talents (4 1/2 tons) of gold plus a great deal of spices and precious stones (1 Kings 10:1-10). The gold in the Magi's gifts thus represents earthly royalty visiting heavenly royalty.

Frankincense was a costly gum-resin from plants that grew in certain parts of Arabia. It was to be used only in connection with the things of God and was customarily beaten very finely (Exodus 30:36). For example, it was used:

- As part of the Holy Incense of the Holy Place (Exodus 30:34-36)
- As part of the Grain Offering (Leviticus 2:1-2, 14-16, 6:14-18)
- As a topping for the Loaves of Showbread (Leviticus 24:5-9)
- Never as part of a Jealousy Offering (Numbers 5:15)
- Never as part of personal use perfumes (Exodus 30:37-38)

For the Magi to give frankincense to Jesus indicated they knew something about His deity and holiness.

Myrrh was made from the gum of an Arabian tree (*Balsamodendron Myrrha*). It was used:

- As part of the Holy Anointing Oil (Exodus 30:22-33)
- In the beautification of royal women (Esther 2:12)
- As part of the fragrance of Messiah (Psalm 45:8)
- For embalming (John 19:39)

The Magi giving myrrh to Jesus indicated that they knew He was Messiah and that He planned to give His life for mankind.

Irenaeus of Lyons stated³ the meaning of the gifts that the Magi brought. These gifts demonstrated to some degree what the Magi knew about Christ.

"Balaam prophesied regarding Emmanuel's star, 'A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a man shall spring out of Israel' (Numbers 24:17 LXX). But Matthew says that the Magi, coming from the east, exclaimed, 'For we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him' (Matthew 2:2). Having been led by the star into the house of Jacob to Emmanuel, they showed, by the gifts which they offered, who it was that was worshipped. They offered myrrh, because it was He who should die and be buried for the mortal human race; gold, because He was a King, 'of whose kingdom is no end' (Luke 1:33); and frankincense, because He

³ Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, III, ix, 2.

was God, who also ‘was made known in Judea’ (Psalm 76:1), and was ‘declared to those who sought Him not’” (Isaiah 65:1).

Ambrose of Milan concurred⁴ with Irenaeus’ interpretation of the meaning of the gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold represents royalty; frankincense represents divinity; and myrrh represents burial and implies resurrection.

“The Magi, when they worshipped the Lord, brought out gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). By gold they acknowledged the power of a king; they venerated God by the frankincense; and by myrrh they acknowledged the resurrection of the body. We too have this treasure if we look into ourselves; ‘For we have this treasure in earthen vessels’ (2 Corinthians 4:7). We have gold which we can give, for God does not exact of you the precious gift of shining metal, but that gold which at the Day of Judgment the fire shall be unable to consume. Nor does He require precious gifts, but the good odor of faith, which the altars of our heart sends forth and the disposition of a faithful mind exhales.”

How Much Did the Magi Know?

The Magi probably saw right through Herod’s lies about wanting to worship the new King himself (Matthew 2:8). After all, Herod had no idea that this event had happened in his own backyard and he hadn’t noticed the star. The Jewish leaders also were totally unaware of what had happened. The Jewish leaders knew from the Prophet Micah that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2-4). They even used this against Jesus, assuming that He was born in Nazareth since He grew up there (Acts 24:5, John 7:40-43). The Magi, on the other hand, had come 800 miles with a small army carrying treasures (Matthew 2:11) to present to the new King that prophecy spoke of as the turning point of human history.

One might excuse Herod for not knowing, but the Jewish leaders had no excuse at all. If they had missed the announcement by the shepherds, they certainly hadn’t missed the proclamation of the Virgin Birth by Zachariah the chief priest and father of John the Baptist. Zachariah had spoken with the midwives who attended the birth of Christ to confirm that Mary was still a virgin following childbirth⁵. At the time of Mary’s “purification” 40 days after Jesus’ birth, Zachariah was taking his turn as chief priest in the Temple. He had Mary stand in the place reserved for virgins where women with husbands had no right to stand; thus he proclaimed the virgin-birth. The Jewish elders were so bent out of shape by this that they immediately went to Herod to plot Zachariah’s death⁶. Zachariah was later murdered by Herod’s soldiers in front of the Temple during the massacre of the Holy Innocents when he wouldn’t disclose the hiding place of his son John. Thirty years later, the Lord laid this murder charge at the feet of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:36).

⁴ Ambrose of Milan, Concerning Widows, V, 30.

⁵ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, Holy Apostles Convent and Dormition Skete, 1989, pp. 176-179.

⁶ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, Holy Apostles Convent and Dormition Skete, 1989, pp. 235-236.

Ambrose of Milan stated⁷ that the Magi believed in one God and that they brought their gifts according to what they understood.

“All nature testifies to the Unity of God, inasmuch as the universe is one. The Faith declares that there is one God, seeing that there is one belief in both the Old and the New Testament. Grace witnesses that there is one Spirit, all holy, because there is one Baptism, in the Name of the Trinity. The prophets proclaim, the Apostles hear, the voice of one God. In one God did the Magi believe, and they brought in adoration, gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Christ’s cradle, confessing, by the gift of gold, His Royalty, and with the incense worshipping Him as God. For gold is the sign of kingdom, incense of God, myrrh of burial.”

When Herod secretly called the Magi for a private audience (Matthew 2:7), he asked what time the star appeared. Herod figured -- probably correctly -- that the star appeared when Jesus was born. Thus Herod found out how old Jesus was and used this information as part of his murderous plot on the Holy Innocents (Matthew 2:16-18). The Magi probably didn’t trust anything Herod said; he had been in power for over 30 years and had a reputation for extreme cruelty. For example, Herod had a number of his own family executed on the merest suspicion; Augustus Caesar was said to have commented “it is better to be Herod’s hog than to be his son”. Just before he died⁸, Herod rounded up and imprisoned a number of the Jewish leaders; then he gave orders that they all be executed the day he died so that no one would rejoice that Herod died. In short, Herod was a monster and Josephus recorded him dying an agonizingly painful death. When the Magi were divinely warned in a dream not to return to Herod (Matthew 2:12), they didn’t need a lot of persuasion.

When the Magi reached the house where Mary, Joseph, Jesus (and probably James also) lived, they fell down and worshipped Him (Matthew 2:11). Joseph was not wealthy; the offering they gave at the time of their purification was two turtledoves -- the default offering for those too poor to afford a lamb (Luke 2:22-24, Leviticus 12:1-8). Joseph, being a carpenter who built houses, had had time to build something to take the place of the cave where Jesus was born. Jesus was about a year old when the Magi arrived.

What Did the Magi Learn from the Star?

Astrology does not pretend to predict who is to be born, but what will happen to them. Chrysostom made⁹ a number of points concerning the star:

1. The star that the Magi saw was supernatural in some way; it was some invisible power transformed into the appearance of a star.
2. The star outshone the sun in broad daylight. It moved first from East to West as the Magi moved from Persia toward the Mediterranean; then it moved from North to South as the Magi moved down the coast toward Jerusalem.
3. The star appeared, then hid itself, then appeared again (Matthew 2:9-10). On their way to Palestine, it led them; when they set foot in Jerusalem, it hid itself. After they left Herod, it appeared again. This is not the motion of a star but of some power highly endowed with reason. It did not have a course of its own, but it

⁷ Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of the Christian Faith, I, iv, 31.

⁸ Josephus, Antiquities, Books 15, 16, 17; Wars of the Jews, Book 1, chapters 22-33

⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VI, 3-4.

moved when they needed to move. In this way it was just like the pillar and the cloud that led Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 14:19).

4. The star pointed out Christ: ‘The star went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was’ (Matthew 2:9). It is not possible for a star in the distant heavens to focus on such a confined space as a baby sleeping in a cradle.
5. Why did the star appear like this? To reprove the Jews for their willful ignorance! From the beginning, Christ opened the door to the Gentiles. Because the Jews wouldn’t listen to the Prophets continually speaking of His advent, He caused the announcement to come first from barbarians speaking a Persian language. This was similar to Jonah and the Ninevites (Jonah 1-4) and the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1-13), who will testify against the unbelieving Jews at the Judgment.
6. Why did God do it this way? The Persians would not have listened to Hebrew prophets, to angels or to a voice from heaven. In His exceeding condescension, God called them by the things that are familiar to them¹⁰. He showed a large and extraordinary star, so as to astonish them, both at the greatness and beauty of its appearance, and the manner of its course. He led them by the hand, and set them by the manger; after that it was no longer by a star, but by an angel that He spoke to them. Thus they became better men little by little.

What Induced the Magi to Visit a King in a Far-Away Country?

John Chrysostom asked¹¹ “What did they hope to gain?” They did not expect Him to reign over them in Persia. Their courage in coming to Jerusalem and in speaking to one of the world’s most renowned tyrants is remarkable.

“Why did the Magi come to entertain the thought of visiting Christ, and who it was that stirred them up to this? It does not seem to me to be the work of the star only, but also of God, who moved their soul. This same kind of thing He did in the case of Cyrus, persuading him to let the Jews go (Ezra 1:1-11). He did not destroy their free will, since even when He called Paul from above by a voice; He displayed both His own grace and Paul’s obedience. Did He reveal this to all the wise men of the East? Everyone would not have believed, but these were better prepared than the rest. There were also countless nations that perished, but it was to the Ninevites only that the prophet Jonah was sent; and there were two thieves on the cross, but only one was saved (Luke 23:39-43). Notice the virtue of these men, not only by their coming, but also by their boldness of speech. That they may not seem to be impostors, they tell who showed them the way, and the

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VI, 3-4. Chrysostom stated that God did the same thing for the people of Ekron and Gaza. The five cities of the Philistines, at the coming of the Ark () were struck with a deadly plague, and found no deliverance. The Philistine men called their prophets, gathered an assembly, and sought to discover an escape from this divine scourge. Their prophets said that they should yoke to the ark untamed heifers, which had just given birth to their first calves, and let them go their way, with no man to guide them. So it would be clear whether the plague was from God or whether it was an accident that brought the disease. ‘If they break the yoke in pieces for lack of practice, or turn where their calves are mooring, it is a chance that has happened. But if they go on right, and err not from the way, and neither the mooring of their young, nor their ignorance of the way, have any effect on them, it is quite plain that it is the hand of God that has visited our cities’ (). The inhabitants of those cities obeyed the words of their prophets; God followed up the counsel of the prophets, showing condescension in that instance also, and counted it worthy of Himself to bring to effect the prediction of the prophets. As a result even His enemies bore witness to the power of God.

¹¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VI, 5.

length of their journey. On their arrival, they had boldness of speech; ‘We have come to worship Him’ (Matthew 2:2). They were not afraid of the people’s anger, or of the tyranny of the king. To me they seem to have been teachers of their countrymen at home. If they did not shrink from saying this here, much more would they speak boldly in their own country, as having received both the oracle from the angel, and the testimony from the Prophet Balaam.”

Why Did Herod and the Jews Overlook the Benefits of Christ?

Chrysostom noted¹² that Herod might be uneasy about the birth of a king, but why was Jerusalem troubled? The prophets had foretold this, and now it has even come to the attention of the Persians. The whole earth was going to come under His rule, according to the prophets, and Israel was to be the center of the earth. Yet they still opposed Him.

“‘When Herod had heard, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him’ (Matthew 2:3). Herod naturally, as being king, was afraid both for himself and for his children; but why Jerusalem? Surely the prophets had foretold Christ to be a Savior, Benefactor, and a Deliverer from above. Why then should Jerusalem be troubled? From the same feeling which caused them to turn away from God during the Exodus, when He was pouring His benefits on them; they thought only of the pots of meat in Egypt, while enjoying the benefits of great freedom.”

“Notice the accuracy of the prophets! The prophet had foretold this from the beginning, ‘They shall be willing, *even* if they were burnt with fire; for unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given’” (Isaiah 9:5-6 LXX).

“Although troubled, they did not seek to see what has happened, neither do they follow the wise men, nor make any particular inquiry. In this way they were both contentious and careless beyond all men. They had reason to pride themselves that the king was born among them, and had attracted the Persians to Himself. They were on the verge of having everyone subject to them, as though their affairs had advanced towards improvement; from the outset Christ’s empire had become so glorious; nevertheless, even for this, they do not become better. They were just delivered from their captivity there; and it was natural for them to think, ‘If the Gentiles tremble before our king at His birth, much more when grown up will they fear and obey Him, and our nation will be more glorious than that of the barbarians’”.

“None of these things awakens them, so great was their dullness. Their envy showed itself instead. Whoever stands in battle against this attitude must be more fervent than fire. Therefore Christ said, ‘I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!’ (Luke 12:49). On this account the Spirit appears in fire” (Acts 2:3-4).

The Nativity Created an Immediate Conflict

John Chrysostom noted¹³ the immediate conflict between the Infant Christ and the Jewish leaders. When the Magi arrived, the Jews were compelled against their will to read the writings in favor of the truth. All the events were done in order that the Jews might not say, “We don’t know when or where He was born”.

¹² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VI, 6-7.

¹³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VII, 1-2.

“Notice how all things are done to convict the Jews! As long as Christ was out of their sight, the envy had not yet gripped them, and they spoke with truth; but when they saw the glory that came from the miracles, a grudging spirit possessed them, and from then on, they betrayed the truth.”

“However, the truth was exalted by all things, and its strength was gathered even by its enemies. In the case of the Magi, both the barbarians and the Jews learn something from one another, and teach one another, which is beyond expectation. The Jews heard from the wise men that a star had proclaimed Christ in the land of the Persians. The wise men, in their turn, were informed by the Jews that this Man, whom the star proclaimed, had been made known from a long time ago by the Hebrew prophets. The enemies of the truth are compelled even against their will to read the writings in favor of the truth, and to interpret the prophecy. Having spoken of Bethlehem, and how that out of it He shall come that should rule Israel, they proceed to add that ‘His goings forth are from of old, from everlasting’” (Micah 5:2).

“One might ask, if He was to come from Bethlehem, why did He live in Nazareth after His birth; why obscure the prophecy? He did not obscure the prophecy, but He unfolded it all the more. While His mother had her residence in Nazareth, He was born in Bethlehem to show that the events were a Divine dispensation. He didn’t return to Nazareth immediately after His birth, giving opportunity to those that might be inquisitive to examine all things accurately. There were many things to move them to such an inquiry, at least if they had been inclined to pay attention to them.”

“Thus at the coming of the wise men the whole city was in a flutter, and together with the city the king. The prophet Micah was brought forward, and a court of high authority was convened; many other things were done there also. Anna, Simeon, Zachariah, the angels, and the shepherds; all these things were sufficient to the attentive to give hints for ascertaining what had taken place. If the wise men that came from Persia were not ignorant of the place, much more those, who lived there, might acquaint themselves with these things.”

“He revealed Himself from the beginning by many miracles, but when they would not see, He hid Himself for a while, to be again revealed from another more glorious beginning. It was no longer the wise men or the star, but the Father from above that proclaimed Him at the streams of Jordan (Matthew 3:17). But at the time of the birth, just so many things happened as were fitted quietly to mark out Him that was come. In order that the Jews might not say, ‘We don’t know when or where He was born’ (John 7:27), all these events in which the wise men were concerned were brought about by God’s providence; so that they would have no excuse.”

Herod’s Bizarre Behavior

John Chrysostom stated¹⁴ that Herod’s actions went beyond just madness to extreme stupidity. The events he witnessed should have told him that he was dealing with God, but he still tried to fight it. Herod’s perception was distorted, both of the Jews and the Magi. His logic did not help him but even telegraphed his intentions to those he was trying to subvert.

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, VII, 3.

“Herod’s attempt to slay Christ means that this was not just an act of madness; it also meant that he was an idiot. The events that he witnessed should have been enough to have restrained anyone from any such attempt. What occurred was not after the manner of man. A star called the wise men from heaven; barbarians make a long pilgrimage to worship a Baby in diapers lying in a manger; prophets from of old, proclaimed all this beforehand. These and all the rest were more than human events; but nevertheless, none of these things restrained him! Wickedness is like this, and is always attempting impossibilities. Note the utter folly of Herod’s logic. If on the one hand he believed the prophecy, and regarded it to be unchangeable, it was quite clear that he was attempting impossibilities. If on the other hand he disbelieved, and did not expect that those sayings would come to pass, there was no need to be in fear and alarm, or to form any plot to kill Christ. Either way his craftiness was superfluous.”

“In addition, did Herod think that the wise men would regard him greater than of the Child that was born, for the sake of which they had taken so long a journey? If they were so inflamed with longing for the Child before they even saw Him; after they had seen with their eyes, and been confirmed by the prophecy, how did Herod hope to persuade them to betray the young Child to him? Herod was thinking like an idiot!”

“Herod called the wise men privately and inquired of them (Matthew 2:7). He thought that the Jews would favor the Child; he never expected that they would fall into such madness as to be willing to give up to His enemies their Protector and Savior, and Him who came for the deliverance of their nation. Therefore he both called them privately, and sought the time not of the Child, but of the star. His slaying the children ‘from two years old and under’ (Matthew 2:16) was done for the sake of a fuller security, adding to the time he ascertained, so that not one might escape.”

“Having therefore called them, he said, ‘Go and search diligently for the young Child; and when you have found Him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship Him also’” (Matthew 2:8).

“Do you see his extreme folly? If he said these things in sincerity, why does he need to inquire privately? But if he intends to plot against Him, how is it he does not perceive, from the fact of their being asked secretly, the wise men will be able to perceive his craftiness? A soul taken captive by wickedness becomes more utterly senseless than anything!”

The Star Gave the Magi Great Reverence for Christ

John Chrysostom stated¹⁵ that the Magi had enormous reverence for Christ. This was so pronounced that they couldn’t even conceive that Herod would plot against Him. The star that guided them didn’t just lead them to the vicinity where Jesus was, but even pointed Him out. This star was no ordinary heavenly body; it actually paused in the heavens to illuminate Christ.

“The wise men did not perceive Herod’s plot to kill Christ because of their great reverence for Him. They never could have expected that he could have gone on to such great wickedness, and that he would have attempted to form plots against a dispensation that was so marvelous. They departed suspecting none of

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VII, 4.

these things, but from what they knew they anticipated the benefit for the rest of mankind.”

“‘The star, which they saw in the East, went before them’ (Matthew 2:9). The star had been hidden, that having lost their guide, they might be obliged to make inquiry of the Jews, and so the matter might be made clear to everyone. After they made inquiries, and had Christ’s enemies for informants, the star appeared to them again. Notice the excellent order; in the first place, after the star, the people of the Jews and the king received them, and these bring in the prophecy to explain what had appeared. Next, after the prophet, an angel again took them up and taught them all things. For a time they journeyed from Jerusalem to Bethlehem by the guidance of the star, the star again journeying with them from Jerusalem. From this we might learn that this was not one of the ordinary stars, for there is not so much as one star that has this nature. It didn’t just move, but ‘went ahead of them’, drawing and guiding them on in midday.”

“‘What was the need of this star any more’, one may ask, ‘when the place was ascertained?’ In order that the Child also might be designated! There was nothing to make Him clear, since the house was not conspicuous, neither was His mother glorious or distinguished. There were also many other children in Bethlehem. The star was needed then to set the Magi at the place where Jesus was. Therefore the star reappeared on their coming out of Jerusalem, and doesn’t disappear, before it has reached the manger. This was marvel on top of marvel; for the Magi worshipping, as the star going before them were strange things. This was enough to attract even people made out of stone. If the wise men had said they had heard prophets say these things, or if angels had spoken to them in private, people might have disbelieved. But when the vision of the star appeared in the heavens, even those that were exceedingly shameless had their mouths stopped.”

“Moreover, the star, when it stood over the young Child, stopped in its course again. This thing itself also was of a greater power than belongs to a star, now to hide itself, now to appear, and having appeared to stand still. From this the Magi also received an increase of faith. For this cause they rejoiced also, that they had found what they were looking for; they had been proved to be messengers of truth; their great journey had been fruitful, so great a longing did they have for Christ. First the star came and stood over Christ’s head, showing that what is born is Divine. Next standing there, the star leads them to worship Him; they were not simply barbarians, but the wiser sort among all people.”

The Devotion of the Magi

John Chrysostom was impressed¹⁶ with the faith and devotion of the Magi to Christ, and their gifts were given as to God and not to man. They were not offended or put off by Jesus’ humble life. Both the Magi and Christ Himself became fugitives because of this. But all this was done for a very far-reaching reason; it was done to emphasize the Incarnation; Christ was really human and had to run for His life.

“What was it that induced the Magi to worship Christ? The Virgin Mary was not conspicuous, nor was the house distinguished; the other things that they saw were not apt to amaze or attract them. Yet they not only worship, but also

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VIII, 1-2.

‘opened their treasures’ (Matthew 2:11), and ‘offered gifts’. The gifts were not as to a man, but as to God; the frankincense and the myrrh were a symbol of this. What then was their inducement? Both the star and the illumination of God in their mind, guiding them by little and little to the more perfect knowledge! None of the outward circumstances was that great; it was a manger, a shed, and a poor mother. They didn’t approach Christ as mere man, but as a God and Benefactor. They were not offended by anything they saw outwardly, but even worshipped and brought gifts. The Magi came close to the self-devotion of the Church, for it was knowledge, obedience and love that they offered to Him. ‘And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed to their own country another way’” (Matthew 2:11).

“Notice their faith; they were not offended, but are docile and considerate; they are not troubled; they don’t reason with themselves, saying, ‘If this Child is great, and has any strength, why is there need of flight, and a clandestine retreat? How can it be, that when we have come openly and boldly, and have stood against so great a people, and against a king’s madness, the angel sends us out of the city as runaways and fugitives?’ None of these things did they say or think. This most especially belongs to faith, not to seek an account of what is commanded, but merely to obey the commandments laid upon us.”

“‘When the Magi had departed, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt’” (Matthew 2:13).

“There is something here worth inquiring into, both touching the Magi, and touching the Child. If they were not troubled, but received everything with faith, it is worthy of examination why the Magi and the young Child are not preserved there in Bethlehem, but they go as fugitives into Persia, and He with His mother into Egypt. What is the alternative? Should He have fallen into the hands of Herod, and yet not have been killed? If this happened, He would not have been thought to have taken on flesh; the greatness of the Incarnation would not have been believed.”

“Christ sent the Magi off quickly, both commissioning them as teachers to the land of the Persians, and at the same time intercepting the madness of the king, that he might learn that he was attempting impossible things, and might quench his wrath. By His power He didn’t only subdue His enemies, but also deceived them with ease. Thus He deceived the Egyptians at the Exodus, having power to transfer their wealth openly into the hands of the Hebrews (Exodus 12:36); He did this secretly and with craft; and this made Him an object of terror to His enemies. The people of Ekron, when they had taken the Ark of the Covenant, and were struck with the plague, advised their countrymen not to fight, saying, ‘Don’t harden your hearts, as Pharaoh did when He mocked them, and they let His people go’ (1 Samuel 6:6 LXX). The same thing happened on this occasion also; something sufficient to astonish the tyrant. Consider what it was natural for Herod to feel, and how his breath would be stopped, deceived as he was by the wise men, and thus laughed to scorn. What if Herod did not become better? It is not Christ’s fault, who marvelously ordered all this, but it is the excess of Herod’s madness, not yielding even to those things which should have persuaded him, and deterred him from his wickedness. Going on still further, Herod received a sharper punishment for so great a foolishness.”

John Chrysostom stated¹⁷ that the result of the visit of the Magi was the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles, especially those that were really into idolatry. The lesson for us is that we can expect hostility and suffering as we try to be godly.

“Why was the young Child sent to Egypt? In the first place, Matthew mentioned the cause, ‘That it might be fulfilled, Out of Egypt have I called my Son’ (Matthew 2:15). At the same time the beginning of hope was proclaimed to the world. That is, since Babylon and Egypt, most in the whole earth, were burned up with the flame of ungodliness, Christ signified from the beginning that He means to correct and amend this. He induced men to expect His bounties throughout the whole world; therefore He sent to the wise men to Babylon, and He Himself visited Egypt with His mother.”

“There is another lesson which we are taught also, namely to look for temptations and plots. This was the case for Christ even from His swaddling clothes! Thus you see at His birth, first a tyrant raging, then Him taking flight, and departure beyond the border; and for no crime His mother is exiled into the land of the barbarians. When you hear these things, you should not be troubled or say, ‘What can this be? I ought to be crowned and celebrated, and be glorious and illustrious for fulfilling the Lord’s commandment’. This supposes that you are thought worthy to serve in some spiritual matter, and then see yourself suffering incurable ills, and enduring countless dangers. Having this as an example, you might bear all things nobly, knowing that this especially is the order of all things spiritual, to have temptations everywhere of the same kind as them. This is the case not only with regard to the mother of the young Child, but also of the Magi; since they retired secretly as fugitives. She, who had never stepped out of her house, is commanded to undergo so long a journey of affliction, on account of this wonderful birth, and her spiritual labor. Observe a wonder again! Palestine plots and Egypt receives and preserves Him that is the object of the plots.”

Origen, reflecting the prevailing opinion of his day, stated¹⁸ that the Magi were familiar with the power of sorcery; but the events surrounding the birth of Christ overshadowed their sorcery, and they knew that someone greater than the demons had come. As a result, they had to see Who this was that Balaam had foretold. By their gifts, they knew that He was both God and man, and that His mission would be to die.

“The Magi were familiar with evil spirits, and invoked them to bring about such results that do not exceed the strength of the evil spirits. Should some greater revelation of divinity be made, then the powers of the evil spirits are overthrown, being unable to resist the light of divinity. It is probable that since at the birth of Jesus ‘a multitude of the heavenly host praised God, saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men’ (Luke 2:14), the evil spirits consequently became feeble, the falsity of their sorcery being clear, and their power being broken. This overthrow was brought about not only by the angels visiting earth on account of the birth of Jesus, but also by the power of Jesus Himself, and His Divinity. The Magi, accordingly, wishing to produce their customary results, which they used to perform by means of certain spells and

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VIII, 3.

¹⁸ Origen, Against Celsus, I, 60.

sorceries, sought to know the reason for their failure, conjecturing the cause to be a great one. Beholding a divine sign in the heaven, they desired to learn its significance. They possessed the prophecies of Balaam, which Moses records, inasmuch as Balaam was celebrated for such predictions, they found the prophecy about the star, and the words, 'I will show Him, but not now; I bless Him, but He is not near' (Numbers 24:17 OSB LXX). They conjectured that the man whose appearance had been foretold along with that of the star, had actually come into the world. Having predetermined that he was superior in power to all demons, and to all common appearances and powers, they resolved to worship Him. They came to Judea, persuaded that some king had been born. But they did not know over what kingdom he was to reign, and were ignorant also of the place of his birth. They brought gifts, which they offered to him as one whose nature was both of God and of a mortal man. That is, they gave gold, as to a king; myrrh, as to one who was mortal; and incense, as to God; and they brought these offerings after they had learned the place of His birth. Since He was God, raised far above all those angels that minister to men, an angel rewarded the piety of the Magi for their worship of Him, by making known to them that they were not to go back to Herod, but to return to their own homes by another way."

The Perspective of the Visit of the Magi

The visit of the Magi to the Infant Christ is an event unique in human history. Coming from a culture that was one of the world centers of idolatry, they came to know God. They had very little information to go on, but they made the most of what they had. Coming a long way to worship a one-year old Baby indicates that they had a good measure of faith. Since they recognized the Baby as God, they were not concerned about a possible conflict between the Baby and other earthly kings for two reasons. First, this Baby, Who was a king, came for the benefit of all mankind, and everyone should have been able to recognize this. Second, this Baby was God, and as God He was capable of defending Himself in any conflict.

Hilary of Poitiers gave¹⁹ a perspective of the Magi visit to the Infant Christ. Not only did the angels glorify God to the shepherds, but the royal Magi, after a life devoted to sorcery and vanity, bow their knees before a Baby wrapped in smelly swaddling clothes! The outward appearance is much different than the inward reality!

"The light of a new star shines for the Magi; a heavenly sign escorts the Lord of heaven. An Angel brings to the shepherds the news that Christ the Lord is born. A multitude of the heavenly host flock together to sing the praise of that childbirth; the rejoicing of the Divine Company proclaims the fulfillment of the mighty work. Glory to God in heaven, and peace on earth to men of good will is announced. The Magi come and worship Him wrapped in swaddling clothes; after a life devoted to mystic rites of vain philosophy they bow the knee before a Baby in His cradle. Thus the Magi stoop to reverence the infirmities of Infancy; its cries are greeted by the heavenly joy of angels. The Spirit Who inspired the prophet, the heralding Angel, the light of the new star, all gather around Him. In such way it was that the Holy Spirit's descent and the overshadowing power of the Most High brought Him to His birth. The inward reality is much different

¹⁹ Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, II, 27.

than the outward appearance; the eye sees one thing, the soul another. A virgin bears; her child is of God. An Infant wails; angels are heard in praise. There are common swaddling clothes; God is being worshipped. The glory of His Majesty is not forfeited when He assumes the lowliness of flesh.”

Gospel: Matthew 2:13-23

The subject of today’s Gospel is the flight into Egypt of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to avoid the massacre of the children of Bethlehem by Herod. This follows verse by verse the Gospel lesson for Christmas Day, which is the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus.

The Massacre of the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem

After their visit to Jesus, Joseph and Mary, the Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Therefore they left for their own country by another route (Matthew 2:12). When they departed, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream saying,

“Arise and take the child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the child to destroy Him. He arose and took the child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt; and was there until the death of Herod” (Matthew 2:13-15).

Just as Joseph, Mary, Jesus and James left for Egypt, Herod went on a rampage. “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its vicinity from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the Magi” (Matthew 2:16). According to tradition, Jesus was about one year old when the 14,000 innocent children were massacred.

The rampage of Herod in slaughtering the innocent children of Bethlehem was similar in a way to the rampage of Pharaoh in Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Pharaoh’s fear was that Israel was getting too numerous, and that they might take over the Kingdom in Egypt. Therefore he ordered all male babies to be drowned in the Nile (Exodus 1:22). Moses was spared this execution through the faith of his parents, and he lived to be brought up as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, who was barren. Thus Moses became Pharaoh’s only heir. Jesus was spared execution at the hand of Herod, who feared that He might take over the Kingdom in Israel.

Cyprian of Carthage stated²⁰ that just like the Prophets and the Apostles, the children of Bethlehem were murdered for Christ’s Name sake. This shows us that martyrdom is something that even an infant can accomplish. If we refuse to suffer for our Lord, who suffered for us, we are without excuse.

“The martyrs are witnesses of the proofs of great courage and faith, and they exhort us by their sufferings to the triumphs of martyrdom. Remember the prophets, whom the Holy Spirit quickened to the foreknowledge of future events! Remember the Apostles, whom the Lord chose! Since these righteous men were slain for righteousness’ sake, have they not taught us also to be willing to die? The nativity of Christ witnessed the martyrdom of infants, so that they who were two years old and under were slain for His Name’s sake. An age not yet fit for

²⁰ Cyprian, Epistles, LX, 6.

the battle appeared fit for the crown. That it might be clear that those who are slain for Christ's sake are innocent, innocent infancy was put to death for His Name's sake. No one is free from the danger of persecution, when even these infants accomplished martyrdom. How serious is the case of a Christian man, if he, a servant, is unwilling to suffer, when his Master first suffered; why are we unwilling to suffer for our own sins, when He who had no sin of His own suffered for us? The Son of God suffered that He might make us sons of God; are we unwilling to suffer that we may continue to be a son of God? If we suffer from the world's hatred, Christ first endured the world's hatred. If we suffer reproach in this world, exile, or tortures, the Maker and Lord of the world experienced harder things than these. He also warns us, 'If the world hates you, remember that it hated Me before you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you' (John 15:20). Whatever our Lord and God taught, He also did, that the disciple might not be excused if he learns and doesn't do."

Ignatius of Antioch stated²¹ that Satan was perplexed over Who Jesus was as a baby. But just as a precaution, he tried to eliminate Him by Herod.

"Seeing these things, Satan was perplexed. He was ignorant that it was a virgin that should bring forth; but the angels song of praise struck him with astonishment, as well as the adoration of the Magi, and the appearance of the star. You reverted to his state of willful ignorance, because all the circumstances seemed to him trifling. He considered the swaddling clothes, the circumcision, and the nourishment by means of mother's milk contemptible; these things appeared to him unworthy of God."

Ephraim the Syrian described²² the visit of the Magi in his Christmas Hymns, where each verse has a part for the chanter and a response from the people, such as, "Blessed is He Who called Him out of Egypt!" While prophets had predicted the time of Christ's birth, they didn't make it plain regarding when; the Magi correctly interpreted the prophets. When Herod's soldiers tried to follow the Magi, the star hid itself so that the Magi could go nowhere. The star called the worshippers but hindered the murderers. When Herod's soldiers quit trying to follow, the star reappeared, and the Magi rejoiced. The murdered babies were an offering as virgin first fruits, martyrs to God.

"The doves moaned in Bethlehem, that the serpent destroyed their offspring. The eagle left for Egypt, to go down and receive the promises. Egypt rejoiced in Him that came. Blessed is He Who called Him out of Egypt!"

"The Scribes read daily that the star rises out of Jacob. The Voice and the reading was for the people; the rising of the Star and the interpretation was for the Gentiles; for them were the Books and for us the facts; for them the boughs and for us the fruits. The Scribes read the things that are written; the Magi saw the things get done, outshining that which was read. Blessed is He Who added to us their books!"

²¹ Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Philippians, Chapter 9.

²² Ephraim the Syrian, Nineteen Hymns on the Nativity of Christ, XVII, 3-20.

“Regarding the shining star that went before the bearers of the offerings, who is able to tell why it withdrew and appeared? It appeared and proclaimed the crown; it was hidden and concealed the location of His Body. It was established for the Son for two reasons, herald and guardian; it guarded His Body, it proclaimed His Crown. Blessed is He Who has given wisdom to them that proclaim Him!”

“The tyrant gazed on the Magi as they asked, ‘Where is the son of the King?’ While his heart was gloomy, he tried to put on a cheerful countenance. With the sheep Herod sent wolves, that they should kill the Lamb of God. Blessed be He Who yet again subdued them.”

“The Magi declared to the tyrant, ‘When your servants joined us, the bright star withdrew itself; the paths hid themselves’. The blessed ones didn’t know that the king had sent bitter foes, murderers as if worshippers, to destroy the sweet fruit. To You be glory, Medicine of life!”

“When the Magi received the commandment to go and seek Him, it is written of them that they saw that bright star and rejoiced. Thus it is known that it had been withdrawn; therefore they rejoiced at its aspect. It was hidden and hindered the murderers; it arose and called the worshippers. Blessed be He Who has triumphed in all things!”

“The abhorred one who slew the children, how did he overlook the Child? Justice hindered him in that he thought the Magi would return to him. While he stayed waiting to seize, the Worshipped and His worshippers escaped his hands. The offerings and the worshippers took flight from the tyrant. Glory to Him who knows all counsel!”

“The blameless Magi as they slept, meditated on their beds; sleep became a mirror, and a dream rose on it as light. The murderer they saw and trembled as his guile and his sword flashed around. He taught his men guile, he sharpened the sword to sharpness; but the Watcher taught the sleepers. Blessed is He who gives prudence to the simple!”

“Prophets declared concerning His Birth, but they didn’t make the time of His birth plain. He sent the Magi, and they came and showed its time. Yet the Magi who made known the time, didn’t make plain who the Child should be. A star of splendid light, in its course showed who the Child was, how splendid was His lineage. Blessed is He Who was pointed out by them all!”

“They scorned the trumpet of Isaiah, which sounded out His pure Conception. They silenced the lute of the Psalms, which sang of His Priesthood. The harp of the Spirit they hushed, which sang again of His Kingdom. Under deep silence they closed up the great Birth that joined the cry of those above with those below. Blessed is He Who appeared in the midst of silence!”

“His voice was the secret key that opened the mouths of the Magi. Whereas preachers were silent in Judah, they made their voice sound throughout creation; and the Gospel which those had scorned, these who came from far took and departed. The scorners began to hear their own orders come from Gentile strangers, who cried out the name of the Son of David. Blessed is He Who by our voice has put them to silence!”

“The slayers of Bethlehem mowed down the tender flowers hoping that among them should perish the tender seedling, wherein was hidden the Bread of life. But the ear of corn that has life had escaped, that it should come to the

sheaves at the time of harvest. The grape that escaped when young, gave itself to the treading at His Passion, that its wine might give life to souls. Glory to You, Treasury of life!”

“The murderers went into a paradise, full of tender fruits; they shook off the flowers from the bough, blossoms and buds they destroyed, unblemished oblations the persecutor unwittingly offered. To him woe, but to them blessing! Bethlehem was first to give virgin fruits to the Holy One. Blessed is He Who receives the first fruits!”

“The Scribes were silenced in envy, the Pharisees in jealousy. Men of stone²³ cried out and gave praise; those who had a heart of stone applauded the presence of the Stone that was rejected but has become the Head. Stones were made flesh by that Stone, and obtained mouths to speak; stones cried out through that Stone. Blessed is Your Birth that has caused stones to cry out!”

“The Star that is written in Scripture, the Gentiles saw from afar, that the People who are nearby might be shamed. O People instructed and puffed up, which by the Gentiles have been in turn instructed, as to how and where they saw. That vision of which Balaam spoke; strangers who saw it spread abroad concerning it. Blessed is He Who has provoked to jealousy those of His own house!”

Traditional sources state²⁴ that Herod thought that the toddler John the Baptist was the person that the Magi were searching for due to the acclaim at his miraculous birth and the circumstances of the recovery of speech of his father Zachariah (Luke 1:17-19, 57-66). When Zachariah would not reveal where John was, he was murdered in front of the Temple next to the altar, where the blood stains soaked into the pavement.

“When Herod knew that he had been mocked by the Magi, in a rage he sent murderers, ‘Slay the children from two years old and under’. Mary, hearing that the children were being killed, was afraid, and took the infant and swaddled Him, and put Him into an ox-stall. Elizabeth, hearing that they were searching for John, took him and went up into the hill-country, and kept looking where to conceal him. There was no place of concealment; so Elizabeth groaned with a loud voice, and said, ‘O mountain of God, receive mother and child’. Immediately the mountain was split, and received her. A light also shone about them, for an angel of the Lord was with them, watching over them.”

“Herod searched for John, and sent officers to Zachariah, saying, ‘Where have you hid your son? Zachariah answered, ‘I am the servant of God in holy things, and I sit constantly in the temple of the Lord. I do not know where my son is’. The officers went away, and reported all these things to Herod. Herod was enraged, and said, ‘His son is destined to be king over Israel’. Herod sent to him again, saying, ‘Tell the truth; where is your son? You know that your life is in my hand’. Zachariah said, ‘I am God’s martyr if you shed my blood; for the Lord will receive my spirit, because you shed innocent blood at the vestibule of the temple of the Lord’. Zachariah was murdered about daybreak, but the sons of Israel did not know that he had been murdered.”

²³ That is men with a heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). The Stone is the One that the builders rejected (Psalm 118:22, Matthew 21:42).

²⁴ Roberts and Donaldson, “The Protevangelium of James”, 22-24, in *Apocrypha of the New Testament*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 8.

“At the hour of the greeting the priests went away, and Zachariah did not come out to meet them with a blessing, according to his custom. The priests stood waiting for Zachariah to greet him at the prayer, and to glorify the Most High. Zachariah still delayed, and they were all afraid. Finally one of them ventured to go in, and he saw clotted blood beside the altar; and he heard a voice saying, ‘Zachariah has been murdered, and his blood shall not be wiped up until his avenger comes’. Hearing this, he was afraid, and went out and told it to the priests. They ventured in, and saw what had happened; the structure of the temple made a wailing noise, and they tore their clothes from the top to the bottom. They were afraid, and went out and reported to the people that Zachariah had been murdered. All the tribes of the people heard and mourned for him three days. After the three days, the priests consulted as to whom they should put in his place; the lot fell upon Simeon. It was Simeon who had been warned by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death until he should see the Christ in the flesh.”

According to tradition²⁵, the Apostle Matthew wrote an account of the early life of Christ, but didn’t publish it. Jerome translated it into Latin in the 4th century; the only copies extant today are Jerome’s Latin translation. According to Matthew, Herod first tried to chase down the Magi, but he couldn’t find them. Then he went after the children of Bethlehem.

“When Herod saw that he had been made sport of by the Magi, his heart swelled with rage, and he sent through all the roads, wishing to seize them and put them to death. But when he could not find them at all; he sent again to Bethlehem and all its borders, and slew all the male children whom he found of two years old and under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the Magi.”

“The day before this was done, Joseph was warned in his sleep by the angel of the Lord, who said to him, ‘Take Mary and the child, and go into Egypt by the way of the desert’. Joseph went according to the saying of the angel.”

In connection with this slaughter, Matthew quoted a prophecy of Jeremiah, “A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning; Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they are no more” (Matthew 2:18, Jeremiah 31:15). Rachel was the wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. Rachel had been barren for a long time prior to Joseph’s birth and had given her maid to her husband because of her barrenness; her children were very important to her (Genesis 30:1-8). As Jacob and his family were traveling back to Canaan from Mesopotamia, Rachel gave birth to Benjamin just before they arrived in Bethlehem, near Ramah²⁶. Rachel died in childbirth and was buried there (Genesis 35:16-20). Later, when the promised land was divided among the twelve tribes of Israel, Ramah along with Bethel, Jerusalem and Bethlehem were among the cities within the land allocated to the tribe of Benjamin (Joshua 18:21-28).

Thus, Jeremiah’s prophecy goes beyond the weeping of the mothers of the slaughtered children; even Rachel, herself, was weeping inconsolably. One might object that Rachel had been dead for c.1800 years; how could she weep? To understand this, one needs to understand the Lord’s viewpoint concerning who’s dead. As proof of the Resurrection, the Lord had quoted

²⁵ Roberts and Donaldson, “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew”, 17, in Apocrypha of the New Testament, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 8. See also the introduction by Jerome to The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.

²⁶ Ramah is just North of Bethlehem.

a much quoted passage, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. God is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). If Jacob is not dead, neither is Rachel.

Justin Martyr stated²⁷ that Rachel weeping for her children refers to the women of the neighborhood of Bethlehem, weeping for their slaughtered babies. The city of Ramah was a little North of Bethlehem, but in Justin’s day there was another city called Ramah on the East side of the Jordan; that is in Arabia.

“The Magi from Arabia did not return to Herod, as he had asked them to do, but departed by another way to their own country, according to the commands laid on them. Joseph, with Mary and the Child, had gone into Egypt, as it was revealed to them to do. Since Herod did not know the Child whom the Magi had gone to worship, he simply ordered all the children then in Bethlehem to be massacred. Jeremiah prophesied that this would happen, ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation *and* bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they *are* no more’ (Jeremiah 31:15). Therefore, on account of the voice, which would be heard from Ramah, i.e., from Arabia -- for there is in Arabia at this time a place called Ramah -- wailing would come on the place where Rachel the wife of Jacob called Israel, the holy patriarch, has been buried, i.e., in Bethlehem. The women weep for their own slaughtered children, and have no consolation by reason of what has happened to them.”

The heartless slaughter of all these children raises another issue: how could a loving God allow this tragedy to happen? After all, the Lord had said that a sparrow doesn’t even fall to the ground apart from the Father’s will and that the very hairs of our head are numbered (Matthew 10:29-30). So He knew what was going on!

John Chrysostom addressed²⁸ the rank injustice of the murder of the children of Bethlehem and compared it with Herod Antipas’ execution of the guards who were holding the Apostle Peter (Acts 12:19). Both Herods were illogical and didn’t understand the Divinely ordered circumstances that presented themselves. In both cases, the Herod involved lashed out at innocent bystanders for something that was beyond his control. In both cases, the fault lies totally with the Herod involved and not with anyone else.

“Listen to me carefully, because many idle things are uttered by many people about the children of Bethlehem. The course of events is full of injustice, and some people express their perplexity about it in a way that is full of audaciousness and frenzy. In order that we may be free of their madness and perplexity, allow us to speak a little about this topic. If this is their charge, that the children were abandoned to be slain, they should find fault likewise with the slaughter of the soldiers that kept Peter (Acts 12:19). Here, when the young Child had fled, other children are massacred in the place of Him who was sought; there, Peter having been delivered from his prison by the angel, Herod Antipas when he had looked for Peter and didn’t find him, slew instead the soldiers that kept him.”

“This is an example of injustice also and not a solution, but an enhancement of our difficulty. I bring forward this case, that I may propose one

²⁷ Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, 78.

²⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, IX, 1.

and the same solution. Christ was not the cause of the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem; it was the king's cruelty. Neither was Peter the cause of the soldiers' death, but the madness of Herod Antipas. If Herod Antipas had seen the wall broken through, or the doors overthrown, he might, perhaps, have had ground to accuse the soldiers that kept the Apostle Peter of neglect. But nothing was damaged, the doors were thrown wide open, and the chains were still fastened to the hands of them that kept Peter, for in fact they were bound to him. Herod Antipas might have inferred from these things -- that is, if he had been strictly doing a judge's office on the matters before him -- that the event was not of human power, but of some divine and wonder-working power. He might have adored the doer of these things, instead of waging war with the guards. God had done all that He did in order to lead the king to the truth, not to expose the guards to implications of neglect of duty. If Herod proved senseless, the skillful Physician of Souls may manage all things for good, but the insubordination of him that is diseased overturns it."

"The same thing happened with the children of Bethlehem! Why was Herod the Great angry at being mocked by the Magi? Did he not know that the birth was divine? Did he not summon the chief princes of the Jews? Did he not gather together the scribes? Did they not bring the prophet Micah with them to the court of judgment, proclaiming these things beforehand from of old? Did Herod not see how the old things agreed with the new? Did he not hear that a star also directed these men? Did he not notice the zeal of the barbarians? Did he not marvel at their boldness? Was he not horror-struck at the truth of the prophet? Did he not perceive what was happening? Why didn't he reason with himself from all these things, that this event was not the craftiness of the Magi, but a Divine Power dispensing all things? Even if Herod the Great was deceived by the wise men, how is that the fault of the young children, who have done no wrong?"

Regarding why the innocent had to suffer, Chrysostom addressed²⁹ this issue at length. No matter how much we suffer, we do not lose anything; instead we gain considerably from all the suffering that we have to put up with.

"Although there are many people that injure (others), yet there is not so much as one that is injured. That which we may suffer unjustly from anyone, it speaks either to the doing away of our sins, God so putting the wrong to our account, or it goes to the recompense of rewards."

"To be clearer, let us use an illustration. Consider a certain servant who owes his Master a lot of money, and suppose that this servant has been spitefully used and robbed by unjust men. If it had been in the Master's power to stop the plunderer and He didn't, but instead He credited what was taken toward the servant's debt, has the servant been injured? By no means! What if the Master credits the servant more than he lost? Has he not gained in the process?"

Irenaeus of Lyons stated³⁰ that Jesus as an infant intentionally sent the children of Bethlehem, who belonged to the House of David, and who were His age, on ahead of Him into His Kingdom.

²⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, IX, 2.

³⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, III, xvi, 4.

“Jesus as a baby was Himself Christ, whom Simeon carried in his arms and blessed the Most High (Luke 2:25-28). On beholding Him, the shepherds glorified God (Luke 2:20). John the Baptist, while yet in his mother’s womb, and Christ in the womb of Mary, recognized Him as the Lord, and greeted Him with leaping (Luke 1:44). The Magi, when they had seen, adored, and offered their gifts to Him, prostrated themselves to the eternal King, and departed by another way, not returning by the way of the Assyrians (Matthew 2:1-12). ‘Before the child shall know how to call his father or his mother, He shall receive the power of Damascus, and the spoils of Samaria³¹, before the king of the Assyrians’ (Isaiah 8:4 LXX).

“For this reason, He suddenly removed those children belonging to the house of David, whose happy lot it was to have been born at that time that He might send them on ahead into His kingdom. Since He was Himself an infant, He so arranging it that human infants should be martyrs, slain according to the Scriptures, for the sake of Christ, who was born in Bethlehem of Judah, in the city of David.”

Chrysostom gave³² several other illustrations. “Remember David, as a fugitive from Absalom, came upon Shimei, a relative of Saul. Shimei followed David as he went along cursing him continually, throwing stones at him and reviling him, trampling on his afflictions as being well deserved.” David’s captains wanted to “cut off this dead dog’s head.” But David forbid it saying, “Let him alone and let him curse; perhaps the Lord will look upon my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day” (2 Samuel 16:5-12).

Quoting David again, Chrysostom said, “Look upon my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins. Look upon my enemies, for they have been multiplied, and they have hated me with unjust hatred” (Psalm 25:18-19 LXX). Lazarus for the same cause enjoyed comfort having in this life suffered innumerable evils (Luke 16:20-25). They therefore who are wronged are not wronged at all if they bear nobly all that they suffer. Rather they gain even more abundantly whether they are disciplined by God or scourged by the devil”.

With regard to the 14,000 children slaughtered in Bethlehem³³, the Church has referred to them as The Holy Innocents and has counted them among the martyrs. Chrysostom stated³⁴ in another place:

“Nothing is holier than the tongue which, in evils, gives thanks to God. Truly in no respect does it fall short of that of martyrs; both are alike crowned. For over the martyr stands the executioner to force one to deny God by blasphemy. In the other case, the devil stands over one torturing him with executioner thoughts, darkening him with despondencies. If then, one bears his

³¹ Tertullian, Answer to Jews, Chapter 9; Against Marcion, II, ii, 3, 13, noted that this prophecy cannot refer to a military campaign because the central figure is too young to command an army. However Christ could do this even as an infant. Therefore the prophecy must be figurative in some way. Tertullian stated that this prophecy was fulfilled by the Magi; the gold and spices they gave represents the power of the East. Samaria and Damascus stood for idolatry following the days of Solomon. The Magi had abandoned their idolatry to come visit Christ.

³² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, IX, 2.

³³ Different sources give different numbers of the infants slaughtered at Bethlehem. Most numbers range from 9,000 to 20,000.

³⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Colossians, VIII, v. 15.

grief and gives thanks, he has gained a crown of martyrdom. Is her little child sick and her mother still gives God thanks? This is a crown for her. What torture is so bad that despondency is not worse? Still it does not force her to vent any bitter word. The child dies; again she gives thanks for the time spent. She has become a daughter of Abraham. She didn't sacrifice with her own hand, yet she was pleased with the sacrifice, which is the same thing. She felt no indignation when the gift was taken away".

Christ had said, "Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). "For whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27).

Most of the martyrs didn't go out of their way to put themselves in harm's way and seek martyrdom. They just couldn't avoid it and faced it courageously and head-on. The Holy Innocents didn't seek to die in their Lord's place, but that's what they did. John Chrysostom stated³⁵,

"Their Lord knows what they might have achieved in terms of good works had they lived. For this reason, He laid up for them no small reward".

Chrysostom also stated³⁶ that we should not be confused when things happen even if they seem contrary to God's promises. He tends to accomplish His Will by these contraries as a demonstration of His power.

"In this we are taught never to be confounded when what is happening is contrary to the promise of God. For instance, when Christ came for the salvation of the people, or rather for the salvation of the world, what kind of beginning did He have? His mother has to flee after His birth; His birth-place is involved in an incredible calamity, and the bitterest mass murder possible is perpetrated; there is lamentation and great mourning everywhere. Don't be troubled for He tends to accomplish His own dispensations by their contraries, affording us from this a very great demonstration of His power."

Leo the Great made³⁷ an analogy to the work of Satan today among believers, comparing Satan's work to the envy of the Jews and the plotting of Herod. If even infants can be martyrs for the Faith, we can also stand up to the schemes against us that this world offers.

"The devil himself is an unwearied imitator of Herod's character, just as he was then a secret instigator. He is tortured at the calling of all the Gentiles, and racked at the daily destruction of his power, grieving at his being deserted everywhere, and the true King adored in all places. He prepares devices, he hatches plots, he bursts out into murders. Of those whom he deceives, he is consumed with envy in the persons of the Jews; he lies treacherously in wait in the persons of heretics; he blazes out into cruelty in the persons of the heathen. He sees that the power of the eternal King is invincible; Whose death has extinguished the power of death itself. Therefore he has armed himself with all his skill of injury against those who serve the true King. He hardens some by the

³⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, IX, 3.

³⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, IX, 4.

³⁷ Leo the Great, Pope of Rome, Sixth Sermon on the Feast of the Epiphany, XXXVI, 2.

pride that knowledge of the Law engenders; he debases others by the lies of false belief; and he incites others to the madness of persecution. Yet the madness of this 'Herod' is vanquished, and brought to nothing by Him who has crowned even infants with the glory of martyrdom. He has granted His faithful ones so unconquerable a love that in the Apostle's words they dare to say, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, want, persecution, hunger, nakedness, peril, or the sword? As it is written, for your sake are we killed all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter. But in all these things we overcome on account of Him who loved us'" (Romans 8:35-36, Psalm 44:22).

The Flight to Egypt

According to tradition, Joseph's youngest son, James (author of the Epistle of James) was too young (about 10 years old) to leave behind and went with Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt. Jesus was about one year old³⁸ when they left. The route they took led them due West to the shore of the Mediterranean Sea and then along the well-traveled caravan route to Egypt. By taking this route, they were able to reach Egyptian soil in about 14 days; this was the quickest route to Egypt. As a practical measure, the gifts given by the Magi probably financed the entire flight to Egypt.

In ancient iconography, the Virgin Mary is often pictured carrying Jesus while riding on a donkey with Joseph and James taking turns leading the donkey. In one case Jesus is pictured sitting on Joseph's shoulders with Mary riding the donkey.

In Matthew's traditional account³⁹ of the early life of Jesus, he stated that many wild animals, such as lions and wolves, accompanied Joseph, Mary and Jesus along part of the way to Egypt as they crossed the wilderness of Sinai. Even though there were two oxen drawing a wagon carrying provisions, and there were sheep following along also, the lions and wolves did not bother the sheep or the oxen, but the lions directed the oxen in their path. Matthew quoted from Isaiah to describe this, 'The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox' (Isaiah 65:25).

At this time, there was a significant Jewish population in Egypt, primarily in the area of Alexandria and along the Nile Valley and Delta. It was because of this Jewish population that the Septuagint was commissioned by Pharaoh Ptolemy II several hundred years earlier. Thus Joseph and Mary were able to find accommodations among their own people during part of the journey.

There are many early accounts of the adventures of the Holy Family that occurred during the Flight to Egypt. For example, there are a number of accounts of idols and statues of Egyptian deities collapsing or crumbling as the Christ Child entered that town. This is supported by Old Testament prophecy: "Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud, and is about to come to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence and the heart of the Egyptians will melt

³⁸ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, October 23.

³⁹ Roberts and Donaldson, "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew", 19, in Apocrypha of the New Testament, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 8.

within them” (Isaiah 19:1). The early Church Fathers also bear witness⁴⁰ to this and this is expressed in ancient hymns and ancient icons.

Athanasius of Alexandria stated⁴¹ that the reference to Christ riding a cloud (Isaiah 19:1) into Egypt refers to His Flight into Egypt with His parents. During this time something unique occurred, where the idols of Egypt were overcome and people began enrolling themselves under Him.

“Christ was born in Judea, and men from Persia came to worship Him. Even before His appearing in the body (at His Baptism), He won the victory over His demon adversaries and a triumph over idolatry. All heathen from every region are renouncing their hereditary tradition and the impiety of idols, are placing their hope in Christ, and are enrolling themselves under Him, the like of which you may see with your own eyes.”

“At no other time has the impiety of the Egyptians ceased, except when the Lord of all, riding as it were upon a cloud, came down there in the body and brought to nothing the delusion of idols, and brought everyone over to Himself, and through Himself to the Father.”

The Church historian Sozomen stated⁴² that a very large tree at Persis in the Thebais at Hermopolis reacted to the Presence of Christ in Egypt by bowing its branches when He arrived. After Christ left, the branches, leaves and a portion of the bark were used to heal the sick. Sozomen concluded that either this was a sign of the Presence of God or the tree had been worshipped by the pagan inhabitants, and the demons that were worshipped were shaken by the Presence of Christ as Isaiah had foretold.

Some accounts portray the Christ Child as a precocious infant who performed many miracles. This, however, is denied by Church Fathers such as John Chrysostom who reasoned⁴³ that if such were the case: (1) He would not have needed John the Baptist to go before Him, and (2) He would have been crucified much earlier since He would have irritated the Scribes and Pharisees much earlier.

Regarding the collapsing idols, the first instance occurred⁴⁴ just East of the Nile Delta after they had entered Egypt. One of the idols had warned the pagan priests (by the voice of the demon) that a God had come to their town. At the same time, the priest’s young son, who had been demon-possessed since birth, wandered into the building where Joseph, Mary, James and Jesus were staying. Picking up some of Jesus’ freshly washed clothing and putting them over his head; he was healed of his demon possession and began praising God. Meanwhile, the idol who had spoken along with the other idols, collapsed and shattered on the ground. This created quite a commotion! After some inquiring, the priest whose son was healed recognized Jesus as the Son of the Living God and treated the Holy Family very well while they stayed there. This seems reminiscent of the time that the idol of Dagon in the Philistine Temple collapsed and fell

⁴⁰ Theodoret of Cyrus, Letter to the Monks of the Euphratensian.

⁴¹ Athanasius of Alexandria, Incarnation of the Word, XXXIII, 5; XXXVI, 4; XXXVII, 5-6; Athanasius of Alexandria, Letters, LXI, 4.

⁴² Salaminius Hermias Sozomenus, Ecclesiastical History, V, 21.

⁴³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXI, 2.

⁴⁴ Roberts and Donaldson, ed., “The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior”, Apocrypha of the New Testament, Ante-Nicene Fathers, v. 8.

before the Ark of the Covenant when the Philistines had captured the Ark (1 Samuel 5:1-4). The same Lord who dwelt between the Cherubim on the Ark (Exodus 25:22, 30:6, Leviticus 16:2, Numbers 17:4, 2 Samuel 6:2) now had come to Egypt.

Concerning Egyptian idolatry, Jerome remarked⁴⁵ that, “No nation was so given to idolatry and worshipped such a countless number of monsters as the Egyptians”.

In addition, historical writings attribute some prophecy of Jeremiah as predicting this. Later in his life, Jeremiah was forced to go to Egypt with some of the Hebrew royalty who were fleeing Nebuchadnezzar prior to the Babylonian conquest (Jeremiah 43:1-13). Eventually, Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt by his own countrymen, but not before he had done considerable prophesying. One of these prophecies (not recorded in Scripture) involved the idols of Egypt falling and being destroyed when a virgin mother with her son entered Egypt. Jeremiah was highly revered by the Egyptians and hieroglyphics depicting these prophecies were included on one of the Egyptian temples. Later when Pharaoh Ptolemy II (who commissioned the Septuagint) inquired⁴⁶ about the meaning of these images, the Egyptian priests replied that it was a mystery foretold by a Hebrew prophet and they were awaiting its fulfillment.

In the same vicinity⁴⁷, Joseph and Mary came upon a large group of robbers. Details of this encounter vary from one source to another; but one common element of all the sources has one of the robbers standing out and letting them pass unmolested. Some accounts say this one robber, named Dysmas (or Titus), even bribed another robber to let them go. Thirty two years later this robber Dysmas was one of the thieves that was crucified with Jesus, who rebuked the other thief for blaspheming, and who Jesus said will be with Him in Paradise (Luke 23:39-43).

At a number of other occasions, Egyptian idols collapsed as the Lord and His earthly parents entered a town. For example, this also occurred at Mataria (near Heliopolis, NE of Cairo), at Hermopolis (Ashmunein in Upper Egypt), and at Cusae (Qusia in Upper Egypt near Thebes). At Cusae, they were driven out of town by angry priests; but at the other two towns, they were received warmly.

For example from Matthew’s traditional account⁴⁸ of Jesus’ early life, all the idols in the temple at Sotinen fell and shattered when Jesus entered. The governor of the city was stunned and recognized Jesus as the God of these gods. Remembering what happened to Pharaoh at the Exodus, the governor and all the people believed in the Lord God through Jesus.

“They came into the regions of Hermopolis, and entered into a certain city of Egypt which is called Sotinen; and because they knew no one there from whom they could ask hospitality, they went into a temple which was called the Capitol of Egypt. In this temple there had been set up three hundred sixty-five idols, to each of which on its own day divine honors and sacred rites were paid. The Egyptians who lived in the Capitol were instructed by the priests regarding how

⁴⁵ Jerome, Against Jovinianus, II, 7.

⁴⁶ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, May 1, February 3.

⁴⁷ Roberts and Donaldson, ed., “The Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior”, Apocrypha of the New Testament, Ante-Nicene Fathers, v. 8.

⁴⁸ Roberts and Donaldson, “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew”, 23-25, in Apocrypha of the New Testament, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 8.

many sacrifices were offered each day, according to the honor in which the god was held.”

“When the most blessed Mary went into the temple with the little child, all the idols prostrated themselves on the ground, so that all of them were lying on their faces shattered and broken to pieces; thus they plainly showed that they were nothing. Then was fulfilled that which was said by the prophet Isaiah, ‘Behold, the Lord sits on a swift cloud, and shall come to Egypt; and the things made by hands in Egypt shall be shaken by his presence’” (Isaiah 19:1 OSB LXX).

“Then Affrodosius, the governor of the city, when news of this was brought to him, went to the temple with all his army. The priests of the temple, when they saw Affrodosius with all his army coming into the temple, thought that he was hurrying only to see vengeance taken on those on whose account the gods had fallen down. But when he came into the temple, and saw all the gods lying prostrate on their faces, he went up to the blessed Mary, who was carrying the Lord in her bosom, and adored Him. He said to all his army and all his friends, ‘Unless this was the God of our gods, our gods would not have fallen on their faces before Him; nor would they be lying prostrate in His presence. They silently confess that He is their Lord. Unless we take care to do what we have seen our gods doing, we may run the risk of His anger, and all come to destruction, even as it happened to our Pharaoh, who not believing in powers so mighty, was drowned in the sea, with all his army (Exodus 14:21-31). Then all the people of that same city believed in the Lord God through Jesus Christ.”

The end of the journey in Upper Egypt was near the Qousqam Mountains about 100 miles from Thebes where they lived in a cave for the better part of a year. Today this cave is the site of the Dair al-Muharraq Monastery. The first church was built on that location in about 60 AD when the Evangelist Mark traveled throughout Egypt, finding a very receptive people as he went. The Monastery was built in the 4th century as were a number of other monasteries and churches that commemorated the various places Joseph, Mary, Jesus and James stayed. Many of these still exist today⁴⁹ and the historic sites are visited by many people every year.

While they were living in the cave near the Qousqam Mountains, Herod died. “When Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ‘Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the child’s life are dead’” (Matthew 2:19-20). Thus Joseph began the approximately 600 mile journey back to Nazareth.

The word “go” (Matthew 2:20) can be contrasted with the word “flee” (Matthew 2:13). “Flee” (Greek: *pheugo*) implies escape or run quickly while “go” is a more general term and implies merely making steady progress in that direction.

The route home most likely was a retrace of the route used in their flight from Herod. Considerable oral tradition exists as to places they stopped and their length of stay in returning home. From this, we can surmise that they were not in a great hurry to get back and that they took their time.

⁴⁹ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, pp. 284-285

Most of the places that oral tradition assigns for their stopping points were springs, wells or sources of water. Being devout Jews and following the Mosaic Laws regarding purification (Exodus 19:14-15, Leviticus 13-15, Numbers 19) this seems logical that they would stop to wash periodically in the hot climate.

Reaching the land of Israel, Joseph had another decision to make. “And when he (i.e. Joseph) heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he departed for the regions of Galilee, and came and resided in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene’“ (Matthew 2:22-23).

John Chrysostom noted⁵⁰ that Archelaus thought that his father had gotten rid of any threat to the throne. Also Archelaus was hesitant to become as blood thirsty as his father since he feared that his father’s death agony was punishment for his deeds. However, since another son of Herod the Great was ruling Galilee, Joseph was given a message from the angel that it was OK to go there.

“How did Archelaus reign over Judea, when Pontius Pilate was governor? Herod’s death had just recently taken place, and the kingdom had not yet been divided into many parts. As Herod had just ended his life, the son for a while kept possession of the kingdom ‘in the place of his father Herod’ (Matthew 2:22). It may be said, however, ‘if Joseph was afraid to settle in Judea on account of Archelaus, he had cause to fear Galilee also on account of Herod Antipas. By Joseph changing the place where he lived, the whole matter was hidden; the whole assault was on ‘Bethlehem and its coasts’. Now that the slaughter had taken place, the young Archelaus thought that the whole matter had come to an end; he thought that the One his father sought had been destroyed. Besides, his father having come to such an end of his life before his eyes, he became more cautious about proceeding further in that course of iniquity.”

“Joseph therefore came to Nazareth, partly to avoid the danger, partly also delighting to live in his native place. To give him more courage, he received an oracle from the angel touching this matter (Matthew 2:22). Luke, however, does not say that Joseph went there by Divine warning, but that when they had fulfilled all the purification, they returned to Nazareth.”

The Death of Herod

Joseph, Mary, Jesus and James were in Egypt for about a year before they learned of the death of Herod the Great. Early historians state that Herod was in great pain before his death, and that this was a consequence of his murder of the children of Bethlehem among other things.

The Church Historian Eusebius of Caesarea⁵¹ quoted Josephus, the 1st century historian, in the details of Herod’s death. While Josephus didn’t mention the murder of the 14,000 babies, he did give a graphic account of the suffering Herod had to endure, both from the tremendous infighting among his family, and the deterioration of his body. Eusebius interpreted this misery as punishment sent by God for his murder of the children of Bethlehem.

⁵⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, IX, 5.

⁵¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, Church History, I, 8.

“When Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Herod was greatly disturbed by the inquiry of the Magi who came from the east, asking where he who was born King of the Jews was to be found. They had seen his star, and this was their reason for taking so long a journey; for they earnestly desired to worship the infant as God. Herod imagined that his kingdom might be endangered; he inquired therefore of the doctors of the law, where they expected Christ to be born. He learned that the prophecy of Micah announced that Bethlehem was to be his birthplace (Micah 5:2). He commanded, in a single edict, all the male infants in Bethlehem, and all its borders, that were two years of age or less, according to the time which he had accurately ascertained from the Magi, to be slain, supposing that Jesus, would share the same fate as the others of his own age. But the child anticipated the snare, being carried into Egypt by his parents, who had learned from an angel what was about to happen.”

“It is worth while to observe the reward which Herod received for his daring crime against Christ and those of the same age. Immediately, divine vengeance overtook him, and gave him a foretaste of what he was to receive after death. It is not possible to relate here how he tarnished the supposed happiness of his reign by successive calamities in his family, by the murder of wife and children, and others of his nearest relatives and dearest friends. The account, which casts every other tragic drama into the shade, is detailed at length in the histories of Josephus. Immediately after his crime against our Savior and the other infants, the punishment sent by God drove him on to his death.”

Josephus records⁵² details of the death of Herod the Great. Not only did Herod have to live with daily plots, subplots and infighting among his many children, but everyone hated him for all he had done. He lived the last years of his life in excruciating pain and his body began to rot before he died. Figuring that no one would mourn his death, he arranged for a great number of Jewish leaders to be murdered on the day he died so that people would mourn him against their will. This was not carried out, however.

“Herod’s severe derangement greatly increased before his death; this was God’s judgment on him for his sins. A fire glowed in him slowly, which did not appear to the touch outwardly as it increased his pains inwardly; for it brought on him a vehement unavoidable appetite. His intestines were ulcerated, and most of his pain was in his colon; an aqueous and transparent liquid oozed from his feet, and a similar substance afflicted him at the bottom of his belly. His male organ was putrefied, and produced worms; when he sat upright he had a difficulty of breathing, which was very loathsome, on account of the stench of his breath, and his rapid breathing; he also had convulsions in all parts of his body.”

“Those who pretended to practice divination, and who were endowed with wisdom to foretell such things, said that God inflicted this punishment on the king on account of his great impiety. Yet he still hoped to recover, though his afflictions seemed greater than anyone could bear. He sent for physicians, and followed what they prescribed for his assistance; he went beyond the river Jordan,

⁵² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVII, vi, 5 (168-178).

and bathed himself in warm baths that were at Calirrhoe⁵³, which water runs into the lake called Asphaltitis⁵⁴.”

“When the physicians once bathed him in a vessel full of oil, it was supposed that he was just dying; but, on the lamentable cries of his servants, he revived; having no longer the least hope of recovering, he gave order that every soldier should be paid fifty drachmae. He also gave a great deal to their commanders, and to his friends. When he came to Jericho, he grew so angry, that he began to do everything like a madman; though he was near death, he contrived the following wicked designs.”

“He commanded that all the principal men of the entire Jewish nation, wherever they lived, should be called to him. A great number came, because the whole nation was called, and death was the penalty for despising the letter of his call. The king was in a wild rage against them all, the innocent as well as those that had given him ground for accusations. When they had come, he ordered them all to be shut up in the hippodrome⁵⁵, and sent for his sister Salome, and her husband Alexas, and spoke to them: ‘I shall die in a little time, so great are my pains. I expect that my death will be cheered by all men; and that I shall die without such mourning as men usually expect at a king’s death’”.

“He desired therefore that as soon as they see he has given up the spirit, they shall place soldiers around the hippodrome, before anyone knows that he is dead. Then they shall give orders to have those that are in custody shot with their arrows before they declare Herod’s death to the multitude. This slaughter of them all will cause Herod to rejoice on a two accounts: (1) as he is dying, they will make him secure that his will shall be executed in what he charges them to do; and (2) he shall have the honor of a memorable mourning at his funeral. Salome and Alexas promised him not to transgress his commands. However, as soon as Herod died, they released the prisoners.”

Consequences of the Flight to Egypt

One thing that stands out (Matthew 2:13) is that Joseph was called upon to react immediately and quickly and flee to Egypt. Joseph was about 81 years old⁵⁶ at the time and this was not an easy task for him to live as a refugee for three years. Chrysostom pointed out⁵⁷ some contradictions Joseph had to deal with:

“Didn’t You just say that He should save His people from their sins? And now He can’t even save Himself, but we must flee far away from home and be away a long time? The facts are contrary to the promise”. But yet, Joseph didn’t question the command; he just did it.

Leo the Great stated⁵⁸ that the Magi entered on a new way of life after their visit. Jesus, by going to Egypt gave new meaning to the office of the Patriarch Joseph who distributed food in Egypt. He also connected back to the Exodus, where the lamb was first slain at the Passover.

⁵³ This is a town just East of the Dead Sea.

⁵⁴ This is the name that Josephus used for the Dead Sea.

⁵⁵ This was an oval stadium used for chariot races.

⁵⁶ Nickolai Velimirovic, *Prologue From Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 31.

⁵⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, VIII, 4.

⁵⁸ Leo the Great, Pope of Rome, *Third Sermon on the Feast of Epiphany*, XXXII, 4.

“Now when the wise men had worshipped the Lord and finished their devotions, according to the warning of a dream, they didn’t return by the same route by which they had come. Now that they believed in Christ, it was fitting for them not to walk in the paths of their old line of life, but having entered on a new way, they needed to keep away from the errors they had left. It was also fitting to baffle Herod’s plot, who, under the cloak of worship, was planning a wicked plot against the Infant Jesus. When his crafty hopes were overthrown, the king’s wrath rose to a greater fury. Reckoning up the time, which the wise men had indicated, he poured out his cruel rage on all the male children of Bethlehem, and in a general massacre of the whole of that city slew the infants, who thus passed to their eternal glory. Herod thought that, if every single baby was slain there, Christ too would be slain. But He Who was postponing the shedding of His blood for the world’s redemption till another time, was carried and brought into Egypt by his parents’ aid, and thus sought the ancient cradle of the Hebrew race. He gave greater meaning to the princely office of Joseph, in that He, the Bread of Life and the Food of reason that came down from heaven, removed the worst famine under which the Egyptians’ minds were laboring, the lack of truth. Christ’s journey to Egypt completed the symbolism that began at the Exodus, where the slaying of the lamb foreshadowed the health-bringing-sign of the Cross and the Lord’s Passover.”

John Chrysostom pointed out⁵⁹ how Jacob and his family going to Egypt, being provided for by Joseph, and returning at the Exodus was a figure of Christ’s descent into Egypt. In doing this, Christ prepared Egypt to receive the Apostles, and Egypt became especially fervent for Christ as a result.

“The patriarch Jacob, called Israel, went down to Egypt and returned at the Exodus, thus completing a type of Christ’s calling out of Egypt. They went down to avoid death by famine; He went down to avoid death by conspiracy. On Jacob’s arrival in Egypt, they were for the time delivered from the famine; Christ, when He had gone down, sanctified the whole land by setting His foot there.”

“In the midst of His humiliation, the evidence of His Godhead is disclosed. First of all, the angel said, ‘Flee into Egypt’ (Matthew 2:13), but did not promise to travel with them, either in their descent or return. This intimated that they had a great fellow traveler, the Child that had been born; such a one as actually changed all things immediately on His appearing, and worked so that His enemies should serve this Divine Plan in many ways. Thus Magi and barbarians, leaving the superstition of their fathers, came to worship; thus Augustus Caesar facilitated the birth at Bethlehem by the decree for the taxing. Egypt received and preserved Him, driven from His home, and plotted against, and obtained a sort of first impulse towards her union with Him. Later when Egypt heard Him preached by the Apostles, she had this to glory in: she had received Him first. The privilege of receiving Him did not belong only to Palestine; Egypt receiving Him proved more fervent than Palestine.”

⁵⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VIII, 5.

In the centuries that followed, Egypt became one of the great world centers of holiness and asceticism, where women as well as men participated. Chrysostom wrote⁶⁰ of this in the 4th century:

“And now, should you come into the desert of Egypt, you will see this desert become better than any paradise, and 10,000 choirs of angels in human forms, and nations of martyrs, and companies of virgins and all the devil’s tyranny put down while Christ’s kingdom shines forth in its brightness. Poets, wise men, magicians, sorcerers, among others, you will see changed and now taking pride in the fishermen, carrying about everywhere the publican, and the tentmaker, and protecting herself with the cross. These good things are not in the cities only, but also in the deserts more than in the cities; since everywhere in that land may be seen the camp of Christ, the royal flock, and the government of the powers above. This lifestyle one may find, not among men only, but also among woman.”

“The war against the devil and his powers is common to women and men; women’s delicate nature is not an impediment in such conflicts. It is not bodily constitution, but mental choice, that decides these struggles. Women in many cases have actually been more forward in the contest than men, and have set up more brilliant trophies. The heavens are not as glorious with the varied choir of the stars, as is the wilderness of Egypt, exhibiting to us all around the tents of the monks.”

Chrysostom described⁶¹ their life style as similar to the life of the Apostle Paul, where they continued in vigils by night and worked with their hands during the day.

“With their great exactness in doctrine, they exhibit also by their life that extreme seriousness. For when they have stripped themselves of all that they have and are crucified to the whole world, they urge their course on yet further using the labor of their body for the nourishment of those in need. For neither because they fast and watch by night do they think it is all right to be idle by day. But their nights they spend in holy hymns and in vigils and their days in prayers; and at the same time laboring with their own hands imitating the zeal⁶² of the Apostle Paul. For if he, when the whole world was looking at him (1 Corinthians 4:9), for the sake of nourishing them that were in need, both occupied a workshop and practiced a craft; and being thus employed did not so much as sleep by night (2 Corinthians 4:8-12, 6:5, 11:27). How much more, say they, is it fitting that we, who have taken up our abode in the wilderness and have nothing to do with the turmoil in the cities, should use the leisure of our quiet for spiritual labors”.

Returning to Nazareth, Joseph and Mary were content to live a meager existence. They were never rich, but always had something to eat. The gifts given by the Magi (Matthew 2:11) may have been consumed in supporting themselves during the three years in Egypt. Jesus therefore grew up being called a Nazarene as was spoken by the prophets (Matthew 2:23).

⁶⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VIII, 6.

⁶¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, VIII, 6.

⁶² See Acts 18:3, 20:34, 1 Thessalonians 2:9, 1 Corinthians 4:12, 2 Corinthians 12:13.

Jesus Shall Be Called a Nazarene

Matthew stated, “But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child’s life are dead’. Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene’” (Matthew 2:19-23).

There is some mystery to the prophetic reference, “He shall be called a Nazarene”, since this reference is not included in most English Bibles. There are three opinions about this:

1. The reference comes from the writings of some prophet whose works are no longer extant⁶³.
2. The reference is Isaiah 11:1, but the text today is corrupted.
3. Nazarene refers to the Old Testament order of the Nazarites (Numbers 6:1-22), similar to Samson and others (Judges 13:5).

John Chrysostom stated⁶⁴ that the reference in the prophets to Jesus being called a Nazarene may be among the lost books of the prophets. Many of the writings of the prophets had been lost due to the ungodliness of the people.

“Matthew added a prophecy to Christ’s journey to Nazareth, ‘That it might be fulfilled’, he said, ‘which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene’” (Matthew 2:23).

“What manner of prophet said this? Don’t be curious, or overly busy about it. Many of the prophetic writings have been lost; and this one may see from the history of the Chronicles. Being negligent, and continually falling into ungodliness, some prophets they allowed to perish, others they themselves burned up and cut to pieces. The latter fact Jeremiah relates (Jeremiah 36:23); the former, the writer of 2nd Kings, saying, that after a long time the book of Deuteronomy was hardly found, buried somewhere and lost (2 Kings 22:8). If they betrayed their books, when there was no barbarian conqueror there, much more when the barbarians had overrun them. As to the fact that the prophet had foretold it, the Apostles themselves in many places call Him⁶⁵ a Nazarene.”

Jerome, who was a Hebrew scholar, stated⁶⁶ that when Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew, he quoted from the Hebrew Old Testament. The only copies of Matthew today have been translated into Greek, where most of the Old Testament quotes are from the Septuagint. The Hebrew text that Matthew used, therefore, had some differences from the best Hebrew texts today, in that “he shall be called a Nazarene” is not found in today’s Hebrew text.

“Matthew, also called Levi, Apostle and previously a publican, composed a Gospel of Christ at first published in Judea in Hebrew for the sake of those of

⁶³ Compare 2 Chronicles 9:29, 12:15, 13:22, 1 Chronicles 29:29, also Jeremiah 36:20-29, 2 Kings 22:8-13. Known lost writings of the prophets include the books of

⁶⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, IX, 6.

⁶⁵ See Acts 2:22, 3:6, 4:10, 6:14, 21:11, 26:71, etc.

⁶⁶ Jerome, “Lives of Illustrious Men”, 3, in Jerome and Gennadius.

the circumcision who believed, but this was afterwards translated into Greek though by what author is uncertain. The Hebrew itself has been preserved until the present day in the library at Caesarea which Pamphilus so diligently gathered. I have also had the opportunity of having the volume described to me by the Nazarenes of Beroea, a city of Syria, who use it. In this it is to be noted that wherever the Evangelist, whether on his own account or in the person of our Lord the Savior quotes the testimony of the Old Testament he does not follow the authority of the translators of the Septuagint but the Hebrew. These two forms exist ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son’ (Matthew 2:15), and ‘For he shall be called a Nazarene’” (Matthew 2:23).

Jerome wrote⁶⁷ that the mysterious quote about Jesus being called a Nazarene comes from a Hebrew idiom in Isaiah that is not present in current Hebrew texts.

“It is written in the pages of the Gospel of Matthew, ‘And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene’ (Matthew 2:23). Let these nice critics of all composition tell us where they have read the words; and if they cannot, let me tell them that they are in Isaiah. For in the place where we read and translate, ‘There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow from his roots’ (Isaiah 11:1), in the Hebrew idiom it is written thus, ‘There shall come forth a Rod from the root of Jesse and a Nazarene shall grow from his roots’”.

Tertullian linked⁶⁸ the prophecy of Christ being called a Nazarene to the Old Testament order of the Nazirites⁶⁹.

“The Christ of the Creator had to be called a Nazarene according to prophecy; because of this, the Jews call us⁷⁰, on that account, Nazarenes after Him. We are they of whom it is written, ‘Her Nazarites were brighter than snow’ (Lamentations 4:7); even they who were once defiled with the stains of sin, and darkened with the clouds of ignorance. But to Christ the title Nazarene was destined to become a suitable one, from the hiding-place of His infancy, for which He went down and dwelt at Nazareth (Luke 4:16), to escape from Archelaus the son of Herod.”

⁶⁷ Jerome, Letter to Pammachius, LVII, 7.

⁶⁸ Tertullian, Five Books Against Marcion, II, ii, iv, 8.

⁶⁹ A Nazirite was someone who was dedicated to the Lord’s service for a special mission and certain procedures applied, such as refraining from cutting the hair and from eating grapes or drinking wine (Numbers 6). Some well-known Nazirites were Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist (Judges 13:2-7, 1 Samuel 1:11, Luke 1:13-17); James, the Lord’s brother was a Nazirite as well all his life. The closest thing to a Nazirite vow today is the vow of celibacy for a monk or nun. There was also a class of Nazirite women devoted to service in the Tabernacle at Shiloh (Exodus 38:8), of whom the Prophetess Anna was one who served later at the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38). The Virgin Mary also served with this group of virgins until her betrothal to Joseph. At the time of Samuel, the apostate sons of Eli engaged in adulterous relations with these women (1 Samuel 2:22).

⁷⁰ That is, the modern Hebrew word for “Christian” is *notsri*, or Nazarene.

John Chrysostom stated⁷¹ that the prophets had called Christ “a Nazarene” to point out that He would be brought up and live there. The Jews intentionally repressed His birth in Bethlehem, since it was evident that He might be the Christ.

“The Jews, when they were asked where Christ should be born, replied, ‘In Bethlehem’ (Matthew 2:5), and produced the evidence, saying, ‘But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah’ (Micah 5:2). Before they had seen Him they bore this witness; but when they saw Him in their malice they concealed the testimony, saying, ‘But as for this fellow, we don’t know where He is from’ (John 9:29). Nathanael did not do this, but continued to retain the opinion which he had from the beginning, that Christ was not ‘of Nazareth’. How then do the prophets call Him a Nazarene? From His being brought up and living there! Jesus refrained from saying, ‘I am not of Nazareth, as Philip has told you, but of Bethlehem’, that He may not make the account of His birth in Bethlehem seem questionable. Even if Nathanael had believed in Him, Jesus would not have given sufficient proof that He was the Christ. What hindered Him from being “of Bethlehem”, like the others who were born there? This then He omits; but He does that which has more power to bring him over; He shows that He was present when they were conversing under the fig tree” (John 1:48).

Aftermath of the Visit by the Magi

The Magi were the first of many Gentiles that would seek the King of the Jews. That the Gentiles would come to know the Lord in large numbers was a mystery hidden in God from the beginning of the ages (Ephesians 3:8-11). And the Magi had a large hand in making it happen. When everyone was scattered during the persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen one year after Pentecost (Acts 8:1, 4), the Twelve also left on their missionary journeys. According to tradition⁷², the Apostle Thomas, as he was heading for India (which he had drawn by lot), encountered the Magi in Persia on his way. Just as the Magi rejoiced with exceedingly great joy when the star reappeared after the audience with Herod (Matthew 2:10), so they did also when Thomas came and told them the rest of the story. Thomas then baptized them, instructed them, and sent them all over the area of Persia with the Gospel. Later, others of the Twelve came through Persia also (Philip, Andrew, Matthias, Simon the Zealot, Jude, Nathanael and Matthew; not necessarily in this order).

Being a Nazarene, Jesus was later scorned by proper Jewry. Even though Nicodemus (a Pharisee) defended Jesus, the other members of the Sanhedrin ridiculed Jesus just because He was from Galilee. They said to Nicodemus: “Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee” (John 7:52). They were technically incorrect in this point; Jonah and Nahum came from Galilee, but no one else that we know of (compare 2 Kings 14:25).

Another aspect of being a Nazarene was a distinctive accent in His speech. Galileans spoke the same Aramaic dialect (of Hebrew) as Judeans, but they were easily identified by their speech. During Jesus’ trail, Peter was questioned about being one of Jesus’ disciples since his Galilean accent gave him away (Mark 14:70, Matthew 26:73). What this speech recognition

⁷¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, XX, 2.

⁷² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi.

amounted to was a different pronunciation of the Hebrew gutturals, and would be equivalent to the differences in pronunciation one might find between Boston, Atlanta and Los Angeles. All of the Twelve, except Judas, were also from Galilee.

The Lord accepted His humble roots and did not seek status or the things of this world, for His Kingdom is not of the world (John 18:36). As He moved around during His three year ministry, He did not have His own house to return to (Matthew 8:20). At the time of His crucifixion, the only property He owned were the clothes He was wearing (John 19:23-24). The Lord illustrated His own life style when He said:

“Whoever desires to be great among you, let him be your servant! And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).