



[Leo The Great](#) [1]

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Sermons, XXXIV, 1-3

I. The yearly observance of the Epiphany is profitable to Christians

It is the right and reasonable duty of true piety, dearly-beloved, on the days which bear witness to the works of Divine mercy, to rejoice with the whole heart and to celebrate with all honour the things which have been wrought for our salvation: for the very law of recurring seasons calls us to such devout observance, and has now brought before us the feast of the Epiphany, consecrated by the Lord's appearance soon after the day on which the Son of God co-eternal with the Father was born of a Virgin. And herein the providence of God has established a great safeguard to our faith, so that, while the worship of the Saviour's earliest infancy is repeated year by year, the production of true man's nature in Him might be proved by the original verifications themselves. For this it is that justifies the ungodly, this it is that makes sinners saints, to wit the belief in the true Godhead and the true Manhood of the one Jesus Christ, our Lord: the Godhead, whereby being before all ages "in the form of God" He is equal with the Father: the Manhood whereby in the last days He is united to Man in the "form of a slave." For the confirmation therefore of this Faith which was to be fore-armed against all errors, it was a wondrous loving provision of the Divine plan that a nation which dwelt in the far-off country of the East and was cunning in the art of reading the stars, should receive the sign of the infant's birth who was to reign over all Israel. For the unwonted splendour of a bright new star appeared to the wise men and filled their mind with such wonder, as they gazed upon its brilliance, that they could not think they ought to neglect what was announced to them with such distinctness. And, as the event showed, the grace of God was the disposing cause of this wondrous thing: who when the whole of Bethlehem itself was still unaware of Christ's birth, brought it to the knowledge of the nations who would believe, and declared that which human words could not yet explain, through the preaching of the heavens.

II. Both Herod and the wise men originally had an earthly conception of the kingdom signified; but the latter learned the truth, the former did not.

But although it was the office of the Divine condescension to make the Saviour's Nativity recognizable to the nations, yet for the understanding of the wondrous sign the wise men could have had intimation even from the ancient prophecies of Balaam, knowing that it was predicted of old and by constant repetition spread abroad: "A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a man shall rise out of Israel, and shall rule the nations." And so the three men aroused by God through the shining of a strange star, follow the guidance of its twinkling light, thinking they will find the babe designated at Jerusalem in the royal city. But finding themselves mistaken in this opinion, through the scribes and teachers of the Jews they learned what the Holy Scripture had foretold of the birth of Christ; so that confirmed by a twofold witness, they sought

with still more eager faith Him whom both the brightness of the star and the sure word of prophecy revealed. And when the Divine oracle was proclaimed through the chief priests' answers and the Spirit's voice declared, which says: "And you, Bethlehem, the land of Judah, are not least among the princes of Judah; for out of you shall come a leader to rule My people Israel Micah 5:2," how easy and how natural it was that the leading men among the Hebrews should believe what they taught! But it appears that they held material notions with Herod, and reckoned Christ's kingdom as on the same level as the powers of this world: so that they hoped for a temporal leader while he dreaded an earthly rival. The fear that racks you, Herod, is wasted; in vain do you try to vent your rage on the infant you suspect. Your realm cannot hold Christ; the Lord of the world is not satisfied with the narrow limits of your sway. He, whom you do not wish to reign in Judæa, reigns everywhere: and you would rule more happily yourself, if you were to submit to His command. Why do you not do with sincerity what in treacherous falseness you promise? Come with the wise men, and in suppliant adoration worship the true King. But you, from too great fondness for Jewish blindness, will not imitate the nations' faith, and directest your stubborn heart to cruel wiles, though you are doomed neither to stay Him whom you fear nor to harm them whom you slay.

III. The perseverance of the Magi has led to the most important results.

Led then, dearly beloved, into Bethlehem by obeying the guidance of the star, the wise men "rejoiced with very great joy," as the evangelist has told us: "and entering the house, found the child with Mary, His mother; and falling down they worshipped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh Matthew 2:10-11 ." What wondrous faith of perfect knowledge, which was taught them not by earthly wisdom, but by the instruction of the Holy Spirit! Whence came it that these men, who had quitted their country without having seen Jesus, and had not noticed anything in His looks to enforce such systematic adoration, observed this method in offering their gifts? Unless it were that besides the appearance of the star, which attracted their bodily eyes, the more refulgent rays of truth taught their hearts that before they started on their toilsome road, they must understand that He was signified to Whom was owed in gold royal honour, in incense Divine adoration, in myrrh the acknowledgment of mortality. Such a belief and understanding no doubt, as far as the enlightenment of their faith went, might have been sufficient in themselves and have prevented their using their bodily eyes in inquiring into that which they had beheld with their mind's fullest gaze. But their sagacious diligence, persevering till they found the child, did good service for future peoples and for the men of our own time: so that, as it profited us all that the apostle Thomas, after the Lord's resurrection, handled the traces of the wounds in His flesh, so it was of advantage to us that His infancy should be attested by the visit of the wise men. And so the wise men saw and adored the Child of the tribe of Judah, "of the seed of David according to the flesh Romans 1:3," "made from a woman, made under the law Galatians iv," which He had come "not to destroy but to fulfil Matthew 5:17 ." They saw and adored the Child, small in size, powerless to help others , incapable of speech, and in nought different to the generality of human children. Because, as the testimonies were trustworthy which asserted in Him the majesty of invisible Godhead, so it ought to be impossible to doubt that "the Word became flesh," and the eternal essence of the Son of God took man's true nature: lest either the inexpressible marvels of his acts which were to follow or the infliction of sufferings which He had to bear should overthrow the mystery of our Faith by their inconsistency: seeing that no one at all can be justified save those who believe the Lord Jesus to be both true God and true Man.

Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895), transl. by Charles Lett Feltoe, vol. 12, pp. 147-149.

[Ancient Authors and Fathers of the Church](#) [2]

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