

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.
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Isaiah 60:1-6

NRSV

Darius, King of Persia, has permitted the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem. The prophet tells the people to arise, for joy, prosperity and salvation (“light”) are now in the city; God is with them; they will reflect the presence and power (“glory”) of God. In the Near East, dawn comes suddenly: dark almost instantly becomes day. Many peoples will live in “darkness” (v. 2, gloom, oppression) but Israel will be different: God will come to them, be present with them and act for them. Many nations will come to pay homage to God. Only some of the exiles returned from Babylon, but soon those who scattered during troubled times (e.g. the conquest of Jerusalem) will return (“gather”, v. 4) and form a community. People from all nations will come to the city to see God’s activity among his people. The returnees will grow in their knowledge of God (“shall see”, v. 5) and will tell others (“be radiant”); they will be joyful because other nations will make them prosperous.

The wealth of Arabia will come to them on a “multitude of camels” (v. 6). “Midian and Ephah” were tribes east of the Gulf of Aqaba. “Sheba” may be modern-day Yemen, the source of “gold and frankincense”, gifts the wise men brought to infant Jesus. All those who come will proclaim God’s might. Jerusalem, destroyed by foreigners, will be rebuilt by foreigners (v. 10).

Psalms 72:1-7,10-14

NRSV

In the ancient Near East, kings were next to gods. A king and his heir were seen as endowed with justice by gods, and had special responsibility for the poor and needy. Kings possessed a supernatural aura. Even in Israel the king was called *God’s son*; in 2:7, the king is adopted as son of God. Many of the verses begin with “May ...”: this psalm is a prayer for the king, possibly written for a coronation. Vv. 2-4 pray that the king may be guarantor for the poor, those who are oppressed – that he may rescue them. Vv. 5-6 seek that the king may live for ever, or at least to a great age. May he, like a god, provide the elements of nature needed for bountiful harvests. In his days, may godliness and prosperity (“peace”, v. 7) be abundant. V. 8 says “May he have dominion from sea to sea ...” May he be sovereign over many nations. (“Tarshish”, v. 10, was probably in Spain; “the isles” may be Crete and Cyprus.) The king will form a bond with the poor (v. 14b).

Ephesians 3:1-12

NRSV

Paul’s advocacy of Gentiles as full and equal members of the church has led to his imprisonment. In this passage, the author recounts his mission to the Gentiles. He assumes that his readers have heard of how he became a Christian, how God appeared to him (“revelation”, v. 3) as he travelled to Damascus to persecute Christians (Acts 9:1-22). The “few words” about the “mystery” are those in 1:8b-10:

Jews and Gentiles are both called to join in Christ’s saving activity, as part of God’s plan, to be completed when God sees fit. Paul’s readers need to determine the truth of this revelation for themselves (v. 4). The Old Testament (“in former generations”, v. 5) mentions the salvation of *other nations*, but this was not understood; now, from “apostles and prophets” through the Holy Spirit, we do understand (v. 5). The sense of v. 6 is that the Gentiles have become *co*-heirs, *co*-members and *co*-partners: in Greek each word begins with *syn* (as in *synchronous*.)

Paul, the “very least of all the saints” (v. 8, for he persecuted Christians), has, in the paradoxical way of Christianity, become the apostle to the Gentiles, to bring us the news of the inexhaustible “riches” of Christ, and to have all understand that, in God’s plan established in the beginning, Gentiles are to form an integral part of the new Israel. It is through the church, the beneficiary of God’s gifts, that God’s saving ways (“wisdom”, v. 10) are to be made known to evil heavenly beings (“rulers and authorities”) who were thought before Christ’s death, to control humanity. This role of the church is part of God’s purpose, carried out in Christ. Faith in Christ gives us the ability to come into God’s presence boldly.

Matthew 2:1-12

NRSV

Matthew, in writing “In the time of King Herod”, sets a *late date* for the birth of Jesus: Herod the Great, puppet king of Judah, died in 4 BC. “Wise men” (Latin: *magi*) were members of a Persian caste of astrologers and interpreters of dreams. (Astrology was widely accepted then.) A star was associated with each person; the way the star rose told the wise men that a king had been born. If the story of the star is intended to be historically significant, the star may have been a supernova or a comet, or a conjunction of planets. Numbers 24:17-24 prophesies that “... a star shall come out of Jacob, a sceptre shall rise out of Israel”, and that this ruler will conquer surrounding nations.

Herod’s fears are aroused because his dynasty may be ended. He consults the religious experts to find out where the magi should look for the Messiah. They answer with Scripture: they loosely blend Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2. (Such license was common at the time.) At David’s anointing as king, the elders quote God as saying “he shall be shepherd of my people Israel”. The maximum age of the children to be killed per Herod’s edict (v. 16) tells us the “exact time” (v. 7) that he learnt from the wise men. V. 8 is classical political duplicity. The star guides them to Bethlehem, where they are “overwhelmed with joy” (v. 10). The gifts are extremely generous; “gold” (v. 11) and “frankincense” are mentioned in v. 6 of today’s first reading.

We read that Gentile wise men visited Jesus. A later church tradition called the wise men *kings*, based on v. 10 of today’s psalm, and still later the Church said that there were three of them. The Western church gave them names.