

COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY, JAN. 8, 2006
(Epiphany of the Lord)
(Isa 60:1-6; Ps 72; Eph 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matt 2:1-12)

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Every year the solemn feast of the Epiphany features the same readings, but I will try to say something fresh, different than in prior brief commentaries. This is the feast of God's manifestation (the meaning of "epiphany") to the whole world. A fervent hope of many Jews in the period after the Babylonian Exile was for salvation, for final deliverance, understood in large part as political freedom from foreign oppression at the hands of the Gentiles, but which would usher in peace and messianic well-being (see, e.g., Zech 9; Isa 60-62). An important aspect of this would be the divine theophany (also meaning "divine manifestation"), as in Isa 63:1-6; Isa 66; Mal 2-3, understood as judgment on sin and evil, which would bring an end to injustice and suffering. The first reading reflects this divine manifestation, when God will shine forth (this is an extremely old idea), Israel's tribes will be gathered (cf. the Twelve apostles) and Gentile oppression will be eschatological reversed when they bring their wealth as gifts to Jerusalem.

Ps 72 is one of the most important psalms describing what the messianic age will be like: no more injustice, the poor will be cared for, there shall be peace all over and even nature will flourish. We must work on this until the Second Coming of Christ, because, although ultimately it will be God's doing, our actions can and do seem to frustrate his design.

The second reading is good background for the gospel, which tells of Christ's manifestation to Gentiles (non-Jews) from his birth. In accord with the biblical prophecies, they bring gifts to the Messiah, whose messianic star (Num 24:17) they, as good (probably Babylonian) astrologers, have recognized. Ephesians proclaims that God's mysterious design, not fully understood for ages, but now "apocalyptically" revealed, has been initially fulfilled, and it includes both Jew and Gentile in salvation in Christ. I say "initially" because of what Paul says in Rom 8 . . .