

Gentile Heroes

In the Word it is often people from other lands who step up to do the right thing.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, December 27, 2020

“Behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” Matthew 2

As surprising as the appearance of the wise men seems to have been to the people of Jerusalem, their arrival, and the important role that they play in the Christmas story, is part of a well-established pattern in the Word.

The children of Israel saw themselves as God’s chosen people and regarded outsiders, the Gentiles, with scorn. Despite this, they actually celebrated quite a few people who were not Israelites. From Moses’ Midianite wife and father-in-law, to Rahab the Canaanite, to the Queen of Sheba and the Good Samaritan, stories in the Word honor many people who might not have been well accepted in Israelitish and Jewish society.

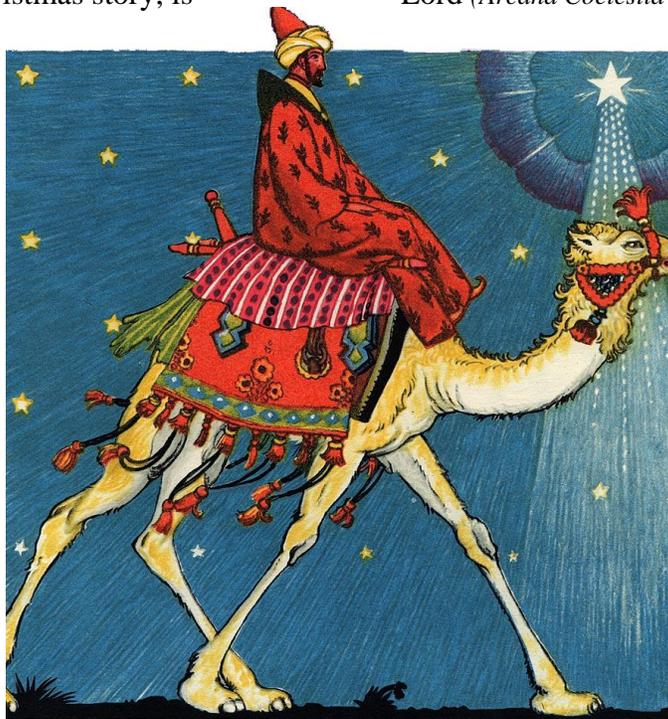
The wise men from the East were among these, as is the central character in a story we read today in Jeremiah about Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian.

Today, a few days after Christmas, we discuss several of these examples. Why is it that they appear in the Word? What part does this phenomenon play in the Christmas story? How is this important to our spiritual lives?

Melchizedek

Probably the first person in the Word that would fit this description is Melchizedek in Genesis 14. He was King of Salem and a “*priest of God Most High.*” He brought out bread and wine to Abraham and blessed him, and Abraham gave him tithes of all he had. In Psalm 110, David says of the Lord “*You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*”

Despite being a Canaanite king, he is in a sense the example on which the Israelitish priesthood is based. The Writings tell us that he represented the Lord (*Arcana Coelestia 6148*).



Jethro and Zipporah

A similar character is Jethro, the Midianite priest who was Moses’ father-in-law (*Exodus 3*). He was honored as the one who gave Moses the pattern for the system of judgment among the Israelites (*Exodus 18*). And Zipporah his daughter corrected Moses when he failed to circumcise their son (*Exodus 4*).

Rahab

Rahab, the Canaanite woman who sheltered the Israelite spies in Jericho, is also an important Gentile figure, not least because she

was David’s great-great grandmother (*Matthew 1:5*).

The Queen of Sheba

A third woman who plays this part is the Queen of Sheba who came to visit King Solomon (*1 Kings 10*). The Writings tell us that her visit pre-figured the coming of the Wise Men, bringing similar gifts of gold and incense to present to the King of Israel (*Coronis 41*).

Ebed-Melech

This brings us to our story about Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian. Ethiopia or Cush is just across a narrow strait in the Red Sea from Sheba, and was often linked with Sheba and Seba. This is one reason why some of the Wise Men are often depicted as African. Ethiopians were part of the kingdom of Egypt and it would not have been uncommon to find them throughout the Middle East wherever Egyptians went.

Ebed-Melech was an official in King Zedekiah's court during the time that Judah was being taken over by Babylon. He rescued Jeremiah when others would have let him die.

Jeremiah was thrown into the pit because he pronounced the situation in Jerusalem hopeless and advocated surrender to the king of Babylon. Ebed-Melech pleaded with the king, who eventually allowed him to take his men and rescue Jeremiah.

“So he took the men with him and went into the house of the king under the treasury, and took from there old clothes and old rags, and let them down by ropes into the pit to Jeremiah. ¹²Then he said to Jeremiah, ‘Please put these old clothes and rags under your armpits, under the ropes.’ And Jeremiah did so. ¹³So they pulled him up with ropes and lifted him out of the pit.”

The meaning of Ebed-Melech

Ebed-Melech's being from Ethiopia stands for an interior knowledge of the Word, and the intelligence that comes from it (*Arcana Coelestia* 1164). In your life he is not your own knowledge, but knowledge from elsewhere. He and his thirty men are the knowledge and the affections that give you the means to be lifted up from evil and unhappiness. A rope is what joins you to what is good (*Arcana Coelestia* 9855).

But it is the old clothes and rags that make it possible for you to be lifted up gently. They stand for *“goods and truths of the sense of the letter of the Word that had not been perceived and understood, and therefore had been neglected and rejected”* (*Apocalypse Explained* 537.17). You have known but not understood these things, and have discarded them. But now they make sense to you, and they help lift you up.

The interesting thing here is that although Ebed-Melech is a Gentile, and stands for knowledge and intelligence from an unfamiliar source, he lifts you up using old familiar means – old rags that had previously gone unappreciated.

This is the pattern with most of the stories that

feature Gentiles. They are exotic and foreign, and yet what they do calls attention to and praises things that are native and familiar. In this case the Ethiopian rescues Jeremiah, who represents the Word and its familiar teachings, which we are all too ready to ignore and discard when we disagree.

This message in the New Testament

Other stories carry this same message, and it is delivered even more pointedly in the New Testament.

The story of the Wise Men is an example. Kings from foreign lands come bearing expensive gifts in recognition of the King of the Jews – just as the Queen of Sheba did. By contrast, the leaders of Israel were not only unaware, but actively hostile.

Other familiar examples are found in the story of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10*), and the Roman centurion who had faith that the Lord could heal his daughter. The Lord then said:

“Truly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! ¹¹ And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness.

There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

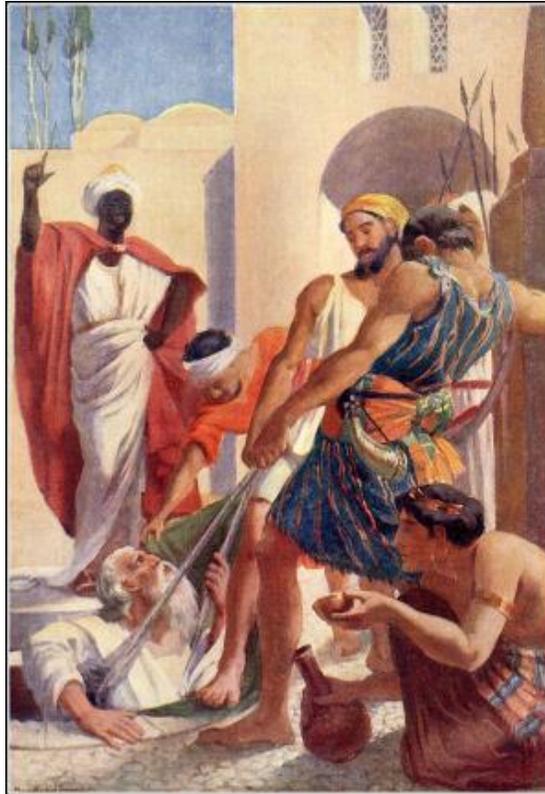
Matthew 8

When He healed ten lepers, only one, a Samaritan, returned to thank Him, and He said:

“Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? ¹⁸ Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?” *Luke 17*

Maybe the most direct is the parable of the wicked vinedressers, who were ready to kill the son of the owner of the vineyard and keep it for themselves. The Lord ends the parable by saying:

“Have you never read, ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? ⁴³ ‘Therefore I say to you, the kingdom



of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.” Matthew 21

Commenting on this, the Writings say:

“When the Gentiles hear about the Lord, they receive and acknowledge Him; nor can a new Church be set up with others. That the Church is set up again with such, is evident from the Lord's words in Matthew 21 (about the wicked vinedressers).” Arcana Coelestia 9256.7

The Glory of My people Israel

Yet as often as foreigners are praised, the far greater emphasis throughout the Word is on Israel and its glory. The examples of Gentile heroes that we have been giving

here are significant mainly because in the larger context of the Word these people are not held in high esteem. They are the enemy, the outsiders, the heathen who worship idols. The children of Israel were forbidden to have anything to do with them. Moses said:

“You shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. ³ Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. ⁴ For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods.” Deuteronomy 7

These teachings were symbolic, because the Israelites were actually no better and in no greater understanding of the truth than others. But in the Word they stood for those in goods and truths, and so to intermix and intermarry with those who represented the opposite was forbidden.

Genuinely good people love everyone and despise no one, but they are also conscientious about what constitutes acceptable behavior. The Writings also emphasize the point that a main ingredient in a happy marriage is agreement about spiritual things. (*Conjugal Love 238-244*).

So the continual emphasis on the glory of Israel is actually an emphasis on the glory of the Lord's

kingdom. Similarly, the Gentile heroes that we have been discussing here were praised and remembered largely because they praised Israel. They were actually praising the Lord and His kingdom.

When the Wise Men travelled from a distant land to worship the King of the Jews they were illustrating this fact. They were also illustrating the saying in John 1 that *“He came to His own and His own did not receive Him.”* For Christianity would not spread widely except among the Gentiles, and the same is predicted of the New Church.

The lesson of Ebed-Melech

For us the lesson is the same as in the story of Ebed Melech. Spiritual help can come from unexpected places. The newcomer and outsider are often able to look at our circumstances with fresh eyes and offer new insights. Gentiles in the Word often represent this perspective.

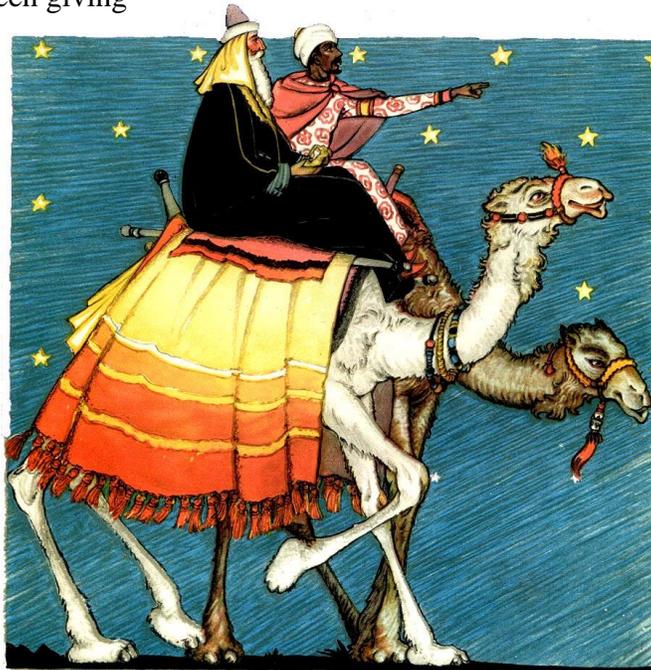
People who have travelled or lived in different parts of the world can appreciate how the exposure to diverse cultures changes a person's thoughts.

Just as Gentiles were looked down on by the Israelites, we usually prefer to listen to those like ourselves and those in our circle – our

own echo-chamber. We resist unfamiliar voices.

This is why it is so significant that Ebed-Melech used old rags and old clothes to raise up Jeremiah. The voice of the outsider often brings a new perspective to truths that we have known all along – the old familiar things that we know but don't care about, like cast-off old rags. When this happens it is like the kings coming from distant lands to worship the unrecognized Lord who is born among us. They don't bring foreign ideas, they redirect our thoughts to what the Word has been teaching us all along.

What better time than the Christmas season and the start of a new year to open our hearts to the wisdom that is not the majority perspective. This is the wisdom of the Gentile heroes, the outsiders who recognize the truth that was here all along, offering their treasures with reverence and kindness.



Readings from the Word

Matthew 2

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. When they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Jeremiah 38:

Jeremiah said: ²“Thus says the LORD: ‘He who remains in Jerusalem shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but he who goes over to the Chaldeans shall live; his life shall be as a prize to him, and he shall live.’” ³“Thus says the LORD: ‘This city shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon’s army, which shall take it.’”

Therefore the princes said to the king, “Please, let this man be put to death, for thus he weakens the hands of the men of war who remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, by speaking such words to them. For this man does not seek the welfare of this people, but their harm.” ⁵Then Zedekiah the king said, “Look, he is in your hand. For the king can do nothing against you.” ⁶So they took Jeremiah and cast him into the pit of Malchiah the king’s son, which was in the court of the prison, and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. In the pit there was no water, but mire. So Jeremiah sank in the mire.

Now Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian, who was in the king’s house, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the dungeon. When the king was sitting at the Gate of Benjamin, ⁸he went out of the king’s house and spoke to the king, saying: ⁹“My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the dungeon, and he is likely to die from hunger in the place where he is. For there is no more bread in the city.” ¹⁰Then the king commanded him, saying, “Take from here thirty men with you, and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the pit before he dies.”

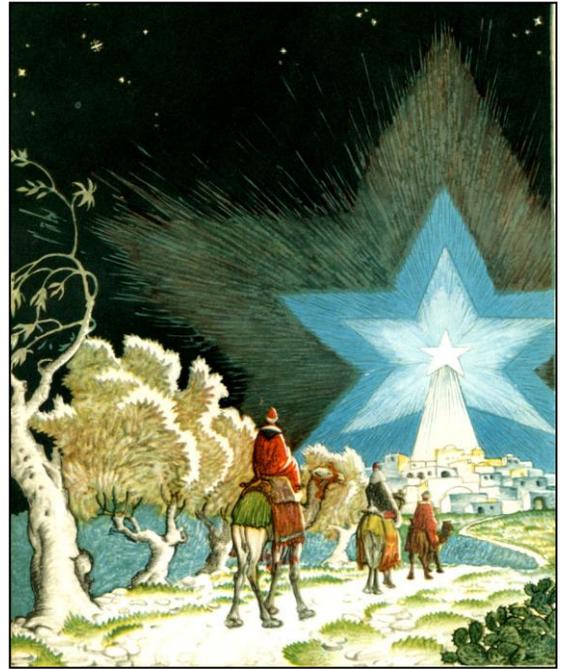
So Ebed-Melech took the men with him and went into the house of the king under the treasury, and took from there old clothes and old rags, and let them down by ropes into the pit to Jeremiah. ¹²Then he said to Jeremiah, “Please put these old clothes and rags under your armpits, under the ropes.” And Jeremiah did so. ¹³So they pulled Jeremiah up with ropes and lifted him out of the pit. ²⁸Now Jeremiah remained in the court of the prison until the day that Jerusalem was taken. And he was there when Jerusalem was taken.

Apocalypse Explained 537.17

The pit, into which they let down Jeremiah the prophet, and out of which Ebed-melech and the men with him drew Jeremiah by means of old cast off and old worn out things, stands for the truth of doctrine falsified. The ‘prophet’ stands for the truth of doctrine. ‘To let down into the pit’ stands for it being falsified. The ‘old castoff and old worn out things by which he was drawn out’ stand for the vindication and restoration of the truth of doctrine by means of such goods and truths of the sense of the letter of the Word as had not been perceived and understood, and therefore had been neglected and rejected. This is the meaning of these old things. Why otherwise would it be mentioned in the Divine Word that the prophet was drawn out by means of such things?

Arcana Coelestia 9198

As is well known, the Lord was less well received in the Jewish Church than by gentiles who were outside the Church. The situation is similar in the Church at the present day, which takes its name Christian from Him. In this Church the Lord is indeed received in what it teaches; yet few accept Him by acknowledging Him in their heart, fewer still doing so with love and affection. The acceptance of Him by gentiles outside the Church who have been converted is different. They worship and adore Him as their one and only God; they declare with their lips and contemplate in their hearts that they acknowledge Him as their God, since He has appeared in human form.



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