

The Meaning of the Epiphany Story
Matthew 2:1-12
January 6, 2019

On this first Sunday of the New Year we meet wise men, these astrologers, a priestly cast from ancient Mesopotamia, or present day Iraq. We are celebrating the feast of Epiphany. Why does Matthew include this story? What does it mean? It is remarkable that he would include it at all since it runs up against Jewish and Christian prohibition of sorcery and astrology.

There are several strange stories in the bible and I think this is one of them. As one writer said, the visit of the Magi has the ring of a folk tale. Matthew alone gives us this story of Magi coming from the east and I think I understand why he does. Because his is the one gospel that seems aimed predominantly at a Jewish audience it is fitting that he would seek to widen the claim of Messiah to the world. Matthew's nativity story is quite a contrast to Luke's manger scene of angels, shepherds and animals. None of them appear in Matthew. Time has probably passed since the birth for the Magi left when the star arose and the journey would have taken them at least a few months. By the time they arrive in Bethlehem the shepherds have gone back to their sheep; Mary and Joseph remain in the same house in Bethlehem with the infant and is now probably at least a year old. It's unlikely, therefore, that the Magi arrived at Luke's manger scene.

These Magi were scholars, astrologers, and stargazers, probably from ancient Persia, and probably from the religion of the Zoroastrians who were known for their studies of the stars. As intelligent men you would think that they would hardly go to King Herod to ask about a future king. That just seems plain dumb. He is the one in Jerusalem you would try to avoid. Knowing just how paranoid Herod was and his legendary cruelty and brutality, I can't imagine Magi going to him for directions as to the child's location. It was this mistake that led to Herod's brutal slaughter of all children under two in Bethlehem.

One of the roots of Matthew's star story that guided the Magi to Jerusalem is found far back in Israel's history. (Joseph is not mentioned in this story, indicating a different source from the infancy

narrative) Balaam was a non-Jewish holy man and visionary. He prophesized:

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near-a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...(Numbers 24:17ff)

Matthew no doubt knew exactly of whom the prophecy spoke, this star coming forth from Jacob. This arresting image would have informed Matthew's Magi insertion into the narrative. It's intriguing, and especially as we celebrate Epiphany, that both Balaam and the Magi were outsiders to Israel's faith.

It is very believable that a star would guide astrologers from the east. Like these Magi, there are many today who treat the positions of the stars as important signs and guides for life. In this case the movement of the star apparently stopped (at least appeared to stop to the observers) and gave the Magi a definite location for the child. We are told that it hovered over the house of Mary and Joseph like a laser beam and gave them pinpoint accuracy by illuminating the site of the child. One can appreciate the fact that astrologers would have been guided by stars and would have followed its trajectory, especially if it was a comet. But, as noted already, one might wonder why Matthew makes such heroes out of astrologers who were likely members of a "pagan religion". Jews would have considered their beliefs superstitious and evil.

They stride into Jerusalem, as one writer describes it, "seemingly oblivious to the dangers in every alley and around every corner." You wonder how good they were at observing human nature. Would they not have noticed that Herod had shifty eyes and deduce that he is one king not to be trusted? Perhaps the dream they had later warning them of Herod's threat to the child only confirmed their suspicions.

The gifts they offered, gold, frankincense and myrrh are symbolic. Gold the colour of kingship; frankincense a symbol of deity, and myrrh a symbol of death, all point to the child as one whose destiny is regal, divine and whose destiny involved a sacrificial in death. Gold has great value; frankincense is a perfume and myrrh is used as anointing oil.

Yes, this is a dark story. This is the adult's nativity story: Brutal Herod, the massacre of children, night flights into Egypt, and danger hanging in the air everywhere we look. Its not so far-fetched is it when we think of many families today who are in flight from their homes because of war. How many suffer today at the hands of tyrants like Herod and how many children starve to death? Matthew wants us to know that even in the midst of life's dark times, like this story of the child, we have God's light illuminating the darkness. Sometimes life is full of grittiness, disappointments, and heartaches. Mary and Joseph felt the insecurities we feel during their flight into the night from Herod.

So yes, this story may be very different from Luke's infancy narrative, but it does offer truth about the world we live in. And most importantly, Matthew reminds us that Christ came for the whole world, even for Magi of another religion. Epiphany wants us to reflect on this universal appeal of Jesus. It seems that his intent is to show his readers that Jesus was a gift to the whole world, not just the Jewish family of Abraham.

This is the light that lightens the darkness in our Isaiah reading: *Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you... Nations will come to your light, kings to your sunburst brightness. (Isaiah 60:1-3)*

Paul insists on this universal appeal of the Gospel: In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Eph 3:5,6)

For a while this light and truth was nurtured and preserved within the family, but when the right time came the light and truth of God burst out of its Jewish container to embrace the wider community of the human family. This is the message of Epiphany.

Amen