

EPIPHANY

The season of Epiphany begins on January 6, on the twelfth day of Christmas, and continues until the opening of Lent. The word “epiphany” means “manifestation” or “theophany” (the preferred word in the Eastern Church). It is the season which concentrates upon God’s manifestation of God’s self through Jesus. Consequently, the visit of the wise men to the Christ child, Jesus’ baptism, his visit as a child of twelve with his parents to the Temple and the miracle of the marriage supper at Cana are four stories traditionally told during Epiphany – all signs of God’s manifestation to humanity through the person and work of Jesus.

The first mention of the church’s celebration of Epiphany is from Clement of Alexandria, who died c. 217. It was firmly established in the Eastern Church by the fourth century, where it ranked with Easter and Pentecost as one of the three primary feast days of the Church. The Eastern Church exclusively celebrated the baptism of Jesus on Epiphany Day.

When the celebration of this season was embraced by the Western Church, both its character and the length of the season changed. Whereas the Eastern Church celebrated Christ’s baptism, the Western Church celebrated a number of “manifestations” of God, but with a particular emphasis upon the coming of the Magi as the event when God was first “manifested” to the Gentiles. As well, the season of Epiphany was extended to Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday that is the beginning of the season of Lent.

The reason for the shift in focus between the two churches is intriguing. Many in the Eastern Church held that when Jesus was born, he was only a normal human being. Christ’s divine nature, they taught, came upon him at his baptism. This came to be known as the “Adoptionist Heresy”. Thus, Christ’s birth was celebrated along with his baptism on a single day, in order to celebrate both the physical birth of Jesus and the birth of his divinity as the Christ.¹

When the Western Church embraced the feast of Epiphany, they wished to make clear that they believed that Jesus was divine from his birth (in fact, from his conception). So it was that the Western Church separated the birth of Jesus from his baptism, so that the former would not be eclipsed by the latter. To do so, they moved the celebration of his birthday from January 6 (still the birthday of the Christ Child in Eastern tradition) to December 25. And they concentrated the focus of January 6, not on Jesus’ baptism but on the visit of the Magi.

The great pope, Leo the Great, sealed this change into Western Christendom’s celebration of Epiphany when he wrote in his Epiphany sermon, *Solemnitai Epiphaniae*, “The day on which Christ, the Savior of the world, first appeared to the Gentiles, is to be revered by us, dearly beloved, with sacred honor; and we ought to feel this day in our hearts those joys which were in the hearts of the three Magi, when being urged onward by the sign and leading of a new star”.²

Unlike Advent and Christmastide that, in the calendar, are both fixed seasons (Advent: the Sunday closest to November 30—December 24; Christmastide: Dec. 25—Jan. 5), Epiphany is a flexible feast, designed to adapt to the irregular date for Easter. Epiphany runs from Jan. 6

¹ Gibson, George M., *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1945), pp. 86-87.

² As quoted by Gibson, *Ibid.*, p. 86.

(Epiphany Day) to Shrove Tuesday (the day before Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of Lent. But Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday can occur anytime over a four-week period as it adjusts to the date in that year for Easter.

In some Christian denominations, Epiphany is only celebrated as a single day – Epiphany Day (January 6). In those denominations, then, the Sundays between January 7 and Shrove Tuesday are counted as the season of “Ordinary Time”, which otherwise occurs only in the second half of the year. To avoid confusion, therefore, we will name each Sunday between January 7 and Shrove Tuesday both by its liturgical name (e.g., the 3^d Sunday after Epiphany) and by its common name (e.g., the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time).

Epiphany of the Lord, January 6

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12 presents the Christmas story that is contained in the Gospel of Matthew.

When we tell the Christmas story today, we combine both the story that appeared in Matthew and the Lukan account into a single story. Thus, that story has both wise men and shepherds gathering around the manger, angels singing “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” and the Star of Bethlehem shining overhead.

In one sense, that is good, because by doing this, we have reconstructed the full story of Jesus’ birth. But in another sense, that is bad, because by combining the two stories, we can very easily end up losing the distinctives of each story which the original writers intended to build into their telling of the Nativity Story.

Each birth story is meant to be like the overture of an opera or play, presenting a tantalizing glimpse to the reader of the primary theme the writer will weave later in his story of Jesus.

We know from our earlier exploration of Luke’s Christmas story that the primary theme of Luke was the theme of Jubilee. Jesus, Luke tells us, was committed to bringing about God’s society to Israel and sought to do so by bringing about a great reversal in the economic, political and spiritual life of that nation. That great reversal, Jesus believed, would occur through Israel fully embracing the Jubilee. Jubilee would come through Jesus’ intervention as Messiah – through his ministry, his empowering of the poor and exploited, his continuing confrontation of the powerful representatives of the Roman and Jewish political, economic and religious systems, his suffering and death at their rejected hands and in triumphal resurrection. That death would create a new community that would practice Jubilee in their life together and bring a new vision to the world of how humanity can live transforming their world together.

Matthew has an entirely different purpose for his Gospel. He is focused upon reaching the Jews of the first century with the claims of Jesus as the Messiah. Toward that end, the author of that gospel stresses the Jewish foundations of Christianity in everything he writes. For example, there is more of the Old Testament quoted in Matthew than in the other three gospels. Likewise, there is more examination of the theme of Messiah in Matthew than in the other gospels.

But there is a second theme in Matthew – a theme that is equally important to the emphasis of Jesus as Messiah. That is the emphasis that if Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah, he is a *marginalized* Messiah. He is the one on the outskirts, among the rejected ones and himself rejected, bringing a salvation that comes not from the center of Judaism, but from the margins. That is exactly the theme that is reflected in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ birth.

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:1-3).

Who was in the center of power at the time? Herod, the king of Judea. Rome – the seat of imperial power throughout the Mediterranean world. The chief priests and scribes of Israel, who ran the lucrative Temple trade and who were collaborators with Rome and Herod to maintain the power and wealth of Israel in the hands of those few who were in the center of power.

And what was their response to the news that the “king of the Jews” had been born? They were frightened – both they and all those who prospered with the political, economic and religious order as it was. And through subterfuge and spying, they seek to identify this newborn threat to the throne in order to eliminate him.

And who was at the margins of power? The Gentile magi or “wise men”, the ordinary peasant couple named Joseph and Mary, and a helpless newborn infant. But also on the margins, pushed there by the lust for power, greed and domination, is God. And God will protect his Son, the newly born Messiah!

A word needs to be said about the magi. Who were they? They were not kings from other countries than Israel. That is a tradition that does not appear in scripture. The idea that they were kings first appeared in Christian tradition in the writings of Tertullian (c. 160-220), who called them *ferē reges* (“almost kings”). The designation of the magi as kings didn’t really become a firm part of Christian tradition until the sixth century, based upon an implied reference in Ps. 72.³ They were not numbered as three until Origen (c. 185-254) did so, probably based on the fact that they brought three presents. But there is no scriptural warrant for them being either kings or being three in number.

So who were the magi? The magi were Gentile priests from the east, perhaps Parthia, Rome’s primary enemy (think about the implications of that for a minute). They were astrologers who studied the skies and thus would have been sensitive to any anomalies in the heavens not observed by ordinary people. It is intriguing that there was no alarm or even notice about a “star at its rising”, not only in Herod’s court but anywhere in the nation of Israel. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that these priests-astrologers, because of their study of the heavens, were able to see what no one else could see, and act upon it.

³ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 842.

Astrologers of the time had divided the heavens into areas dedicated to certain countries. The anomaly (whatever it was) had occurred in that section of the heavens assigned to Israel (the lowest eastern portion of the sky or “at its rising”). Astrological signs were often understood to signal the birth of a king. So it made sense that, noting this anomaly, these magi journeyed to Jerusalem (the capital city of Israel) and to the king’s palace to pay homage to a newborn king whom they presumed would be cradled there.

The arrival of the magi at Herod’s court was disturbing enough. But to have them share that they were seeking “the king of the Jews”, and to discover that this king was not Herod but a new-born child, and that they wished to prostrate themselves before him and worship him must have frightened Herod nearly to death. To put it mildly, “he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him”. Thus, both the appearance of and the words of these magi from Rome’s enemy had destabilized the Roman and Jewish power of Jerusalem.

Turning to the religious leaders of Jerusalem (who were also part of the governing elite and allies of Rome) to gain information about the Messiah’s birthplace, Herod was given the prediction that occurs in Micah 5:2. Thus, Bethlehem became the target, and Herod sent the unsuspecting magi to continue the search with the words, “bring me word (where he is) so that I may also go and pay him homage.” Right!

So the magi continued in their quest, found the infant Jesus with his father and mother, paid him homage, and gave him gifts reserved for kings: gold, frankincense and myrrh (Ps. 72:10-11; Micah 4:1-4; Isa. 2:1-4; Isa. 60:4-11). Then, “having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road”.

Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus is a magnificent overture to the captivating story of a peasant Messiah who comes from the economic, political and religious margins of Israel to turn its and Rome’s systems upside-down. Thus, Jesus makes the margins the center of life and the center of life its margins (cf. Matt. 28:1-15, when the priests, knowing Jesus had risen from the dead, bribe the eye-witness guards who reported his resurrection to them, and thus undertake damage-control rather than repent and embrace Jesus as Messiah). For salvation always comes from the margins of the world!

Isaiah 60:1-6 is the story of how a marginalized, little nation becomes the center of God’s transforming work and “a light to the nations” (cf. Isa. 42:6, 49:6).

“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 shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:1-3).

This passage that declares how God will work to bring liberating and redemptive light to both Israel and all the nations of the world has been a favorite passage used by Christians to proclaim Christ’s birth. It is easy to understand why the church would gravitate to Isaiah 60:1-6. The very reference to “light”, “glory” and “darkness” being dispelled reminds one of the Star of

Bethlehem (vss. 1-2). Nations coming to the light (vs. 3) reminds one of the fact that it was Gentiles who could perceive Jesus as Messiah when all the Jewish elite could view him only as threat. The worship of the Christ Child by those who come from far away and “gather together”, coming to him (vs. 4) reminds the reader of the weary magi arriving at the dwelling of Mary and Joseph to pay obeisance to the newly-born king. Isaiah’s proclamation that the wealth of nations will flood into Israel (vs. 5) reminds one of the precious and very expensive gifts of gold and frankincense brought by the magi (vs. 6). And it must be noted that all the countries named in verses 6 and 7 were all Arabic tribal groups that made up the Parthian Empire from which the magi came.

Within its context, this is a prophecy promising redemption to Jerusalem and to Israel. But it is also an exceptional piece of scripture, because it stresses that this salvation will not be exclusively for Israel, but for all the nations of the world. It will be out of Israel that God will bring one who will bring God’s light to all the nations of the world, and the darkness of despair, of oppression, of greed, of absence from God will be dispelled. Thus, it reminds us of the great work of redemption and of liberation that God intended to do both through the spiritually-committed remnant of Israel and most fully through his son, the newborn king in a stable.

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 is a psalm that would not have pleased Herod, the Roman emperor or any of the other Israelite kings who placed their own personal power and wealth over that of the nation. One can quickly see why the church has traditionally used Psalm 72 for the Feast of Epiphany, when Israel’s monarchy is compared with the wise men (kings) of Gentile nations.

“Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more” (72:1-4, 7).

The Psalmist continues. “(The king) delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight” (vss. 10-12).

The assumption of the Psalmist is that any Israelite monarch will be measured by the degree to which poverty will be eliminated, oppression of the people lifted and prosperity spread throughout the land. And those reading this Psalm in conjunction with today’s lessons would see that measurement applying as much to King Herod, to the High Priest and the religious/political leaders of Israel and even to the Roman authorities as it would to Israel’s king at the time that this Psalm was first written!

The success of any monarch of Israel was determined by his commitment to the poor and powerless, and the way he chooses to use the wealth and power of the nation to bring liberation and well-being to those poor. God is not impressed by magnificent temples – whether built by Solomon or by Herod. God is not impressed with the nation’s status on the world scene, or in its

military prowess. It is the well-being of all the people of his nation with which an Israelite king is to deal. This is to be his focus, and his very reason for existence.

When the king is a responsible and responsive king to the pain and misfortune of his people, then “May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service” (vss. 10-11). Because Herod refused to work for the good of his people but only to amass power and influence for himself, the world “has departed another way”. Because Jesus was centered on the marginalized and hurting, “Wise Men still seek him!”

Ephesians 3:1-12. Paul⁴ begins this chapter by reminiscing about his own ministry – not to become nostalgic as he recognizes he is approaching its end, but because the examination of the purpose of his own ministry will help the church to more clearly discern and embrace its mission in an empire that is about to become the greatest threat to the young Christian church that it has ever faced.

In 3:1-9, Paul declares that he has been commissioned by Christ (vss. 1-3), and that commission was to bring “the mystery of Christ” to the Gentile world (vs. 4). In previous generations, Paul declares, this was a mystery known only to Israel. But now that mystery is to be brought to the Gentile world to those who can receive it and become “sharers with Israel of the mystery” (vss. 5-6). Paul has become obsessed with this mission because he is the least of the apostles, and yet he has been given this richest of all assignments (vss. 7-8). Paul’s objective, therefore, is to get the Gentile world to embrace the mystery of the gospel that was previously known only to Israel (vs. 9).

The responsibility of proclaiming and acting out this mystery that God gave to Paul to bring to the Gentile world is now about to be passed on to the church. So what should the church do with this mystery?⁵

⁴ For centuries, there has been debate over the authorship of Ephesians. Some contend that it was written by Paul, others suggest it was written by a disciple of Paul’s following his death. Arguments against Pauline authorship center around the significant differences between the writing style used in Ephesians and Paul’s writing style in his other letters. That argument is countered with the observation that the purpose of Ephesians is profoundly different than any of Paul’s authentic letters, in that in Ephesians he was writing an essay (as opposed to a letter) not to a single church but to all his churches, attempting to present a comprehensive statement of his theology that he wanted to continue being held by the church after his death. It is my opinion that there is insufficient evidence to support the arguments of non-Pauline authorship of Ephesians. Therefore, in my exposition of Eph. 3:1-12, I will refer to Paul as the author of Ephesians, and that the purpose of this essay is to build the essential Pauline theology that would enable Paul’s churches not only to survive the Roman persecution it was about to face, but to engage the Roman Empire in a struggle for the control of the minds, hearts and souls both of the people and of the systems of the Roman world.

⁵ The term, “mystery” does not mean in English what it meant to the ancient world. To us, a mystery is a secret or a riddle to which the answer has not yet been found (thus, a crime is a mystery so long as its perpetrator is not found, but once discovered, the mystery has been solved). In the ancient world, a “mystery” is a secret that has been, or is being disclosed gradually to humanity as God or the gods choose to reveal it. Dr. Bonnie Thurston writes, “Originally a Greek military term from Ptolemaic Egypt, “mysteries” were plans drawn up by the royal family and kept secret even from the generals before battle. In Greco-Roman religious practices, “mysteries” were the secret information shared with initiates to lead them to immortality. In the Qumran scrolls, the word is used in connection with God’s wise providence, the mystery of salvation previously hidden in God but revealed to the Teacher (i.e., the

Paul declares that the church must now take over his work so that this mission becomes the primary work of the church. That work is “to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that *through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*” (3:9-10).

It is particularly intriguing in this seminal statement by Paul to note who is to hear “the wisdom of God in its rich variety”. One would have expected Paul to write at this point, “through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the Gentiles” or “to the people” or “to individuals”. But that is not what Paul wrote!

How does Paul actually end this sentence (vs. 10)? To whom is the “mystery of the wisdom of God” to be made known? Paul writes that it is to be made known “*to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places!*” What does he mean by “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places”?

What he is referring to is the powerful spiritual forces that invest the political, economic and religious systems of a nation, an economy or even a religion with the power by which they dominate and control the world. So, in other words, what Paul is referring to here is the spirituality of Rome and of Rome’s political, economic and religious institutions!

Thus, what Paul is declaring is that the new role of the church that they are inheriting from him is to proclaim to the world’s systems the reality of a new vision for society – a world with its political, economic, values-setting, entertainment, communication and religious systems living in God’s shalom community, Jesus’ “kingdom of God”. The church is to work in the Gentile world to bring it to the place where it is embracing for its corporate life as well as for individual lives the “mystery of God”!

To accomplish this is why that baby had to be born in Bethlehem and sought after by magi from the margins of the empire – so that a frightened Herod and a Jerusalem troubled with him might come to God, and in coming to God, turn from operating systems of privilege, power and dominance to creating governments and economies and religions that would seek justice, share wealth and embrace relationship with God? Would the Herods of the world “go and pay the baby homage” (Mt. 2:8)? Or would they just go on killing the babies (2:16-18)?

(Cycle C Epiphany.doc)

leader of the Qumran community).” (*The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*. Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 2093.