

**“Is That *Epiphany* or *Apostrophe*?”
Matthew 2:1-12**

Introduction

When it comes to Epiphany, I am reminded of this humorous Yiddish “shtick” in the 1991 Peter Pan film “*Hook*” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsB2KGaX6bg). Wondering how to deal with Peter’s now captured children, Hook’s sidekick, Smee, with surprise on his face, says, “I’ve just had an apostrophe!” Hook, face down in his hands: “I think you mean an epiphany.” Smee, pointing to his head: “Like it just struck my brain.” Hook sarcastically says, “Well, that must hurt.” And the scene continues...

Epiphany is probably the least known liturgical day or season. Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost have their observances. Epiphany? Not so much. At least here in America. Even the pseudo-liturgical celebrations like Super Bowl Sunday, Mother’s Day, VBS week, and the Kirkin’ eclipse Epiphany. No wonder Smee just had an “apostrophe.”

The word *epiphany* means a sudden perception or insight into the essential meaning of something; a moment of revelation; a moment when you suddenly feel you understand something very important to you; a powerful religious experience; and, of course, the Christian holy day on January 6th. It celebrates the revelation of the baby Jesus, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi, the Wisemen, the Three Kings.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who includes the Epiphany account (Read Matthew 2:1-12ff).

- 1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem
- 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."
- 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.
- 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.
- 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:
- 6 " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' "
- 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.
- 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."
- 9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.
- 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
- 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

I. Jesus, Herod, Magi – kings in their own right?

The three main regal characters are mentioned in the first verse: “After Jesus (the King) was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of (King) Herod, Magi (Kings) from the east came to Jerusalem.” The epiphany, the revelation of Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords begins as both Matthew and Luke record the arrival of our Savior/Messiah. On one hand, the Magi reveal what human beings as sinners may become through grace; humanity under the power of grace. On the other hand, Herod reveals what human nature through sin has become; humanity under the power of sin.

This Epiphany passage in Matthew 2 reveals people coming to Christ with worship in their hearts, but also people coming to Christ with murder on their minds; in faith or in rebellion; under God’s mercy or under God’s judgment.

The Magi asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Who were the Magi? The best we can surmise is they were astronomers and astrologers (charting the movement of the stars and interpreting meaning in the stars, as was common in ancient times). A Hawaiian language translation calls the Magi “Da Smart Guys who know plenty bout da stars.”

But something “super” and or “natural” happened. The only time we hear the Magi speak is in verse 2: “We saw his star and we have come to ‘worship’ this newborn king.” It means they came to pay homage, to kiss the hem of his garment.

Matthew uses the word “worship” 13 times (more than any other New Testament book except for Revelation). “We have come to worship him.” Herod says, “As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” And when they saw the child with his mother Mary, the Magi “bowed down and worshiped him.” We know that when Herod didn’t find Jesus, he didn’t worship. The horrific slaughter of little boys in Bethlehem was commanded by the notorious, blood-letting Herod.

Most likely, Los Tres Reyes, the three kings were not kings. Herod was no king of any nobility. Only Jesus is King in his own right.

II. Not Just Jesus’ (apostrophe) Birth

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem... the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.” It says, “On coming to the house” (not the manger as we have conveniently put the Magi and the Shepherds together at Christmas), at the house “they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

So, what is the significance of Epiphany for us on this coming Wednesday, January 6th? It is a huge deal! In the great kindness of God, he leads them, these Gentile star gazers to his Son. From Abraham to Jesus to today, God's salvation is offered to all. Remember Simeon in the Temple with baby Jesus in his arms: "Sovereign Lord, my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." Paul writes in Galatians 3: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Matthew prepared his readers for this in chapter 1 with a selective genealogy of Jesus' line. He includes Gentiles! He includes women (unheard of in 1st century writings)! The angel in Luke proclaimed it as well: "I bring you good tidings of great joy that will be for all people." The Lord's divine "for-all-ness," as Dale Bruner puts it, is found throughout God's word.

The word of God... that's part two of how the Magi found the newborn king. The Star led them to Jerusalem. It was the quote from the prophet Micah that led them to Bethlehem. "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

This is an important point. The beauty of Creation: the skies, the oceans, the mountains, the sun, moon and stars, the galaxies can only bring us half way to faith in Christ. The word of God, the Bible, the scriptures have the power to bring us home to our Savior and Lord. God is the author of both and uses both to reach us.

A writer for *Christianity Today* (Joel Mayward) was thinking about how God chose to do things. He said, "Sometimes I think God could have been more strategic in how he chose to reveal himself to his creation. Why didn't he wait until television, when he could have done a two-hour evening special on how much he cares for us and desires relationship with us? Certainly he knew the Internet was coming—he could have created a Facebook account and given us constant updates on his love for us through his statuses, sharing special nuggets of inspirational verses and catchphrases through his Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr accounts. Wouldn't the latest technological advancement be far more effective (well, at least until the next upgrade)?"

"Instead (we know), the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God knew that intimacy, face-to-face contact, lives and stories shared, hugs and kisses, fingertips meeting when hands are held, even the brutal blows on hands nailed to a wooden cross – this is the embodiment of divine love. God closed the distance between heaven and earth as he showed up in our world as one of us."

God uses Creation (how he got the attention of the Wisemen). God uses his Word (how he got them to be with the infant Jesus face to face). Then the Magi "bowed down and worshiped him and

opened their treasures. They presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” In the beginning and at the end (Matthew 2 and then Matthew 28), Jesus is worshiped.

Conclusion

Christmas is all about Jesus’ birth; Jesus with an apostrophe. The gospel, the Good News of God’s love and grace, mercy and forgiveness, our salvation becomes ours in the message of Epiphany. “For God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

So, Merry Christmas and Happy... Epiphany! Let us bow down and worship King Jesus as we come to the Table of the Lord of all.