

“EPIPHANY”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-18

As a child and as a youth, I was an avid reader. On into adulthood I continued to read far more than the average person. It is surprising to me when I encounter a new word. There have been a few books that had so many new words that I kept a list of them. Only a few.

You may be surprised to know that when I went to seminary, I had never heard of the word “epiphany.” Epiphany is a Greek word, written in English letters. In English it means “the appearance or manifestation of a divine being or the sudden perception of the essential nature or meaning of something; an intuitive grasp of reality through something usually simple and striking; an illuminating discovery, realization, disclosure.”

“Epiphany” occurs in the Greek eleven times in the New Testament. In English Bibles the word “epiphany” is usually translated as “appearance”, “manifestation”, or “revelation.” There is another Greek word for “revelation” – “apokalyptos.” That is why in some Bibles the book of Revelation is called the Apochalypse. What is the difference between epiphany as revelation and apokalyptos as revelation? In an epiphany God reveals Himself by appearing, in apochalypse God reveals Himself by telling.

One of the earliest Christian holy days was the Feast of Epiphany. It celebrated the coming of Jesus Christ into the world – God with us; the revealing of the Christ to the Gentiles by the coming of the Magi; and revealing that Jesus Christ is God’s Son at His baptism. In all three instances God was breaking through from above.

1.) Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the LORD will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60:1-3 NKJV)

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, 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." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'" (Matthew 2:1-6 NKJV)

Where did the magi come from? The Bible says that they were from the East. They could have come from China, India, Persia. We don't know. What captures our attention is the marvelous star that lead them first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. We know that they were astrologers. God used their heathen superstition to tell them that a King of the Jews had been born. There must have been more that they discerned from the stars about this king that impelled them to travel for probably a year to see Him and to worship Him with gifts.

The star was important. So were the gifts. No doubt the gifts provided funds for Joseph, Mary, and Baby Jesus to flee to Egypt. We usually ignore the most important element, the epiphany of their visit. The Jews were a very clannish group that kept itself separate from other people. To go into the house of a Gentile or to walk in a crowd where there were Gentiles made a Jew unclean.

The prophets had foretold a day in which the Gentiles would seek to know the God of the Jews. The Jews ignored such prophecies. Here were Gentiles seeking their promised King. They were shocked.

2.) Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also." When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. (Matthew 2:7-12 NKJV)

This is epiphany in the fullest sense of the word. God has revealed Himself in the flesh of a young Child. Jesus is Immanuel – "God with us." When the wise men from the East saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. But when they saw the Christ Child they fell down and worshiped Him. When they opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

I know a minister to Iranians. In his Christmas letter he wrote:

"This Christmas I long to share with every Muslim the understanding of who Jesus is and why He came to earth. The truth is that the majority of the Muslims of our world have never heard this amazing news....When Joseph was told by the angel what to name his child he was given two names. The first was "Jesus" meaning, according to Matthew that he would save his people from their sins. The second name was "Immanuel" meaning "God with us." (Matthew 1:20-22). In these short sentences Matthew reveals what it is that the Muslim does not know about Jesus; that He is God incarnate and the redeemer of the world....Sadly, this Christmas one-fifth of the world will not celebrate Christmas because it has never been told this wonderful Good News – it will continue to believe that God remains remote in the

heavens leaving no way to really know Him. They will go on...having no knowledge of the atoning work of the cross and God's amazing grace."

The wise men were not Muslims, but whether they were Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroasterists, Confusionists, or whatever religion, they still only knew God as remote and salvation if possible by their own works.

3.) Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more." (Matthew 2:13-18 NKJV)

Herod now has an epiphany of his own. This Child represented a threat to his power. Herod, only half Jewish, was not the rightful king of the Jews. He bought the right to be called King of the Jews from the Romans. He carried the support of the Jewish religious leaders. While the rightful king of the Jews was Joseph, a humble carpenter in Nazarus, Herod had no reason to fear. This Child born in Bethlehem had attracted an entourage of visitors from the East. Shepherds spread the story of angels who announced his birth. Regulars at the Temple had spread the news in Jerusalem. This was getting out of hand. Driven by Satan, he tried to kill the Child Jesus by massacring hundreds of young children. He failed only because they had fled to Egypt.

God came to earth in the form of a baby who grew up and lived among us. He came because He wants you to know Him personally.

