

Epiphany

A Sermon by Stephen D. Cole

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"1 And when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came Magi from the east into Jerusalem,

2 saying, Where is He who is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east, and have come to worship Him.

7 Then Herod, privately calling the Magi, precisely inquired of them at what time the star appeared.

9 And when they had heard the king they went out; and behold, the star which they saw in the east went before them, till it came and stood over where the little Child was.

10 And having seen the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

11 And coming into the house, they found the little Child with Mary His mother, and falling down they worshiped Him; and opening their treasures, they offered to Him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

(Matthew 2:1-2,7,9-11)

Our text speaks of the visit of wise men from the East, or, more specifically, the Magi, to use a word closer to the Greek of the New Testament. This visit is commemorated at the Christian feast day of Epiphany, on the sixth of January, the eve of which is called "Twelfth Night." Historically in the General Church, not much attention has been paid to the Christian calendar overall, nor the Feast of Epiphany in particular. But is it something to which it would be reasonable to give closer attention? Why is it called "Epiphany"? And what does it have to do with the Magi? It does not seem likely that they came only twelve days after Jesus was born. Indeed, the story seems to suggest that it may have been up to two years later.

So let's take a closer look at this term, "Epiphany." In common speech, it usually refers to a sudden realization or insight. It is the "Aha!" moment, the "Eureka" experience. Often it describes a mental breakthrough after one has labored over something without previous success. Sometimes it is the moment when one sees something familiar or commonplace in a whole new light.

A striking example from the Word is Jacob's reaction in awakening from his dream of the ladder or stairway to heaven: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not. In a moment, he sees that what, at first, seemed an ordinary and mundane spot is, in fact "none other than the house of God, and this *is* the gate of the heavens." (Genesis 28:17)

This idea of seeing things in a "new light" is involved in the root meaning of the word "epiphany," the latter part of the word being related to the Greek word for "light," which we also find, for instance, in the word "photon" and "photograph." An epiphany is, metaphorically, when the light goes on. A similar Biblical expression, which is also seen in common speech, is "to have one's eyes opened." When Hagar and Ishmael were sent out into the wilderness, she despaired, believing that they would die of thirst. But then "God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water." (Genesis 21:19) The well, of course, was already there, but she had now been inspired to see it. Explaining this verse, the *Arcana Coelestia* states:

It is said that "God opens the eyes" when He opens the interior sight or understanding; which is effected by an influx into the rational, or rather into the spiritual of the rational. This is done by the way of the soul, or an internal unknown way. This influx is the state of enlightenment. (AC 2701)

The passage goes on to explain that people tend to think of this as some kind of innate intuition, when, in fact, it is an influx from the Lord through heaven into the obscure and confused ideas in the mind bringing them into an order that reveals the truth. This is a good description of genuine epiphany, although that word is not specifically used in this context.

This raises the question: is “Epiphany” a term actually used in the Word? The Greek noun, from which we get the English word “Epiphany,” does occur in several of the Epistles:

In First Timothy, the readers are exhorted to “Keep the commandment unspotted, unblameable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim 6:14) Here the word “appearing” represents the Greek for “epiphany.” Likewise in Second Timothy we read of “The appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, having abolished death and having brought to light life and immortality through the gospel.... (2 Tim 1:10) Notice the connection of the appearing or epiphany of the Lord to the bringing of light. This is even more obvious in the second chapter of Titus, which speaks of “awaiting the blessed hope and *the* appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ... (Titus 2:13), where it glory, or shining brightness of the Lord which appears.

These passages are, admittedly, from the Epistles, but they are all quoted in the Heavenly Doctrine in the little work *Scripture Confirmation* 29 under the heading “The Coming of the Lord.” This noun form of epiphany does not appear in the Gospels, but near the beginning of the Christmas story in Luke, Zacharias uses the corresponding verb, *epiphaino*: “The Dayspring from on high hath visited us to give light to those who sit in darkness.” (Luke 1:78-79) Here again the Coming, the appearing, the epiphany of Lord is pictured as the appearing of light to those in darkness.

The idea of “epiphany” is that of enlightenment, enlightenment such as we read about in the passage concerning the “opening of the eyes.” The form of the verb without the prefix portion, that is to say “phaino” rather than “epiphaino,” is used frequently in the Gospels. It is the word employed, for instance, on the occasions when the angel of the Lord *appears* to Joseph in a dream, both before and after the birth of Jesus. And in the first chapter of John, we hear of the Lord being the light that “shines (or appears) in the darkness.” But for our purposes today, let us especially note that it is the word used when Herod asks the Magi, what time the star “appeared” or “shined.”

The appearance of the star was the first epiphany for the Magi. But what made it an epiphany? Seeing a star is not, in and of itself, an epiphany. At that time and in that place and for those people it was, however, an epiphany. To understand why requires understanding who the Magi were.

The Magi appear only in the Gospel of Matthew. And even here, their story covers only 12 verses of one chapter. They come and they go, and they are not heard of again. Few details about them are mentioned in text. And yet, there are at least three clues to their identity

The two of these are right at the beginning: “Behold, there came Magi from the East.” First, they are called “Magi,” a term for a specific type of wise man. To understand what type, it helps to go right to the second clue: they were from the East. This is not just telling us the *direction* from which they came – it is telling us the *place* from which they came, a place elsewhere more fully called “the land of the Sons of the East.”

Where, exactly, was this land of the Sons of the East? The beginning of Genesis chapter 29 speaks of Jacob leaving his home in Canaan to seek a wife in the land of his kinsfolk: "And Jacob lifted up his feet, and went to the land of the sons of the east." Concerning this the *Arcana* explains: "That Aram, or Syria, was called the "land of the sons of the east," is evident, because it was thither that Jacob betook himself." (3762) A little later in this passage it is said:

"That the wise men from the east who came to Jesus at His birth were of those who were called the "sons of the east," is evident from the fact that they were in the knowledge that the Lord was to be born, and that they knew of His advent by a star which appeared to them in the east"

And following shortly after that we read:

That from ancient times such a prophetic knowledge had existed among the sons of the east, who were of Syria, is evident from Balaam's prophecy concerning the Lord's advent, in Moses: I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not nigh there shall arise a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise up out of Israel.' (Num. 24:17). That Balaam was from the land of the sons of the east, that is, from Syria, is evident from these words: Balaam uttered his enunciation and said, Balak hath brought me from Syria, out of the mountains of the east (Num. 23:7).

All this might seem to cinch the argument that Syria is what is meant by "the land of the Sons of the East." And yet we find this in the work *Coronis*: That wisdom flourished in Arabia, appears from the queen of Sheba's journey to Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-13); also from the three wise men who came to the newborn Jesus, a star going before them (Matt. 2:1-12). (*Coronis* 41:2) This seems to imply that they came from Arabia. But, to further complicate things, here we have another passage from later in the *Arcana* that adds Ethiopia to the possibilities:

The reason why the wise men from the east offered these things to the Lord then born, was that they might signify His Divine in the Human; for they knew what gold signified, what frankincense, and what myrrh, because they were in the science of correspondences and representations. In those times this was the chief science among the Arabians, Ethiopians, and others in the east; and therefore also in the Word by "Arabia," "Ethiopia," and "the sons of the east," in the internal sense, are meant those who are in the knowledges of heavenly things (n. 1171, 3240, 3242, 3762). But in course of time this science perished, because when the good of life ceased it was turned into magic. (AC 10252:6)

This passage also alludes to a third clue: the gifts that they brought. The uninformed reader of the story might suppose that the choice of the offerings went no further than picking treasures valuable enough for a king. But from Heavenly Doctrine we learn the significance of this clue: that the Magi selected them based on their knowledge of correspondences. But how did they have this knowledge? This third clue points us back to the significance of the second clue:

The Heavenly Doctrine explains that the "land of the sons of the East" was a land where the wisdom of the Ancient Church still remained. This Ancient Church had once extended over a large part of the earth. And among those of that church, the Science of Correspondences was revered as the foremost science, as the Science of Sciences. But, in course of time, this powerful knowledge was abused by many and employed to promote evil plans. As such, it was called "magic" in a bad sense, or we might say "black magic." And so, in the Lord's Divine Providence, this Science was allowed to perish and be forgotten in most of the world. Glimmers remained in ancient myths and in the Egyptian Hieroglyphics, but the meanings of these, too, faded from memory.

There were a few places, however, where this knowledge remained in its integrity until the Coming of the Lord. And among these were the lands of the Sons of the East. These lands included, at a minimum, Syria to the north of the Holy Land, Arabia to the east, and Ethiopia to the south. From which of these did the Magi come? Is it possible that they each came from a different direction? Neither the Scriptures nor the Heavenly Doctrine give a clear answer to this. But what is clear is that each of them came from one of the lands of the Sons of the East, each from one of those few places in which the Science of Correspondences remained in its integrity. And this is reinforced by retuning to our first clue, the title “Magi.” They are often called “Wise Men” and this is fair, because Magi *were* wise men. But, on the other hand, not all wise men were Magi.

When the Pharaoh in Joseph’s time was desperate to have an interpretation of his dreams, “he sent and called all the magicians of Egypt, and all the wise men thereof.” (Genesis 41:8) The Arcana explains the difference between wise men and magicians:

"Magicians," in a good sense signify interior memory-knowledges, whereas "wise men," signify exterior knowledges That those were called "magicians," or "magi," who were in the knowledge of spiritual things, and also in revelations thence, is plain from the Magi who came from the east to Jerusalem, asking where He was that was born King of the Jews, and saying that they had seen His star in the east, and were come to worship Him (Matt. 2:1, 2). The same is also evident from Daniel, who is called the "prince of the magicians" (Dan. 4:9). (5223)

“Magician” is derived from the word “Magi.” In Latin, in fact, they are simply the same word. The Magi who came to worship the baby Jesus were not mere “wise men,” having only natural knowledge, they were true magicians, knowing science of correspondence, seeing the spiritual causes of natural things. This was how they knew what gifts to bring, this was how they had known the meaning of the star.

And this actually brings us back to epiphany. A genuine epiphany is to gain a sudden spiritual insight that gives a new perspective on something that was previous seen in only a natural way. This was imaged in the experience Jacob had in his dream, seeing the connection of natural reality to spiritual reality. This was the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, when their eyes were opened and they suddenly recognized Jesus.

The Lord is restoring in the New Church the Science of Correspondences. With it comes the possibility of wisdom such as the Magi had, a knowledge of the spiritual causes of natural things. This knowledge perished in ancient times, we are told, when the good of life ceased. It was not simply a matter of forgetting or being confused. It can be restored only with those who look to the good of life or of use.

Epiphany does not come on demand. It usually comes unexpectedly. But it does favor those who, like the Magi, have prepared themselves: by studying the Word, learning the Science of Correspondences and looking to the good of life.

Amen.