

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; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

For as much as we love this story, I find it intriguing that we seem to want this story to be something other than what it is. Some of us can't resist memories of Christmas pageants past, complete with stage-frightened kids wearing construction paper and glitter crowns with sequins pinned to their bathrobes.

I remember a story about three little magi who hit the stage to deliver the performance of their budding careers. The first magi stepped forward, lifted a Kleenex box converted into a treasure chest with a hot-glue gun and proudly said, "This is gold." Magi number two stepped up, holding a jar filled with wood pellets for all to see: "Myrrh is the gift I bring." The third moved regally to the front of the stage with a rhinestone bejeweled box, lifted it high and said, "Frankie sent this."

Now, children's pageants are perfect vehicles for instilling the love of our sacred stories in the people who will inherit them and keep them alive. At some point, however, we need to move beyond the sweetly naïve pageants or

there are unintended consequences. We are likely to cling to childlike views of the incarnation long after we've reached adulthood. And if that perspective stops informing our life experiences, we may conclude that the church has no new insights for us.

We also need to hear other elements of the story that include the tragic use of ruthless power and infanticide. These provide crucial context for the incarnation.

On the other hand, some of us get stuck in the tall grass picking at the factual details of the story, searching in vain to make rational sense. Was the star Halley's comet? Could it have been a supernova or a massive meteor?

The most likely answer from the world of astronomy and cultural anthropology is that the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other. The magi, thought to be Zoroastrian priests from Persia and Medes, took Saturn as a representation of the Judeans. They considered Jupiter to be the royal or kingly planet. And so, if the two planets aligned, as they did three times before the year 7 BCE, they could easily have concluded that a new Judean king was about to appear.

The impulse to search for physical confirmation for the incarnation is reasonable, but limited. Rational exploration is insufficient because while this story is authentic and reliable, it was never meant to be entirely factual. Just as this story is sweet and joyful, but not cute. Searching too far in either of these directions can become exercises in taming all the turbulent truth out of Matthew's story.

Threading a path between historical authenticity and intuitive folklore provides a powerful and persuasive teaching tool with implications that we are only now beginning to see.

Only Matthew's Gospel gives us this story. No other ancient documents confirm the event. Scholars are increasingly convinced that the Jewish author of the Gospel revised a tradition from the book of Numbers – the story of Balaam. Balaam was a rather dodgy prophet who gave a series of prophecies to King Balak of Moab. Balak wanted Balaam to curse the people of Israel, but Balaam, who could only speak the words God put in his mouth, gave God's people blessings instead, and cursed Balak and his allies.

In the last prophecy, Balaam said: "I see him, but not here and now. I perceive him, but far in the distant future. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth. Edom will become a possession, Seir a possession

of its enemies, while Israel does valiantly.” You can imagine how popular that was.

Some parts of the church teach that Balaam was prophesying about Jesus. I don't make that leap. Jewish rabbis have consistently taught that Balaam's star prophecy refers to King David. The oracle, so say the rabbis, was partially fulfilled when David defeated Edom and Moab. They have also taught that Balaam's oracle presents a long-term promise. And while the rabbis may have other thoughts, at least for the Jewish author of Matthew's Gospel, that long-term promise was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Matthew's project transcends and includes the interpretation of ancient scripture *as well as* natural and social circumstances. For first century Mediterranean people, the boundaries between reality and appearance was far more porous than it is for us. For them, the greater significance was found less in objective evidence and more in impressions and appearances.

Matthew takes great care to establish that Jesus was a true descendant of David, Israel's greatest King. Bethlehem was David's birthplace, ancestral home and the site of his anointing as king. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is not born in a stable. Instead, Jesus, King David's rightful heir, is born in the family home.

The arrival of Gentiles to pay their respects to Jesus gives us the first words spoken in Matthew's gospel: "Where is the newborn king of the Judeans? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to fall down in adoration to him."

This is startling, given the condemnation of astrological cults throughout Hebrew scripture. Yet, here are people from outside Judea who, without the benefit of scripture, followed the appearance of a sign in nature. People who are all sorts of wrong have chosen to acknowledge the truth of what they found in Bethlehem.

And that truth is brilliant. Not only has a new king been born, but he has come to bring God's peace and justice. And not just to the Judeans, but to the entire world. The magis' public recognition provides a powerful impression of legitimacy to Jesus as the descendant of royalty.

Then Matthew drops a bit of a bomb by contrasting these pagan magi, who act honorably and respectfully and *in public*, with King Herod, who acts shamefully and fearfully in secret.

Honor was the core value in the ancient world, and anyone who acted secretly appeared to have something shameful to hide. Whether a group of Zoroastrian priests actually visited Herod or not, the theological and literary

impression is unmistakable. Matthew's story portrays Herod as a king without honor, an imposter.

Herod, an unprincipled and conniving man, is terrified by the question that the magi brought to him. He knows that there is no new heir to the throne in his house, so he calls his courtly scholars to find out where a new Judean ruler might be born. They find an unsettling answer in the words of the prophet Micah: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

These are not reassuring words for a dishonorable and ruthless king hoping to re-establish an imperial city for himself. Even Herod can recognize the threatening omen of a prophet who foresees a shepherd-leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition, but by connection and attentiveness to their needs.

And so, hoping to learn more, Herod secretly sends the magi off to Bethlehem with a lie. They walk to the modest village just six miles south of Jerusalem and a world away. And there, the magi encounter the amazing revelation of the incarnation; the Christ child born of Mary. And while the baby is still unknown to the world, the magi bend their knees and offer gifts fit for one born in a palace.

Being especially perceptive magi, they refuse to participate in Herod's secretive and shameful behavior. They go home by a different route, enraging Herod who reveals his spiteful nature by killing all the young male children in and around Bethlehem to avoid losing his throne to this newborn.

Now, for as much as we love this story, we sometimes want to shield our eyes from the fear and vanity associated with it. And sometimes, we want to establish rational confirmation for events that defy explanation.

There is another way home.

With patience, practice and grace, we come see that the truth shining at the heart of Epiphany is God's radiance found in all that is genuinely human, in all our grandeur and our failure. God blesses us endlessly in moments and flashes through the most common objects and the unexpected people.

Sometimes, the radiance of Epiphany flickers like a candle in a distant window and sometimes it dazzles like fire blazing across the night sky. It is the light of Christ Jesus: the peasant infant so helpless that he had to rely on others to hold him up, the priest who was himself sacrificed, and the king who was and is the shepherd of all God's children.

The radiance of Epiphany peeking at us through the cracks reveals that even the most ordinary events are filled with more beauty and more holiness than we can imagine. And when we catch sight of that radiance, we are compelled by our created nature to move toward it with the best gifts that we can find.

In those encounters, God reorients us – sets us on a different road home – guided now by a different star.

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