

## How do the Magi receive revelation?

Today's gospel for the feast of the Epiphany is Matthew's account of the journey of the Magi to the house wherein Jesus was born. Led by a star, they travelled from further east to Jerusalem where they inquired of Herod, client king of Rome, "Where is the child born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star at its rising and have come to worship him?" (Matthew 2:2). Much of the chapter is about discernment: how do the Magi determine that following a star from their place of origin will lead them to a child born to be King? How does Herod assess the threat level of such a child? How do those in Herod's realm respond to the quest of the Magi? How does Joseph defend the child in his care against the threat Herod poses? Discernment is a question that interests all religious people.

But through these questions lie larger ones about determining the significance of the child for the Magi, for Herod, for the kingdom of Judea, for Israel. Matthew does not describe the process of discernment each character in the narrative undergoes so much as the outcome: the Magi tenaciously follow the star over long distances in order to worship this child; Herod reacts in fear and then stealth, then anger and retaliation, as he copes with news of the child's birth and the implications of the child; all Jerusalem reacts in much the same way as Herod to the query of the Magi; Joseph simply does what an angel tells him and thus saves the child and his mother by taking them to Egypt. Since the focus of Matthew's narrative is on Herod and not the Magi, readers of Matthew see how a client king of Rome is undone by news of a potential rival's birth. Herod is a king out of control, not one who rules by self-control. He is the anti-type of a self-possessed ruler of the age.

So what are the means of discernment the narrative ascribes to each character? The Magi follow a star. When it stops over the place where the child is born, they enter the house in great joy. They are also guided by dreams that warn them to depart for their own country another way and not return to Herod and his cruel intentions towards children. Herod's chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem read prophetic scripture that indicates that the child will be born in Bethlehem. Herod seeks human advice: there is no suggestion that he has access to divine guidance. Joseph receives and heeds a warning dream coming directly from an angel.

There are three mediums for discerning divine revelation in Matthew 2: a star, dreams and prophecy. Each medium is particular to the receiver: for the foreign Magi astronomy, not scripture, provides authoritative revelation; Herod's advisors consult their scriptures, not the heavens; while Joseph, a righteous man and a devout Jew, is visited with dreams bearing an angel. The stars, the scriptures, the dreams all speak joy, life and triumph for

the child and his mother, to those who would receive that message. Herod, seeking his own security and power, receives from divine revelation fear, deceit, stealth and murderous rage.

Throughout its length, the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that God speaks to individuals and nations through dreams and prophetic scripture. Where Matthew breaks new ground is in asserting that the same God of Biblical revelation is also the source of astrological revelation to the Magi that brought them out from a different culture and civilization across many miles with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for the child born King of the Jews. We don't know what happens when they go home. We don't know how they deal with knowledge of the child. But we do know that God works through their lives and the lives of those with whom they come into contact. This is the Epiphany of Matthew's Magi for ancient and modern readers.

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