



Members of the traditional group of "Los Historiantes" gather outside a house as they celebrate the feast of the Epiphany Jan. 6, 2019, in San Salvador, El Salvador. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Cabezas)



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"We three kings ..." Sing for a minute, then ask yourself, "Who decided there were just three of them or that these wise pilgrims from the East were kings?" Those are just two of the details tradition has added to Scripture for this feast. When we pay more attention to the Gospel than to our crèche sets, we'll see that Matthew simply tells us that they were "Magi," that is, astrologers or magicians, maybe Zoroastrian priests. They came from the East — literally, from the place of the rising sun, a reference to the territory we call Iran.

The Epiphany of the Lord

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Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

Matthew 2:1-12

This last scene of the Christmas season, unlike Luke's local lore about no room at the inn and angels singing to shepherds, comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew, the one from which we will hear most this year. Matthew wanted to interpret Jesus for his Jewish brothers and sisters, so he made lots of insider references to their religious heritage, prophecies fulfilled, etc. The account of pagan seers seeking the newborn Jesus fits right into his plan to open his parochial-minded audience up to the fact that the Gospel is universal. From the time of Jesus, the Gospel belongs to all the nations, not just the chosen people.

Who were these Magi and why did Matthew tell us about them? They were religious seekers, perhaps a whole caravan of them, who didn't have the Hebrew Scriptures to guide them. They relied on their traditional ways of knowing God through nature and reading the signs of the times in the movement of the stars. That tells us that Matthew realized that God was moving people to interreligious dialogue from the

time of Jesus' birth.

The story of the Magi has a bit of everything needed to summarize the Gospel. The evil ruler Herod reminds us that although the powers of the world are mighty and terrifying, God can circumvent them in unexpected, utterly simple, and nonviolent ways.

In the chief priests and scribes, we get a depiction of religious leaders and theologians seeking something less than the truth. They could tell the Magi what the prophets promised, but they were culpably incurious as to what God might be up to in their day. They told the Magi where to look, but they didn't bother to follow their own interpretation of Scripture. They left it to their successors to confront the inconvenient truth of Emmanuel: God in their midst, calling them beyond their own interests.

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Finally, we have the symbols of the Magi themselves, pilgrims who were obviously well-educated and sufficiently wealthy. They were open enough to look beyond the limits of their own wisdom. They were so hungry for more meaning in life that they went to a foreign land and consulted the wisdom of an alien tradition.

When they learned what they could from the Jewish theologians, they continued on the way their own lights led them. Finally, they met the mother and child and discerned that they had found what they were seeking.

In the end, Matthew simply says, "They departed for their country by another way." That's another way of telling us they were not the same as they had been when they set off on the journey. We know nothing more about them.

This is a story about the unexpected and unfinished. Note that the Magi, who came bearing rich gifts, offered nothing to Herod and his court. Royal splendor failed to impress them. But their own religious symbol, the star that called them beyond the familiar, led them to a simple family.

There, by the light of their own traditions, they perceived a promise that moved them to offer their homage with gifts that foretold an unthinkable combination

royalty, divinity and suffering.

Matthew included this incident in his Gospel to nudge his people into realizing that while the mystery of Christ began with the chosen people, the Gospel is meant for entire the world. (Jesus' last words are, "Go and make disciples of all the nations" — [Matthew 28:19](#).)

As we close the Christmas season, Matthew invites us to cultivate a double vision. We need to cast a critical and self-reflective eye on the religious leaders here. They remind us that unless our orthodox theology leads us to new encounters with God in our midst, it is not only useless, but can lead to evil.

With the other eye, we follow the Magi and gaze beyond our horizons, toward new respect and openness to others who genuinely seek to know God. This will prepare us for the coming year in which the Scriptures and our Catholic tradition, Matthew and Pope Francis will call us again to respond the unexpected and universal dimensions of the unfinished Gospel.

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