

# Epiphany

Epiphany is usually the name for the Christian festival that is seen by many people as the last bit of Christmas - holidays over, headache still from too much drinking, debts to pay from all the shopping, but still the church has a go at Christmas with the story about three kings and a wandering star. What is, or was, the Epiphany? What other uses are there for the word?

## EPIPHANY

To most people the word Epiphany is associated with Christmas, it is one of those religious words – like Magi – that crops up at that time of year. In the Bible and at Christmas the epiphany is the manifestation of the Christ to the Gentiles – the infant Jesus seen by the magi (mistakenly called the three “kings”) who travelled from from the East.

Epiphany is from the Greek word used in the New Testament (*epiphaneia*, meaning appearing or appearance, especially the advent of Christ, Christ’s first appearance and final coming). Epiphany therefore means to reveal, a revelation, a disclosure. The whole of Jesus’ life is therefore an epiphany, a revelation, a disclosure: God reveals of God’s self to humanity. Jesus the Christ is therefore the messiah, the anointed one who saves, but he is also the Son of God and as such is the living image of the Father – for the Father and the Son are one (John 10:30).

The fullest disclosure, appearance as such, of God is in Jesus Christ, as presented in the New Testament – *‘That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life’* (1 John 1:1).

## DISCLOSURE

An epiphany is therefore a divine disclosure, God revealing something of God to us. To use a more technical theological term this is a *theophany*. God discloses something of God’s self to us, yet with every revealing there is also something hidden. However well you think you know someone there will always be unplumbed depths that you know

nothing about, that perhaps they don’t know themselves. Epiphanies are therefore often ambiguous — the meaning and intention behind God’s revealing is often difficult to perceive. God chooses how and when to reveal something to us; how we respond is crucial — our salvation often depends on it. It is through Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross that we are saved from our sins; however, it is crucial that we respond to what God in Christ has done for us. And our only valid response is faith, leading to thanksgiving and worship, and then to seek the will of God for our lives.



The Epiphany Window, St Luke RC church  
(Twinbrook) Belfast



## EPIPHANY-EPIPHANEIA

An epiphany, as derived from the Greek word *epiphaneia* (ἐπιφάνεια), is essentially the realization or comprehension of the greater meaning, the perception of the essence of something - whether religious or secular. An epiphany-epiphaneia is to do with how the mind works, how, given sensory data and information from external stimuli, will draw conclusions beyond simply the sum of the given information. This realization beyond the information given by the senses is then perceived to be of greater consequence than the merely mundane or mortal - truth, the greater truth relating to something - is perceived to be beyond the merely mortal and mundane.

## TRUTH AND PERCEPTION

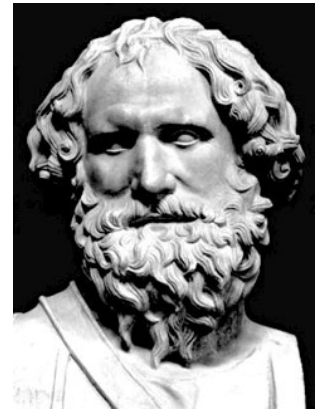
As a philosophical or literal assertion, epiphany-epiphaneia is often invoked to indicate that the meaning has been discovered, or that the last piece of the puzzle has been found, *therefore*, the individual has *seen* the greater truth, the whole picture; this perception leads to realization, this realization *illuminates* to a much greater degree than facts or information usually does. As such an epiphany-epiphaneia is to do with how the mind works and has been explored within a philosophy of the mind. But this is not all: an epiphany-epiphaneia consists of two elements: the realization, but also the external truth that has triggered the realization. This raises a difficult question for atheists of whether truth exists, and what is external to us. It is very difficult to acknowledge the dual reality of the epiphany-epiphaneia within the human mind, and the reality/existence of external truth without reference to God. The celebrity atheist and media scientist Richard Dawkins, for instance, simply ducks the question, by-passes the question, by asserting that the mind, reason and truth all issues from nature - the blind movement from the big bang (the origin of the universe) into stars, planets, life, evolution, etc. Therefore an epiphany-epiphaneia from this perspective is simply an aberration produced by the random and inherently meaningless movement of molecules and electrical impulses within the brain. If this is so, why do we assign meaning and truth to the realization?

## QUESTIONS

- Where do ideas come from ?
- What realizations have you experienced that have changed your life ?
- Are all epiphanies from God ?

## REALIZATIONS

An epiphany-epiphaneia as a sudden comprehension is often the key to scientific advances and technological developments. Examples include the realization by Archimedes of how to estimate the volume of a given mass, which inspired him to shout 'Eureka!' (I have found it), according to the popular story, from his bath.



Archimedes  
c.287BC – c.212BC

Many mathematicians and scientists will credit epiphanic episodes as key to their work, realizations that then needed to be worked out in detail over many years; for example Albert Einstein and Charles Darwin, also Marie Currie.

## MEANINGS

**Epiphany** : as a feeling, a sudden realization of great truth

**Theophany** : an appearance of a deity to man

**Hierophany** : a manifestation of the sacred

**Daršana** : Hindu term most often associated with visions of the divine

### Oxford English Dictionary

1. **Epiphany**, noun (plural epiphanies) - the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12); the festival commemorating this is on 6 January in the Western Church.
2. **Epiphany**, noun (plural epiphanies) - a moment of sudden and great revelation.
3. **Epiphanic**, adjective

From the Middle English, from Ancient Greek, to reveal, and from ecclesiastical Latin, epiphania.

### New Testament Greek

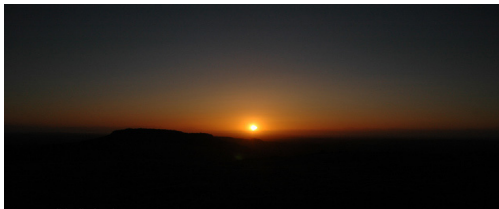
**Epiphaneia** (ἐπιφάνεια) : epiphany, appearing or appearance, especially, the advent of Christ, both Christ's first appearance (2Tim 1:10) and Christ's final coming (1 Tim 6:14). In the KJV Bible the word is also translated as 'appearing' and 'brightness'.

**Epiphanes** (ἐπιφανής) : conspicuous, often used figuratively, as memorable, in the KJV Bible, notable.

**Epiphauo** (ἐπιφάω) : to illuminate, often used figuratively, in the KJV Bible, to give light.

## OLD TESTAMENT

There are several appearances of God in Christ in the Old Testament which constitute epiphanies. For example, the fourth figure in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:25) is taken to be Christ, pre-incarnate. Christ is seen as one of the three angelic figures that visited Abraham in the wilderness (Genesis 17). The angel of the Lord who appears in the Old Testament is also to be seen as the pre-incarnate Christ, the second person of the Trinity, uncreated, eternally begotten from eternity to eternity, who appears to people at crucial points in salvation history. Isaiah 53 recounts, prophetically, what Christ Jesus will do for us, how he will take our sins on the Cross and die for us; therefore Isaiah's prophecy, though not strictly an epiphany, tells us something about Christ.



## NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament there is the explicit appearance of Christ to Saul on the road to Damascus – this is a classic epiphany. Such appearances/visitations are not restricted to Biblical times; neither are they restricted to religious people. For many, there may be a moment in life when there is the sudden realization of meaning, or the comprehension of the essence of something, a clarity of mission — this, in part, is what it is to be born again in the Spirit, at its most basic. These encounters with the divine are valid and true if they are rooted in God, if they issue from God: but not any old 'god' — the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in the Trinity. This Trinitarian God is known through love, as love; but again, not any kind of love, but self-denying, altruistic, self-sacrificing love, as revealed to us in Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, and in the Bible. Even if someone does not know about Christ and how he died to redeem us on the Cross, the Spirit of Christ may still touch that person, Christ will reveal God's love at the most opportune point in that person's life, and for a moment it will seem as though heaven has touched earth, the veil between humanity and eternity will become less opaque, but for a moment, and that person will not be the same, they will be changed from that encounter.

What do these Biblical Passages tell you about how God reveals though epiphanic moments? How was the moment of revelation affected by the knowledge and understanding, also the state of mind, of the individual?

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

1 Kings 19:11b-13

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Acts 9:1-9

How do these three passages differ from the Gospel accounts of how people reacted when they met Jesus? To what extent did Jesus know people better than they knew themselves? Did Jesus reveal though moments of revelation (epiphanic moments) details, truths, that change a person's life?



# Epiphany - The Blood of Sacrifice

**The arrival of the long-awaited Messiah, God descended to earth, incarnated fully human, causes dissent.**

Mary has to tread a very narrow and fragile path. If she owns to a virginal conception she will be stoned to death for blasphemy; if she claims the child in her womb is not Joseph's (betrothed, married, but not living together) then she will be stoned to death for adultery: if she or Joseph lie and say he is the father, they will be punished.

The three magi (wise men, astrologers) know that to visit the new-born Messiah they must tread a very difficult political path - their very interest and presence threatens the status quo.

King Herod, threatened by the fulfilment of the prophecy that the Messiah will be born as a new saviour king, slaughters all the boys aged two years or younger in Bethlehem, hoping to rid the world of the Messiah.

Christmas leads to Good Friday, and then Easter - Resurrection. Resurrection arrives through the pain and death, the nihilism and suffering, of the Cross.

This balance between joy and celebration (Christmas) the pain and death (Good Friday) was - for the Early Church and the Medieval Church - seen by balancing Christmas with St Stephen's Day. For centuries the day after Christmas was St Stephen's Day. The joy and celebration of Christmas, the drinking, eating and indulgence, rooted in the Pagan mid-winter festivals fused with the remembrance of the Incarnation, became, the next morning - 26th December - St Stephen's Day: the remembering that at the heart of Christmas is sacrifice, Stephen being the first martyr and a symbol of the 'cost of discipleship'.

Christmas must always be balanced with Good Friday to give us Easter Sunday. And the Epiphany to the Magi is the symbol of this balance, the cost of discipleship. In the Medieval Church this balance between life and death, between the joyous rebirth of creation in the Incarnation and the ultimate sacrifice Jesus paid, was represented by holly: the coniferous green leaf symbolised new life (the Incarnation and Resurrection); the red berry - Christ's blood shed for us on Good Friday; the holly's prickle - the crown of thorns; the white blossom - the purity of Mary's Annunciation. This balance through holly was recounted in two carols - 'The Sans Day Carol' and 'The Holly and the Ivy'

## The Sans Day Carol

Now the Holly bears a berry as white as the milk  
And Mary bore Jesus, who was wrapped up in silk.

*And Mary bore Jesus Christ our Saviour for to be  
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly.  
Holly, holly,  
And the first tree in the greenwood it was the holly.*

Now the Holly bears a berry as green as the grass  
And Mary bore Jesus, who died on the cross.

Now the Holly bears a berry as black as the coal  
And Mary bore Jesus, who died for us all.

Now the Holly bears a berry as blood is it red  
Then trust we our Saviour who rose from the dead.

## The Holly & the Ivy

The holly and the ivy,  
When they are both full grown,  
Of all trees that are in the wood,  
The holly bears the crown.

*O, the rising of the sun,  
And the running of the deer  
The playing of the merry organ,  
Sweet singing in the choir.*

The holly bears a blossom,  
As white as lily flow'r,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,  
To be our dear Saviour.  
*O, the rising of the sun...*

The holly bears a berry,  
As red as any blood,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,  
To do poor sinners good.  
*O, the rising of the sun...*

The holly bears a prickle,  
As sharp as any thorn,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,  
On Christmas Day in the morn.  
*O, the rising of the sun...*

The holly bears a bark,  
As bitter as the gall,  
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,  
For to redeem us all.  
*O, the rising of the sun...*

The holly and the ivy,  
When they are both full grown,  
Of all trees that are in the wood,  
The holly bears the crown.  
*O, the rising of the sun...*



# Herod and the Magi



*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."*

*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."*

*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*

*And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

*When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."*

*When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:*

*"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."*

*After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."*

*So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."*

Matthew, Chapter 2



The Three Magi-  
Early Christian Sarcophagus, c.2nd C.

## QUESTIONS

- Have we lost something of the balance between Christmas-Good Friday-Easter, today? Why?
- Do the Churches retain this balance, or are they the same as secular liberal humanist society?
- If this balance has gone is there any way of the Church restoring this balance?
- The Magi's encounter with Herod bring the Christmas story right into the corruption, mire and sordidness of politics, do we try to avoid this mire today? How can the Church be in the world yet not of it?
- If we are faithful to the Biblical account and the human problems that surrounded Christ's arrival, are we, as critics would say, inadvertently anti-Semitic (for example criticizing Jewish ethics which dictate the stoning to death for adultery and blasphemy - a risk Mary faced all her life after the Annunciation)?
- Read Matthew Chapter 2 (left) and consider the struggle, and dangers, the corruption and evil, the manifold difficulties that led to the birth of the Messiah, and the babe's survival.



## A Tale of Two Astrologers...

**T**arooqk stood on the banks of the Great River; even in this cool dawn light the pattern in the sky was clear. He knew something was different in the heavens, he had seen it developing over many months. So had many of his fellow astrologers - Magi. As a Magus he had been educated in the Zoroastrian astrological cult, and in the wisdom of many Middle Eastern religions, but also the science of observation - reading the skies, the heavens. He also knew the uniqueness of the Hebrews, their scriptures and their relationship with the one true living God.

**F**or centuries the Magi had charted the movements of the planets and stars, and all expected such a convergence - one day. But none dreamed it could happen in the lifetime. Saturn, Jupiter and Regulus were each day brighter and closer together. If they were to converge - leastwise appear to converge when viewed from earth - then they all knew what it would mean. For centuries such a convergence had been prophesied to happen when a great king would be born. Such a new king would be no ordinary monarch but would be ordained by God for the salvation of humanity; the ancient Hebrews had written of just such an event. It was now believed amongst the Magi that this king would be no ordinary mortal but God descended to earth, incarnated in the form of a baby. The Magi had founded their schools of astrology in Babylonia and Persia - ancient traditions. They knew of myths from numerous people of gods visiting earth and ruling over peoples, demanding obedience and subservience, demanding riches and maidens, demanding Pagan sacrifices. But this incarnation was to be different, oh so different. God would not 'appear' as a man, but be born of a virgin, born a helpless and vulnerable baby, sharing our humanity, not ruling as a despotic divine.

**A**ntigones was also an astrologer, who had been trained in Rome, the son of shamans and priests who practised the cult of the divinity of the Emperor - ordinary citizens paid them to sacrifice, and to burn incense for the Emperor, who was acknowledged as a god. Caesar Augustus had sent him to Herod's court to spy, and to indulge Herod's obsession with prophecy and astrology. Antigones believed none of this nonsense, but pandered to people as a soothsayer, claiming to know what was written in the stars. But things were going wrong. Herod had noticed that three stars were brighter than normal, also that they seemed to be on a path of convergence, and demanded to know what it meant. Herod



The Three Magi, mosaic in the basilica of San Apollinare in Classe (6th C.)

knew the Jewish scriptures better than Antigones; Antigones tried to get knowledge from the rabbis - but given that Herod had slaughtered many of them for offering the wrong advice, in the past they were reluctant to speak with Antigones. Herod feared the ancient prophecy from Isaiah, Malachi and others - that a new Jewish Messiah king was to be born, of a virgin, who would be the saviour of his people.

**A**s Antigones stalled, Tarooqk debated and discussed with the senior Magi - Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar - and they decided a journey was necessary. The movement of the stars, the prophecies, were all coinciding - over Judea, and the ancient texts and the pattern in the skies indicated a small obscure city called Bethlehem. Its only claim to fame was as the place from which the ancient Hebrew King David had come from. Tarooqk and about thirty servants and scholars would accompany the three senior Magi; they would caravan to Judea - a thousand mile journey with camels, tents, water and provisions, quite a sight!

**A**ntigones kept trying to deflect Herod's obsession with the star forming from the three planets, he kept trying to explain how it was perhaps for the son of a Roman senator, or perhaps to prophecy another son for Herod himself. But Herod was having none of this. He knew his astrology and he knew his Jewish scriptures. The more Antigones tried to deflect or explain away, the angrier Herod was with him; and his Pagan trickery could no longer win over the crowds or curry royal favour. And he knew in his heart of hearts that if there was significance in the movement of the astrological bodies then there must be enormous significance in what was clearly happening in the sky.

**O**nce the Magi caravan had reached the border of Judea, Herod sent a small military force to meet it. It proved impossible for the three senior Magi to refuse an audience and they were escorted to Jerusalem to meet Herod. They played it as diplomatically as they could, and promised to return and advise Herod of what they found. Herod's spies tracked them to Bethlehem; they seemed to spend time in a run-down part of the fringes of the city, used essentially for storing animals and providing cheap accommodation for agricultural workers, but then the Magi gave the spies the slip and escaped in the night into the mountains and thereby back towards Babylonia.

**H**erod in his anger sent a force to attack the caravan - now camped outside of the Judean borders. When the three magi were found missing Tarooqk and the entire caravan were massacred. Tarooqk died with the new star in his sight thanking God for the birth of mankind's Messiah. Antigones ingratiated himself with Herod by finally acknowledging the possibility that this might be what Herod feared, so he advised that if the star truly was announcing the birth of the Messiah then he should send his soldiers to Bethlehem to massacre all the boys under two years of age - just to be sure. Antigones was back in favour, the people flocked to him to watch him perform as a priest, to see him read the entrails of sacrificed animals for them, to sooth-say, and to comfort and massage Herod's troubled ego...