



KNOW & GROW TOPIC OF THE WEEK: THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD



1. What does the word "Epiphany" mean? "Epiphany" means "manifestation." It comes from Greek roots that mean "to show, to display" (*phainein*) and "on, to" (*epi-*). An epiphany is thus a time when something is shown, displayed, or manifested to an audience.

2. What is the feast of the Epiphany about? According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: The Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah of Israel, Son of God and Saviour of the world. The great feast of the Epiphany celebrates the adoration of Jesus by the wise men (*magi*) from the East, together with his baptism in the Jordan and the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee.

In the magi, representatives of the neighbouring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations, who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation.

The magi's coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations.

Their coming means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Saviour of the world only by turning towards the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament.

The Epiphany shows that "the full number of the nations" now takes its "place in the family of the patriarchs", and acquires *Israelitica dignitas* (is made "worthy of the heritage of Israel") [CCC 528].

3. When is Epiphany celebrated? This varies from country to country. In some countries, Epiphany is a holy day of obligation ([Canon Can. 1246 §1](#)). Where that is the case, it is celebrated on January 6th. In the United States, Epiphany is not a holy day of obligation, and its celebration is transferred to the first Sunday after January 1st.

4. Why is Epiphany connected with January 6th? Pope Benedict explains: It is hard to say how far back the beginnings of the Christmas feast go. It assumed its de-

finite form in the third century.

At about the same time the feast of the Epiphany emerged in the East on January 6 and the feast of Christmas in the West on December 25.

The two feasts had different emphases because of the different religious and cultural contexts in which they arose, but essentially their meaning was the same: the celebration of the birth of Christ as the dawning of the new light, the true sun, of history [[The Spirit of the Liturgy](#), pp. 106-107].

Eventually, however, the emphasis on January 6 shifted--particularly in the west (and in some parts of the east)--to reflect manifestations of Christ beside that which occurred at his birth (namely, those that occurred at the coming of the magi, at his baptism, and at the wedding feast of Cana).

5. Who were the Magi? Pope Benedict explains: In the relevant sources, the concept of Magi (*mágoi*) encompasses a wide range of meanings, from the wholly positive to the wholly negative. To the first of the four principal meanings, Magi are understood to be members of the Persian priestly caste.

In Hellenistic culture they were regarded as "rulers of a distinctive religion," but at the same time their religious ideas were thought to be "strongly influenced by philosophy," so that the Greek philosophers have often been portrayed as their pupils (cf. Delling, "mágos," p. 356).

No doubt this view contains some not easily definable element of truth: after all, Aristotle himself spoke of the philosophical work of the Magi (cf. *ibid.*, p. 357).

The other meanings listed by Gerhard Delling are as follows: possessors and users of supernatural knowledge and ability, magicians, and finally deceivers and seducers. . . .

For the Magi in Mt 2, it is the first of the four meanings that applies, at least in a broad sense. Even if they were not exactly members of the Persian priesthood, they were nevertheless custodians of religious and philosophical knowledge that had developed in that area and continued to be cultivated there.

6. Why did the magi come to see Jesus? They apparently had material of a prophetic nature (some have suggested that they got it from an eastern Jewish community, such as the one in Babylon) that allowed them to identify the birth of the new "king of the Jews" astronomically.

They may have been especially motivated to come see *this* king of the Jews since there was an expectation at the time that a universal ruler would shortly come from Israel. Pope Benedict explains: We know from [the Roman historians] Tacitus and Suetonius that speculation was rife at the time that the ruler of the world would emerge from Judah—an expectation that [the Jewish historian] Flavius Josephus applied to [the Roman emperor] Vespasian, consequently finding his way into the latter's favor (cf. *De Bello Judaico* iii, 399–408).

7. Why did they go to Herod? Probably, because they assumed the newborn king would be a son of Herod--the current "king of the Jews." Pope Benedict comments: It is quite natural that their search for the newborn king of the Jews should take them to Israel's royal city and to the king's palace. That, surely, is where the future king must have been born. This, of course, played into Herod's paranoia for his throne and led to the slaughter of the innocents. These are the baby boys in Bethlehem that Herod the Great had slaughtered in an attempt to kill the Baby Jesus. (On December 28, the Church commemorates the slaughter of the holy innocents.)