

## ***Following Stars***

**Matthew 2:1-12**

Whenever I go to the grocery store and wait in line at the checkout counter, I find that I am easily distracted by the sirens of seduction beckoning me to certain carnal pleasures. When I was a child, it was the candy display conveniently located at my eye and hand level, where I could easily slip in a Mars bar or Tootsie-roll into the cart full of groceries my mother was buying in her weekly trip to the A & P.

By the time I was a teenager (intoxicated, as I was, by hormones), I could not prevent my ogling eyes from drooling over the scantily clad vixens drawn on the covers of Jacqueline Susann and Harold Robbins novels. I feigned interest in such literary classics, explaining the educational value to my inquiring mind.

Alas, when I became an adult, I put away such childish things. Instead, I forsook carnal pleasures for worldly ones by joining the mass of supermarket shoppers who furtively glance at the Hollywood gossip rags and fill their minds with all the news that isn't fit to print, for the simple entertainment of knowing that the world's celebrities, for all their fame and glory, are just as rude, perverse, and emotionally unbalanced as the rest of us. There are no illusions of grandeur in the trite tattletales of tabloids.

Reflective of this collective mania over media exaggeration and misinformation, Americans as a rule are star-gazers. We love our celebrities, regardless of our personal appetite for gossip. We are drawn to larger-than-life figures who make the headlines and cause heads to turn whenever they are spotted in the public square. They may be glamorous or crude, movie idols or musicians, but as long as

fame is the name of their game, they are portrayed as the demigods of American culture—the pantheon of our public pathology.

Who are they? They are the stars we follow. Most of us have a favorite Hollywood actor or actress, or athlete, or musical performer, a TV personality, or a writer. The star we follow might be a corporate tycoon, an entrepreneur, a billionaire investor, or an economic guru. We might be drawn to a spiritual leader, a social philosopher, an inspiring politician, or a popular pundit.

Whatever and whomever it is, most people follow the stars who embody their values or demonstrate greatness in their field of dreams. They look up to this figure, often idolize their achievements, perhaps place them on a pedestal, and follow with interest what they say or do. These celebrities personify what we want to claim about ourselves in some way—the kind of lifestyle we admire, the type of image we'd like to present, the things we think and believe about the world, the manner we'd like to express ourselves, and the like. That's why we're fascinated by them; that's why we are intrigued by what they say and do; that's why we follow certain stars and study their movement.

In many ways, the plethora of stars in our cultural universe is not unlike the stars we see overhead. Some stand out more than others; some are visible for a season, but then disappear for a time. Some are constant, with steady, orderly presence, in season and out of season; some flash across the sky seemingly out of nowhere, only to fizzle in the changing atmosphere. The stars we follow may last a lifetime or they may come and go with the rising of the sun.

Americans are not unusual with this fascination with the stars. Humankind has been doing this since the embryonic stages of civilization. The only difference in modern times is that we don't define or develop our pantheon of cultural and political deities in quite the same manner. There's no official imprimatur from an emperor or monarch or pope; our idols typically come from the cultural and political trends of our time, whether or not they are worthy of honor, let alone adulation.

That said, like the ancient Greek and Roman gods, our cultural icons can represent our highest ideals or our worst character, with often a mix that sustains their fame or notoriety. However they are portrayed, their value to society is often magnified far beyond what they actually contribute compared to others, thus requiring a more circumspect estimation of what celebrities represent and mean to us over time. As we see far too often, not all that glitters is gold.

The story of Epiphany, of course, is about following a star—a story narrated solely by the Gospel writer, Matthew. Tradition has interpreted it much in the way it is described. Namely, that the “star” followed by the Magi was an actual astral body that traversed across the skies of the eastern Mediterranean region two thousand years ago until it magically stopped over the little village of Bethlehem in Judea, casting its aura over the place where Jesus was born. Since this can't literally happen, down through the ages efforts have been made to explain the story by associating the natal star with celestial phenomena such as comets, asteroids, or meteors that could have flashed for a short period of time, compelling these mystified magi to follow its direction across the deserts of Mesopotamia, until they

eventually arrived in Jerusalem. There, as the story unfolds, they were told of Micah's prophecy, which then led them to the ancient city of David, where they met and paid homage to the newly born Christ child. Interpreting the story in this manner has made it more palatable to modern minds.

As reasonable as this sounds, though, this was not the way astrologers would have read the skies or followed the stars. Magi, as stargazers, interpreted the astral sights in relation to each other and within constellations—each of which conveyed a certain meaning. Magi were considered wise because as astrologers they would discern the portents provided by the gods in the night skies and then advise kings and emperors. Magi played an important role in Persia, Babylonia, and Greco-Roman civilizations, as rulers attempted to establish and protect their empires. Even in the book of Daniel, much is made of the role that astrologers played in Babylon as cosmic guides and interpreters of dreams. They were “intelligence gatherers,” but their “intelligence” came from interpreting the events and signs in the skies.

With this in mind, many have suggested that it's possible what could have occurred was a conjunction of the planets, Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars, taking place in the constellation, Pisces. Jupiter represented royal leadership—a king or emperor, for example. Saturn was identified as the star of the Amorites of the fertile crescent region. Mars was the sign of a conqueror, and Pisces was a constellation sometimes associated with the last days and with the Hebrew people. If this “star” rose from the eastern horizon, it meant that a new era was about to commence.

If you combine all these signs, the Magi could have read the sky in this way: a new ruler was to be born in Palestine to the Hebrew people, who would usurp the current rulers. If that's what the gods were proclaiming in the stars, then customary to the day, their king—Persian or otherwise—would send an official entourage to pay homage to this new leadership as part of a shrewd political and military strategy. Overtures to the potential ruler could make an ally instead of an enemy. It's possible that Matthew may have had this in mind while crafting the story of the Magi coming to Bethlehem.

Whether or not any of this is historical is difficult to say, since Matthew is the sole source of this storyline and he may have simply drawn upon a local legend while he was writing his Gospel in ancient Antioch. But for our interests, his intent wasn't to merely to convey a local legend or even chronicle history; rather, as a Jew he was making an important theological and spiritual declaration about Jesus' message regarding the unfolding realm of God. That is, if foreign kings and ancient sages could discern the coming of a new era for Israel, why did Jesus' own people miss the significance when their messiah was present among them?

More to the point, what kind of leader were they looking for? Who would they respect? What vision for their nation would inspire them? Which campaign would they get behind? Who would be their heroes? What destiny did they strive for as a people, and who would lead them to their new promised land? In other words, what rising star would they follow in order to make their peace with heaven and find their place on earth?

Matthew was posing these crucial questions symbolically in the portrayal of the Magi following a star to Bethlehem. The type of leader who Israel, like the Magi, should be drawn to was the one who would bring ultimate peace to the people of Judea and Galilee, unlike the ones they normally followed. This one who came as a second David (symbolized by Bethlehem) would teach them to reconcile with their enemies and make one new humanity out of the old—one where racial, ethnic, and religious identities would no longer divide humanity and where control of territory and military might no longer would define what peace would be. He would be a messianic leader in a way that few within Judea would discern or appreciate at the time; yet, in the wider world, from the perspective of the wisest ones, he would represent a saving grace for everyone. This, I believe, was how Matthew chose to begin his story about Jesus.

Now, as Christians, we affirm this theological belief as central to our faith. But, if we think more deeply about this, these same questions are posed to us as well. This ancient story reminds us that we offer our response whenever we celebrate and follow the stars in our own world. Every day you and I make some claim about what we value or honor, or believe is right or true or worthy of our attention or praise based on the particular stars we choose to follow.

So Matthew asks us the same: who are our cultural heroes and why? Who do we follow that exemplifies what we want to be? Who will lead us to the life we aspire to or to the world we desire? What do we value, personally, and what garners our support in society? What signs do we point to that indicate we're doing well and which ones indicate to us we're headed in the wrong direction? The bottom

line is, what is it that inspires us, guides us, leads us to a place where we believe we will be blessed, perhaps where we even view it as sacred? These are not insignificant matters to ponder, especially when we begin another year of our lives.

Let me add, even if we embrace the deeper message behind this story of Epiphany that Matthew has provided for us, we should be aware of how counterintuitive the realm of God is to the conventional thinking and wisdom of our celebrity-laden world. It requires a discerning mind to discover its truth and a wise and willing heart to follow its way. There are many stars out there we can follow and many of them will lead us in directions farther away from Bethlehem than toward it.

Rather than being enamored by the glitter and gold as most people are inclined to be, the way of Christ beckons us to be attentive to the uncommon stars that rise up among us—those who provide a remarkable witness of what is truly good, altruistic, merciful, honorable, honest, just, generous, reconciling, and grace-filled—those who, like Jesus, are among heaven’s brightest stars. No superficial glitz or glamour will we likely find; nor will greed or lust for power of status and privilege be lionized among them; nor will we find meanness of spirit or hardness of heart toward those less fortunate. Instead, these stars will bring brightness to the landscape of life around them in a way that benefits everyone, not just themselves or their nation or their kind.

These are the stars that lead us back to Bethlehem, that bring us to a place where the divine presence is born anew and to the stories that bear heaven’s gifts. These are the stars we are to follow.

For that is where the Magi went, that is what sages recognize is worthy of praise—the place where the humble, the discerning, the merciful and hopeful gather: the place where wise ones go—a place where the brightest stars of Bethlehem lead us all to a more perfect and peaceful destiny.

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