

Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

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A Spiritual Practice for Epiphany

Beholding Ourselves into Change

Christmas carols and folk retellings of the story of the Magi often highlight the exotic aspects of Matthew 2, particularly the magical star that moves across the sky and the lavish gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the Magi carry with them. However, these exotic details miss the story's main point.

I suggest that the most prominent feature about Matthew 2:1-12 is the spiritual practice of seeing—but unfortunately, this is not always evident in modern translations. For inexplicable reasons, the New Revised Standard Version fails to translate in Matthew 2:1-12 two of six appearances of the verb *eídon*, one of several Greek verbs for seeing. When all six uses of this word are faithfully translated, it becomes clearer that beholding has a decisive role in this story.

To highlight this, I've reprinted the text below, noting in red the two appearances of *eídon* that the NRSV does not translate (vv. 1, 9), and noting in brown the four appearances of *eídon* that it does translate (vv. 2, 9, 10, 11).

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, *[idou, or "behold," appears here in the Greek text]* wise men from the

East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed *[eídomen, or "we beheld"]* his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king,

they set out; and *[idou, or "behold," appears here in the Greek text]* there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen *[eídon, or "they beheld"]* at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

¹⁰ When they saw *[idóntes, or "while they were beholding"]* that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw *[eídon, or "they beheld"]* the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure

chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Five observations. **First, the Magi had a disciplined habit of beholding.** Perhaps they had been keeping some type of "star journal" that documented which stars belonged where, allowing them to track the appearance of this odd

continued on reverse

Eídon

A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament



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Beholding Ourselves into Change (continued)

star which behaved differently. In any case, they realized God was doing a new thing because they were committed practitioners of looking (vv. 2, 9, 10).

Their actions might inspire us to keep a record of what we see, perhaps in a sketchbook, journal, photography album, or digital recorder. Keeping some kind of record of what happens to us can be a useful spiritual exercise.

Once we record our events, feelings, and ideas, we can then look for the unusual which does not fit the pattern. When the star appeared in the east, the Magi soon knew something unusual was afoot—this particular star wasn't normally there. The odd and unexpected may be a clue that God is up to something redemptive.

Second, beholding put the Magi in motion. While the act of beholding often begins in quiet meditation, it does not end there. Instead it leads us to some type of action. Stargazing usually needs some quietness and stillness, but for the Magi this was insufficient. Their quest to behold more fully the activity of God pulled them out of their homes—indeed out of their native land—and set them on pilgrimage.

For many of us, passive beholding will not be enough either: it must form the fruit of action. It may propel us, as it did the Magi, to set out on a journey and take presents to give away, or to engage in some other act. Beholding leads us to do something in response to what we have seen.

Third, the journey of beholding ultimately led the Magi to worship. Their worship was accomplished in three acts: kneeling, paying homage, and offering gifts (v. 11).

We too may allow the practice of beholding to lead us to joyful worship. There are other options, of course, beyond kneeling, bowing, and offering presents. We might sing a song, write a poem, dance in the living room, paint a picture, throw a party, take a walk, laugh with friends, or bring our joy to church on Sunday. Whatever our favored mode, we might abandon ourselves to praise.



I have already hinted at the fourth observation: Matthew 2:1-12 beckons us to join the Magi in the spiritual practice of beholding. This is where the omissions of verses 1 and 9 become crucial (in red on the previous page). The Greek *idoù* in those two verses is the second person singular command form of *eido* and essentially means *Look! See! Behold! Perceive!* However, the text cannot be addressing this command to any of the charac-

ters in the story—instead the command is addressed to us, the readers and hearers of the text.

Idoù, in other words, summons us to participate with the Magi in beholding the events of the story. In our mind's eye, we behold the Magi coming to Jerusalem (v. 1). In our imagination, we join the Magi in gazing on the star rising in the east (v. 2). When the Magi leave Herod's palace and set out for Bethlehem, we participate with them in beholding the star ahead on the road (v. 9). We vicariously join the Magi in feeling "overwhelmed with joy" when the star stops over the house where Jesus is (v. 10). And tag-

ging along into the house after the Magi, we too behold on the inner screen of our minds "the child with Mary his mother" (v. 11). It naturally follows that this spiritual practice of beholding will

draw us, like the Magi, into acts of worship at the sight of Emmanuel, God with us (1:23).

Fifth, *idoù* is in the middle voice, a grammatical form indicating that the people who behold are in turn deeply affected by what they see. Simply put, what we behold changes us. Beholding is a transformative activity that can bring us to faith—as it did the Magi—or deepen the faith we already have. *Gloria in excelsis Deo!*