

MORAVIAN MOMENT #89

What is the significance of Epiphany?

Epiphany is a Greek word meaning "to manifest" or "to show" and is a Christian feast day which celebrates the "shining forth" or revelation of God in human form in the person of Christ. The feast falls on January 6. Western Christians commemorate the visitation of the Magi to the child Jesus on this day, i.e., his manifestation to the Gentiles. Eastern Christians commemorate the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, his manifestation as the Son of God to the world. It is also called **Theophany** ("manifestation of God"), especially by Eastern Christians. The Moravian Church acknowledges Epiphany as the end of the Advent/Christmas season. The Moravian Church sees it as a launching pad for the Mission of the church.

The observance had its origins in the Eastern Christian Churches, and was originally a general celebration of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and included the commemoration of: his birth; the visit of the Magi, or "Wise Men" from Persia Magi's being Persian priests, who arrived in Bethlehem; all of Jesus' childhood events, up to and including his baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist; and even the miracle at the Wedding of Cana in Galilee. However, it seems fairly clear that the Baptism was the event predominantly commemorated.

The date of the feast was very early fixed on January 6. Ancient Liturgies speak of *Illuminatio*, *Manifestatio*, *Declaratio* (Illumination, Manifestation, Declaration). In Matthew 3:13–17; Luke 3:22; and John 2:1–11; the Baptism and the Marriage at Cana are dwelt upon. Western Christians have traditionally emphasized the "Revelation to the Gentiles" mentioned in Luke, where the term Gentile means all non-Jewish peoples. The Biblical Magi, who represent the non-Jewish peoples of the world, paid homage to the infant Jesus in stark contrast to Herod the Great (King of Judea) who sought to kill him. However, in this event there is also a revelation to the Children of Israel. Saint John Chrysostom identified the significance of the meeting between the Magi and Herod's court: "The star had been hidden from them so that, on finding themselves without their guide, they would have no alternative but to consult the Jews. In this way the birth of Jesus would be made known to all." (*St. John Chrysostom: Homilies on St. Matthew 7*)

The earliest reference to Epiphany as a Christian feast was in the year 361, by Ammianus Marcellinus Epiphanius who said January 6 is *hemera genethlion toutestin epiphanion* (Christ's "Birthday; that is, His Epiphany"). He also asserts that the Miracle at Cana occurred on the same calendar day. Although the celebration isn't celebrated as a public holiday many people in the eastern parts still celebrate it.

However, this was not the case everywhere. Saint John Cassian says that even in his time (beginning of the 5th century) the Egyptian monasteries still celebrated the Nativity and Baptism together on January 6. The Armenian Apostolic Church still continues to celebrate January 6 as the only commemoration of the Nativity.

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