

An Epiphany Crossing

Programming Matthew 2:1-12 For Readers Today

Robert W. Bertram

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I. Diagnosis

In this Matthean cliff-hanger about the gullible foreigners (“magi from the East”) and their predatory host (Herod), the real suspense comes only when we recognize that the same plot which imperiled the characters in this ancient story still imperils its readers today. If the story is God’s way of diagnosing or “seeing through” Matthew’s readers then and now, what is our problem which we here “see him seeing?” Since such a large diagnosis could be too intimidating to be credible all at once, we had better approach it one step at a time.

Preliminary Diagnosis: Astray

The first problem is that the magi wind up in Jerusalem by mistake – not by accident but by a quite sophisticated mistake. Notice, it is not only Herod and the Jerusalem establishment who are the problem characters in this story. So are the magi, at least at first. At this early stage in the diagnosis the magi suffer from much the same fault which besets the Jerusalemites. They all are misled by an initial prejudice, albeit a reasonable prejudice, about what “the newborn king of the Jews, the Messiah” must be like. Call it “The Jerusalem Bias.”

The kind of king the magi were looking for is the kind anyone would look for who knows anything about authority. And who knows

more about that than the smart wordling or, in Matthean terms, “the Gentiles?” “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority them.” (20:25) As one middle-management Gentile put it: “I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” (8:9) That is Gentile authority: some are “in” it only by having others be “under” it.

So it is understandable that the Gentile magi, who also were authorities in some field or other, should set out from home with the same preconception of kingship. You can tell by the kind of presents they had packed along, fit for a worldly king. That is a dead giveaway. Moreover, look where they were heading. What further need had they of “the star!” Thank you, they could make it the rest of the way on their own, to Jerusalem of course. Where else but in the capital of his realm would any self-respecting “king of the Jews” be born?

But then how were the poor magi to know that Jewish kings are supposed to be categorically different, especially when Herod himself, the sitting king could not disabuse them? He likewise assumed that any future king of his people, indeed any “Messiah” (v.4), would have to be a contender for Herod’s own Gentile brand of supremacy. For isn’t it always so: whether Jew or Gentile, someone always has to do the subjecting and therefore, some others the submitting? Herod’s own subjects agreed with that—and all Jerusalem with him.” (v. 3) Oh, eventually they might oppose the king— for his “soft raiment” and “kings houses” (11:8), his philandering and political executions – and the king in turn might “fear the people” (14:5) lest they should gain the upper hand. But what if they did? In that case it would be they, “the people,” who now would be in control and someone else would still be *under* control. Either way, in Jewish Jerusalem the magi would find their Goy (Gentile) prejudice about authority roundly endorsed.

The Jerusalem clergy were no exception – “all the chief priests and scribes of the people.” (v.4) They were authorities of the Jewish Scripture, a clout which they had over layman Herod. Scripture, too, was perceived by them just as it was by Herod: an authority to be submitted to merely because of its superiority, meaning its superior rightness. No wonder that, when this Scripture contradicted their Goy *Vorverstaendnis* about the nature of rulership, they were constitutionally unable to take the hint, right while they quoted the passage word for word. They could read the directions to misguided strangers but could not take the directions themselves. There must be some psychiatric term for that pathological loss of direction, something like “The Goy Vertigo.” Child in Bethlehem.

Is it all that different in your religious establishment? Or mine? Test question: where would we go to find who is in charge of it? To what address? And why there? Is it because we assume that that is where the church’s real authorities are: the church bureaucrats, the professors who cite Scripture, “the people” who topple the bureaucrats and the professors? How Goy! “All these things do the Gentiles seek” (6:32) and they dead-end in Jerusalem by mistake, with all those exotic trinkets on their hands.

Advanced Diagnosis: Exclusive

The worse problem – worse than this Gentile authority confusion which like a Bermuda Triangle disorients ourselves—is the way in which this confused authority has to fear others, and has to purge them as rivals. I say “has to,” for Herod’s problem (he carries the story’s “problem” role alone from here on) is not only a problem of his own making but is compounded more and more by factors beyond his own control, to which he then must react in character. He is now the problem’s pawn as well as its perpetrator, not only just its subject but increasingly its

object. Given his false orientation to authority, one party after another appears to him as a threat whom he must then eliminate. Diagnostically, Herod continues as a present option for us all.

The most immediate threat is the Child in Bethlehem. See how the news about him leaves Herod “startled” (v. 5), so much so that Herod has to have him killed. (He succeeds posthumously.) The tragic irony is that Herod had to expunge the Child physically because he had already expunged him theologically, having replaced him with a fantasy, an imaginary rival for the Herodian throne. *That* “newborn king of the Jews” on whom Herod now put a contract existed nowhere except in Herod’s one-track delusions about authority.

Up against that authoritarian fixation, this contrasting Davidic Child-King from a burg like Bethlehem was simply inconceivable, also for Herod’s theological experts. Years later their successors still could not imagine why David the king had ever deferred to his own off-spring as “Lord”: how on earth could the child be both? Ever since, this childlike Christ has been unnerving us theologians into re-casting him as some Goy authority, legalistic or antinomian, thus disposing of him.

But it isn’t only this Jewish Child, Herod’s own best hope, and it isn’t only Herod’s Jewish roots in the history of Davidic promise from which Herod has to cut himself off, presumably to protect himself and Judaism. No, he must exclude other Jews as well, including those very legitimators of his, the scribes and priests, who cannot be trusted with his scheme: they might turn it against him. (v 7) Next, he reaches “into Bethlehem and the region all around,” where Matthew reports him to have “massacred all the boys of two years of age and under.” (v. 16) To argue about the historicity of that claim would at this point evade the issue. For isn’t there historicity enough in all those later

“Herods,” especially Christian ones, who still destroy their fellow-Jews under the same Herodian pretext “that I too may come and pay [Jesus Christ] homage?” (v. 8)

It isn't only Jews, however, whom Herod schemes against but Gentiles too, maybe Gentiles most of all. I mean these Gentile magi who arouse Herod's jealousy by acting as though a Jewish king could somehow be a welcome ruler for themselves, Goy outsiders, and at the same time be a “king of the Jews” – a wild combination which no doubt had often fired Herod's own ambition albeit without real hope of lasting success. Such an unrealistic extension of Jewish kingship would already be enough to rule out the Bethlehem child as an impostor. At any rate, whether or not Herod thought that way, many later did who resented Jesus for fraternizing with “tax-collectors and sinners.” Some of my fellow-Jews, I think, are most offended not so much by Jesus himself as by the objectionable Gentile company he keeps, those sinful and unwelcome gate-crashers whom he brought home with him and who because of his unilateral invitation claim equal rights within the Jewish family. To which exclusivistic prejudice the Matthean gospel seems to say, How Goy! Herod, for his part, found no better use for his Gentile guests than to exploit them as means for getting at the Child. And they naively went along, “obeying the king.” (v. 9)

Herod's kind of Goy authority would have persecuted Jews and Gentiles whether or not the Child had appeared. That kind of authority always does, whether in its civil or ecclesiastical guise. It has to remove competitors, real or imaginary, precisely to stay in power as that kind of overling-underling authority. What the coming of the Child did was to provoke that holocaustic drive into the open and expose it, a kind of pre-Apocalypse anticipating The Day when this Child would return as Son of man to complete the exposure. Meanwhile, the Child's authority has already been extended to everyone, to all

nationalities and ethnic communities. (28:18,19) Therefore, authoritarian oppression against absolutely everyone, the hungry and thirsty and strangers and naked and prisoners, is oppression against Christ himself. (25:41-45) Which leaves little doubt as to who it is whom Herod's sort of Goy authority, legalist or antinomian, must ultimately exclude: not only the Child or his peoples but the Father.

Final Diagnosis: Excluded

The worst of the problem – worse than the misguided system of Goy authority, worse even than its paranoid exclusivism—is that it gets its way. And it does so with massive cosmic, even divine cooperation. Herod the excluder is himself excluded. He pulls the door shut, but there is also someone on the other side pushing, and locking. Herod saw to it that no one would be marching up from Bethlehem. No one did, not even the magi he had counted on. If what he had wanted was to be left alone, then how alone he is left is more than ever he could have wanted.

Herod's conspiracy, already with the help of the unsuspecting magi, seemed to be moving right on schedule directly to Bethlehem, with even the star reappearing to provide extra logistical support. But then one thing led to another. Once in Bethlehem the magi, who on their own were really not all that clever, just happened to have this dream: "Take the Jerusalem bypass." So it turns out that Someone else had been riding coattail on Herod's scheme. It wasn't only Herod who had wanted the magi in Bethlehem, and who got them there thanks to Herod's cunning. Herod the Goy-user was himself being used, so was his Goy authority, against himself. What had begun as a perfectly workable plan to rid himself of the Child gets out of hand and becomes instead a way for the Child to be rid of Herod, permanently.

In face of this uproariously funny Jewish-Christian wisdom story, our own problem seems to be how to keep from laughing – something I suspect the magi could not manage either, all the way home. I recall with amusement G. B. Shaw's Blanco Postnet, who concludes that there are always two games being played, the game we play together and the game being played on us. But then, on second thought, I recall that Herod, in being beat out at his own game and with his cooperation, is hardly an exception. Over and over throughout this Matthean gospel Jesus repeats the selfsame warning to his own followers. There may still be cause for a last laugh, except that now the question has shifted: how to keep from being the Herods on whom the laugh is?

II. Prognosis

If that much was diagnosis, God seeing through us, then at least as surely is this a story of his seeing us through, prognosis. But that also is too much to believe all at once. Gradual is more credible.

Preliminary Prognosis: Shepherded

The first factor in the Christian solution, though not all there is to it, is always the christological factor. That comes first if only because it is the most obtrusive. Where else but in the Christian gospel do you begin by diagnosing one set of patients and then, when you come to their prognosis, suddenly change the subject to quite another Patient? The practice of “changing the subject” – not only from ourselves to God, which is hardly unique to Christians, but from ourselves to this no less human and harried Child – is basic to every Christian crossing. It happens also to be odd, hence hard to ignore. All the more reason to start there.

If Herod's preoccupation with Goy authority fated him to exclude

others and ultimately to be excluded by the highest of all authorities, a fate from which the magi themselves were snatched only by outside intervention, by what authority can this “newborn king of the Jews” intervene in behalf of his friends? Answer: by Jewish authority. That Jesus should arise out of Judaism and be born in Judea (v. 1) and, after making symbolic “exodus” from Egypt and undergoing “exile” up north amidst “the nations” in Nazareth, should eventually return to Jerusalem, in that Jewish capital to have his authority finally confirmed, was no historical accident. On the contrary, that was all “necessary,” altogether according to historic promise. Only a Jew could be (amending Bonhoeffer) a man for *all* others, God’s authoritative Everyone.

Christologically, however, the acid question remains, Why just this Jew? And read “Jew” not only ethnically but theologically. What does God see in this Jew? Not just: what do we see in him? Or even: what do we see of God in him? But first: what does God see in Jesus – of himself and of us, together? In any honest christology “from below” Jesus dare not be exempt from that critical question any more than Herod or the scribes or the rest of us are. What is it, up against God, that qualifies Jesus for an authority unlike all Goy authority and superior to it? *Coram Deo* as well as *coram hominibus*! Before God as well as before human beings!

Let us not piously spare Jesus that tough question, as other christological fashions have done, by asking merely what difference Jesus makes to us, his human friends. No, what difference does he make to God, that his friends should thereby qualify as God’s friends? Otherwise, with only his effect upon us to consider, we conveniently relieve him of that ultimate accountability which all humans have to face and, instead, we predefine him one-sidedly as *God* facing *us* – to be sure, God in human form. Once the question is so hedged, Jesus evaporates

into God's "revelation" to us, or God's incarnational-sacramental "drawing near" to us, a kind of divine-human tubular extension of deity into the world. Then his earthy Jewish biography functions chiefly as a front for God, God's pantomime or mating dance vis-a-vis us. But that depreciates how this mundane Jew, a person in his own right, was himself vis-a-vis the heavenly Father (and still is), not just one with the Father but also "distinct" from him, whose fatherly confirmation Jesus quite historically had to win.

It is game of Moltmann to reintroduce the big christological question (would that he made more of it), "What does Jesus' death on the cross mean for God?" Bolder yet is the version of that question which seems to inform the Matthean gospel: what difference did Jesus make to God, that this one Jew at last enabled God to be the different God he had so long promised to be – "to all nations?" What difference did Jesus make to God, that he, of all "the sons of Abraham" and "sons of David" at last was that one son of theirs who was as well the universal "Son of God?" What difference did Jesus make to God, that his Jewish style at last allowed God to duplicate the impossible "reign of heaven" in a mundane equivalent, "upon the earth" – and to put this very Jew in charge of it all as junior king? Granted that it is Jesus' resurrection which confirms historically that he makes some difference to God. But what difference does that confirm, other than that God finds Jesus himself unsinkable? What is it historically about Jesus which endears also his friends to God?

The answer Matthew calls "the good news of the kingdom." (24:14; 4:23; 9:35) The thing about Jesus which made such a difference to God is that it was "the sinners" who made such a difference to Jesus. Anyone who meant so much to him as the sinners did, he was entitled to and was authorized to bring them home with him to his Father's party. That about Jesus is the long-awaited

Jewishness which proved him to be his Father's Son: his Davidic, shepherdly compassion for the strays. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. " (9:36)

How hilarious, therefore, by hind-sight, that Jesus' royal birthplace should be obscure little Bethlehem, the ancestral town of Judaism's shepherd king, for which the old prophet had seemed almost apologetic: "And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are by no means least ..." (v. 6) To this offbeat town the straying, sheeplike magi had to be led gawking and uncomprehending by every trick in The Book, and by authorities in the Jerusalem travel bureau who could not comprehend their own directions. It was because this Jew-Child in sheeptown Bethlehem would be (as the chief priests' own travel directions' tried to tell them) the one who at last "would shepherd my people Israel" (v. 6) that the heavenly Father himself could finally end his search for candidates and announce, *This is my beloved Son*" (3:17) – the one by whom the sinners were so beloved. How kingly of Jesus, how congenitally like his Father who sired him single-handedly. (1:18,20)

That is what cost the Child his life from the moment it began. But the price which he paid for so identifying with his friends the sinners, "his life as a ransom for many" (20:28), is the very basis of his new authority, not just the style of it. For his befriending the rejects, for treating them as his equals and thus upending the whole Goy authority system of topdog-underdog, "the chief priests and elders of the people" demanded of him "by what authority" he did that. (21:23) Really, though they had never caught on, he had anticipated their question long before in the case of the paralytic boy. At that time their objection had been not to the boy's being healed and certainly not to his being cured of sin as a precondition of his medical cure. Only antinomians, with their own inverted brand of authoritarianism,

would oppose that. No, what offended the scribes is that they mistook Jesus for an antinomian. The way Jesus claimed to get rid of the boy's sin was to forgive it. Understandably that pretension struck the authorities as cheap grace. If heaven comes to earth to make sinners "righteous," surely it does so not merely by forgiving them out of hand. That, as Jesus seems to agree, would be too easy.

But what his critics missed was Jesus' devastating irony: so you think my absolving the boy is "easy." (9:5) Have you forgotten what gives the Son of man his unique authority: not some Goyish barking out a command that the sin should vanish but rather that, as the suffering Servant of the Lord, "he *took* our infirmities and *bore* our diseases" himself? (8:17) His forgiving sin is authorized by his own "blood of the covenant poured out for many." (26:28) So his being born in out-of-the-way Bethlehem, almost snubbed by the magi, hunted by Herod and misrepresented by Herod's theologians were not just attacks on the Child's authority. They were also the making of it.

Advanced Prognosis: Involving

At first the sinners' rescue had to be taken out of their hands by the Messiah's intervening for them, seeing that the Herodian dimensions of their problem were beyond their control, necessitating a "change of subject." But once this messianic Subject intervenes, his patients immediately become agents again and are immediately pressed back into the most responsible, exalting subjecthood. They believe. Or in Matthew's elaborate version of the magi, "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (v.10) as though that response of theirs was an essential condition of the Child's successful kingship. Where the rumor of the Child had left Herod and all Jerusalem "startled," the magi by contrast are characterized as "overjoyed."

True, their joy is only as warranted as their object, namely, whether the Child truly is “the newborn king of the Jews.” Still, it is a peculiarity of his sinner-loving authority to return the compliment back upon them, on their quite human response. Yet this Christ exerts his authority by raving about their response with epithets which should properly be reserved only for deity: “Great is your faith” (15:28, 8:10) “Your faith has made you well, your faith has saved you.” (9:22) If the contrary authority of the world is inevitably exclusive, the new authority of the Child is radically inclusive.

Final Prognosis: Returned

The best thing of all about Jesus’ childlike authority is that it relieves the hostile earthly authorities of their false priority but, in that very sublimation reinstates them to their intended dignity. Perhaps the loveliest thing the Jewish Child does for the magi, or really gets them to do, is to make the most of what they are: the Goyish gifts they bring, the Goyish place where they live, the Goyish things they do for a living. The Child’s world-embracing authority finds new room for all that.

When “they opened their treasure-boxes and brought out gifts for him, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (v. 11), there is not the slightest suggestion that “Mary his mother” so much as harrumphed or tried politely to explain that this Child, you see, is here to do his own giving, not to be given to, and that after all he is not named “Jesus” (Yahweh saves) for nothing, to be demeaned by such materialistic ostentation. She doesn’t even say what (in the structural counterpart at the other end of the gospel) the pious disciples say: “Why this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.” (26:8, 9) Perhaps the later Jesus would have put the magi at ease by reinterpreting their incongruous gifts: “In pouring

this ointment on my body [they have] done it to prepare me for burial." (26:12) But the point was not to put the magi at ease, a question of etiquette. The fact is, they were, though unintentionally, more than half right: he does have authority also "upon the earth." (9:6, 28:18)

But therefore so do they, his friends. Nowhere in the story are the magi advised, now that they have been inducted into the kingdom of heaven, that henceforth they had best withdraw from the secular world. Jerusalem may have been under a travel advisory, but for other reasons. We may be sure that where they did return instead, "to their own country," (v. 12) was no haven from Goy authority. Neither were they forbidden to resume such authority in their accustomed vocations (whatever it is magi do) any more than the Goy centurion had to resign his commission and hang up his sword. (8:13) But what the magi did do with their old authority now that it had been redeemed by the Child, how they redeployed it "not in order to be served but to serve" – to serve the Messiah's sick and poor and the naked and the prisoners and the unforgiven – may well have alienated the secular authority system which they were now infiltrating. So what? Longevity isn't everything. Anyway, servants are not above their masters – like their master, yes, but not above. (10:24) Nor need they ever again aspire to be, now that his mastery and theirs is likewise cruciform.

But that is probably when the magi came up with earthier gifts than ever: when they, the once unwelcome strangers in Jerusalem, found strangers of their own back home to welcome and so risked more estrangement for themselves by earthing the Father's heaven there among the casualties of Goy authority. Then they, still as naive as ever, must have discovered that they had just hit upon the Child's most favorite tastes in material gifts: "It was I who was a stranger and you welcomed me." (25:35) Imagine the laughter.

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