

# The Epiphany of Our Lord

## THE SHOWING GOD

Matthew 2:1-12

## The Epiphany of Our Lord

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

1In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, "Where is the child who was born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, are by no means least among the rulers of Judea; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then 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." 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

*[Since the fourth century, the Western Church has celebrated Epiphany (from the Greek word epiphaneia; not in our text) as the “manifestation” or “appearance” of Jesus to the Gentiles, that is, non-Jews. Gentiles are here represented by Oriental “wise men” (the original Greek word is magoi) who, unlike Jewish priests, could decipher astrological events such as the rising star that they were following. Thus, a more exact English translation of magoi is “astrologers.”]*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: The Great Misunderstanding**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Question of Jesus’ Kingship***

The astrologers, having interpreted the rising star, inferred that the newborn child was the rightful “king of the Jews.” They came to “pay him homage” (v. 2) as a king and to bring him the kingly gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In effect, the astrologers were the Welcoming Committee from their own “country” (v. 12). King Herod, however, “and all Jerusalem with him” (that is, the leadership) were unsettled and confused by the news, perhaps even “frightened” (v. 3). If this newborn child is indeed the “king of the Jews” (see 27:37)—that is, the expected “Messiah,” the “ruler of Judea,” the “shepherd of Israel,” then who is King Herod?

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Paying Homage to Jesus’ Kingship***

The astrologers simply came “to pay homage” to the newborn king. For them, the child was a worldly king of great significance (hence the star) to whom great respect was due (hence the homage). Although “overwhelmed with joy” (v. 10) at finding him, there is no implication in the original Greek that their “homage” was to the savior of the world, or that they had any

intent to worship the child. But King Herod (appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate, 38-4 BCE) feared what worldly kings always fear, that the new king will seek his death (2:16). For him, the newborn king, whether the promised Messiah or not, was a definite threat. Over against a king who is God-appointed, Herod's titular appointment as king of the Jews would be revealed to everyone as the sham it actually was, undermining his hold on power. Herod himself, not the God of Israel or the Messiah of Israel, was the only king worth dying for, or so he believed.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Showing Jesus' Kingship***

The astrologers and King Herod knew that God created the stars and moved them in their heavenly courses. God, in moving the rising star to rest upon Jesus (v. 9), showed on a cosmic scale that this king was of great significance. That much was clear. But the absolute necessity of Jesus, for the astrologers and for King Herod, was beyond knowing or believing. The Gentile astrologers could not know how feeble their understanding of God's greatness was; and they could not see beyond their astrological wisdom or believe the depth of their sinfulness before God. Nor did Herod the Great understand God's greatness, that the Messiah would appear in weakness (and thus not be a threat to Herod's worldly power) in order to destroy Herod's pitiless fears. For without this newborn king, both the astrologers and King Herod—and us with them—remain in the sin and miseries of our own devising, believing that worldly wisdom (or religion) or worldly kings offer any comfort and joy before God.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Showing God**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Love Shown in Jesus the Christ***

That this newborn king was indeed the king of the Jews, the

Messiah, the ruler of Judea, and the shepherd of Israel was borne out, for all the world to see, in his crucifixion (27:11, 37); and affirmed by God in his resurrection (28:7-9). In Jesus, God demonstrated his relentless love for all peoples by taking their sin upon himself and showing the whole world what sin looks like in the eyes of God, and in so doing removing the barrier between God and humanity (27:51). In Jesus' crucifixion, God himself is "manifest"; God himself "appears"; God "shows" himself to the world. In Christ, we see God and ourselves most fully and clearly. At the very point at which our sin against God is revealed most horribly, God's love for us is displayed most decisively.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Paying Homage to God's Incarnate Love***

The worldly "joy" (v. 10) and "homage" (v. 11) of the astrologers to the newborn king foreshadowed the great "joy" (28:8) and worshipful "homage" (28:9, 17; same Greek word) of the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. That all of God's promises to Abraham (and through him to the world) were fulfilled in Jesus is shown in the faith of those who welcome the Crucified and Resurrected One into their hearts, thereby entrusting their lives to the king of the Jews—God's love incarnate.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Showing God's Love through Us***

God continues to "manifest" or "show" his love for the world through us, incarnately (in our flesh). Whenever we, trusting in God's love for us and for the world, love our neighbor (anyone and everyone), we are showing our neighbor and the world what God's love looks like. Astoundingly, such love, weak and feeble though it may appear, brings the merciful presence of God to bear upon the world by pointing to the cross and to God's kingly love there displayed.