

# The Epiphany of Our Lord

## RE-PRIORITIZING AUTHORITY

Matthew 2:1-12

## The Epiphany of Our Lord

### Analysis by Steve Kuhl

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been 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 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. 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.

*For a much more expanded crossings-style analysis of this text see Bob Bertram's "An Epiphany Crossings on the Crossings website at <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/Epiphany2.pdf>.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: The Mis-Prioritizing of Gentile Authority**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Astray**

The whole thrust of this Epiphany story is about diagnosing and prognosing (sic!) the complex relationship that exists between Christ and the world; and the various characters represent various features of that relationship. The initial diagnosis is exhibited in the assumptions that the guide the Magi's journey. These wise men, as we call them, who might be likened as "scientists" in their day, are in search of the "king of the Jews." By that title, "king of the Jews," Matthew means a new form or style of reliable authority upon which all humanity can ground its life: call it Jewish or messianic authority. We dare not let go unnoticed, then, how these wise men are like us post-moderns—searching and grasping for certainty in life. Still, what makes them even more like us is the fact that in their quest they are led astray not by the star or even their "science" (that is, their observational skills), but by their bias: we'll call it, their "Jerusalem bias." They assumed that truly reliable authority was styled after the best of "gentile" or secular authority: authority based on the big stick, "authority over" (20:25), like the kings wield who rule in great capital cities. Indeed, they cannot even begin to imagine what Jesus' "Jewish" kind of authority might look like. Descriptions

of which come later as Matthew's grown up Jesus teaches through such telling phrases as "turn the other cheek" (5:39) and "whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (20:27). No wonder the wise men ended up far astray from where God was leading them—in mighty Jerusalem and not lowly Bethlehem. Would we do any better?

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Defiant***

The advanced diagnosis is represented by the reaction of Herod to the news of a new born "king of the Jews." Deeper than the Magi's "Jerusalem bias" is Herod's outright defiance of the "king of the Jews." Notice that this defiance is only magnified when the Jewish prophetic writings, which Herod supposedly honored, confirmed the Magi's quest for a new "authority figure" entering the world. To Herod, a new born king of the Jews represented nothing but rivalry to his "gentile" kind of authority—a rival to be eliminated. To be sure, Jewish authority (that foretold by the prophets) does rival gentile authority, but not simply. The two authorities can co-exist, though never as equals and not forever, as the Magi's eventual "homage" to Jesus indicates. All authority is ultimately subject to Jesus (28:18). But by defying Jesus' distinctive claim over the world and unique kind of "Jewish" authority, Herod ironically undermines his own authority and credibility. His rule is thus characterized inwardly by his coveting of power and outwardly by his (murderous) attempts to eliminate all competitors, the very things that "Gentile" or secular authority exists to oppose.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Excluded***

The final diagnosis has to do with what God has to say about a world deluded by its "Jerusalem bias" and "defiant" of any God-prophesied alternative to its reign of power. The irony—indeed, tragedy—in all this is that God finally gives Herod his way. Jesus' rule is excluded from his life—excluded not because of Herod's cunning, but God's, as God tells the Magi in a dream to

go home another way, effectively cutting Herod off from the rule of the new born “King of the Jews” altogether (2:12). The full extent of this exclusion is evidenced a few verses later. There it is revealed that Herod has died (2:19) and his son (no better than he; forgetful of his father’s rivalry against Jesus) now rules in his place. This is not simply a matter-of-fact reading of historical developments. As the drama intimates, this is God’s judgment. In Herod’s death, God is secretly wielding gentile-like authority, too. What Herod never realized is that the gentile authority he wielded wasn’t his after all. In truth it belonged to God; and that measure of injustice with which he wielded it (inwardly by coveting power and outwardly by murderous tactics) would be met by a counter measure of justice from God. Gentile rule is given to eliminate sinners, including sinner kings. Herod didn’t get that. Do we? That being the case, the question is how to change the terms of our engagement with the God of gentile authority?

## **PROGNOSIS: The Priority of (Jesus’) Jewish Authority**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Prognosis) : *Shepherded***

The initial prognosis begins with “changing the subject,” as Bertram describes it, from us to the One who looks least likely to be able to do anything about the diagnosis we just described: the child Jesus. But if we follow Matthew’s storyline closely Jesus will always have this appearance; he will always look to be the opposite of what the world considers competent authority/power/*exousia*. Nowhere is that more evident than Jesus on the cross. The cross of Jesus is not a bad thing that happened to a good guy, though to say as much, as did both Pilate (27:24-26) and Judas (27:4), is not wrong in itself. Still, at a much deeper and more significant level, that is, from God’s perspective, the cross is God in God’s self exercising a new authority style over sinful humanity. The sign

displayed over the cross says it all: "This is Jesus, King of the Jews" (27:37), meaning, here and now he is ruling in a new way. And what is the distinctive characteristic of this new styled rule? Jesus himself said it succinctly: "Go learn what this means, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (9:13). Two things stand out in this description of Jesus' authority: The first is the contrast (really, remarkable duel) between "mercy" (Jewish authority) and "sacrifice" (gentile authority), exemplified in Jesus words from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (27:46). In Jesus, Son of God, we have "God with us" (1:23) establishing a new kind of rule based not on gentile authority, the big stick, "an eye for an eye," as Jesus called it, but on "Jewish" authority, mercy and forgiveness, the ethos of "turning the other cheek" (5:38-39). These rules clash. Second is its preferential option for sinners. This rule is designed specifically to bring into God's fold those stubborn, defiant, excluded strays that are otherwise excluded—and all because of the unprecedented love of the suffering-servant-shepherd-king-Jesus. Was it not for the fact that God in his hidden majesty was in on this plan from the start—as revealed at Jesus' baptism (3:17) and as observed by the expert in gentile authority standing under the cross when he said "Truly this man was God's Son!" (27:57)—one might well have agreed with Caiaphas that all this sounds like "blasphemy" (26:16). Indeed, was it not for the fact that God himself raised Jesus from the dead, confirming the priority of Jesus' "Jewish" authority over "gentile" authority we wouldn't be telling this story.

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Homage***

The advanced prognosis has to do with the way people "yield" to Jesus' "Jewish" authority and appropriate the benefits of his rule, his cross. Here the wise men are once again emblematic; and Matthew is rich with descriptors about what-all is happening

deep “within” them as they encounter the new born king. Of course, throughout Matthew’s Gospel, “faith” (15:28, 8:10, 9:22) is the key word for describing the inward appropriation of Jesus’ gentle, Jewish rule. That’s because by its very nature Jesus’ new-styled rule is non-coercive; rather, it is invitational in nature. Whereas gentile authority is an *imposed* authority, Jesus’ messianic Jewish authority is an *offered* authority; and as such it sets the person free. With regard to the wise men, this faith is revealed in the “overwhelming joy” they felt as the star rested over the house where he lived (2:10), in the homage they paid as they approached the child King (2:11) with wonder, and in the profound outpouring of their very selves offered to the child in the symbols of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (2:11). In all this we see the meaning of faith as that “happy exchange” as Luther called it, in which what is Christ’s is ours and ours is Christ.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Returning, But by Another Way***

Now that the Magi had found in Jesus what they were looking for, a reliable (Jewish) authority upon which to base their lives, they gladly subjected their whole life to him, as their gifts and homage indicate. But note: to be one of the fold and not a stray does not mean abandoning the gentile world from which they came. Rather, it means returning to it, but now “by another way” (2:12). For the Magi (and us) that means returning to neighbors, spouses, children, even their/our old Magi craft, whatever that may be. It even means exercising gentile authority, if we have it, only now, too, “by another way”: “not in order to be served, but to serve” (20:28). New-styled Magi may even find themselves at times risking estrangement from other gentile authorities, as when the Magi in our text snub Herod and his evil purposes. But that simply exemplifies the (salvific) priority of Jewish authority over gentile authority, not the exclusion of one to

the other. Ultimately, they return to tell others of the new born “king of the Jews” that others, too, might have their lives reprioritized and be guided to pay homage to him.