

Two Kings

Isaiah 60:1-6 | Psalm 72:1-15 | Ephesians 3:1-12 | Matthew 2:1-12

MATTHEW 2:1-12

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, 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 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 there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

INTRODUCTION

John Henry Hopkins, Jr., son of Episcopal Bishop John Henry Hopkins, was born in 1820 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Later a clergyman, himself, in the Episcopal Church of the United States, he was both a graduate and the first church music teacher at General Theological Seminary in New York. And even though he later gave the eulogy at the funeral of President Ulysses S. Grant, Hopkins's most enduring contribution to American history is a little song he wrote as part of a Christmas pageant for his nieces and nephews in 1857. The song begins this way: "We three kings of Orient are..."¹ It is a song that fits perfectly with today, the Feast of the Epiphany, Western Christianity's celebration of the theophanic revelation of Jesus Christ to gentiles, captured in the story of the visit of the magi as heard in our Gospel reading.

Not being one to remove a bandage slowly—but rather to rip it off with a flourish—let me begin by telling you that nearly every word of that hymn's opening line—"We three kings of Orient are..."—is very possibly wrong, or, at the very least, overstating the biblical account. Matthew identifies the visitors as being from the East—and the *Orient* certainly refers to the land east of there—but it doesn't specify Persia or Babylon, the traditionally held points of origin. So, let's call that one probable, but not entirely necessary. *Kings*, however, is more problematic. Since they brought pricy gifts, it stands to reason—but the word Matthew uses is actually *magi*, meaning wise men, or magicians, or sorcerers, or astrologers. So, let's call this one improbable. And of course, the tradition that there are three of them comes from the mentioning of three gifts. And as Hopkins imagines it, each gift was given by exactly one of the magi and only one. But Matthew doesn't actually say there are three of them. There could have been only two. There could have fifty. Repeat gifts do happen.

¹ There are several good sources for the background of this Christmas carol, including William D. Crump, *The Christmas Encyclopedia*, Third Edition (London: McFarland & Company, 2013), 436-437.

But of course, our goal here this morning is not to deconstruct a Christmas carol that, if anything, takes some poetic license with the details for the sake of a Christmas pageant. I only mention these things because—like more than a few traditions—the details can get in the way of what’s actually going on. They can become distractions. And even though I just told you this story, this passage, is probably not about three kings from Persia, I am going to tell you that Matthew, in these verses, wants us to know about *two kings*—two kings from Israel: Herod and Jesus. Let’s take a closer look.

1. HEROD

In the first three verses, Herod is referenced twice—both times as King Herod. And the drama of the passage is introduced in these references... because they are in contrast to the question of the magi: “*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?*” If you’re Herod in that moment, you’re thinking: ‘Ummm... you’re talking to him. I’m the king of the Jews. And I’m not a child.’ It’s kind of a shocking to the system. ‘Someone else has been born king? What does that make me? A lame duck?’ And I know this is especially hard to imagine, but sometimes leaders, when there is an imminent transition of power that they don’t want, do desperate, even shady things to try to maintain power. And so what does Herod do? He sets in motion a plan, calling together the Biblical and legal experts and inquiring where the Messiah—notice the transition in language here, Herod won’t give up the title of King just yet, he’s asking about the Messiah, the anointed one—he wants to know where the Messiah will be born. And then he sends the magi, asking for a report when they find him. Why? So he can pay homage—or so he says. Of course, we find out in the next passage that his desperation to hold on to power drives him to a particularly evil place, though not out-of-character for him, in the slaughtering of children two and under in and around Bethlehem. Why does he react this way? It’s back up there at the beginning. The thing driving Herod, and his followers apparently—at the news of the birth of the Messiah—is *fear*. Fear drives him to anxiety, treachery, fury, and eventually homicide.

2. JESUS

The other king, however, the target of Herod’s wrath, is Jesus. And while we don’t learn much about Jesus directly in this passage, who the magi are and how they respond to him tells us a lot. The whole scene evokes Old Testament allusions—something we should expect if we know Matthew’s agenda. The arrival of foreign dignitaries to visit the Son of David points us to the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon back in the book of 1 Kings.² Even the gifts presented point us to that scene in which gold and spices were gifted to Solomon, the Son of David. As we heard in the Psalm, gifts of gold are given to the Messiah from foreign kings, with another reference to Sheba.³ The prophet Isaiah, toward the end of his book, also imagines the future glory of the Messiah as it rests upon his dispersed people now gathered—and the picture he uses?—foreign kings and peoples (again, a reference to Sheba among others) bringing gold and frankincense and wealth and abundant natural resources to God’s restored people.⁴ Even the star which guided the magi points us to an Old Testament story, that of Balaam in the book of Numbers.

² See 1 Kgs 10:1-10.

³ See Psa 72:1-15, especially v. 10.

⁴ Isa 60:1-22.

Balaam—a visionary from the East—prophesied to the king of Moab that a star would rise out of God’s people, a ruler who would destroy God’s enemies and take possession of the Land.⁵

What’s the point of these Old Testament allusion? First, notice what they all have in common. They focus on gentiles. From the Queen of Sheba to the unnamed foreign dignitaries to Balaam to the magi, these allusions show gentiles interacting with the Messiah. *That is, Jesus Christ is not only the king of the Jews, but the hope of the whole world—and always has been.* Second, they are all upper class, wealthy, cultural elites. They magi would have been considered exceptionally smart, holding positions of intellectual sway. They were the first-century equivalent of *influencers*. Do you know this term? It’s a marketing concept that’s been around for a long time—referring to a person who can influence the purchasing decision of others because of their authority or knowledge. We used to call them experts. But interestingly, in the age of social media, a whole new side of the definition has emerged—someone who can influence the purchasing decision of others because of the size of their social media following. No expertise required. So, you can be an Instagram model or a Facebook celebrity and gain a sizeable following with no particular talent or relevant body of knowledge or training. I don’t know about you, but it seems a bit dubious to me. If I’m going to buy a new toothpaste, 9 out of 10 dentists’ recommendation seems a lot better to me than 9 out of 10 trending twitter tweets or whatever. And so, it is no accident that on the one side, you have the Jewish king and his legal experts, plunged into fear at the promised birth of a new King—saying he’ll pay homage, but deceiving in fear. And on the other side, you have the social, cultural, and intellectual elites of the gentile world, the influencers among gentiles, represented in the magi, bowing before this newly born King. And why? Their response is summarized in a single word as well. Verse 10: *“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”*

Fear for Herod. Joy for the magi.

3. Us

This is not unlike responses to Jesus today. The arrival of Jesus as King means the loss of power. It means there is a requirement to live according to his rule and under his reign. It means we are no longer the kings of our own lives, determining life according to our own sense of self-actualization of who we are. But rather, we are challenged to live in relationship to him, to submit, to obey, to follow. To give of ourselves. To humble ourselves and bow down—denying ourselves and taking up crosses even.⁶ And for a lot of people, this means fear. It means anger because living in submission to Christ really does challenge who we think we are, and we want to do. It requires actual submission, not just saying you’ll pay homage—but actually doing it.

Consider the magi. They travelled across the land, dedicated themselves to finding this newly born king, and upon meeting him, knelt down and actually paid homage. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave. And they did so joyfully. Friends, we have that choice as well.

⁵ For the full story, see Numbers 22-24 and the oracles. For the reference to the star, see Num . For the references to Balaam’s origin, see Num 22:5 (which identifies his home as on the Euphrates). Cf., LXX Num 23:7, which points to a home in Aram (Syria) or Mesopotamia. Beyond this, there is some interesting Moses typology here that, based on Josephus’s account of the infanticide by Pharaoh on the basis of a prophecy from an Egyptian astrologer, suggests a prototype of the magi in the Exodus story. See Josephus, *Ant.*, 2.206-216. Cf., *Exod. Rab.* 1:18; *b. Sanh.* 101b. Other traditions attribute the information to Pharaoh’s magicians, Jannes and Jambres.

⁶ See Mark 8:34 – 9:1.

We can come to Jesus—yes accepting the challenge of a life lived according to his way and the cost of that—but joyfully, joyfully contented in the salvation he provides, joyfully in relationship to him. The cost, even of denying oneself to live in submission to Christ, the cost is worth it.

CONCLUSION

As I begin to conclude, I want to point us briefly to a 5th century commentary on Matthew simply known as the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, an anonymous and incomplete commentary on the Gospel. In referencing this Epiphany passage, it draws an important conclusion:

“And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly,” because they had not been deceived in their hope but, rather confirmed even more that they had not undertaken the burden of so great a journey without reason.⁷

Brothers and sisters, the journey was worth it and for a reason. Denying yourself, following, and submitting to the rule of King Jesus, is a journey with a purpose. Let us not lose sight of the matchless glory of Christ Jesus our Lord, revealed to those of us who follow.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for revealing your Son to the magi and to us, that we might joyfully follow him. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁷ Anonymous, *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, Homily 2.4. PG 56:641.