

The Gifts of the Magi

Thomas Robinson, *The Great Gift Exchange 3*, December 9, 2012

Matthew 2:1-15

¹ Now after **Jesus was born in Bethlehem** of Judea in the days of **Herod the king**, behold, **wise men (magi) from the east came** to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born **king of the Jews?** For we saw his star when it rose and have **come to worship him.**”

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling 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 is written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come **a ruler**
who will **shepherd my people Israel.**” [Micah 5:2-4; 2 Samuel 5:2]

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them **what time the star had appeared.** ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”

⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

¹¹ And going into the house they saw **the child with Mary his mother**, and they fell down and **worshiped him.** Then, opening their **treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.**

¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

¹³ Now when they had departed, behold, an **angel of the Lord** appeared to **Joseph** in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and **flee to Egypt**, and remain there until I tell you, for **Herod** is about to search for the child, to **destroy him.**” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “*Out of Egypt I called my son.*” [Hosea 11:1]

Micah 5:2-4

² But you, O **Bethlehem Ephrathah**, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be **ruler in Israel**, whose **coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.** ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and **shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD**, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now **he shall be great to the ends of the earth.**

Isaiah 60:1-3, 6

¹ Arise, shine, for **your light has come**, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ² For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. ³ And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. ... ⁶ They shall bring **gold and frankincense**, and shall bring **good news, the praises of the LORD.**

Numbers 24:15-17

¹⁵ The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor, the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly, ¹⁶ the prophecy of one who hears the words of God, ...: ¹⁷ “**I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel...**”

Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh

The gifts of the wise men are classic and ironic. Those three gifts are the basis for “three wise men” / “kings.” And what gifts! Just what a new-born baby needs! Gold. Always useful. But frankincense? Myrrh? Aromatic spices, very expensive. Used in temple incense and in burying the dead. Just what a baby needs! Better a teddy bear or college fund. What’s going on here? Gifts are always expressive. These gifts are at the center of a story that has so much going on, so much irony: Issues of revelation and insight, recognizing kingship/lordship, worship & service; violence & alienation, God’s kingdom vs the world’s. Think ahead to Jesus’ teaching about seeking God’s rule; serving two masters; storing up treasures. Think of the Phil. 2 hymn of divine emptying, exile, obedience, death, exaltation.

Who Gives the Gifts?

Matthew describes the visitors as Magi (*magoi*), a term of mystery. Technically the name goes back to Persian astrologers/priests of Zoroastrianism (Persian state religion) but by NT times the term suggested eastern (non-Jewish) philosopher/sage/astrologer. They echo Balaam, a Gentile prophet, hired to curse Israel, but blessed them: “*a star will rise.*” What is happening in Jesus is for the whole world, the Jews and beyond. The sign is in the very structure of nature, but the elite of his own people are not watching for the sign. The Nations come like the Queen of Sheba to Solomon bringing gifts, sign of salvation. They want to worship this King of the Jews. The next time that phrase is in Mt the Gentiles are Pilate and his soldiers: questioning, mocking, accusing. (Mt 27:11, 29, 37).

Who Doesn’t Get Them?

The naïve sages ask Herod about the king of the Jews. Herod was king by Roman support and violent conquest, but came from an Edomite family, never considered legitimate. He was canny, powerful, violent, fearful, intolerant of rivals. They just ask a simple question. Herod wants to use these naïve sages. He knows the hopes of his people and translates their inquiry to be about the Messiah: God’s anointed king, son of David, hope for renewal. The priests and scribes paraphrase Micah and 2 Sam. and identify Bethlehem, David’s home. But the Magi never open their treasures for Herod as King of the Jews. Herod embodies the power, wealth, glory, violence of this world. Both they and Herod recognized that they were seeking a rival king: Lk 1:52 “*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the lowly.* They seek a different king to worship. Herod feigns worship to hang on.

Who Gets Them?

The magi follow the miraculous star-sign till they come to the house. An ordinary villager’s house would be shared with animals (a manger?) with a raised packed earth platform for the people. They worship a baby with no trappings of royalty. They give royal gifts. But like the crown Jesus later wore, the gifts come with thorns – Herod’s pursuit. This baby is an immediate fugitive, an alien from home and country. A sign of his greater alienation from divine glory. But he comes for people alienated from their true creator and true identity, captive in deadly slavery. God calls his son out of Egypt. He calls us to himself. Seek his kingdom. Who is your Lord? Who gives you gifts of life eternal?