

Epiphany 2025
A Sermon by Chris Hensley
Based on Matthew 2:1-12
Presented to Sardis Baptist Church
January 12, 2025

Our text for today offers us the story of two very different kings. One wise, the other wicked. One a legitimate heir, the other a puppet of a larger and more menacing power. Both of these kings are sought out by wise sages or magi, a word rooted in the Greek from which we get our word *magician*. These stargazing wise guys likely hail from Persia or Media or somewhere to the east of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It is not totally unheard of that individuals such as these would travel great distances to witness something which they believed was to be grand based on the signs which they saw in the night sky. Comets, planetary movements, supernovas and so on would signal events such as changes in rulers, major political shifts, and could even mark the birth or death of significant figures.

While it is true that the Hebrew Bible forbade divination and astrology, that does not mean that figures within the Hebrew Bible did not tap into those resources at times. Further, that is not to say that these figures represent a negative within the telling of the narrative of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary the first evangelist is quite intentional in adding these figures into the narrative. Though Matthew is the most Jewish of all four Gospel accounts

in that there is much overt connection to the Hebrew Bible which the others authors omit, Matthew is also intentional in opening the doors of inclusion for the Gentiles throughout this account and it begins in the birth narrative. In fact, it can also be seen in the genealogy of Jesus as Matthew's genealogy differs from Luke's slightly and goes beyond Abraham and the Hebrew people. That to say, ministry to and with the Gentiles is important for Matthew's account of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

From a practical stand point, this passage is difficult. It is difficult because the passage says that magi followed a star to an exact point. This reading seems to be where the early Christians interpreted the star as an angelic being rather than a celestial body. There are historical records which R.T France has compiled which suggest that what we know as a super nova occurred in 5/4 BCE which would align with the historical Jesus' birth and serve as a sign for those ancient stargazers of the demise of a political leader, in this case Herod. That to say that it is difficult to make full sense of this story from a historical or logical mindset. Rather, it is more fitting, I think, to look to this account not as history but as the intentional inclusion of a people group in the new covenant between humanity and God.

Matthew walks a fine line of harkening back to the Hebrew scriptures and traditions, honoring them and pointing to the continuation of many of

their teachings and reframing many other of those teachings and broadening the scope and target audience of those teachings. This first evangelist does this at the outset, setting the tone for the remainder of the writing. Matthew does this through the inclusion of Gentile stargazers, individuals who would not have been as readily included in the Hebrew Bible are thrust to the foreground and given a special Divine wisdom which the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were not privy to and did not understand. One must navigate carefully the writings of Matthew. A superficial reading offers easy connections to anti-Semitic attitudes rooted in Christian scriptures. This, though, is an unfaithful reading and those who do this are eisegeting – reading their own interpretation into – the text.

Matthew portrays Herod as a wicked king, cruel and uncompromising in his paranoia at losing the meager power which has been afforded him by the true power located in Rome. The historical figure of Herod dies not long into the turn of the era from BCE to CE. At the arrival of the magi, Herod saw the writing on the wall as it was understood that these stargazers brought with them messages of weal and woe. In this case, the weal was the birth of this new king, one born king of the Jews. The woe is unexpressed within our passage, though is understood by Herod as being his own demise with the birth of this other king. Herod was an Idumean, a person from Edom, and was

given his title of king of the Jews by the Roman empire. This new king is born with the title and is born in Bethlehem, a mere six miles from the city of Jerusalem. All of this rankled Herod to the point that he made plans to eliminate this perceived threat under the guise of wanting to worship this new king as these magi claimed was their own desire.

Our passage for this morning solidifies the theme of inclusion within the Gospel account of Matthew, it further points to the reality that the powers that be which are of human design hold no sway or influence over the intended order of things. As the Church sits with the announced identity of this child whose birth we celebrated a couple of weeks ago, and as our nation sits with the reality of the changing of political leadership at the federal level in just a week or so, let us cling to what Matthew seems to be teaching. The powers of this world control much, though ultimately the Church is called to be different and to serve a leader whose power and influence supersedes that of the leaders of this world. Further, our calling as a part of this spiritual community known as Christianity calls us to service, radical inclusivity, love of the other – however the world others them – and to work for reconciliation with all people.