January 6, Epiphany (Matthew 2:1-12)

Why does Matthew insist on calling Jesus a king?

by Greg Carey in the December 6, 2017 issue

Though still an infant, Matthew's Jesus is Israel's king. Matthew's genealogy has hinted in this direction by naming David and his descendants rulers of Israel and then Judah until the exile. But the story of the Magi makes this point explicit. Not only is Jesus "King of the Jews," he is the savior of all people.

All four Gospels address Jesus' royal identity, but Matthew stresses kings and their behavior more than the others do. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, Matthew (like John) stops to quote Zechariah: "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you" (21:5). An unidentified "someone" hosts Luke's banquet parable (14:15–24); a king hosts Matthew's version (22:1–14). Only Matthew relates the parable of the sheep and the goats, in which a king passes judgment over the nations (25:31–46). Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as king is hardly overwhelming, but it is noticeable.

The kingdom of God is one of Jesus' primary metaphors, but we know its limitations. Kings and queens are hard to find these days. *Kingdom* suggests a government with territory and borders. And the kingdom image connotes rule by domination, reeking of both hierarchy and patriarchy. None of these associations comport with Jesus' ministry.

Matthew's king parables are long on judgment, and harsh judgment at that. The king hosting the wedding banquet exacts bloody revenge upon the citizens who beat and kill his slaves; then he casts the poorly dressed guest into the outer darkness. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the king consigns the poor goats to an eternal fire. We tend not to think of God in these ways, so we find alternative language. "Kin-dom of God" communicates Jesus' distinctive vision of a blessed community, in which rank and privilege do not exist. No one is to be called rabbi, father, or teacher (Matt. 23:8–10). The first are last and the last first (19:30, 20:16); "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (23:12).Yet Matthew insists upon calling Jesus king.

The arrival of the Magi signals Jesus' prominence. We should avoid overconfidence in trying to identify them or their activities. They are not "wise men," and they are not kings. The term *magi* derives from Persian court circles, but it came to include magicians in general. Greek versions of Daniel place magi among the officials in the Babylonian court, where they are unable to interpret dreams without knowing the content of the dream itself. The Magi in our story enjoy the freedom to travel (or are authorized to do so). Although many ancient texts mock magi as charlatans, in Matthew these men read the skies rightly and bring gifts to the infant Jesus. Their witness frightens Herod, who takes them deadly seriously.

The Magi worship Jesus, the first of several instances in which Jesus receives worship in Matthew. (Matthew portrays Jesus receiving worship more than twice as often as Mark, Luke, and John put together.) Translations can be misleading on this point, as *proskyneō* literally means to fall on one's knees. The NRSV reads, "they paid him homage." But Matthew is clear here. The Magi seek Jesus so that they may worship him. Even Herod proclaims a desire to worship Jesus. Their gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—express this worshipful recognition of Jesus' royalty.

Commentators observe that the Magi participate in a biblical motif, according to which gentiles bring gifts to Jerusalem and its king (see especially Ps. 72:10–11 and Is. 60:5–11). Like Melchizedek, the gentile priest who blesses Abraham (Gen. 14:17–20), the Magi demonstrate that gentiles are fully capable of responding to God's work. This too is a Matthean emphasis. Jesus is Israel's Messiah, living out its scriptures and fulfilling its law (5:17–18), but his ministry will embrace all the nations (24:14, 28:18–20).

Meanwhile, a king already rules Judea. Matthew makes certain we readers know that Herod is "the king," identifying him as such three times. Herod's behavior follows a familiar script: the frightened tyrant. First, he seeks advice from his priests and scribes—without telling them why. Then he secretly brings in the Magi, asking them to find the child—to do his work for him. Our lectionary reading omits what follows (2:13–20). God thwarts Herod's plan by sending dreams to both Joseph and the Magi. He is tricked. This forces Herod to act on his own, and he loses control: "infuriated" (NRSV), he slaughters every male child under the age of two in Bethlehem. Insecurity fuels his fury.

We have here a sustained parody of the royal Herod. He does not match up to the ancient masculine virtues of courage, frankness, and self-control. Fear and anger

seize him, and he lashes out. Despite his violence, he fails. Let the reader understand: even tyrants who act like buffoons can be deadly.

In the end Jesus will define true royalty—in ways we may like, and in ways that leave us uncomfortable. Matthew's Jesus wields divine authority (9:6, 28:18), and he demands that his followers do as he says (7:21–27). But Jesus also singles out the poor in spirit, the mourners, the lowly, and those deprived of justice for God's blessing (5:3–6). Gentle and humble, he imposes an easy yoke and a light burden (11:28–30). For these reasons I am reluctant to abandon terms like *king* and *kingdom of God* altogether. Ancient people knew kings and empires, even if we don't. The Magi bear gifts indeed, including gentile worship of Israel's king. As king of the Jews, Jesus' reign of justice and compassion displaces Herod's raving fury.