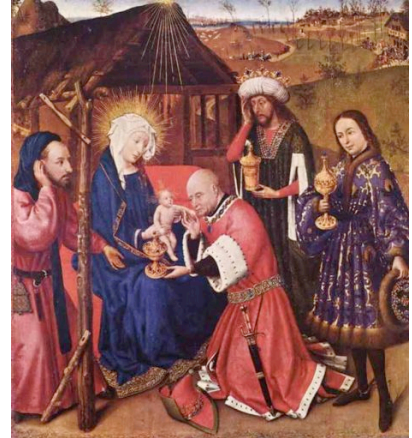


IN THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT: WHAT GIFT SHALL I OFFER?

A REFLECTION FOR TWELFTH NIGHT, THE EPIPHANY, 2013
BY JOHN BENNISON

*Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son (or sun) of York;
And all the clouds that low'r'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.*

Opening lines from *Richard III*, Wm. Shakespeare, 1594



Above: Adoration of the Christ Child by the Three Kings – Jacques Duret, ca. 1403

The opening lines in this particular Shakespeare tragedy depicts Richard – one of the Duke of York's sons – offering fleeting praise to his own decadent brother Edward's good fortune; Edward having wrested the king's crown from Henry VI. The underlying problem however has only been kicked down the proverbial road. For, left disgruntled and brooding over own sorry lot will lead soon enough to Richard's own scheming and murderous treachery; resulting in his own brief and fleeting season of royal triumph and defeat. So much for one king's rise, and subsequent darkening of days.

If ever there was a winter of our own discontent, those days certainly seem to be upon us. We live in a nation where those vying to exert their political positions of power thought their New Year's Eve party was best celebrated in the legislative chambers of Congress; fighting over who will wrest the good fortunes of our exorbitant abundance from whom, and how much.

Depending on your point of view that battle may have been won or lost in the latest bout, but the larger wrangling war is far from over. This season of our discontent covers the landscape; from Sandy Hook to Hurricane Sandy's aftermath; from battles at the borders and beyond, to inner city violence. And all the while, some of our neighbors flock to their local Walmart to stockpile more weapons and ammo.

These comments are written on the sixth day of January, and some of those neighbors of mine are wondering why we still have our holiday lights up. The holiday gift-giving season is so, like, *last year*. But for you and me it's the twelfth day of Christmastide, and this is Twelfth Night. And I'm still wondering about what gifts I might still have to offer. And I'm still hoping for a new dawning, and for the shadows to flee away.

“For behold, darkness covers the land,” says the ancient prophet (Is. 60). “Deep gloom enshrouds the people.” And an age-old alternative to a longed future still flickers in those shadows.

But over you the Lord will rise,
and his glory will appear upon you.
Nations Will stream to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawning.
Your gates will always be open;
by day or night they will never be shut.

Violence will no more be heard in your land,

ruin or destruction within your borders.
You will call your walls, Salvation,
and all your portals, Praise.
The sun will no more be your light by day;
by night you will not need the brightness of the moon.
The Lord will be your everlasting light,
and God will be your glory.

The story of the Epiphany (*epi-phanos*, 'light all around) still has a babe in the manger, waiting for someone to notice, to wonder and to wander to the unlikeliest of places, beneath the newest star. The Magi – those strange characters from afar -- will first ask the enthroned King where his presumed replacement might be found, and the familiar plot line to yet another variation of the same tragic tale will commence.

But Twelfth Night is about gifts, given and received. What does the one whom we might seek to truly know have to give us in this winter of our discontent? And what will we offer in return? What gifts shall we offer to this world, worthy of the holy alternative; the *other* One we might instead seek to follow?

WHAT GIFT SHALL I OFFER: A PLAY IN THREE PARTS

*What then shall I give him,
poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb.
And if I were a wise man
I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him,
My strength, my will, my heart.*

Slight variation, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, English poet Christina Rossetti, 1872

The story of the *Visitation and Adoration of the Magi* bearing gifts is about the question of one's allegiance, and more. To whom or what will you not only swear allegiance? But also, what you'll give -- of whatever you've got -- to demonstrate such fidelity in both word and deed?

It is a play in three acts: Act One has to do with allegiance. Act Two is about an alternative to mere adoration. Act Three is about the subsequent, consequential, alternate way forward.

By way of a few prefatory remarks, numerous references made in this commentary assumes familiarity with Matthew's story (conveniently provided at the end of this commentary). In addition, it's important to keep in mind this familiar tale is a wonderful fabrication, intended to convey truths the storyteller wants to share. A few remarks from commentator Harry T. Cook say it well:

"Magi -- whence our words "magic" and "magician(s)," --did exist in several forms in Middle Eastern antiquity as ... a class or type of sages or maybe priests. (But) Depicting representatives of a Persian or other alien elite studying the stars to discern the birth of a Jewish king and then coming to worship him in his infancy or early childhood was a daring reach. ... By the time Matthew's gospel tale appeared in the form we now have it, the idea of a Jewish king could only have been nostalgic fantasy. The tableau of exotic wizards from an alien land bowing low before a child and bringing gifts to him was one way for the evangelist to say that the gospel he was promulgating was or could be a universal one."

ACT I: ALLEGIANCE

In the first part of this mythic tale, the magi journey from afar to Jerusalem, and all Jerusalem represents. If you wanted to know what was happening in that neck of the woods, you'd go to Jerusalem. That's where the temple was, of course; along with all that temple authority conveyed. But perhaps more importantly, it was also where the puppet king Herod represented the Empire, and the seat of political power. In Jerusalem you'd find the ones who held all the cards, those in "the know," the "deciders," movers and shakers. So the magi go to government headquarters, and ask the *king* where a *new* king can be found.



"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" they ask, "For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

Numerous commentators have tried to strip away the typical sentimentality with which the story is often retold to clearly expose the ludicrous, laughable nature of the question; and the one to which the question is addressed. "Where's the king?" one scholar (Crossan) likes to conjecture Herod may have replied? "You're looking at him!"

But in addition, Herod might also well have asked, "Who wants to know?" Because the answer to that question is one shared by a common assumption. Who wants to know? The *world* wants to know. The world in which we perpetually find ourselves always wants to know who's in charge. Who has the upper hand, the power and might -- and consequent authority -- to tell us what's what?

It's about one's allegiance: to whom or what will you give of whatever you've got? Who is Lord?

The common assumption and claim that was presumed to be beyond dispute in the context of Roman imperial theology was Caesar was lord and savior, both human and divine. As Crossan aptly puts it, "The question is what happens when titles are taken from the Roman emperor and transferred to a Jewish peasant in Galilee? It is more than a joke. This was high treason."

Still, I can imagine the gospel writer chuckling to himself as he spun this retrospective, imaginary tale. The way Matthew would dare poke fun at Rome (and not that long after Rome had crushed the latest Jewish uprising) Herod's intelligence network in this plotline had obviously fallen down on the job. In Herod, the Empire had to confer with the Temple, and rely instead on ancient Jewish prophetic scripture (Micah 5:2) to discern those portents of things to come (or had already transpired for Matthew's listeners):

"In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'"

Not *least*? If Bethlehem wasn't the least likely hick town in this backwater province of the Empire, what was? Never mind. Because, since those in power have a tendency to want to retain power, the king is aptly portrayed as already scheming. Send the foreign stooges as cover to find anyone who would threaten to unseat entrenched power. And for a gift, take flattery, essentially saying: "Go, find him, then let me know so I too can genuflect before my replacement."

Right.

ACT II: ADORATION OF THE CHRIST BY THE MAGI

Three magi are not mentioned, only presumed, simply because Matthew's tale mentions three gifts. But since the story is really all about myth and metaphor anyway (in addition to the convenient fulfillment of long-anticipated Jewish prophecy in Matthew's in own intention) we might as well appreciate the richness of the text and the storyteller's efforts.

First there is overwhelming joy, awe, wonder; set in what is depicted as a dreary, dark and dank sort of place. But if that doesn't seem sufficiently out of place, there's more.



There are the extravagant trinkets, fit for a king, representing the best of what it was presumed the world had to offer: wealth (gold), opulence (incense), myrrh (more opulence, even in death). Because these are royal gifts, who better to offer them to the newborn "king of kings" but foreign monarchs? So the magi are subsequently depicted in subsequent legendary versions as kings themselves. What better way to convey the subjugation of all earthly power and authority than such obeisance? In Matthew's tale (and his intentions in telling it), the magi – overcome by joy, awe and wonder – are also shown to be wise enough to genuflect before One who *should* hold scepter and crown.

They're also wise enough to avoid collaborating with their counterpart back in Jerusalem. They heed their own angel's dream-warning, and slip out of town another way.



ACT III: THE ALTERNATE ROUTE

The magi's alternate route is drawn even before the angel suggests it. It is cast the moment they bend the knee and bow before the newborn king. The shifting of their allegiance sets a new course for them; even as it renders dull the gloss and sheen of their offered, worldly trinkets. With greater alarm than even Herod's treachery could conjure, they may have realized the gifts required would far exceed the gifts they'd offered.

Now, to Matthew's fanciful tale I myself have imagined another apocryphal variation; one of those "ah, from the mouths of babes" kind of one-liners: When the baby Jesus rips open his presents and finds the glittering gifts given, he looks into the eager, expectant faces of his esteemed admirers and asks, "Is that it? Is this all?"

Remember, the Epiphany story in Matthew is written after the fact. That is, it is written in the light of his account of Jesus' life, his words and deeds; to the extent Matthew's early believing community was able to reconstitute this composite figure. Consequently, after Jesus' execution, and decades later after Rome had sacked Jerusalem, what did it say about this quaint little gospel tale that transfers such titles as Lord and Savior from Augustus and gives them to what we call a Galilean miracle worker and sage in his own right? What changes? Who changes? What different gifts might those who would be changed offer instead?

Put another way, what's the alternative to the typical movers and shakers of this world? What is this unconventional – and therefore confrontational – juxtaposition and way of thinking, and acting? Matthew's gospel begins with a subversive joke, asking where can one find this different king. As numerous progressive commentators have asked, is it any wonder the next time Matthew's gospel

gives Jesus the kingly title “King of the Jews” it is on the inscription hanging over his head on the cross?

But to those who dare ask – and even more so dare to offer another kind of gift -- there’s a way “home” by another route.

EPILOGUE

On the second day of Christmas my true love could have given me two turtle doves, along with a partridge in a pear tree. Fortunately, she did not. We’ve gotten to the point where we ended up returning most of the gifts we exchanged, and realized we had a lovely holiday nonetheless.

So it was also that on the second day of Christmas this year, on December 26th, I was intrigued to watch what seemed to me an “alternate” exchange of gifts on the evening news. The LAPD’s anonymous gun buy-back program was such a howling success that in a single day more than 8,000 firearms were removed from the streets of the City of Angels and destroyed.

Included in the round up was a collection of those infamous assault rifles, and even a military-grade missile launcher. In exchange, the donors received a \$200 gift certificate. If the powers that be – that is, the mayor’s office and police department -- hadn’t run out of gift certificates, who knows how many more weapons could have been removed from our country’s almost mindboggling stockpile of firearms – a ludicrous joke in itself?

Thinking back on it – from this exchange and clear “epiphany” to the first of such tales, by those who were subsequently considered wise -- I couldn’t help but think the babe in the manger would have preferred just such an offering to the gifts he actually received.

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The Story of the Magi – Matthew 2:1-12

Brief Commentary: Matthew's gospel, composed a half century after Jesus' life came to an enigmatic end, constructs this rich and fanciful tale about the beginning of a Galilean peasant rabbi's life that was portrayed by the gospel writer to be a threat to the established authorities from the start. Inherent in the story is proof-text fulfillment of various messianic prophecies (Micah 5:2 – the foretold birthplace of the anointed one) and the mythical tableau, where galaxies get rearranged and magicians from alien lands get the news before the proper authorities do. Matthew's "good news" message is intended to be shared with the larger non-Jewish audience to whom the gospel would increasingly be shared.

In 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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



Triptych at right: Contemporary artist He Qi