

## **A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12**

**Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD**

This story is full of political intrigue because of the interaction of representatives from the East who have come to honor a new king of Israel and King Herod, the current king of Israel who is a highly vulnerable vassal ruler of the Roman empire. It is a story of international diplomacy between Israel and the countries to the east, Babylonia and Persia. The magi both express respect for the young king-to-be and by their action seek to establish a positive relationship between their country and the future government of Israel. Their gifts are appropriate gifts for a king. Their recognition of Jesus' star is a sign that those who pay attention to the heavens and the relationships of the powers in the heavens recognize the birth of Jesus as a major event.

The story has five episodes and builds up to the entry of the wise men into the house to see the child with Mary, his mother. The dynamic of the story is experiencing the political intrigue that is implicit in the wise men following the star. Anyone in the first century who knew anything about Herod would immediately recognize that the child Jesus was in great danger because Herod had executed many members of his family who were suspected of plotting his assassination including a mother-in-law, a wife, and two sons.

The star is the most consistent verbal thread that runs through the whole of the story. In the first episode the wise men announce "we have observed his star at its rising". And then Herod learned from them the time when the star had appeared. In the fourth episode, the verbal thread of the star is elaborated and its movement is described from the point of view of the wise men: "there ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising until it stopped over the place where the child was and when they had saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." This sentence is told with the feelings and tone of the wise men, not an objective observer. It is an opportunity to express their wonder and joy at this star and its movement. There is also the verbal thread of "pay him homage;" thus, the magi announce when they come to Jerusalem that they have come to pay him homage, when they get to the house they kneel down and pay him homage and Herod says that he wants to go and pay him homage.

The climax of the first episode is Herod's fear and all Jerusalem with him. So rather than this being good news for Herod and the people of Jerusalem, it is a source of fear for them. Of course, the reason for that was the political instability that it implied. No one looked forward to changes in a relatively stable regime, even if it was almost wholly corrupt. Herod's calling together first of the chief priests and scribes of the people and then the wise men is a description of high-level meetings he held to figure out how to deal with this potential threat to his regime. The telling of the story needs to convey the importance of Herod's convening of first the leaders of Israel and then these foreigners who have come in order to honor a new king. The characterization of Herod when he

speaks to the wise men should convey in some way the sinister character of his unctuous tone. Conveying that ambiguity is one of the challenges of presenting the character of Herod here. There is a kind of undercover communication here between the storyteller and the audience about what is actually going on, namely, that Herod is trying to get the information he needs to kill this potential contender for the throne.

The other dimension of the story is the character of the wise men. They are clearly men of great wisdom and faith who had traveled for a year or more to find the child. Indeed, as becomes clear in the next story, it may have been as long as two years since the star had appeared and the wise men had begun their search. The Matthean storyteller is creating a high degree of identity with the wise men in this story. This is a very powerful and appealing dynamic. The wise men were, after all, Gentiles who represented the countries of the East, Babylon and Persia, that had oppressed the people of Israel for centuries (Babylon most of the sixth century B.C. and Persia for the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.).

The wise men are both the naïve source of the threat to the child's life and the attentive means of his deliverance from Herod. The last two episodes are inside views of the wise men as they come to the house, are amazed at the place where the star stopped, and give their gifts. Notice the progression of the inside view: first, what they heard from Herod, then what they saw in the movement of the star, and climactically what they felt on seeing it come to rest. Conveying the awe and the wonder of this star and this diplomatic/spiritual mission that is completed in the giving of their gifts is the challenge of the telling of this story. It is a story of great joy for the children of all ages because the wise men's gifts are the precedent for the giving of gifts at Christmas.

What does this story do, then and now? This story creates a richly nuanced picture of the survival and honoring of the holy in the midst of the violent world of internal and international political conflict. The wise men from the East are scientists in their day who are determined at great personal cost to recognize and honor the genesis of a new birth of peace in the midst of a violent and corrupt world. They in turn are part of the overwhelming providence of God who protects and saves the one to whom God has given birth in order to save the world from the cycle of violence and war. The Messiah is born in the midst of a world in which his own life is only saved by the intervention of God who delivers him from the tendency of the powers of the world to find good things a threat and an occasion of transformation of goodness into a means of evil.

In this event Jesus the Christ shares the earlier experience of the people of Israel who were delivered from death in Egypt by the intervention of God. It is a story of a heavenly father who cares for and delivers his son from the possibility of death that his birth and identification in the heavens unexpectedly causes. It is a story of light dawning and being recognized in the midst of darkness.

This story sheds light on the situation of the world today in which the sources of light and life are in constant danger of being overwhelmed by the power of darkness and violence

is with us every day. It is a story of hope full of the promise that God will continue to save the spirit and energy of God's son and those who honor and follow him. It is a source of light for all those whose hope is threatened by the power of darkness in the political intrigue and violence of our time.