



## Revelation and Response: Matthean Texts for Christmas and Epiphany\*

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The appointed gospel lessons (Series A) for the First Sunday after Christmas, Epiphany, the Baptism of our Lord, and the Third Sunday after Epiphany are texts of revelation and response. The revelation of God in human form—a babe being nourished at his mother’s breasts, a man dripping Jordan’s baptismal water—creates a response. While the revelation itself is singular and unique—the human Jesus—the response depicted in these lessons from Matthew is variegated, ranging from adoration to zealotry. The lessons ring with clarity the refrain of the Epiphany hymn, “God in flesh made manifest.”

### *First Sunday after Christmas: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23*

This reading includes two separate paragraphs from the second chapter of Matthew, verses 13-15 and verses 19-23. Why did the creators of this lectionary choose to omit verses 16-18? A first response would be that Matt 2:13-18 is the Gospel for the Festival of The Holy Innocents, Martyrs (December 28). A closer look at the text itself suggests that there is a unity within this split text and that the story of the slaughter of the innocents may be a Matthean literary device unnecessary for this particular Gospel lesson.

A major feature of these two paragraphs which describe the escape of the holy family to Egypt and their subsequent return to Nazareth is the careful parallel to Old Testament figures and events. In the first place, there is Joseph, the dreamer. Twice an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream (2:13, 19) and in 2:22 Joseph is “warned in a dream.” Little imagination is needed to remember another Joseph known for his dreams and his interpretation of dreams. In Gen 37 the earlier Joseph has two dreams, one in which the sheaves of his brothers bow down to him, the other in which the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to him. Later (Gen 40) the incarcerated Joseph interprets the dreams of his fellow prisoners, the butler and baker of the King of Egypt. “After two whole years Pharaoh dreamed he was standing by the Nile” (41:1)—from that dream Joseph interprets the imminent seven

\*This essay was written after extended conversation with Professors Arland Hultgren and Mons Teig of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary and Pastor John Bornhoft of First Lutheran Church, Columbia Heights, Minnesota.

years of famine. Matthew wants his readers to make the connection between God who acted in the life of Old Testament Joseph and God who acted in the life of this New Testament Joseph.

More specifically, Matthew draws other links between the Old Testament “mighty acts of

God” and these more contemporary events. It was Joseph who brought his family to Egypt in Genesis and in Matthew. It was the political authorities who killed the infants to protect themselves in Exodus and in Matthew. It was a boy child who was saved from death in Exodus and in Matthew. It was “out of Egypt” that the son was called in both Exodus and Matthew (cf. Hos 11:1). Moses led the first Exodus out of Egypt; Jesus will lead the new exodus. Israel’s story now becomes Jesus’ story.

For readers still unable to make the connection between the Old and the New, Matthew finally resorts to his formula quotation, “This took place to fulfill...” In Matt 1:22, the first use of the formula appears, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet...” In our present pericope Matthew includes the formula twice (2:15, 23). The earlier reference in this second chapter is clearly traceable to Hos 11:1, while there is no known antecedent for “He shall be called a Nazarene.” Perhaps Matthew intended an association with Isa 11:1, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (*neser* in Hebrew) shall grow out of his roots.” The point is to explain “Jesus of Nazareth” (Matt 26:71) rather than the Messiah of Bethlehem expected by the chief priests and scribes (Matt 2:5).

Matthew’s point is clear—Israel’s redemption is about to be accomplished again, this time through the story of this child Jesus, “God in flesh made manifest.” The saving act of God in the Exodus of the Old Testament is about to be manifested again through this child Jesus. As the Exodus set the stage for the redemption and liberation of God’s people, the birth of Jesus sets the stage again for the redemption and liberation of God’s people, this time through the death and resurrection of this boy-child become man.

There is a secondary theme at work in this lesson as well, the providential care of God for God’s own. As God cared for, provided for, watched over the people of Israel, so God cared for, provided for, watched over this holy family. Jesus is nurtured, raised, tended to, and ultimately raised from the dead and given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18) by this providential God.

#### *The Epiphany of Our Lord: Matthew 2:1-12*

There is but one set of Epiphany texts, regardless of series, for there is but one Epiphany Gospel: Matt 2:1-12. It is unique to Matthew, although the *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* of Kurt Aland pairs this lesson with Luke 2:8-20 under the rubric “The Adoration of the Infant Jesus.” The “adoration” of Luke’s smelly shepherds gives way to Matthew’s *magoi* (our “Magi”) from the East for the day of Epiphany. The scenes are quite different, but there is a brief moment of similarity between the two stories. The shepherds “went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them” (Luke 2:16-17). The *magoi*, when they saw the star, “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him” (Matt 2:10-11). There is a moment of revelation for the shepherds and the *magoi* when they

encounter this infant with his mother, and that moment of revelation has given rise to Christmas pageants of shepherds and “wise men” complete with bathrobes, crooks, and crowns.

But there is only this one epiphany to these *magoi* from the East, Gentiles probably,

astrologers most likely. Gentiles probably because they come from “the East,” astrologers because they had seen a star and had come to worship the royal one whose birth had been so spectacularly noted. The *magoi* come to worship the one born King of the Jews. The interplay of the two kings gives little reason to call these visitors “kings.” There are two kings in this story, not three; one is named Herod, one is not named but clearly known as “the Christ.”

In this story the revelation triggers the same response on one level. The outsiders, the *magoi*, come to worship (*proskynesai*). Herod declares his intention to “come and worship him,” but his public intention is tainted by his earliest response—“he was troubled.” And not only Herod, but “all Jerusalem with him.” The outsiders come to worship, but one wonders about Herod. The child king may be a threat, and there is no ambiguity in the *magoi*’s words, “Where is he who is born king of the Jews?” Herod is king, not this newborn. Yet Matthew’s point is clear—this child *is* the king of the Jews, the Messiah, the anointed one, the new David. And this child is come to be worshiped by all, even the outsiders, the *magoi*, from the East, and even Herod.

The Old Testament allusions drip from this passage as well. Balaam announced in his oracle: “a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Num 24:17). The Lord promised David, “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his Kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his Kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:12-13). David had come from Bethlehem (1 Sam 17:12). Isaiah spoke of riches to come from Arabia, gifts of gold and frankincense to “proclaim the praise of our Lord” (Isa 60:6), gifts for worship. The book of Isaiah ends with the vision of “all flesh” coming “to worship before me” (66:23).

Matthew’s Epiphany is clear—this one born in Bethlehem is the promised Messiah, the Old Testament successor to David, born king of the Jews to be worshiped by all flesh. And can it be said that to say “this one is the king of the Jews” is to claim “Herod is not”? And if we proclaim “this one is king,” who (or what) is not king today? Perhaps the kingship of Jesus seems irrelevant to us in democratic America, but if the king has come to be worshiped, what is the object of our worship today? A brief reminder from Luther may suffice:

The simple meaning of this commandment is, you shall *worship* me alone as your God. What do these words mean and how are they to be understood? What is it to have a god, or what is God? Answer: A god is that to which we look for all good and where we resort for help in every time of need; to have a god is simply to trust and believe in one with our whole heart....Now, I say, whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God.<sup>1</sup>

The Good News of Epiphany is this: the long-expected King has come for Matthew and for us. The new age has come. The gift has been given so that the gifts can be given.

<sup>1</sup>Luther’s *Large Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967) 10.

### *The Baptism of Our Lord: Matthew 3:13-17*

In contrast to the previous texts, found only in Matthew’s Gospel, the lesson for the Baptism of Our Lord is recorded in all four Gospels. But Matthew tells this story from his unique

point of view. There is a clear difference of perspective in Matthew from that of Mark, Luke, or John. For example, Matthew spells out a very specific purpose for Jesus' visit to John: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John." The unasked "Why?" hovers in light of Matthew's earlier pointed description that people were baptized by John "confessing their sins" (3:6) and John the Baptizer's own words, "I baptized you with water *for repentance*" (3:11). Why should Jesus, the sinless one, be baptized?

Jesus' answer—to our unasked question and to John's own "and do you come to me?"—is loaded with key words: "For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (*plerosai pasan dikaiosynen*, 3:15). Oscar Cullman observed:

The baptism of Jesus is related to *dikaiosynen*, not only his own but also that of the whole people. The word *pasan* is probably to be underlined here. Jesus' reply, which exegetes have always found difficult to explain, acquires a concrete meaning: Jesus will effect a general forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

The baptism of Jesus the sinless one stands him in solidarity with the repentant ones, those who came "confessing their sins" to be baptized by John "with water for repentance." The sinless one stands with them but he will effect their salvation ("he will save his people from their sins," Matt 1:21). But Jesus also stands in solidarity with the Baptizer himself. "For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe" (Matt 21:32). What was true for John, was true for Jesus.

There is more to this story in Matthew's Gospel as well: a public epiphany of the identity of the one who has just been baptized. The heavens were opened and the spirit of *God* descended on Jesus like a dove (in Jesus' eyes). The voice from heaven proclaimed, "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I delight." In Mark and Luke the proclamation is to Jesus, "You are my son..." but in Matthew this is a public disclosure, an epiphany, "This is my son..."

The story describes the inauguration of Jesus' ministry. The spirit of God descends on Jesus, and Jesus is authorized to bear this office. The Isaiah reading for the Baptism bears the witness,

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him,  
he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa 42:1)

The way is set; Jesus' vocation is clear:

He will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not fail or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law...(Isa 42:4)

These texts suggest a Festival of Baptism within the life of the congregation—a

day to baptize and to affirm the vocation which baptism confers on all believers. Baptism is a public inauguration for believers individually and corporately. One possibility would be to include an “Affirmation of the Vocation of Christians in the World” within the order of worship for the day.<sup>3</sup> The Lutheran Order for Holy Baptism itself concludes:

Through Baptism God has made these new sisters and brothers members of the priesthood we all share in Christ Jesus, that *we may proclaim* the praise of God and *bear his* creative and redeeming *Word* to all the world.

The baptized are received as “fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father and *workers with us* in the kingdom of God.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus’ baptism, his entry into public ministry, reminds all believers that baptism marks our entry not into private Christianity, but into public witness, into the public mission of Jesus to the world.

#### *Third Sunday after Epiphany: Matthew 4:12-23*

The Matthean context for this Gospel reading is important. Jesus was baptized; Jesus was tempted; Jesus began to preach. The baptism text was assigned for the First Sunday after the Epiphany; the temptation text is assigned for the First Sunday in Lent. Matthew’s order is baptism, temptation, preaching. For Matthew, baptism and temptation lead to the public ministry of Jesus. Might one add, the baptism and the temptation prepare for the public ministry? (How do we understand that order as we prepare persons for public ministry today?)

There is an even more specific context for the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as Matthew reports it: “When he heard that John had been arrested,” Jesus left Nazareth for Galilee, particularly for Capernaum by the sea. Again Matthew’s formulaic quotations come into view (4:14-16). Unique to Matthew, these verses indicate that Jesus’ move to Capernaum “in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali” took place so that “what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.”

In that context, in the land of Galilee, Jesus began to preach a word of *metanoia*: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The reign of God is near. Is this a word of time or place, a word of “Apocalypse now!” or a word of imminence here? Over and over again Jesus preached and told stories about the kingdom. To his disciples Jesus answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 13:11). Throughout that thirteenth chapter Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven: it is like a man who sowed good seed; it is like a grain of mustard seed; it is like leaven which a woman took and hid; it is like treasure hidden in a field; it is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; it is like a net thrown into the sea. For Jesus the king, the kingdom was indeed at hand, planted and growing in front of the eyes and ears of his disciples and the people who followed. And the only response to the revelation of that kingdom was *metanoieite*: “Repent,” turn around, change, become new.

The Gospel for Epiphany 3 continues with the parallel invitation to and response of the two sets of brothers Simon and Andrew, James and John. The parallel response is most evident in the Greek text, but it is also apparent in the English of the RSV: “Immediately they left (*hoi de eutheos aphantēs*) their nets and

<sup>3</sup>E.g., *Occasional Services* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 147f.

<sup>4</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 124-125. Emphasis added.

followed him (*ekolouthesan auto*)” (4:20), and “Immediately they left (*hoi de eutheos aphentes*) the boats and their father, and followed him (*ekolouthesan auto*)” (4:22). Three times a form of the verb “follow” is used: “follow me” (4:19); they “followed” him (4:20, 22). The image is clearly a master seeking his followers, a sharp contrast to the traditional pattern of people seeking a master. Jesus invites these four fishermen to “follow” him and they do so in order to become “fishers” of other people.

Well might it be noted the kind of fishing these four were invited to do. The brothers left boats and nets, not hooks and lines. The kind of fishing Simon, Andrew, James, and John knew was the kind in which a net was dragged along in the water to pull in everything in its path, not our mere recreational hook, line, and sinker. Jesus’ words about the kingdom present a challenge to evangelism as it is often defined today:

The kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, people drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Matt 13:47-50)

This is not lapel-pin hook evangelism; this is nets thrown into the sea to gather fish of every kind. “Follow me, and I will make you fishers” of men, women, children, of every kind.

The Gospel text carries over into 4:23, a verse separated in the *Oxford Annotated Bible* from the previous verse and connected instead to 4:24-25. But this verse captures the ministry of Jesus: teaching, preaching, and healing. Now that is a threefold ministry! This is an Epiphany lesson, a text of revelation and response.

Jesus appeared in Galilee with his message of the kingdom, appearing among Jews and Gentiles, the religious and non-religious, scribes and fishermen, and among the learned and simple. We have here a manifestation of the divine mission among all sorts of persons.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus appeared, and people responded. Simon and Andrew, James and John followed...immediately. But a few verses later, “great crowds followed him” (Matt 4:25).

Texts of revelation and texts of response. These texts bear witness to the revelation of God in human form—a babe being nourished at his mother’s breast, a man dripping Jordan’s baptismal water. These texts also describe the response of kings and fishermen, of Gentiles and religious authorities, of ordinary folk and royalty to this one we know as Jesus the Christ.

<sup>5</sup>A. J. Hultgren, *Lectionary Bible Studies: The Year of Matthew: Advent-Christmas-Epiphany* (Minneapolis; Augsburg, 1977) 65-66.