

Matthew's Audience and the Gifts of the Magi

Warren Carter and Dorothy Weaver, two scholars who have written extensively on the Gospel of Matthew's interaction with the Roman Empire, point out how the messianic portrait in the gospel's infancy narrative (1:1–2:23) contests kingship and power in the Roman imperial world. The visit of the gift-bearing magi to worship the newborn king of the Jews presents a sharp contrast between those who hold allegiance to God and the powers of the world that oppose God, represented by Herod and the Jerusalem elite. The magi's prostration before the infant is understood as worship of the king as God's representative, and their presentation of the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh is seen as an OT allusion to bringing gifts to the king. However, another allusion might be considered when read from the perspective of Carter's "authorial audience." This paper will explore the following questions: (1) how does examining the magi's gifts from the perspective of an audience in Antioch in Syria open up the possibility that another allusion might have resonated with them, the presentation of similar gifts (silver, frankincense and myrrh) to the Seleucid king Antiochus III? And (2) how would such a resonance fit with an anti-imperial reading of the gospel?