

# “Star in the East”

a sermon for The Second Sunday after Christmas, Epiphany (transferred) RCL, 05 January 2020

for St. Paul & the Redeemer Episcopal Church, Chicago, Illinois

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[Begin by reading T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi"]

I don't think any part of the New Testament has received more extra-biblical adornment than the birth narratives in the second chapters of Luke and Matthew. The outpouring of creativity the birth narratives have inspired down the ages is astounding. T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi" is among the more sober and introspective modern glosses on Jesus' birth.

A fair amount of our fondness for Christmas and Epiphany is actually for accretions to these rather spare biblical narratives: "In the bleak midwinter... snow was falling snow on snow", for example, or a candlelit singing of "Silent night, holy night", more so than the story embedded in the experience.

Popular tradition has likewise dressed up the biblical account of the magi's visit to the point of obscurity. Let's peel away some of those later additions, such as:

- calling them "kings" (a practice that arose from early associations of this story with prophetic passages in the Hebrew Bible, such as we heard earlier in Psalm 72). Even "wise men" isn't an exact translation. Perhaps "astrologer", "priest", or maybe "magician" ...;
- setting them astride camels;
- specifying three of them (simply because there were three named gifts. I guess it's expected that each visitor brings a hostess gift when calling);
- assuming that they represented three distinct ethnic groups (often depicted as vaguely Arab, Asian, and African), or giving them names;
- thinking the star led them right to Jesus' crib;
- assigning metaphorical significance to each gift (gold acknowledging Jesus' royalty, frankincense validating his divinity, and myrrh for embalming, presaging his death). In biblical times, all three were associated with royalty; these additional interpretations came later.

Here is a "cleaner" read of the text:

*Essentially:* Astrologers somewhere east of Bethlehem see a new light in the sky and discern from it that a new King has been born to the Jews. Prompted by this discovery, they seek out the new king. Once found, they bow before and worship him, and present him three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—and then they leave.

*Additionally:* The star the astrologers follow doesn't lead them directly to Jesus, at least not immediately. Having discerned that it indicates the birth of the king of the Jews, they go to Jerusalem, the capitol city, and ask around, in search of this new king. The reigning king, Herod, up to this point unaware of the birth of a supposed usurper, gets wind of their queries. At his bidding, the Jewish authorities deduce from biblical prophecies that Bethlehem would be the proper birthplace for a king. Herod informs the magi of the baby's general whereabouts—secretly, presumably to prevent others from finding out about him and threatening Herod's grip on power—and prepares immediately to eliminate him. The magi will return to Herod with the exact location of the babe. Finally, the star leads the magi right to Jesus.

I don't read much fiction, maybe because I so often feel manipulated by the writers' machinations to lead to their desired outcomes. Couldn't things have gone differently? Who gave these people power to pull those narrative strings? (This probably says more about my desire for control than about fiction writing.) Our writer—let's call him Matthew—pulls cosmic strings. He could have had the star lead the magi to Jesus. Instead, the star provides no guidance, so they stop off in Jerusalem, and stir up Herod's jealous rage. Why this detour?

For our writer, this story needs to accomplish a few goals: to reveal Jesus to non-Jews, who made up part of his community; to adhere Jesus' life to Jewish tradition, and fulfill biblical prophecy to legitimize Jesus in the eyes of Jews in Matthew's community; and to put Jesus in conflict with the authorities, a theme that threads through the rest of his ministry.

Scholars have speculated that Matthew likely was active in a first-century Jewish-Christian community in Syria whose religious worldview permeates this gospel: straddling traditional and non-Jewish values, it is particularly concerned with Jesus' divinity and with the Law, and reflects struggles between early Christians and their Jewish neighbors.

Jesus was born King of the Jews through his adoption by Joseph, whose Davidic lineage Matthew traces at the beginning of the gospel. Jesus' life and ministry, as portrayed in Matthew's gospel, echo the lives of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, and Moses. Joseph was forced into Egypt; Moses fled Egypt, leading the Hebrews from slavery under Pharaoh. By connecting Jesus' story with those of pillars of Jewish faith, Matthew's narrative lends legitimacy to Jesus' right to the throne of David, and role as Savior of God's people—persuasive information for his community.

But in Matthew's telling, Jesus' birth and royalty were first revealed not to Jews, but to “the nations” (that is, non-Jews), represented by the magi. Now one sees why Matthew also traced Jesus' lineage to Abraham, the father of many nations, not just the Jews. It was gentiles—the magi—who brought Jesus' birth and birthright to the attention of the Jews.

Pharaoh's animosity toward Moses is mirrored in Herod's toward Jesus. Had the star been a more accurate navigational aid, the magi wouldn't have stumble-bumbled around Jerusalem, raising Herod's hackles. Herod might never have learned of Jesus' birth. The magi would have had no reason to return to Herod to report the baby's location. Herod's plot is foiled only when they are told in a dream (presumably divinely inspired) to take another route home. An angel might not have had to warn Joseph in a dream that Herod intended to kill Jesus, and that Joseph must flee to Egypt with Mary and his infant son to protect the child; their return from Egypt fulfills the prophecy of Hosea, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” Herod, avoided by the magi and thus still uninformed of the child's digs, might not have fulminated so and ordered the massacre of all children in Bethlehem two years old and younger, recalling for Matthew and his hearers words from Jeremiah,

“A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

further tying Jesus' story to biblical precedent.

I won't say that Matthew manipulates the story, but I will say that he constructs a narrative that advances certain theological claims about Jesus, not a historical account of his birth and infancy. This is backed up by conflicts of chronology between Matthew's gospel and the events in Luke's account. Neither story gives us just the facts, but each shares some of its truths.

Thus distilled, what might this story teach us?

It might be illuminating to try recasting the story as if it were happening here, tomorrow, on the Feast of the Epiphany.

Is Jesus a Mexican baby in the American Southwest, ruled over by Anglos who deny the historic legitimacy of Mexican claims to that land, who were themselves descended from immigrants, much as the Hebrews were when God gave them new lands after their flight from Egypt? Is Jesus' royalty recognized by aboriginal sages from South America, who trace their lineage back before Spanish conquest? There are many possible scenarios.

Christendom is dead, many say, in a time of European secularism and cultural intermingling. But, if Christendom has a heartbeat anywhere, it is here in the United States, one of the most religious—and Christian—of western societies.

Jesus was a Jew, yet his message challenged official Judaism, and his ministry attracted and shaped a new community increasingly distant from their Jewish roots. If Jesus were born to us today, even if nothing about his message changed, he would attract and shape a new community increasingly removed from most of contemporary Christianity. That is how radical his love is, and how far from the *status quo* it remains, even in our so-called “Christian country”. America overflows with nominal Christians, we who profess an established faith, but who so often willfully ignore its most challenging tenets.

The citizenry of Jesus is one of hearts and minds. His true kingdom has never been defined by borders and governments and armies, but by extended hands and open doors. Jesus' kingdom has not come into being because Jesus' followers have not yet embraced and enacted the radical love for all that he demonstrated and mandated. If there is to be a reign of Christ, it must be a community that cares for all God's creatures, that plants and fertilizes and cultivates a new Eden, one into which everyone is welcome, and whose bountiful harvest is available to all. This is the kingdom of the Jesus the magi knelt before. This is the world into which we must transform the broken one in which we live today.

Let's conclude with a little of that extra-biblical adornment that helps us see biblical truth from different angles. These are the last verses of the Fifth Cantata from J.S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, written for the First Sunday after the Circumcision (which happens to be today):

*My beloved reigns already. A heart that loves his rule and gives itself wholly up to him is the throne of my Jesus.  
Truly the chamber of such a heart is no princely dwelling, but a dark cell; yet as soon as a gleam of thy grace shines therein, it is as if filled with sunlight.*

Merry Christmas, everyone. Happy Twelfth Night. And a joyous Epiphany to you.