



The Adoration of the Magi
Oil on copper
Joseph van Bradael (1688–1739), ca. 1700

Riveted

“Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.” Matthew captures our attention with a story unlike any other in the Jesus traditions. Sages from a distant land had seen an auspicious omen in the heavens: a star heralding the birth of one who would be “king of the Jews.” They’ve journeyed over rugged terrain for months, following the star all the way to Bethlehem. Arriving at the place where Mary has given birth to Jesus, they are “overwhelmed with joy”! They kneel and pay homage to the newborn, offering him tribute fit for royalty: glittering **gold** and costly aromatic resins, **frankincense** and **myrrh**.

What an ASTONISHING story!

What would *possess* a group of sages—probably priestly diviners from the Persian royal court¹—to make a demanding and dangerous journey of *literally 1,000 miles* to a backwater village in the Judean hill country? They’re following a star that not only leads them to Jerusalem but somehow actually stops over a particular house?? And these dignitaries have brought exquisitely costly gifts for a random baby born in occupied Palestine to parents with no connection to Roman imperial power?!

Matthew is a brilliant storyteller. But even MORE ASTONISHING than the details of the storyline are the claims that resonate just beneath the surface of the narrative. The **theological register** of this story is majestic and musically rich, a shimmering polyphony of motifs interwoven from the Torah and the Prophets to hymn the power of Jesus Christ as the Messiah for whom Israel has been longing!

First, Matthew draws on a fantastically interesting oracle in the book of Numbers, delivered by a Mesopotamian visionary named Balaam to Israel *centuries* before Jesus was born.² Remember the story of Balaam and his talking donkey? That’s the guy. ^{Numbers 22–24} In our Gospel reading, when the sages from the East—from *Mesopotamia*—explain to Herod, “We observed his star at its rising,” Matthew means for us to hear the fulfillment of Balaam’s oracle in Numbers 24: “A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel,” signifying the advent of a mighty ruler who will overthrow Israel’s enemies. Herod understands the threat: in this tiny baby, Jesus, the magi have glimpsed the one who will bring about the defeat of Rome and *every earthly empire* that seeks to subjugate the people of God!

Next, Matthew quotes the prophet Micah: an oracle also from *centuries* before the birth of Jesus. Micah prophesied, “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least ... for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.... He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,” Micah says, “and they shall live secure”: this Messianic ruler will usher in a global age of peace, and Israel will be saved from its enemies. ^{Mic 5:5–9} With this quotation from Micah 5, Matthew is underscoring the point: Jesus will bring down the Roman empire and *every* regime built on oppression or greed for power!

Finally in this amazing story of the magi—this is so beautiful—Matthew reflects on Isaiah 60, our first lesson this morning. “Arise, shine, for your light has come,” Isaiah sings, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.... They shall bring **gold** and **frankincense**, and ... proclaim the praise of the LORD”!³ Jesus is born, and here come the nations. Matthew is not playing! This is *not* a metaphor. Sages from the Persian royal court have followed a cosmic sign *straight* to baby Jesus, and they’ve brought treasure: **gold** and **frankincense**, just as Isaiah had prophesied. Salvation has dawned for Israel!⁴

Matthew knows how to keep our gaze **riveted** on Jesus as his Gospel unfolds. The glorious beam of the Epiphany star is a cosmic spotlight shining on Immanuel, “God with us.” ^{Matt 1:21–23} Matthew’s superbly crafted story catalyzes in us a deep eagerness for the Messiah; we are positively transfixed as we watch the baby Jesus.

The magi have shown us the beginning of the life of faith: what spiritually wise people do, those who glimpse God's purposes written in the heavens, is find their way to Jesus. The magi have journeyed a *thousand miles* to get to Jesus, they prostrate themselves before him, and they give him treasure: lustrous **gold** gleams all around the baby, and the air around him is fragrant with the aromas of **frankincense** and **myrrh**.⁵ Their witness is powerfully compelling. With countless believers through the centuries, we kneel with the magi and offer our praise to the Christ child.

Then, of course, the magi return home. But *we* aren't going anywhere. Matthew's artistry leaves us yearning to understand discipleship. How will it transform our lives—how it will *save us*—that we have found our way to Jesus? Matthew's dramatic storytelling ensures that we remain **riveted**, gazing at our precious Messiah, trying to imagine *how* he will become the hope of all who love God!

Thus we are transfixed as the magnificent Gospel of Matthew continues to unfold. As new disciples—as readers of Matthew 2 who have *just learned* to kneel before the baby Jesus—we have a million questions. For many believers eager to know the salvation of our God, one question is at the forefront:

When the newborn Messiah learns to speak, what will he say?

Friends, *this* is where Matthew offers treasure of his own.

There are several astonishing and profound things Jesus says *only* in Matthew.⁶

- Jesus says, “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”^{5:17} Jesus is the fulfilment of all that the Torah teaches! He embodies precisely those qualities to which the prophets call their community: unwavering fidelity to God and courageous solidarity with all who are oppressed! Love of God and love of neighbor: on those two things hang all the Law and the Prophets,^{Matt 22:40} and we understand that in lifechanging ways when we follow Jesus.
- Something else Jesus says *only* in Matthew: “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”^{11:28–30} Jesus as divine Wisdom invites all who are diminished, dispirited, or despairing to find respite and restoration in him. Consider that a *personal* invitation when you are grieving or exhausted, daunted or depressed. Come to Jesus—find rest in your Savior!⁷
- And remember the stirring *last words* in the Gospel of Matthew: the risen Christ promises his disciples: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”^{28:20} Words precious beyond the telling—a promise we can take with us into the darkest night of loss, into every landscape ravaged by conflict, into those moments when we don’t know how we can go on.

In the exquisite theology of the First Gospel, Matthew offers his own treasure: his Gospel is a glorious gift of testimony to Jesus. Matthew offers the **GOLD** of

Scripture: Jesus fulfills all the Law and the Prophets in his wondrous healings, his wise teachings,⁸ and in his death and resurrection. Matthew offers the aromatic

FRANKINCENSE of testimony that in Jesus, we will find rest for our souls.

And Matthew offers fragrant **MYRRH** in the promise that Christ will be with us always, until heaven and earth pass away and we are taken up into the new Jerusalem, radiant with the glory of God! ^{Rev 21:1-2, 23}

The magi have shown us the meaning of Epiphany: no matter how arduous the journey, we should do everything in our power to find our way to Jesus.

Search for him in Scripture! He fulfills everything in those pages that is generative, everything that fires your spiritual imagination, everything that draws you toward Love.

Struggle toward him when your burdens feel too heavy for you, when you feel alone or overwhelmed.

And trust his promise: he is with us *always*, no matter what—with each believer personally, and with the Church.

Friends, find your way to Jesus!

And remain **riveted** by the good news!

In the Name of the One who is the Light of the World:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

7 January 2024

Feast of the Epiphany (transferred)

Isaiah 60:1–6; Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14; Ephesians 3:1–12; Matthew 2:1–12

For St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ On the history of interpretation of the magi in Matthew 2, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (Hermeneia; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 106–114. Following are some delightful tidbits from Luz’s discussion. Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165) says “the magi have renounced the evil demon of magic and have converted to Christ” (106). For Tertullian (ca. 155–ca. 220), “the coming of Christ means a new ‘light of knowledge,’” and “with the homage of the magi the world’s wisdom is reoriented” (107). A mosaic in the Santa Maria Maggiore church in Rome has the baby Jesus as a tiny enthroned adult who speaks, “‘a symbol of Christ’s self-revelation and an imperial gesture’” showing that “the Christ child is the ‘small enthroned Logos’” (108). According to John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), the magi serve as exemplars of those “who have experienced an ‘inner enlightenment’” (109). The gifts of **gold**, **frankincense**, and **myrrh** have been interpreted according to many different schemata. In the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum*, a fifth-century commentary long attributed mistakenly to Chrysostom, the magi’s gifts stand for “rational faith, pure reason, and good works,” for Euthymius Zigabenus (d. 1118 or 1120) “pure works, prayer, and destruction of the passions,” and for Martin Luther (1483–1546) “faith, hope, and love” (109). Luz observes that during the Reformation, Protestant and Catholic theologians alike “polemicized against identifying the magi with kings,” but their position has had little influence “on popular piety,” and the description of the delegation as “three kings” continues in many churches to this day (111).

² Jerome (ca. 347–420) and many other interpreters hear Num 24:17 in the background of Matt 2:1–12. See Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, Fathers of the Church 117 (translated by Thomas P. Scheck; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 64.

³ Isaiah 60:1, 3, 6. “**Gold** and **frankincense**” in the Septuagint of Isaiah 60:6 (χρυσίον καὶ λίβανον) was assuredly known to Matthew the scribe, who uses the same terms in Matt 2:11 (χρυσὸν καὶ λίβανον). “Kings” is not part of the Matthew story, and we cannot say how many magi there were: it could have been a vast retinue of sages and their servants, bearing huge quantities of **gold**, **frankincense**, and **myrrh**. Tradition has simplified the possibilities: there are three because three gifts are named, and they are kings because the gifts are costly and could well have been imagined as tribute from a royal court.

⁴ Listen to this beautiful music of Felix Mendelssohn—sung by our wonderful St. Thomas’s choir many times—to get a sense of what Matthew has done in his richly layered story of the magi: “[There Shall a Star from Jacob Come Forth](#).” The composer interweaves three themes to extraordinary effect: the oracular saying of Balaam in Num 24:17 about a star coming forth from Jacob; a musical setting by Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608) of words from Rev 22:16, where Jesus says, “I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” [see hymns 496 and 497 in our Episcopal *Hymnal 1982*]; and arguably, the magnificent Word theology of the Gospel of John. This beloved piece from Western choral repertoire, “Es wird ein Stern aus Jakob aufgehen,” is taken from an unfinished oratorio by Mendelssohn entitled *Christus*. The piece was first performed in Düsseldorf in 1852.

⁵ The symbolic significance of the sages’ three precious gifts has been explored since the earliest days of the Church. **Frankincense** was used in sacrificial offerings in ancient Israel and Judah (see Exod 30:34; Lev 2:1–2, 15–16; 6:8; 24:7; Neh 13:5, 9; Jer 17:26; 41:5; Sir 50:9; Bar 1:10), a point taken up by Christian interpreters of this gift of the magi as indicating Jesus’ divine nature. Their gift of **myrrh**, a spice used at burial, is understood by numerous Christian interpreters as signaling proleptically Jesus’ death on the cross. The comment offered by Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 315–ca. 367) illustrates a major stream of theological interpretation: “The offering of gifts ... represented their awareness of Christ’s full identity: the **gold** proclaims him as King, the **incense** as God, the **myrrh** as man. And so through the Magi’s veneration [of him], the understanding of every mystery is summed up concerning his death as man, ... his resurrection as God, [and] ... his judgment as King,” that last pointing to Jesus’ eschatological return as judge of all nations, per Matt 25:31–46. See Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*, Fathers of the Church 125 (translated by D. H. Williams; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 46.

⁶ The so-called “Special Matthew” material serves as an indispensable guide to the theological purposes of the First Gospel.

⁷ Relevant here: Jesus also says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”^{11:18} Only in Matthew do we find that crucial promise of our Lord, so lifegiving to Christians enduring persecution, and so bolstering to struggling believers everywhere who wonder whether their witness matters. Jesus is among us. Treasure indeed!

⁸ Jesus’ teachings are vital to Matthew’s understanding of Jesus as the Christ. The Evangelist has structured his Gospel by means of five major discourses of Jesus. #1 is the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1–7:29); #2 is on mission (10:1–11:1); #3 comprises many of Jesus’ parables (13:1–53); #4 has to do with the believing community (18:1–19:2); and #5 concerns the apocalyptic future (24:1–26:2).