

The Meaning of the Visit of the Magi

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Among the best known Christian stories is the visit (or adoration) of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12), annually commemorated in Western eucharistic liturgies on or about 6 January. But what does the story tell us? What is the point of Matthew's insertion of this story in his Gospel?

The commonest answer is that Matthew has here told us that an unnumbered group of Gentile astrologers heeded a divinely-given sign, the star, understanding it to call them to worship the new-born Christ, the Son of God, and that they heeded the call, found the divine child and offered him the kind of worship which is due to God, thus providing Christians with a model of faith in the divine nature of Jesus.

This view of the account is evidenced in St John Chrysostom's commentary on Matthew, which St Thomas Aquinas quotes in his *Catena Aurea*:

Let Marcion and Paul of Samosata then blush, who will not see what the Magi saw, those progenitors of the Church adoring God in the flesh. That he was truly in the flesh, the swaddling clothes and the stall prove; yet that they worshiped him not as mere man, but as God, the gifts prove which it was becoming to offer to a God. Let the Jews also be ashamed, seeing the Magi coming before them, and themselves not even earnest to tread in their path.¹

Or again:

It was as on this day that the wise men of the East were allowed to approach and adore the infant Saviour, in anticipation of those Gentile multitudes who, when the kingdom of God was preached, were to take possession of it as if by violence, and to extend it to the ends of the earth.²

¹ Latin text in *S. Thomae Aquinatis: Catena Aurea in Quatuor Evangelia*, Vol. 1 (Turin: Marietti, 1915), 35.

² John Henry Newman, "Sermon 10. Faith and reason, contrasted as habits of mind" in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford between A. D. 1826 and 1843* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1909), 176. Cf. "... the Epiphany ... being the day on which the wise men came from the East under guidance of a star, to worship Him, and thus become the first-fruits of the heathen world." *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. II (London/Oxford/Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1873), 80.

I do not think this is the meaning of the story at all. The climax of the story is the honouring or adoring, of the Magi. But what were they doing when they so acted? We can answer this question only if we have answered two prior questions: (1) whom were the Magi seeking to find? and (2) whom did they believe they had found?

What they did when they “worshiped”, or “paid homage” to, the child depends on what beliefs they had about him at the time. I shall explain this further because it is fundamental to my argument. What a person does intentionally is the same as the answer to the question: what is (was) the point of what he does (did)? I can give a young lady a bunch of flowers believing she has a disposition to favour men who so act and my giving is likely to bring about her favouring me. I can perform the same act believing that she will be consoled by it for the death of her mother. In both cases I give the same person the same gift, but the point of the giving is different in each case. What I do is describable by reference to the beliefs that I hold about what I am doing. To do *X* in the belief that *X* is *Y* is a different act from doing *X* in the belief that *X* is *Z*.³

An example may help to clarify this matter. There are Protestants who assert that Catholics and Orthodox worship, that is, adore, give divine honour to, images of saints. As evidence they cite instances of Catholics and Orthodox honouring statues and ikons with gestures that are common in Christian worship of God, such as incensing them, kissing them reverently, placing lighted candles before them. It seems to these Protestants that the Catholics and Orthodox are thus offering the unique kind of worship which is adoration (*latría*). But if one were to ask any of these agents what they were doing they would not reply, “Worshiping statues and ikons as God (or gods)”, for they do not believe for a moment that these objects are divinities.⁴ Necessary to a description of what they are doing are the beliefs they hold in doing what they do.

I turn now to the two questions.

1. Whom were the Magi seeking?

The question is difficult to answer, as are many questions about Matthew 2:1-12, because the story is extremely sketchy. There are no

³ Here I am reliant on the economical analysis of intentionality of Gareth Moore, *A Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality* (Continuum: New York/ London, 2003), 49-55. Moore uses the spelling “intensionality”.

⁴ This point is succinctly expressed by the Council of Trent: ... *Christum adoremus, et Sanctos, quorum illae similitudinem gerunt, veneremur* (... we are adoring Christ and venerating the Saints whose likeness these images bear) (DS 1823). The distinction is between adoring and venerating, a distinction marked by different beliefs about Christ (God), on the one hand, and the saints, on the other.

parallels to it in the other Gospels, nor in the whole New Testament, to which one can turn for elucidation, and resemblances to stories in the Old Testament are faint.

Commentators have often pointed out that events in the infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew seem to be written from the point of view of those who believed that the resurrection of Jesus constituted a divine declaration that Jesus was God's Anointed, his Beloved Son, and that this post-resurrection belief prompted the evangelists to create stories of the infancy, such as that of the visit of the Magi, which strengthened this belief. On this view the series of events constituting the visit of the Magi did not occur — the account is not history.

I should like to give notice that I am putting aside the question of the historicity of the story, important as it is. I shall not answer the question: did these events happen? Rather, I shall attempt to answer the question: what was Matthew trying to tell the reader by recounting this story? To this question there can be no answer unless we know whom the Magi were seeking and whom they believed they found. For the dénouement is the 'adoration' of, or 'rendering homage' to, the infant Jesus. Remove it and the story is pointless. If we reject the possibility of the story's being pointless, then we are left facing the question: whom did the Magi believe they were honouring or adoring?

Whom were they seeking? "The one born king of the Jews" (2:2). No explanation is given as to how they came to believe that the star they had seen "at its rising" betokened the existence of someone born king of the Jews, nor of why they believed information regarding his location could be discovered in Jerusalem. True, it was common in the years surrounding the birth of Jesus for odd behaviours of celestial bodies to be interpreted as indications that someone of importance was about to be born or had been born. But how this common belief was transformed into a particular belief that a king had been born and, also, that he was king of the Jews rather than, say, of the Egyptians - none of this is explained in the text.⁵

"Where is he the one born king of the Jews?" is their question. The question is odd because there is already someone bearing the title, "king of the Jews", namely, Herod the Great. The Romans had conferred on him this title. However he later had to establish his authority by force over Judea and, later still, adjacent territories.

Here I draw attention to the fact that the case of Herod shows one could be the recipient of the title of king whilst lacking all capacity to

⁵ Lack of textual evidence has not prevented invention of explanation: "But there must have been some special Divine revelation whereby they knew that 'his star' meant the birth of a king, that this new-born king was very God, and that they should be led by 'his star' to the place of the God-King's birth (St. Leo, Sermon. xxxiv, 'In Epiphany.' IV, 3)." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. IX (Appleton: 1910), 530.

rule for some time after reception of it. So it is possible that when the Magi said they were seeking a king they meant they were looking for someone upon whom an authority had conferred the title, and who was not yet ruling

But if the child were someone upon whom the title of king had been conferred there is no evidence of this in the narrative. In fact, we readers do not know why the Magi would think that this child was a king, in the sense that an acknowledged authority had given him the title.

As I have said, their question is odd because there was already someone both bearing the title and also ruling. Perhaps they did not know this fact. For this to be the case, they would have had to be uncommonly ignorant. The probability of their being so ignorant would be increased, were they foreigners. These hypotheses cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed for lack of textual evidence. We do not know the region from which the Magi came. So we are left with the oddness of their question.

The question remains: why were the Magi looking for a male child who was a king? He could not be ruling, so he could not be identified as king by his acts. It would make sense to describe him as a king only if either (a) some high authority had conferred the title on him or (b) he had a rightful claim to the title by virtue of his birth into a family where succession to the title was determined according to an established rule of succession.

I have already ruled out (a) for lack of supporting evidence. So let us look at hypothesis (b).

Take the case of the present king of Greece. There is a man who is that king by reference to the rule of succession which was widely acknowledged in Greece before the overthrow of the monarchy. By reference to that rule he is king. However, he does not rule anyone - he has no kingdom. Was the infant Jesus king of the Jews in virtue of a rule of succession employed by Jews in Judea and neighbouring territories? Once again our speculation is halted for lack of evidence regarding what induced the Magi, before they arrived in Jerusalem, to believe the child was a king.

But does not Matthew stress that Jesus is a descendant of King David? In the genealogy, Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, appears in the list of descendants of David. When the angel announced to Joseph that Mary would bear a child, he addressed Joseph as "son of David" (1:20). True, but this would not have provided a reason for the Magi to believe that the child Jesus was a king. After all, if being a descendant of David made one a king, then Joseph was a king. Moreover there were thousands of men living who were descendants of David. No one would think that being a descendant of David was sufficient to qualify as a king of the Jews. Further, Jesus was not a son of Joseph.

Relevant is the fact that there is no reason provided by the text to believe that the Magi had ever heard of Joseph and of his descent from David. The view they held was that an exceptional star indicated that a king of the Jews had been born who was worthy of homage (*proskyneisai*).

Whom were the Magi seeking? Herod understood from the report he had received that they were looking for “the Christ”. It seems that “king of the Jews” and “the Christ” are the same person.

The magi asked for “the King of the Jews”; Herod speaks of “the Messiah”. For the same interchangeability, see Matt. 26:63 where in the Sanhedrin the chief priest asks about Jesus as “the Messiah” and 27:37 where Jesus is crucified by the Romans as “the King of the Jews.”⁶

Given that they were seeking the Christ, and given that they were directed to the town where a prophecy said the Christ would be born, it follows that the child whom they found there was, in their belief, the Christ, and they offered homage to him under that description. It seems to follow that they are amongst the first believers in Jesus as the Christ, thus constituting a model for Christians.

We must scrutinise this conclusion. The Magi asked, “Where is the one born king of the Jews?” Herod asked the experts where the Christ was to be born. They came to the conclusion that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem of Judah on the basis of a text which is a compound of Micah 5:2 (RSV) and Second Samuel 5:2. According to this text, who will be born in Bethlehem? “... a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”⁷

Herod accepted this as the answer to his question, so by “the Christ” he must have meant a political ruler, a king. “Since this [king of the Jews] was the official title of Herod the Great, the Magi’s question would have been interpreted as referring to a rival of Herod.”⁸ Note that the Magi, also, seem to have accepted that the one they were seeking was a king. I say “seem to” because Herod sent them to Bethlehem, and they went there, so they must have believed he had answered their question regarding the location of a king.

I summarise this analysis of Matthew 2:1-6. The Magi came to Jerusalem in search of a king, a political ruler of the Jews. Herod and his advisers told them to go to Bethlehem. There they would find “the Christ”. What is the implied description of the Christ they were employing? Matthew does not say. But if we suppose that Herod

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), 175.

⁷ Second Samuel 5:1-3 is an account of the selection and anointing of David as king of Israel - a political ruler.

⁸ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 42.

transmitted to the Magi the description given by the experts - "... a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel", and that they accepted this description, then they turned south seeking to find a king, in the sense of a governor of Israel. Muhammad, after his return from Medina to Mecca, would have satisfied the description of the one they sought.

But in what sense was this child a king in the view of the Magi? Obviously, his being a child ruled out the possibility that he was exercising authority or rulership, so he could be a king only in the sense that he had been designated to rule. If Herod reported to them that Bethlehem had been selected as the town where they would find "the king of the Jews", giving as his reason that the Scriptures included a promise by Yahweh that "a ruler who will shepherd (or govern) my people Israel" would be born in Bethlehem, then the Magi believed that the child had been designated ruler by no less a one than God. If we suppose, further, that Herod had given them this information, then they went to Bethlehem in the hope of finding the one who will rule Israel; that is, a king.

I see no alternative to making these suppositions. From them it follows that the Magi were expecting to encounter in Bethlehem a child who had been designated king by God. When they said they had come to pay him homage "... the association of the action with the title 'King of the Jews' in vs. 2 directs the reader's thought to homage paid to royalty rather than to worship of divinity."⁹

2. Whom did they believe they had found?

Herod sent the Magi to find the child and report the latter's location. They followed the star "to the place where the child was", in Bethlehem. On seeing the child they fell down and "paid him homage" or "worshipped him" (*prosekynèsan*). Then they offered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. What were they doing? What they were doing is describable by the beliefs they held about the object of their acts of paying homage and offering gifts. Were they paying him mere respect? or the homage of men offering allegiance to him? or worship (*latría*) as to one they believed to be God? or what?

The Revised Standard Version of the New Testament translates the Greek word *prosekynèsan* as "worshipped". There are various other English translations. A great deal depends on the translation because we know of only two external acts the Magi performed on finding the child: (1) *prosekynèsan* and (2) "offered him gifts". But what did they believe they were doing in performing these acts?

⁹ Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 174.

First, let us consider *prosekynèsan*. “When the NT uses *proskynein* [infinitive], the object is always something - truly or supposedly - divine”, writes Greeven in the prestigious *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.¹⁰ But is this true? Previously Herod had said (2:8), “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, so that I too may come and *proskynèso* him.” Herod could scarcely have been declaring, falsely, that he intended to visit the child and adore him, because the only information he had regarding the latter was that a prophet had said a “ruler” and “shepherd” or “governor” of Israel would be born in Bethlehem, one so designated by God. Such a description did not betoken divinity. Nor did it suggest any relation to Yahweh different from that of previous kings of the Jews or of Israel.

A possibility to consider is that kings were commonly regarded as divinised at that time, so the Magi were expressing their belief that they were giving proper honour to a god. That possibility has to meet the immediate objection that, if that were their belief, why did they not prostrate themselves before the god, Herod?

A more general objection lies in the fact that, in the Jewish tradition, designation by God of someone as a ruler did not imply, or even suggest, that the ruler somehow shared in divinity, and was, consequently, worthy of worship. “Israel never had, never could have had, any idea of a king who was a god.”¹¹ The kings of the line of David were all deemed to have been anointed by God. Hence, they were Christs (anointed), yet no Jew considered them divinities. Indeed, the biblical tradition asserted that many of the Christs were unworthy of their anointing, so that they were anything but divinities. The Dead Sea scrolls show that their two Christs were never objects of worship amongst the Essenes.

When the Jew, Herod, said he would come and “worship” the child he can only have meant that he would pay homage to the child as to one he believed to be a king, for the word we find in Matthew for what Herod said he would do, *proskynèso*, is the same word which Matthew uses to describe the acts of the Magi when they come into the presence of the child, Jesus. They were, therefore, doing no more than what Herod had promised he would do, namely, perform an act acknowledging that Jesus was worthy of honour in virtue of Jesus’s being the future king of the Jews.

I have tried to determine the meaning of the word, *prosekynèsan*, by reference to the context. The context is a search for a child under

¹⁰ Heinrich Greeven, “proskyneô” In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988) edited by Gerhard Friedrich and translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Vol. VI, 763.

¹¹ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 113.

the description “the one born king of the Jews”. Whatever the Magi did on finding the child, they did in the belief that he was the king of the Jews - and nothing more. They did not know what we readers know, namely, that Joseph is not responsible for the conception of Jesus and the Holy Spirit is. In that respect, they were ignorant, as was Herod, and “the chief priests and scribes of the people”; as also was the prophet Micah whose words they interpreted.

The whole episode is succinctly summarised by René Laurentin: “They had identified the *King* by a heavenly sign. Their programme was to adore him (2:3). This programme is now completed.”¹² A king, no more than a king, was the object of their ‘adoration’.¹³

In contrast, we, the readers, are the privileged ones. We know what Joseph knew, that the child is God’s Son.

If the genealogy establishes that Jesus is Son of David and Son of Abraham, the account of Jesus’ birth, 1:18-25, with its echoes of the birth of Isaac (“your wife will bear a son and you shall call him . . .” [v. 21; cf. Gen17:19], greatly exalts his status above Jewish messianic expectation of a traditional kind. The agency of the Holy Spirit displaces that of the man who would otherwise be his human father, preparing the way for him to be later understood as God’s Son not in the sense in which any king of David’s line, and particularly the expected Anointed One, could be called “Son of God” but in a way indicating unique relationship to God.¹⁴

Conclusions

Suppose that the case I have made is sound. What conclusions follow?

There is a form of humour that is common in drama, dramatic irony, where the audience knows more than the players, a situation which the audience finds somewhat comical. One example occurs in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* where the spectators know that Cesario is a girl but Orsino and Olivia do not. The story of the Magi belongs to this genre.

The story exemplifies this form which, in virtue of its irony, is both comic and tragic. We are meant to find the story of the Magi

¹² “Ils avaient identifié le *Roi* par signe de ciel. Leur programme était de l’adorer (2, 3). Ce programme est maintenant rempli.” René Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l’Enfance du Christ: Vérité de Noël au-delà des Mythes* (Paris: Desclée & Desclée de Brouwer, 1982), 327.

¹³ “But as they are convinced that He is the divinely ordained King, this idea firmly set in their minds is enough to win their reverence for Christ.” John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew Mark and Luke*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 88, edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, and translated by A. W. Morrison.

¹⁴ Brendan Byrne, “The Messiah in whose name ‘the Gentiles will hope’ (Matt:13-21): Gentile inclusion as an essential element in Matthew’s Christology”, *Australian Biblical Review* 50 (2002), 60.

amusing. Poor fools, they came looking for a king. They believed they had found a king. They did honour to the one they believed to be a king. They returned home believing they had acted appropriately towards a minor king. Poor deceived Magi, for we know he was never a king but was someone much, much greater, than a king.

This point is confirmed by the fact that it was common at this time to regard *magoi* as fools. In Jewish literature, “Not a single story or text presents magi as wise or indicates that the knowledge they possessed could ever be viewed as worthy of acquisition.” “They are fools.”¹⁵ They are ignorant for “[t]hey think he is ‘king of the Jews’, a political identification that in Matthew’s narrative reflects the point of view of those who do not understand who Jesus is or what he is about”.¹⁶

We know he was the Christ, where “Christ” does not mean “king”. An Anointed One, a Christ, was someone anointed *for* some function, e.g., ruling as king, offering sacrifice as priest, performing miracles. Prophets were figuratively anointed.¹⁷ So was Jesus.

Anointed for what function? Later in his Gospel (11:2-6), Matthew reports that John the Baptist heard of the “works of the Christ” and sent disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come”? The question concerns the identity of “the Christ (Anointed)”. Jesus’s reply was in the form of citing his deeds of healing and preaching. Thus he both acknowledged he was the Christ and also defined the Christ by certain functions he was performing. Such functions did not include those of a king. It was for these functions that he was christed (anointed).¹⁸ Earlier in his Gospel, Matthew said the child to be born had been commissioned by the Holy Spirit to “save his people from their sins” (1:21). The final words of Jesus in that Gospel assert that he had been given all authority in heaven and earth “to make disciples of all nations” and to teach them. He did not mention his having been divinely authorised to rule as king.

The tragic element in the story of the Magi lies in the mighty mistake they made in believing that Jesus was destined to be a king. Jesus was never a king. He never exercised rulership over anyone. By the criteria of kingship widely accepted in the inter-testamental period

¹⁵ Mark Allan Powell, “The magi as wise men: re-examining a basic supposition”, *New Testament Studies* 46, 6.

¹⁶ Powell, “The magi as wise men”, 11.

¹⁷ de Vaux, 105. In “L’onction du Christ” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 3, 1958, 251, I. de la Potterie writes, “Mais dans le Nouveau Testament, l’onction est liée à l’oeuvre du salut dans son développement historique, elle indique l’inauguration d’un ministère, d’une *fonction* du Christ.”

¹⁸ In another Gospel, that of Luke, Jesus claims to have been anointed *for* announcing good news, etc. (4:16-21).

- criteria including legislating, commanding armed forces as a means of enforcing decisions, passing judgements in courts (involving the imposing of penalties) - he was never a king. That leaves only the possibility that he was designated by God to be king of the Jews and failed to establish rule over the Jews during his lifetime, so that he was both designated and ineffectual.

Had that possibility been actualised, then the Magi would have been mistaken still, for they would have honoured as a king one whom they believed would one day exercise kingship. They would have mistaken their man, and we would know it, whereas they would not.

Close to Christian faith in Jesus is Peter's confession in Matthew 16:16, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." I am not saying that Peter is here professing clearly belief in the divinity of Jesus, but he is saying he believes Jesus is the Christ in that Jesus is especially authorised by God to represent God and to teach his message. Certainly he is not expressing a belief that Jesus has been designated by God to rule a minor kingdom.

I repeat: the content of his belief determines whether the believer is exercising Christian faith. Peter is a model of one well on the way to Christian faith. The Magi are not because they believed he was merely a future king of the Jews. Had they believed he was destined to be the king of China, or anywhere else, equally they would have failed to be models of Christian faith. So we can not offer the Magi as models of faith.¹⁹

Failure to recognise Jesus's status both as one specially commissioned by God and also as one somehow sharing in God's nature is a theme running throughout Matthew's Gospel, as also of the other Gospels. The Jewish people in general failed to recognise his divine origin and nature. Scribes and Pharisees rejected suggestions that he was from God. Pilate saw only a claimant to be king of the Jews in front of him when he sentenced Jesus to death (27:37). He saw what the Magi saw.

When the Magi prostrated themselves before Jesus they were not doing what the disciples were doing after the resurrection when they "took hold of his feet and worshiped (*prosekynèsan*) him" (28:17). Why? Because they had beliefs about Jesus different from those of the Magi, beliefs derived from their having witnessed his deeds and having heard his teaching.

¹⁹ Pope Pius XII's encyclical, *Quas Primas* (1925), proclaiming the Feast of Christ the King, witnesses to the same tendency as is to be found in the Gospels, namely, that of trying to make Jesus a king when their fragmentary accounts of the life of Jesus show he rejected claims to be king.

The common claim that the Magi recognised the divine origin of Jesus and acknowledged it by prostrating themselves before him²⁰ is similar to the claim that Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas. Columbus discovered some islands of the West Indies and caught sight of a parts of the coast of Central America. He died without knowing that a vast continent, the Americas, barred any journey westwards. Similarly, the Magi never knew that the one they had honoured as a potential petty king was “my beloved Son”. It is we who know that truth.

I return to my original question: what was Matthew’s point in telling the story of the Magi? I suggest that the answer is that Matthew wanted to contrast common expectations regarding the Messiah with the Messiah that Jesus proved to be. This is shown clearly in the account of Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi (16:13-23), to which I have already referred. Immediately after the confession, Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man had to undergo great sufferings and to be rejected.” He is the Son of God and also the Suffering Servant of the Book of Isaiah, which Matthew has previously quoted ((12:18-21)).²¹ This tells us what kind of Messiah he claimed to be.

“Messiah he was, in his own sense of the term”, writes Dodd.²² Raymond E. Brown notes, “Actually, the Jewish concept of the Messiah had to undergo considerable modification before it could be applied to Jesus, whence Jesus’ reluctance to accept the title without qualification”.²³ Matthew’s story of the Magi dramatises the common misconception of the role and status of Jesus.

²⁰ “This indeed we know to be taking place ever since the three Magi were called from their far-off land and were led by the star to recognise and worship the king of heaven and earth.” Saint Leo the Great, Sermon 3, Epiphany, as quoted in the Office of Readings for the Feast of Epiphany in the current Liturgy of the Hours of the Latin Rite.

²¹ “Matthieu présente l’enfance dans la perspective de toute la suite, Passion comprise.” René Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l’Enfance du Christ: Vérité de Noël au-delà des Mythes* (Paris: Desclée & Desclée de Brouwer, 1982), 327.

²² C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1971), 103.

²³ An Introduction to New Testament Christology (Paulist Press: New York/Mahwah, NJ, 1994), 160 (footnote omitted). Cf. John L. McKenzie, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London/Dublin/Melbourne: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), Vol. 2, 67: “Without denying the unity of history and of themes, we maintain that the concrete historical reality of Jesus Christ is predicted nowhere in the OT. Jesus exceeds the limits of the OT knowledge of God; for, in his own words, one cannot put new wine into old wineskins. The radical novelty of his person and of his mission can be seen in the very designation Messiah/Christ . . . The early Church proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, well aware that no figure like him can be found in the OT.”

Celebrating the Epiphany

Were one to accept my explanation of the visit of the Magi, is there anything left for Christian piety at Epiphany? I suggest there is. The Magi failed to recognise who Jesus was and is. On this day Christians can acknowledge him as the Father's beloved Son, not a mere son of David, not a mere king. They can make reparation for the failure of the Magi to have faith in Jesus, and for the same failure of many who knew him in the flesh, and for the vast number of those who have learnt something of him but misunderstood who he is, or have rejected him. It is a day to renew and affirm faith in Jesus.

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