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SOME REFLECTIONS ON JUSTIN MARTYR AND THE NATIVITY NARRATIVES

by ERIC F. F. BISHOP

MR. BISHOP'S meditations on biblical themes, as our readers well know by this time, are regularly marked by a freshness of approach and illuminated by the author's experience of Near Eastern life and letters. The present article is specially appropriate for the Feast of the Epiphany.

TRAVELLERS to Hebron today can hardly help noticing the large village on the right not far from the fork in the road to Bethlehem. This village is Bait Jāla, which has been blessed with a triple identification.¹ Bait Jāla has always been largely Christian and chiefly Orthodox. It is not surprising that in 1954 there was published in Bait Jāla under the auspices of the Trustees of the Orthodox Church, a little volume entitled *The Christian's Companion* containing both private devotions and liturgical services. Among these is the Arabic version of the Liturgy for the Feast of the Nativity.² In this there would seem to be more emphasis on the Matthaean account of the visit of the Magi than on the Lukan story of the Shepherds, though this is not neglected, with references to the "cave" and the "manger".

In one context the *Majūs* are mentioned as Kings of the Orient (*Mashriq*)—though without any specification as to their number or speculation as to the origin. In any case "King" would not mean the ruler of a district; but rather the chief of some tribe, perhaps like Lemuel King of Massa whose "words" are appended to the book of Proverbs.³ In fact Solomon and David before him were really Kings of the Tribe of Judah, extending their suzerainty over a wider area, though other tribal allegiances asserted themselves after Solomon's death. Perhaps, then, the laconic question of the Magi on arrival in Jerusalem, "*Where* is the child, born to be King

¹ Baedeker, *Palestine and Syria*, 100; Hoade, *Guide to the Holy Land*, 401; Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine*, 31.

² Pages 160-174.

³ Lemuel is a good illustration, especially as Massa may have been in Arabia. He was a chief and a Wise Man (Proverbs 31: 1ff.).

of the Jews?" was both natural and tribal. In the accounts of the Trial and Crucifixion the Gospels are unanimous in the use of the same term, so far as the imperial authorities are concerned. The jurisdiction of the *Malik* was limited. Abraham is recorded in Genesis as having had contact with several kings.

There is, too, the relevant verse in Psalm 72 about the kings of Sheba and Seba bringing gifts; and the still more relevant passage in Isaiah 60—"they shall all come from Sheba; they shall bring gold and frankincense . . . all the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together unto thee"—but neither the author nor editor of the first Gospel, despite the interest in the fulfilment of prophecy, chose to introduce either of them in this connection. Yet we have Justin Martyr's opinion that the Magi hailed from Arabia.⁴

In his Article on Justin in the *Dictionary of Christian Biography* Henry Scott Holland, while stating that the "substantial characteristics of our Lord's life, even to minute details, are obviously the same for Justin as for us", does allow "some additions or changes in detail to the main story: they are few enough to be mentioned". In the nativity narrative all but one of these are divergences from Matthaean statements. The genealogy is attributed to *Mary* not to Joseph. The Lord's birth-place was a *cave*. The origin of the Magi was *Arabian*. All the children in Bethlehem were slaughtered. Jesus was not of "comely aspect". Justin's prophetic interests may have fitted in with the last description, matching Isaiah's "he hath no form nor comeliness".⁵

There is one further discrepancy between Justin's version of the visit of the Magi and Matthew's account. The latter implies that Joseph and Mary had the use of a house in Bethlehem by the time the Wise Men arrived. "House" implies something superior to "cave" (Epiphanius read σπήλαιον for φάτνη in Luke 2: 7). Justin's "cave" was "adopted" in the *Protoevangelium* of James as in later Apocryphal documents, including the *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy*.⁶

Justin's story (later repeated with variations) is that the "child being born in Bethlehem, when Joseph had nowhere to lodge in that village he lodged in a certain cave close to the village; and it was then, while they were there, that Mary brought forth the Christ and laid him in a manger, where the Wise Men coming from

⁴ In the *Dialogue with Trypho*, 78.

⁵ Volume III, 585.

⁶ James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 45; Henricus Sike, *Evangelium Infantiae* (MDCXCVII) pages (23) and 17.

Arabia found him".⁷ Justin would not appear to have regarded the "manger" as equivalent to a "stall", much less the "cave" as a "stable". The detail of the "manger" is not Matthaean in any case, so that Justin became responsible for the mention of the "manger" in connection with the Magi—a fallacy, if we accept Matthew, which has not yet been eliminated. While the Church of the Nativity is built over what was (obviously) a cave, there is no cogent proof that Justin's cave and that below the sanctuary of the great Church are identical. "The cave tradition", writes R. W. Hamilton, former Director of the Department of Antiquities, "can be more easily linked with St. Luke's version than with St. Matthew's".⁸ But neither Gospel can be held as valid authority for the tradition. What seems certain is that by the middle of the second-century A.D. floating tradition with regard to the Nativity may have been slightly different in different localities. By 150 Bethlehem had become generally recognized as the place of the birth of Jesus; and there may well have been third-generation believers able to pass on to others what they had heard from parents or grandparents, most of which information could be substantiated in the Gospel records.

Might not some such theory account both for the mis-statement in Justin that the Magi visited the Child Jesus in the manger; and his declaration that these men came from Arabia? This information belonged in a tradition that was outside the canonical narratives. In the first statement Justin seems to have been in error; in the second there seems no valid reason why he may not have been right. Part of the trouble is that the mis-statement has had far more prominence right down history, including twentieth-century sermons; whereas the "Arabian" suggestion for the origin of the Magi has hardly been accorded the consideration it merits.

Places in both eastern and western Syria have been held to be the home of the writer or editor of the First Gospel. This has probably helped in the assumption that the Wise Men came from the other side of the Syrian Desert—Babylonia or Persia. Curiously the Arabic *Gospel of the Infancy* takes the latter country for granted; since Zoroaster is credited with having predicted their advent.⁹ Further, early in the seventh century A.D. Persian hordes "laid waste the cities of the Roman Empire and Syria, burnt Jeru-

⁷ Scott Holland thought some of the additions or changes probably were "confusions or amplifications of Justin's own".

⁸ *The Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem*, 108.

⁹ "Magi venerunt ex Oriente Hierosolymas, quamadmodum praedixerat Zoradascht" (*op. cit.*, 17).

salem and imprisoned the Patriarch Zacharias. . . . On their arrival at Bethlehem they were amazed— 'at the picture of the Persian Magi the astrologers, their fellow countrymen'." R. W. Hamilton continues that "in respect and affection for their ancestors, whom they venerated as if they had been alive, they spared the church".¹⁰

The Persians remained in control of Palestine for 14 years, till their defeat at the hands of the Roman Emperor, Heraclius. The Arab occupation began less than a decade later. It was the Church as it had been rebuilt by Justinian which was visited by the Persians in 614. Bethlehem, as other places in the country, had suffered at the hands of the Samaritans the previous century. It would seem possible that the Persian legend was sufficiently deep-rooted to have survived the demolition of the Constantine building and subsequent depredations, as to have commemorated the Persians in mosaics. This mosaic being attributed to St. Helena put the legend further back in history. It also commended itself to Clement of Alexandria and Chrysostom; while Origen, who knew the Palestine of his day, and Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem, considered favourably the claims of Babylonian astrologers, as did St. Augustine of Hippo; and it must be admitted that the consensus of three such scholars is formidable.¹¹

It was another North African Christian, Tertullian, the Carthaginian lawyer, who, following in the wake of Justin Martyr, concluded an Arabian origin from the nature of the gifts. This deduction was at least plausible—one of the details making for the historical probability of the general outline of the story. Frankincense and myrrh were in juxtaposition in Canticles some centuries before the First Gospel was written,¹² with the implication of their being a recognized commodity imported into Palestine as into other countries in the same region. Still earlier than Justin, Clement of Rome, writing to the Corinthians on the subject of the Resurrection, not in any deliberate discussion of the Nativity of Jesus, happens to mention in a spontaneous way "the marvellous sign which is seen in *the regions of the east*, that is, in the parts about Arabia. There is a bird which is named the phoenix. This . . . liveth for five hundred years; and when it hath now reached the time of its dissolution that it should die, it maketh for itself a coffin of *frankincense and myrrh* and the other spices."¹³ The phoenix

¹⁰ Hamilton, *op. cit.*, 21.

¹¹ McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 14.

¹² Canticles 3: 8; 4: 14.

¹³ See Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 68.

was a bird of fiction, but Arabia with its spices is mentioned as something as well known as the legend. Tertullian, who would probably have poured scorn on the idolatrous fable, posited Arabia being the home of the Wise Men from their offerings.

We have no reason for thinking that Tertullian knew of the opinion of Justin on this matter. It does seem worthwhile following them in paying attention to the offerings of the *Majūs*, both the gold and the spices, as some indication of where they came from. It is only legend that has usually limited the number of the travelers to three; it is legend too that has suggested an African origin for one, whether from "the parts of Libya about Cyrene" or in the direction of Nubia. But if the Arabian theory be conceded probability, with its Great Incense Road along which the caravans would move till they branched off some to Egypt, others bound for Syria and Persia, there are factors to be considered. It is South Arabia (the Yemen), and parts of Africa diagonally opposite, Somalia (today), in the same latitude, that have been and are the main sources of the world's supply of these spices which are not indigenous to Palestine. "The Romans at their furthest", wrote Charles Doughty, in his *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, "were only two marches from the frankincense country". "The South Arabian Incense trade to foreign nations is the oldest of which we have any record." "The *regio thurifera* of Pliny . . . is named Holy Land in a hieroglyphic inscription of the 17th century B.C., which is a monument of an Egyptian expedition to S. Arabia; from whence they fetched frankincense, myrrh and incense trees in pots." Or again, "Hejra in Ptolemy and Pliny is an oasis staple town of the *gold and frankincense caravan road* from Arabia the Happy". Later Doughty has a sadder picture of the situation in his days, "for frankincense is no more of Arabic Felix, and yet the perfume is sovereign in the estimation of all Arabians. The most is brought now in the pilgrimage from the Malay Islands to Mecca; and from thence is dispersed throughout the Arabian peninsula, almost to every household. The odour comforts the religious and embalms the brain; that we think the incense-odour religious, is by great likelihood the gentile tradition remaining to us of this old gold and frankincense road."¹⁴

So far as "the gold of Arabia" is concerned, when the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon, she brought gold as well as precious stones. Professor Margoliouth wrote in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, "Almost as famous as the incense was the Arabian

¹⁴ *Travels in Arabia Deserta* I, 94, 95, 97; II, 603.

gold".¹⁵ While we may not yet be certain where Ophir was situated, it may be worthwhile noting that since the rise of the Sa'udi Family to power in Central Arabia gold has been discovered (in 'Asir) as well as oil.

For modern notices of the other commodities offered by the Magi, a few years ago *The Times* had a note from a correspondent that, under agreement between the Somali Parliament and Communist China, Peking would receive under this trade agreement, among other commodities, frankincense, myrrh, etc.¹⁶ Frankincense is only one of the ingredients of incense. The Arabic *lubān* is connected with the root meaning "white", as would seem indicated by the flower. The word has passed to other languages, Hebrew, Greek, Persian, Hindi.¹⁷ The Hebrew word for "incense" on the other hand, *qetorah* or *qetoreth* (Arabic is cognate), gave its name to the Incense Road. Frankincense gives the impression of having been valuable in itself, not because of being a chief ingredient in incense proper. It is in part allegorizing traditions that have grown up round the gifts that have tended to obscure the more natural associations of the Arabian connection.

It is true that in recent years Persia and Babylonia have been canvassed again. In 1947 a church in Kirkuk was dedicated to the Wise Men. There are probably not a few Persian Christians who would take it for granted that the Magi with a Zoroastrian ancestry and a reputation for astrology, were of Iranian origin. This view might have confirmation in the *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* where it is stated that the "opening up of India by Britain made it plain that the source of supply [of frankincense] which had previously come through Persia, was to be found there".¹⁸ Does this mean that an Iranian origin for the Magi entails the assumption that they would have obtained the spice *en route* for Jerusalem? The verdict in this case rests upon the Zoroastrian practice of astrology. The same objection would be true in the Babylonian theory. There were astrologers there as in Persia—the Jews too had had experience of living in both countries—but should this preclude the possibility of Arabian astrologers, apart from the record of history with regard to the "incense traffic of Arabia [so D. S. Margoliouth] alluded to by all the ancient writers who speak of that country; it formed the basis of the proverbial wealth of the

¹⁵ Vol. I, 134.

¹⁶ *The Times*, November 4, 1963 (quoted by permission).

¹⁷ For Hindi I am indebted to the late Reverend L. Bevan Jones, Principal of the Henry Martyn School, Lahore.

¹⁸ Vol. I, 620f.

Sabaeans, who regulated it with the utmost precision and severity"?¹⁹

So we turn to myrrh, "known to mankind from the remotest times and among the most precious articles of ancient commerce".²⁰ Probably the reference to "myrrh" at the close of our Lord's earthly life has predisposed the minds of some to interpretative symbolism in the connotation of the third of the offerings of the Magi. Hymns, however ancient, should not be accorded the authority of Scripture. Interpretations, ancient and modern, have been "replete with spiritual significance".

If other languages, east and west, have taken over the Arabic *lubān* for frankincense, there would seem to be a common Semitic root for "myrrh", the Greek loan taking two forms and Matthew having *μύρρον* in this context, as in the Johannine account of the embalming.²¹ "Though we may admit", wrote Cromarty Smith in the *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, "in the gifts presented there was an unconscious fulfilment of prophecy (Isa. 60: 6), no symbolism of the nature referred to can have been designed by the Magi . . . they simply offered to the new-born King, whom they came to worship, the choicest and most precious products of their country . . ." ²² The omission of any reference to the predictions in Isaiah 60 might be hard to explain, unless the gifts implied the natural thing for people coming from Arabia.

There is the question as to whether "from the east" is a possible description of Arabia *vis à vis* Palestine. Perhaps not too much stress should be laid on the fact that people living on the Jerusalem-Nāblus side of Jordan used to refer to the other side not as "Trans-jordan" but as East of Jordan, the east wind (*sharqiyyah, shirocco*) coming over from the Desert. More important is the word occurring in Psalm 72 in the same context as Sheba and Seba—this is "Kedar". Sheba and Seba are unquestionably Arabic; and in other Old Testament contexts Kedar occurs in connection with the Arabs, as in inscriptions from Nineveh and elsewhere.²³ Tracing their ancestry according to Genesis from Ishmael, like other nomad Baduin tribes they seem later to have settled south of Damascus on the other side of Jordan. It is the grouping with Arabs that is significant. Arabia was a very large section of the Near Eastern

¹⁹ H.D.B., Vol. I, 134ff.

²⁰ D.C.G., Vol. I, 212.

²¹ John 19: 39.

²² Vol. I, 212.

²³ See Margoliouth's article in H.D.B. ii, 832.

World. When Saul of Tarsus went off to Arabia after his conversion, it was most likely to the Sinai desert. It was there that the great apostle became one of the wiser men of the East. He became one of the *Bani Qedem* like the Prophet Job, the hero of the Wisdom Literature and the example of patience. Job was one of the *Bani Qedem*, the "children of the East". "A general name", wrote D. S. Margoliouth, "for the inhabitants of the country east of Palestine, especially the Syrian desert, but also including what was known as Arabia".²⁴ The archivist of 1 Kings refers to the wisdom of the Children of the East; while further back in Palestinian history the Children of the East are mentioned in connection with the Midianites and the Amalekites.²⁵ For a Palestinian narrative the normal understanding of the east was across the Jordan and down beyond the Dead Sea, with the meeting place of the caravans at Petra. It is surprising that Origen and Jerome do not seem to have recognized the relevance of the phraseology—with their Palestinian residence in Caesarea and Bethlehem.

The writer of the First Gospel concludes his account of the visit of the Wise Men by stating that they returned to their own country by a different route from that by which they had approached Jerusalem. They had been expected to return and make report to Herod; but by interpreting the validity of their dream took another way home. In his *Guide to the Holy Land* Eugene Hoade has some worthwhile words at the start of his chapter on Bethlehem in reference to more recent history. He says that "when in 1948 the ordinary road from Jaffa Gate to Bethlehem was blocked, cars and buses for a time went through Khan el-Ahmar, by Mar Saba and St. Theodosius to Bethlehem. Within a few months the Government constructed a road through Abu Dis to St. Theodosius."²⁶ (The road taken by pilgrims and tourists since 1952 has been shortened and improved to a length of 16 kilometres.) It is the mention of St. Theodosius, however, that is interesting. Somewhat later in his *Guide*, Hoade makes further reference to the "imposing monastery of St. Theodosius". This has two Arabic names, *Deir Dosi* and *Deir Ibn 'Ubaid*.²⁷ It has been for many centuries the centre of the nomad Baduin 'Ubaidiyeh tribe. The place used to be visited on the way from the larger monastery of Mar Saba to Bethlehem. The present (Greek) monastery was built on the ruins of a previous one and for the Christians retains the name in the corrupted form of

²⁴ H.D.B. i, 635.

²⁵ 1 Kings 4: 30; Judges 8: 10.

²⁶ Page 343.

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, 393.

Dosi. The Muslim tribe that roams the area knows the place as 'Ubaidiyyeh. "They are said to be descendants of the Christian guardians brought by a Byzantine king to guard Mar Saba and Mar Theodosius convents." In the course of time they became Muslims. The tradition is that the Monastery was built on the site of the cave or shelter (*ma'wa*) where the Magi stayed on their way back to their own country.²⁸ This would surely be more likely for the first night's lodging out of Bethlehem with an Arabian destination rather than a Persian or even Babylonian. They would naturally have avoided Jericho as much as Jerusalem with Herod's men on the watch. The Matthaean narrative is surely more reasonable with the "other way" being south of the Dead Sea. The road would take them to the west side of the Dead Sea the coast of which they would skirt passing 'Ain Jidi (*Engedi*) and below Massada and so via Petra to the Great Incense Road. They knew the stars well enough to guide them.

Leonard Twells in his biography of Edward Pococke, the first Professor of Arabic in the University of Oxford, says that the Professor "gives an account of the Magi who were very numerous, not only in Persia and India, but in Arabia too, thinking it probable that these were of this last country, who came into Judaea to worship our Saviour".²⁹ The *Encyclopedia of Islam* "enumerates five localities in Ancient Arabia which bore the name of *Kaukabān*—Planet Land—one of them being 9,000 feet above sea level". . . . We should remember too that Arab tribes were called after stars, and Arabs swore oaths by the stars.³⁰ The Persian Zoroastrians and the Babylonian star-gazers had no monopoly in things astrological or astronomical. This does not preclude the leadership of Persia-Babylonia in this science. The influence of the former seems to have reached further down the African mainland than the latitude of Somalia, while back in the days of Empire the Yemen supplied myrrh and frankincense to Darius through the satrap.³¹

The Magi arrive in Jerusalem with a straightforward question. As Dr. Nigel Turner has pointed out, the stress of the question posed dealt with location rather than identity. They knew about the King of the Jews; they were not aware of how to reach his whereabouts. "Where is the new-born King of the Jews?"³² The

²⁸ This tradition has recently been mentioned by Dr. Issa Massou in an unpublished Ph.D. thesis of London University.

²⁹ Twells, *Pococke's Theological Works* I, 35.

³⁰ *Jesus of Palestine*, 31; *Encyclopaedia of Islam* II, 831.

³¹ See *Jesus of Palestine*, 29. Quoted from Coon, *Caravan*, 76.

³² *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament*, 25, 26.

implication here is concerned with knowledge they already had in respect of an expected Messiah—"King of the Jews" and "Christ" were interchangeable terms, as proved by the quotation in Micah. The question arises as to how these men knew of the expectation; and the natural assumption is that some knowledge of Jewish expectations along this line was theirs. This would be equally true and necessary alike for Persians, Babylonians or Arabs. Each country had its Jewish colony—and thirty years on sent contingents to the Feast of Pentecost. There is no hint in Matthew that the Epiphany was a manifestation of Christ to Gentiles, but to Jews, who were such either by birth or through the adoption of Judaism. If the suggestion of the Arabian origin, with the imprimatur of Justin Martyr and Tertullian, be accepted, the Magi would be Arabized Jews or Judaized Arabs. When all is said and done, Judaism was well established in Arabia long before the rise of Islam. There were Jewish agricultural colonies around Madina, a form of occupation impossible in the desert town of Mecca. Further south in Yemen one of the famous kings was Dhu Nowās, an Arab who embraced Judaism.³³ More significant than actual Jewish colonization, however far back it may go, is the Judaeo-Christian background to Islam. Jews and Christians were regarded in Arabia as the People of the Book, especially the former, long before Arabia had a book of her own. The doctrines held in common with regard to the Resurrection, Revelation, Judgment and the Will of God surely reveal an interplay of religious thinking in Arabia³⁴—matters which for all their importance must be regarded as ancillary to the verdict of Justin Martyr and Tertullian with regard to the astrologers "from the east", in their quest to know where to find the child that is born to be king of the Jews, whose star they had recognized and come to offer their homage.

Redhill, Surrey.

³³ Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 41.

³⁴ Cf. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 264.