

The Episode of the Magi and Christian *Kerygma*

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In the problem of New Testament historicity the episode of the Magi constitutes a chapter of its own. It may truly be considered a test case. We can to some extent measure by it the validity of any conception of New Testament literary forms. We will first rapidly survey the present position of research on the episode, paying special attention to the kind of historicity attributed to it. We will then try to give a new exposition of the midrash theory. Finally we will discuss the place of this midrash in Christian *kerygma*, both past and present.

I

THE PRESENT POSITION OF RESEARCH

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the new rationalistic approach to scripture did not fail to affect also the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. Scholars such as Holtzmann, Hilgenfeld, Dieterich, Usener and Wellhausen subjected the story of the Magi to a rigorous historical examination.¹ Their verdict proved to be a negative one. Impressed by the parallelism of birth stories in the Greco-Roman world, by the contradictions with Luke, by the unlikely details and apologetic tendencies in this narrative of the Magi, they pronounced against its historicity. Dieterich sums up with the statement that the episode of the Magi developed as a legend from two sources: belief in birth-announcing stars and the expectation of persons who according to prophecy were to bring gold and incense to the Messiah.² To these German scholars then the

¹ H. J. Holtzmann, *Die Synoptische Evangelien*, Leipzig, 1863; *Die Synoptiker*, Tübingen, 1901⁸; A. Hilgenfeld, *Die Geburts und Kindheitsgeschichte Jesu*, *Zeit. f. wissens. Theol.*, 44 (1901), pp. 211-235; A. Dieterich, *Die Weisen aus dem Morgenlande*, *ZNW*, 3 (1902), pp. 1-14; H. Usener, *Die Geburt und Kindheit Christi*, *ZNW*, 4 (1903), pp. 1-21; *Das Weihnachtsfest*, Bonn, 1911; J. Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Matthaei übersetzt und erklärt*, Berlin, 1914.

² A. Dieterich, *l.c.*, p. 12.

narrative of the Magi, grown as a legend without any factual foundation in history, deserves no historical credit.

In reaction to this position many a Christian scholar asserted his acceptance of the factual historicity of the narrative. These gallant defenders count among their ranks renowned commentators and writers of the early twentieth century: Knabenbauer, Lagrange, Plummer, Allen, Benning, Klostermann, Baldi and Fonck.⁵ But also more recent authors break a lance for the historical reliability of the facts narrated, among whom we reckon: Houdous, Simon-Dorado, Fuller, Richards, Schmid, Gaechter and Bonnard.⁴ The arguments adduced in favour of this position vary much in range and quality. An appeal is made to the interest Babylonian astrologers took in Canaan,⁵ to an expectation of a saviour even in the non-Jewish world,⁶ to the historically attested visit of Parthian Magi to Nero⁷ and to Flavius Josephus' testimony regarding Herod's cruelty.⁸ More than one author explains the star as a natural phenomenon, such as Halley's comet or a specially bright conjunction of stars.⁹ The Magi are said to have realized the significance of the astronomical phenomenon because of Balaam's prophecy regarding the star that was to rise from Jacob,¹⁰ or because of Daniel's

⁵ J. Knabenbauer, *Commentarius in Matthaeum*, Vol. I, Paris, 1922^a; J. M. Lagrange, *Evangile selon St. Matthieu*, Paris, 1910; A. Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, London, 1910; W. C. Allen, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Edinburgh, 1922^a; J. Benning, *Die Glaubwürdigkeit der Kindheitsgeschichte Jesu* (Matt. 2) gegenüber religionsgeschichtlicher Parallelen, *Theol. u. Glaube*, 9 (1917), pp. 571-591; E. Klostermann, *Das Matthäus Evangelium*, Tübingen, 1927^a; D. Baldi, *L'Infanzia del Salvatore*, Roma, 1925; L. Fonck, *De Veritate historica narrationis Sacrae de Infantia Christi, Verbum Dom*, 7 (1927), pp. 289-296.

⁴ E. J. Houdous, *The Gospel of the Epiphany*, CBO, 6 (1914), pp. 69-84; Simon-Dorado, *Praelectiones Biblicae, Nov. Test.*, Vol. I, Madrid, 1928; R. C. Fuller, When and where did the Magi visit the Holy Family? *Scripture*, 4 (1950), pp. 183-185; H. J. Richards, The Three Kings, *Scripture*, 8 (1956), pp. 23-28; J. Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, Regensburg, 1959^a; P. Gaechter, *Das Matthäus Evangelium*, Innsbruck, 1963; P. Bonnard, *L'évangile selon St. Matthieu*, Neuchatel, 1963.

⁶ The texts are extensively cited by Allen, l.c. (note 3), pp. 11 ff.

⁵ Flavius Josephus, *Bell. Jud.*, VI, 5, 4; III, 8, 9; Tacitus, *Historia*, V, 13; Suetonius, *Vespasianus*, 4, 5; *Virgil*, 4th Eclogue; cf. Klostermann, l.c. (note 3), p. 11.

⁷ Plinius, *Hist. Nat.*, 30.1, 16; Dio Cassius, LXIII, 1-7; Suetonius, *Nero*, 13; cf. Dieterich, l.c. (note 1), pp. 6 ff.

⁸ *Antiq.*, XVII, 6, 5; *Bell. Jud.*, I, 33, 6.

⁹ J. Keppler, De vero Jesu Christi Mediatoris nostri natali anno, in *Opera Omnia*, Vol. IV, Frankfurt, 1863, p. 197 (conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn): followed by O. Gerhardt, *Der Stern des Messias*, Leipzig, 1922, pp. 88 f.; Baldi, l.c. (note 3), pp. 23 f.; Houdous, l.c. (note 4), pp. 80 ff., etc.; Knabenbauer, l.c. (note 3), p. 84 (a meteor); Lagrange, l.c. (note 3), p. 23 and Gaechter, l.c. (note 4), pp. 65 f. (a comet), etc.

¹⁰ Num. 24:17; e.g. Lagrange, l.c. (note 3), pp. 23 f.

prophecy regarding the time of the Messiah's coming,¹¹ or again on account of a prophetic utterance attributed to Zarathustra.¹² However much these authors may differ in explaining various details, they would certainly subscribe to Allen's careful formulation of the episode's historicity:

'We need not press every detail of the narrative. Descriptive detail may have crept in (in some small measure) from the Old Testament or from analogous literary or folklore stories . . . The main outline of the story, however (the expectation of a Jewish redeemer, the interest of Eastern Magi, their coming to the West), is noteworthy for its historical probability.'¹³

The rationalistic rejection of the episode has, on the other hand, also been met by a more tolerant approach. Many students of St. Matthew's Gospel have come to admit that the visit of the Magi and the accompanying events are possibly unhistorical. At the same time, however, these men contend that the narrative has a truly historical message to bring. This paradoxical contention rests on the assumption that in the second chapter of Matthew the literary form of historical midrash was employed, in which form a kernel of teaching from the Old Testament is clothed in narrative explanations. In various shades this theory is found with Zahn, Loisy, McNeile, Levertoff-Goudge, Lohmeyer-Schmauch, Daube, Bloch and Bourke.¹⁴ It is our conviction that this theory, if correctly understood, combines the advantages of a solid critical foundation and true insight in New Testament historicity.

II

A NEW EXPOSITION OF THE MIDRASH THEORY

Let us begin our analysis with a critical look at the facts narrated. From a historical point of view they appear to be highly problematic. The story abounds with interior contradictions. Would an unbelieving, Pharisee-detesting Herod convoke the Sanhedrin? Would he do so asking for a Biblical

¹¹ Dan. 9:25-27; e.g. Houdous, l.c. (note 4), p. 73.

¹² G. Messina, *Ursprung der Magier und die Zarathrustische Religion*, Roma, 1930; *I Magi di Betlemme e una predizione di Zoroastro*, Romae, 1933; *Ecce Magi ab Oriente venerunt, Verbum Dom*, 14 (1934), pp. 7-19; Simon-Dorado, l.c. (note 4), pp. 335 f.; Gaechter, l.c. (note 4), pp. 60 f.

¹³ Allen, l.c. (note 3), pp. 14 f.

¹⁴ Th. Zahn, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, Matthäus*, Vol. I, Leipzig, 1922^a; A. Loisy, *Les Evangiles Synoptiques*, Vol. I; A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, London, 1915; P. P. Levertoff and H. L. Goudge, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, London, 1929^a; E. Lohmeyer and W. Schmauch, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, Göttingen, 1956; D. Daube, *Anti-Syrian feelings of Maccabean times. The Earliest Structure of the Gospels*, *NTS*, 5 (1959), pp. 174-187; here 179 (note 4); R. Bloch, *'Midrash' Dictionaire de la Bible*, Sup. V, col. 1263-1281; M. M. Bourke, *The Literary Genus of Matthew 1-2*, *CBQ*, 22 (1960), pp. 160-175.

quotation which any scribe could have given him?¹⁵ What further need of the star once the prophecy had been recalled and the Magi directed to Bethlehem?¹⁶ Is it likely that the distrustful Herod would allow the Magi to go their way without at least a spy to watch their movements?¹⁷ Moreover, if the coming of the Magi upset the whole of Jerusalem, if their adoration at Bethlehem and the murder of the infants were known to tradition, why does neither Flavius Josephus, nor Jesus Himself, nor John, Mark, Peter, Paul or any other apostle, nor even Luke in his infancy narrative, allude to this fact?¹⁸

What was the evangelist's source of information on such hidden matters as Herod's secret council with the Magi and the angel's apparitions to them and to Joseph?¹⁹ Instead of relying on historical witness, the author would rather seem to draw his material from contemporary legend: the birth of great persons was thought to be heralded by the apparition of stars;²⁰ the Messiah was expected to be born under such a star;²¹ certain stars were believed to guide travellers 'moving along with them';²² the journey of 'Magi' to Nero may have set the example of how Isa. 60:1-7 could be fulfilled;²³ the miraculous escape from enemies at birth is a frequent theme in birth stories, such as in those of Moses, Abraham, Romulus, Cyrus, Paris and Oedipus.²⁴ Add to this the undeniable apologetic tendencies of providing a plausible explanation for Jesus' dwelling in Nazareth and of exposing the inexcusable blindness of the Jewish leaders!

¹⁵ McNeile, l.c. (note 14), p. 15; Levertoff-Goudge, l.c. (note 14), p. 132.

¹⁶ Levertoff-Goudge, l.c. (note 14), p. 132. Authors deduce from this also that there were originally two distinct stories: the Magi's visit to Bethlehem under guidance of the star and Herod's persecution of the Child, cf. Dieterich, l.c. (note 1), p. 3; W. Knox, *The Sources of the Synoptic Gospels*, Vol. II, Cambridge, 1957, pp. 122 f.; Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, Tübingen, 1933², pp. 125 f. Bourke, l.c. (note 14), pp. 172 f.

¹⁷ Bourke, l.c. (note 14), p. 174.

¹⁸ The 'prudentia apostolica' adduced by Fonck, l.c. (note 3), p. 293, can hardly be called a satisfactory solution!

¹⁹ If Joseph (cf. Gaechter, l.c., note 4, p. 68) and Mary (cf. Baldi, l.c., note 3, pp. 319 ff.) are assumed to have been the immediate source of information, why then do we find no other details on Jesus' birth?

²⁰ Compare the parallels of Abraham, Alexander, Mithridates, Augustus, Alexander Severus. Usener, l.c. (note 1), pp. 79 ff.; Dieterich, l.c. (note 1), pp. 2 ff.

²¹ Excellent material is found in H. L. Strack und P. Billerbeck, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus erläutert aus Talmud und Midrasch*, München, 1922, Vol. I, pp. 76 ff.; Lohmeyer-Schmauch, l.c. (note 14), p. 20.

²² F. Boll (Der Stern der Weisen, ZNW, 8, 1918, pp. 40-48) has shown that the Greek word *astēr* always denotes a single star (no conjunction). Parallels of the guiding star that 'moves along' with Lohmeyer-Schmauch, l.c. (note 14), p. 20.

²³ For the accounts by Dio Cassius (Book LXIII, 1-7), Suetonius (Nero 13), and Plinius (Historia Nat. 30, 16), see Dieterich, l.c. (note 1), pp. 9 ff.; Baldi, l.c. (note 3), pp. 313-319.

²⁴ R. Graves and R. Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, London, 1964, pp. 138 f.

All these considerations point to but one conclusion: the historicity of the events described is highly problematic. If the actual adoration by the Magi, the actual slaughter of the infants and the actual flight to Egypt were to be taken as the norm of historicity, the story might certainly have to be qualified as unhistorical.

But is this the case? Does the author of this chapter want to teach the actual, objective, historical occurrence of these events, or is there another historical truth that he has in mind? Only a careful analysis of the text itself can decide this question.

Reading the second chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel attentively, one is struck by the prominence of what we might call the theme of place, the theme of locality. The 23 verses have 31 direct and indirect indications of place: Bethlehem is mentioned five times, Jerusalem twice, Egypt four times, Nazareth and Galilee each once, the land of Israel twice, the East three times; more general indications, such as 'their land', 'all townships around it', 'there', 'Ramah', and so on, another 11 times. What is even more surprising, all the indications of place refer to definite localities, known by name, except for the generality 'the East'. All the four explicit quotations from the Old Testament concern places: 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah' (v. 6), 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (v. 15), 'a voice was heard in Ramah' (v. 18) and 'He shall be called a Nazarene' (v. 23). Similarly, God's miraculous interventions have no other purpose than to direct His servants to the right place: the star leads the Magi to Jerusalem (vv. 1-2) and later to the house 'where the child was' (v. 9). They are warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem (v. 12). An angel instructs Joseph to go to Egypt with the child (v. 13). Again an angel appears to make him return to Israel (v. 20). A third time he is warned in a dream to settle in Galilee (v. 23). The whole passage is dominated by the theme of place.

It will further be noticed that locality is of interest to the author in as far as that locality belongs to the newly-born Messiah. It is Christ whom the Magi seek at Jerusalem and whom they find at Bethlehem. It is Christ who has to flee to Egypt, who is taken back to Israel and finally directed to Nazareth. The Magi's question: 'Where is the newborn king of the Jews?' (v. 2), repeated by Herod in its more precise form: 'Where should the Christ be born?' (v. 5), truly characterizes the central theme in the mind of the author, the birthplace of the Messiah.

Other Gospel passages underline the weight of this problem in early Christian apologetics. Nathaniel objects: 'What good can come out of Nazareth?' (John 1:46); the people doubt: 'Could the Christ come out of Galilee?' (John 7:41); the Pharisees remark scornfully: 'No prophet is raised from

Galilee !' (John 7:52). All this presupposes that Jesus' provenance from Nazareth was handled as an argument against His Messiahship. Luke's elaborate story of how Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem so that the Child was born there and not in Nazareth (Luke 2:1-39) serves the same purpose. The question where the Christ should be born and whether Jesus had complied with prophecy in this matter was not of mere academic interest. To all appearances it was a moot point in Jewish polemics against Christians, a bone of contention that demanded a clear Christian reply.

Keeping all this in mind, we may reconstruct the origin of chapter two in St. Matthew's Gospel in the following manner. In the course of discussion with Jewish Rabbis, the author had singled out a number of Old Testament passages which could be said to refer to the birthplace of the Messiah:

- (1) *Mic. 5:2*.—'You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.' The Aramaic Targum renders the text as follows: 'The Messiah will come out of you to take up dominion over Israel'; the same inference is made in the *Pirqe Eliezer*.²⁵ Even if these texts be post-Christian, they witness to the Messianic interpretation given to *Mic. 5:2* in Jewish tradition.
- (2) *Num. 24:17*.—'A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.' The Targum Onkelos, the Targum Jerusalem I, and various passages in the Talmud refer this text to the birth of the Messiah.²⁶ In their interpretations the Messiah himself is the star. Other Jewish literature expresses the expectation that the Messiah will be announced by a star.²⁷ The phrase 'out of Israel' may have been taken in a local sense.
- (3) *Isa. 60:1-7*.—'Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!' These verses are addressed to Jerusalem. A few lines earlier we read: 'I will come to you as redeemer' (*Isa. 59:20*). The rising of a light would naturally be taken as an allusion to a birth. Further on it is stated that the Lord Himself will be the sun, the moon and the light (*Isa. 60:19-20*). It is not difficult to imagine that this text was explained as prophesying the birth of the Messiah at Jerusalem, where all the foreign kings will come to adore him.
- (4) *Hos. 11:1*.—'Out of Egypt have I called my son.' In collusion with Messianic passages such as: 'You are my son, today I have begotten you' (*Ps. 2:7*), this verse was taken to refer to the Messiah. It would seem

²⁵ Strack-Billerbeck, l.c. (note 21), p. 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 76 f.

²⁷ Lohmeyer-Schmauch, l.c. (note 14), p. 20.

that the prophet thus attributes to the Christ an Egyptian origin.

- (5) *Jer. 31: 15*.—‘A voice is heard in Ramah . . . Rachel is weeping for her children.’ The phrase ‘a voice is heard’ denotes both a cry of anguish²⁸ or a shout for joy.²⁹ The expression occurs also with the specific connotation of the woman who cries out when giving birth to a child. *Jer. 4: 31*: ‘I heard a cry as of a woman in travail, anguish as of one bringing forth her first child.’ And in *Jer. 30: 5 ff.* we read: ‘We have heard a cry of panic, of terror and no peace . . . Why do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in labour?’ Jewish literature speaks of the special birth pangs that will accompany the birth of the Messiah.³⁰ Since the second half of *Jer. 31: 15* describes ‘Rachel’ as ‘weeping over her children’, the voice heard in Ramah could be explained in rabbinical exegesis as the birth of the Messiah at Ramah, accompanied by the expected throes.

- (6) *Isa. 9: 1-2*.—‘. . . The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, towards the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’ That the appearance of this light should be connected with the birth of the Messiah follows from the rest of the oracle which reads (vv. 6 f.): ‘For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; the government will be upon his shoulder, etc.’ In Christian apologetics this passage could with some right be handled as prophesying that Galilee be the Messiah’s birthplace!

- (7) *Isa. 11: 1*.—‘There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch (nēšer) shall grow out of its roots.’

The fact that the Christ was called a branch, a ‘nēšer’, would fascinate any Rabbi. Quite in harmony with prevailing rabbinical verbal magic, Christians would see a connection between Christ being a Nošri (inhabitant of Nazareth) and the cryptic being a nešeri attributed to the Messiah by the prophet.³¹

The early Christian apologete who composed the chapter may have listed all those texts with the localities connected with the Messiah’s birth: Bethlehem (*Mic. 5: 2*), Israel (*Num. 24:*

²⁸ *Jer. 48: 3, 49: 21, etc.*

²⁹ *Jer. 7: 34, 16: 9, 25: 10, 33: 11, etc.*

³⁰ Cf. *Sanh. 98b*.

³¹ This interpretation was already found with St. Jerome (*In Isa. 11: 1, ML 24, 48; Eph. 57: 7, ML 22, 574*). The plural ‘prophets’ (*Matt. 2: 23*) may refer to the parallel ‘šemaš’-texts. See the extensive discussion by Simon-Dorado, l.c. (note 4), pp. 343 ff.

17), Jerusalem (Isa. 60:1-7), Egypt (Hos. 11:1), Ramah (Jer. 31:15), Galilee (Isa. 9:1-2) and Nazareth (Isa. 11:1). He may have seen it to be his main task to illustrate that it was in harmony with prophecy that Christ was born in Bethlehem, yet took up his dwelling in Nazareth. With this in mind he reconstructed the history of Jesus' childhood in the form of a historical midrash which would effectively link up all these Biblical quotations. To compose the story he may have drawn from existing traditions, historical or legendary, about the star and the adoration of the Magi, about Herod's persecution and the flight to Egypt. It may also be that he inferred these events from the Old Testament texts themselves. Whatever his sources, he skilfully elaborated a story which would do justice to the theological implications of Jesus being the saviour of the whole world and also to the prophetic expectations of His origins.

All through the narrative the author seems to build round chapter 60 in Isaiah. He recounts how the light shining over Jerusalem (vv. 1-2) is fulfilled in the star. Delegates come from distant nations to adore the newborn Messiah and, as foretold (vv. 3-7), they flock to Jerusalem!³² The Jewish Sanhedrin voices a slight correction: 'No, it is not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem that the Messiah is to be born.' The Magi go and bring their gold, myrrh and incense as prophesied (v. 6), disappearing all of a sudden. This last detail is also hinted at by Isaiah when he says immediately after mentioning the foreigners who came to worship: 'Who are these that fly like a cloud . . . ?' (v. 8). The allusion to oppression (vv. 10, 14, 15) gives the occasion to introduce Herod's persecution which causes Christ's flight to Egypt (fulfilling Hos. 11:1) and the cry in Ramah (fulfilling Jer. 31:15). The phrase in verse 18: 'Violence shall no more be heard in your land', provides the author with the chance to have Joseph recalled from Egypt since 'those who sought the child's life are dead' (Matt. 2:20). When verses 19 and 20 then continue to speak of the Lord being Israel's light, the tactical withdrawal to Galilee can be explained in the sense of Isa. 9:1-2. This text which prophesied that the light of the Messiah would shine on Galilee may have had its original place here (at Matt. 2:22).³³ The reference to 'nēšer' in verse 21 ('the branch of my planting') would naturally introduce the settlement at Nazareth, linking it with the 'nēšer' prophecy of Isa. 11:1. Chapter 60 in Isaiah formed the prophetic background against which the infancy story is painted.

It is our conviction that a midrashic commentary of this kind may already have been in existence when it was taken up and inserted into the Gospel by its composer. The theme of

³² The special mention of Jerusalem's apprehension (Matt. 2:3) may be due to Isa. 60:5: 'You will fear . . . etc.'

³³ The citation of Isa. 9:1-2 must have wandered from here (after Matt. 2:22) to its place in Chapter Four, perhaps by the redactional pen of the evangelist.

Christ as 'the persecuted Son of man',³⁴ the theme of the Pharisees' wilful rejection of the Christ,³⁵ the theme of salvation for the whole world,³⁶ the theme of Christ as second Moses,³⁷ perhaps even the theme of Christ's relation to political power: all such themes could well be integrated with some modification into Matthew's Gospel.³⁸ It is the final redactor of the Gospel who may also have introduced his own stylistic touch, such as the quotation formulas employed all through the Gospel,³⁹ and the schematic arrangement of the pericopes.⁴⁰ In brief, St. Matthew or whoever composed the Gospel found this midrash on Christ's birth and, modifying it, inserted it into his Gospel.

III

THE MIDRASHIC ACCOUNT OF THE MAGI AND CHRISTIAN KERYGMA PAST AND PRESENT

The literary form of midrash, or as in the case at hand of haggadah, is at times viewed with suspicion. To some critics this refined form of exegesis has become almost synonymous to indulging in legends. Against such prejudice it should be stressed that midrash is a beautiful form of Biblical commentary which does not want to create legends, but which often explains Biblical passages by integrating them into a story.⁴¹ Examples may illustrate this point. A Rabbi finds four scripture passages on the creation of man: 'after God's image' (Gen. 1:26); 'God repented of having made man' (Gen. 6:6); 'what is man that Thou art mindful of him' (Ps. 8:5) and 'even to your old age I am He . . . I have made and I will bear' (Isa. 64:4). In order to combine them in a harmonious explanation, he recounts how God discussed with his angels how He was to create man, and in the form of question and answer these Biblical quotations are introduced.⁴² Did the Rabbi want to convey that this conversation had really taken place? Of course not: the setting

³⁴ Lohmeyer-Schmauch, l.c. (note 14), p. 26.

³⁵ Bonnard, l.c. (note 4), p. 24.

³⁶ J. Racette, *L'évangile de l'enfance selon Saint Matthieu*, *Sciences Eccl.* 9 (1957), pp. 77-82.

³⁷ S. Muñoz Iglesias, *El genero literario del Evangelo de la Infancia en San Mateo*, *Est. Bib.* 17 (1958), pp. 243-273.

³⁸ Bonnard, l.c. (note 4), p. 24; Daube, l.c. (note 14), p. 179.

³⁹ Formula 'that it might be fulfilled': Matt. 1:23, 2:15, 2:18, 4:15-16, 8:17, 12:18, 13:14 f., 13:35, 21:5, 27:9 f., 27:35. Formula 'for it is written': Matt. 2:6, 4:4, 4:6, 4:7, 4:10, 11:10, 21:13, 26:31. Whereas the second formula is rather common in Jewish writing, the first one is a typically Matthean one. I do not exclude the possibility that this latter formula originally occurred in our midrash and that it was taken over by the evangelist and extended to other Biblical passages.

⁴⁰ See the schematic structures suggested by Lohmeyer-Schmauch, l.c. (note 14), p. 19, Racette, l.c. (note 36), pp. 78 f.

⁴¹ Bourke, l.c. (note 14), p. 160.

⁴² Sanh. 386, R. Mayer, *Der Babylonische Talmud*, München 1963, p. 74.

was his own. But he *did* want to teach some basic historical truth about God's determination to create man in spite of man's future sins.

In a similar way many scriptural passages are interwoven in such historical haggadahs: concerning Joseph,⁴³ Israel in the desert,⁴⁴ Moses,⁴⁵ Saul,⁴⁶ Abraham,⁴⁷ Joshua⁴⁸ and so on. As an interesting parallel may serve the haggadah about the Hebrew midwives in Egypt: here we find as many as nine Biblical quotations referring to midwifery twined into the story.⁴⁹ In all these cases the historical events narrated serve to bring out the fuller meaning of the Biblical texts and their mutual relationship.

The midrash on Christ's birthplace (Matt. 2) should be interpreted in the same light. Employing this literary form early Christian preachers did not want to teach the arrival of the Magi, the murder of the innocent children and the flight to Egypt as historical facts. But they *did* want to show that Christ's withdrawal from Bethlehem to Nazareth is in harmony with Old Testament prophecy. They also wanted to teach the theological implications of His birth. Far from being a mere legend, this midrash made its hearers appreciate the reality of Christ's birth far more profoundly than by a meagre statement of the few physical facts known. In this way haggadah can become a genuine literary form that teaches historical truths, even if it does so—paradoxically—by an imagined reconstruction of events.

How did St. Matthew himself, or whoever inserted this midrash into the Gospel, understand the passage? Did *he*, perhaps, take all the events described as historical facts? Many authors say 'yes' to this question. They say 'yes' because they think that the historicity of the rest of the Gospel is put by the author on one line with the historicity of the Magi narrative. Levertoff-Goudge remarks: 'Indeed it is possible that the story of the Magi is, at any rate in part, a Christian midrash rather than authentic history, though the compiler of the Gospel may not have recognized its true character.'⁵⁰ Plummer states: 'There can be no doubt that the evangelist regards this narrative, like that of the Virgin-birth, as historical. He has it on what he believes to be good authority, and he would have his readers accept it as completely as he does himself.'⁵¹ Allen

⁴³ Sota 36b, B. Yoma 35b, Test. of Joseph 9:5; Gen. Rab. 1075-76; cf. Graves-Patai, l.c. (note 24), p. 256.

⁴⁴ Sabbath 88a, Mayer, l.c. (note 42), pp. 116 f.

⁴⁵ Sabbath 89a, Mayer, l.c. (note 42), p. 128.

⁴⁶ Yoma 22b, Mayer, l.c. (note 42), p. 136.

⁴⁷ Menahôt 53, Mayer, l.c. (note 42), p. 175.

⁴⁸ Tmura 16a, Mayer, l.c. (note 42), p. 132.

⁴⁹ Sota 116, Mayer, l.c. (note 42), pp. 108 f.

⁵⁰ Levertoff-Goudge, l.c. (note 14), p. 131.

⁵¹ Plummer, l.c. (note 3), p. 11.

puts it this way: 'In view of the matter-of-fact character of the editor of the Gospel, it is almost certain that he believed that he was transmitting matters of actual fact.'⁵² Similarly Lagrange, who defends the historicity of the passage in the light of the entire Gospel.⁵³

All such argumentation rests on the assumption that the evangelist could have employed only one and the same kind of literary form throughout his Gospel. Old Testament parallels would suffice to put us on our guard: the historical books from Genesis to Esdras blend anecdotes, tribal traditions, legends, historical events, hero sagas and accurate reports into the one history of salvation. But, restricting ourselves to Matthew, does his Gospel really present that homogeneous historical treatise that it is thought to be? Does Matthew not place Christ's sermons and actions in theologically significant settings, such as 'on the mountain' (cf. Matt. 4:8, 5:1, 8:1, 14:23, 15:29, 17:1, 24:3, 28:16) or 'in the desert' (cf. Matt. 3:1, 4:1, 11:7, 15:33)? At times he surely draws from precise traditions, but does he not at other occasions *create* such a setting to recall the first covenant on Mount Sinai and Israel's former journey through the desert? Would any modern scholar put the historicity of the account in which Peter is said to catch a fish with a shekel in its mouth? Does Christ's temptation in the desert not exhibit midrashic characteristics similar to those of the Magi narrative? St. Matthew certainly wanted to teach the historical fact of Jesus' redemptive activity: in this aspect all parts of his Gospel are equally historical; but he taught this truth through a variety of literary forms. The precise historical value of details cannot be deduced from the general character of the Gospel, but only from the literary form of the passage in question.

In my opinion it is only when St. Matthew's Gospel entered Hellenistic Christianity that it began to be understood as literally historical in all its details. The Greeks did not know the force and value of midrash. They would naturally come to regard the events narrated as genuine facts. The Magi are now considered historical figures, whose origin, whose number, whose names, whose past histories become the subject of popular curiosity as well as of theological discussion.⁵⁴

Then, what about our *kerygma* today? Supposing that the episode of the Magi were eventually to be universally accepted by scholars as a historical midrash, would it not create doubt

⁵² Allen, l.c. (note 3), p. 14.

⁵³ J. M. Lagrange, *Évangile selon St. Matthieu*, Paris, 1948², pp. 45 f.

⁵⁴ A. Vitti, *Apocryphorum de Magis enarrationes, Verbum Dom 7* (1927), 3-13; K. Meyer, *Die heilige Drei Könige und ihr Festtag im volkstümlichen Glaube und Brauch*, ThLZ 12 (1949), col. 751 ff.; H. Kehrer, *Die heilige drei Könige in Literatur und Kunst*, Leipzig, 1909; for the discussion of the Fathers of the Church: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, Vol. I, in loco.

and uncertainty among the ordinary faithful who so far held the story to be historical in all its details? What attitude should the modern scholar take when exposing or explaining this scriptural passage to the faithful?

First and foremost, the object of *kerygma*, the object of Matthew's teaching regarding Christ's birth, remains the same, whether he teaches through haggadah or by means of an accurate narration of facts. It is not the actual coming of the Magi, the actual murder of the innocents, the actual flight to Egypt that are at stake, but the mystery of the incarnation itself. It is, therefore, irrelevant to faith whether these details are believed to be historical or not. What matters is faith in Christ, the Son of God who became man to save the whole world, not faith in the Magi.

Secondly, the very disagreement among scholars warns us not to impose our view on others, whatever it may be. Even if we personally are convinced of the midrash theory, we have no right to proclaim it as if our interpretation were the only valid one.

When referring to this narrative in pastoral situations, we may prudently abstain from discussing modern explanations when these would cause confusion. Instead of upsetting our faithful by interpretations that will only be half understood, we should stress the positive teaching contained in the chapter. Rather than emphasize the actual historicity of the details, we should bring out the theological themes dear to the evangelist.⁵⁵ In the further future the midrashic character of the story may cause as little difficulty to our lay people as the current explanation of Genesis, chapter one!

Father McKenzie's example is much to the point here: a Christmas crib may represent the Holy Family in a way that is far removed from the historical situation. Yet no one would regard such artistic treatment as a distortion of the historical reality.⁵⁶ A prudent pastor when explaining such a crib to children will stress its positive sides, passing over in silence whatever may not agree with Palestinian conditions. Pointing out historical shortcomings to children would unnecessarily upset them, unless they be grown up, and sufficiently mature to see the distinction between the unhistorical form and the historical contents!

⁵⁵ See W. Dignath, *Weihnachtstexte im Unterricht*, 1965; A. Vögtle, *Das Schicksal des Messiaskindes. Zur Auslegung und Theologie van Matt. 2, Bib. Leben 6* (1965), pp. 246-279.

⁵⁶ J. L. McKenzie, *Exegete at the manger. Symbol and Fact in the Christmas story*, *Commonweal* 81 (Dec. 25, 1964), pp. 439-442.