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The Magi as Wise Men: Re-examining a Basic Supposition

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The tradition that identifies Matthew's magi as 'wise men' is considered in light of narrative criticism, social history, and *Wirkungsgeschichte*. An examination of literature relevant to the narrative's setting reveals that Matthew's readers are expected to regard magian learning not as wisdom but as foolishness. Matthew's narrative is prejudiced against scholarship, such that the magi's status as fools is what qualifies them as candidates for divine revelation. The tradition that regards the magi as wise men can be traced to the Renaissance and attributed to an ideological bias that favours a blessing of scholarship.

In the first volume of his magisterial commentary of the Gospel of Matthew, Ulrich Luz discovers that the interpretative scheme he calls *Wirkungsgeschichte* yields a particularly interesting result in his analysis of 2.1–12, the story of the magi. With regard to this passage, he observes, the tradition reveals not so much a 'history of influence' as a history of the text's 'lack of influence'.[1] Perhaps no other passage in Matthew has been subject to as much interpretative growth as this one. Legends concerning the magi abound, providing them with names, making them kings, designating their countries of origin, describing their physical appearance, and reporting on such extra-biblical occurrences as their return journey, their conversions, and their deaths. In the Middle Ages, a cult of relics concerning the magi arose. As saints, they were also assigned protective functions, some of which survive in popular piety today. In Spain, Argentina, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and most areas of Mexico, the magi fill the role elsewhere assumed by St Nicholas, giving gifts to children in honour of Jesus' birth. A recent monograph by Richard C. Trexler, *Journey of the Magi*, details the development of such traditions, particularly as they appear in drama and art.[2]

1 Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (CC; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 141.

2 Richard C. Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1997). Other basic resources include M. Hengel and H. Merkel, 'Die Magier aus dem Osten und die Flucht nach Ägypten (Mt 2) im Rahmen der

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My interest in these traditions has been hermeneutical. Rather than simply indicating that certain traditions are right or (more often) wrong from an exegetical perspective, I have tried to understand the reading strategies that have produced such interpretations. Thus, I recently published an analysis of the popular tradition that identifies the magi as kings.[3] The most interesting part of that study was the discovery that this interpretation did not simply develop (as is usually thought) as a mistaken, over-literal reading of the story as a fulfilment of certain OT passages (Isa 60.3; Ps 72.10–11). The magi did not come to be identified as kings until after Constantine, though the OT citations had been noted previously. Furthermore, the initial context for this identification was political legitimation of Christian rulers. In short, as the church came to acquire worldly power, its exegetes came to read the magi story as a blessing of such power. They did so by filling what literary critics call narrative 'gaps' in ways that had not been done before.

I now wish to contend that a similar process has occurred with regard to the identification of the magi as 'wise men'. I am at once on shakier ground because, while virtually all scholars consider the tradition that identifies the magi as kings to be erroneous, the identification of these magi as wise men is almost unanimously accepted. Indeed, I am aware of only two scholars who have seriously questioned this identification, and they have done so in contexts that have not earned much of a hearing for their views. A work from 1936 by W. K. Lowther Clarke tried to interpret the magi's adoration as representing conversion from an unwise way of life. His real interest was in developing a polemic against the Roman Catholic Church's endorsement of gambling (which he thought represented the modern equivalent of astrology, insofar as both involve yielding to determinism). At least he had a sense of humour. The article was called 'The Rout of the Magi', invoking a pre-poststructuralist pun that could make Derrida

antiken Religionsgeschichte und der Theologie des Matthäus', in *Orientierung an Jesus* (FS Josef Schmid; ed. P. Hoffmann; Freiburg: Herder, 1973) 139–69; Hugo Kehrer, *Die heiligen drei Könige in Literatur und Kunst* (2 vols; Leipzig: Seemann, 1908–9); Karl Meisen, *Die heiligen drei Könige und ihr Festtag im volkstümlichen Glauben und Brauch* (Cologne, 1949); Bruce M. Metzger, 'Names for the Nameless in the New Testament', in *Kyriakon* (FS J. Quasten; ed. P. Granfield and J. Jungmann; Münster: Aschendorf, 1970) 79–99, esp. 79–85; Moisés Mayordomo-Marín, *Den Anfang hören: leserorientierte Evangelienexegese am Beispiel von Matthäus 1–2* (FRLANT 180; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); Eberhard Nestle, 'Einiges über Zahl und Namen der Weisen aus dem Morgenland', in *Marginalien und Materialien* 2 (Tübingen: Heckenhauer, 1893) 67–83; A. Schulze, 'Zur Geschichte der Auslegung von Mt 2, 1–12', *TZ* 31 (1975) 150–60; C. Schoebel, *L'histoire des rois mages* (Paris, 1878). Further detailed bibliographies are included in Trexler and in Hengel and Merkel.

3 Mark Allan Powell, 'The Magi as Kings: An Adventure in Reader-Response Criticism', *CBQ*, forthcoming.

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proud.[4] Better known today is the 1958 article by C. S. Mann, whose ideas were largely derived from Lowther Clarke, and who ended up suggesting that Matthew's magi were not Gentiles, but Babylonian Jews.[5] No one, to my knowledge, has followed him in acceptance of this conclusion.

Still, the fact remains that the magi were *not* viewed as wise men for a long time in the history of tradition. In fact, they did not really come to be thought of as such until the time of the Renaissance and, especially, the Enlightenment. My previous study of how acquisition of worldly power inspired the church to bestow royalty on these figures makes me suspicious as to whether the acquisition of worldly wisdom did not have a similar effect. It was, after all, the church's scholars (its own 'wise men' of the day) who first decided the magi story was about 'wise men', not kings.

In this article, I do two things: first I go out on a limb and argue that, in fact, Matthew's readers are not expected to regard the magi as 'wise'.[6] I do this knowing that in some future work my name might end up on a short list with Lowther Clarke and Mann, though I do not agree with the general thrust of either of their studies. Second, I will provide a synopsis of the history of tradition that explains the development of this pervasive reading. More can be done, but this will give us enough to think about.[7]

4 W. K. Lowther Clarke, *Divine Humanity: Doctrinal Essays on New Testament Problems* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1936) 41–51.

5 C. S. Mann, 'Epiphany – Wise Men or Charlatans?', *Theology* 61 (1958) 495–500.

6 An abbreviated version of this first part of the paper was presented as a lecture at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and subsequently published in that school's journal. See Mark Allan Powell, 'Neither Wise Nor Powerful: Reconsidering Matthew's Magi in Light of Reader Expectations', *TSR* 20 (1998) 19–32.

7 In addition to the usual commentaries, important historical and redactional studies of Matt 2 include M. Bourke, 'The Literary Genus of Matthew 1–2', *CBQ* 22 (1960) 160–75; R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, ²1993); J. E. Bruns, 'The Magi Episode in Matthew 2', *CBQ* 23 (1961) 51–4; C. H. Cave, 'St. Matthew's Infancy Narrative', *NTS* 9 (1962/63) 382–90; J. D. Crossan, 'Structure and Theology of Mt 1,18–2,23', *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 16 (1968) 119–35; Jean Daniélou, *The Infancy Narratives* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968); Charles Thomas Davis, 'Tradition and Redaction in Matthew 1,18–2,23', *JBL* 90 (1971) 404–21; A. M. Denis, 'L'adoration des mages vue par S. Matthieu', *NRT* 82 (1960) 32–9; J. D. M. Derrett, 'Further Light on the Narratives of the Nativity', *NovT* 17 (1975) 81–108; Albrecht Dieterich, 'Die Weisen aus dem Morgenlande', *ZNW* 3 (1902) 1–14; Morton Enslin, 'The Christian Stories of the Nativity', *JBL* 39 (1940) 317–8; P. Gaechter, 'Die Magierperikope (Mt 2, 1–12)', *ZKT* 90 (1968) 257–94; Herman Hendrickx, *Infancy Narratives* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975); A. R. C. Leaney, 'The Birth Narratives in St. Luke and St. Matthew', *NTS* 8 (1961/62) 158–66; E. Nellessen, *Das Kind und seine Mutter: Struktur und Verklindigung des 2. Kapitels im Matthäusevangelium* (SBS 39; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969); A. Paul, *L'Évangile de l'enfance Saint Matthieu* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968); E. Peretto, 'Ricerche su Mt 1–2', *Marianum* 31 (1969) 140–247; H. J. Richards, 'The Three Kings (Mt ii. 1–12)', *Scr* 8 (1956) 23–8; P. Stuhlmacher, 'Epiphanias. Matthäus 2,1–12', *GPM* 27 (1972) 63–70.

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Matthew's Magi as Wise Men

The identification of magi as wise men cannot be affirmed or denied as a historical fact in the same way as their identification as kings. The problem lies in the subjective sense given to the label *wise*, clearly an evaluative term. We may grant as a historical fact the assertion that magi were 'learned', that is, that they possessed knowledge of certain subjects beyond that of their peers. At issue is the question of whether Matthew's readers would be expected to identify such knowledge with 'wisdom'.

We must beware of confusion related to the English word *wise*, which can carry different meanings. When we ask, 'Are Matthew's readers expected to regard the magi as *wise*?', we mean, 'Are they expected to regard the magi as persons who are learned in matters of significance?' Are the magi to be regarded as *wise* in the sense in which Matthew uses σοφός (11.25; 23.34) not φρόνιμος (7.24; 10.16; 24.45; 25.2, 4, 8, 9) or συνίημι (13.13, 14, 15, 19, 23, 51; 15.10; 16.12; 17.13).[8] I think that the former sense is what is normally meant when people call the magi 'wise men'.

For many readers today, the answer to the questions just posed seems obvious. Magi were students of the stars and their knowledge of the heavens was obviously worthwhile since it enabled them to interpret the sign that they saw in the heavens and, so, to come to Jerusalem in search of the Christ. But Matthew says nothing of this. The magi merely arrive in Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East (or, at its rising) and have come to worship him' (2.2). Matthew does not narrate the magi's perception or interpretation of the star. The narrative leaves a gap where this part of the story is concerned and modern readers have bridged that gap with the suggestion that the magi's specialized knowledge allowed them to interpret the divine revelation. This suggestion has not gone unchallenged. Rosenberg, for example, has claimed that the magi would have been acting only on 'common knowledge' in attributing the birth of great men to heavenly phenomena.[9] There are examples of such manifestations in rabbinic stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses, where the revelation does not require any special knowledge on the part of the recipient (see Str-B 1.77–8). In any case, the history of reception reveals that assumptions attributing valuable knowledge to the magi do not by any means offer the only way of bridging Matthew's gap concerning this non-narrated revelation. We want to determine how Matthew's readers might have been *expected* to bridge it.

8 In Matthew, φρόνιμος refers to a quality of character, not to something that is acquired through learning (to be 'wise as serpents' does not mean to be well-educated; the 'wise maidens' are not necessarily better instructed than the foolish ones). Similarly, συνίημι refers to a gift of God, to insight akin to faith rather than to knowledge acquired through education.

9 R. A. Rosenberg, 'The Star of the Magi Reconsidered', *Bib* 53 (1972) 105–9.

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To speak of readerly expectations is to raise a host of theoretical concerns involving how the category of 'reader' is best understood (original reader? ideal reader? first-time reader? complacent reader? etc.). I am not sure that the fine-tuning of these hermeneutical distinctions impinges greatly upon the present study. For what it is worth, I envision a set of 'implied readers' as defined rather broadly by such literary critics as Wayne Booth, Seymour Chatman, Wolfgang Iser, and Peter Rabinowitz.[10] The concept is basically that of an 'authorial audience', of readers who respond to the story in ways consistent with the intentions of the author(s). The distinctions between such an audience as defined through literary criticism and the historical audience of Matthew's community as defined by redaction criticism are not significant for a study such as this one, though of course, the two concepts are epistemologically discrete. In either case, attention must be paid to the knowledge, beliefs, and values that appear to be presupposed by the text. We are asking what sense readers (historical or 'implied') would be likely to make of the magi story, given our best suppositions concerning what such readers are probably assumed to know and believe.

How would Matthew's readers be expected to regard magi?

Matthew begins the story by simply noting that 'magi' (μάγοι) came from the East to Jerusalem' (2.1). Readers are clearly expected to know what μάγοι are, since the term is not defined. Such knowledge would necessarily be evaluative. So what image or images does Matthew assume the word μάγοι will evoke for his readers? Astrologers? Scientists? Pagan star worshippers? Political retainers of the Persian court? Specifically, was Matthew's narrative written in a context where the readers would be expected to assume that magian knowledge constitutes what they, the readers, would regard as wisdom?

Since Matthew's narrative itself offers no evaluative comments on magi in general or on their specialized knowledge in particular, we must look elsewhere, to literature most relevant to the context in which this story was composed (what I call the 'discourse setting of the narrative'[11]). We may look at three progressively relevant tiers of information.

First, there is literature of the Greco-Roman empire in general. Here, the evaluation of magian knowledge is mixed. Cicero refers to magi as 'wise and learned among the Persians' (*De divinatione* 1.23.47) but Tacitus denounces their arts as 'absurdities' (*Annals* 2.27–33). The story of Tiridates preserved by

10 See further Mark Allan Powell, 'Narrative Criticism', in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (ed. Joel B. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 239–55; idem, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (GBS; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 19–21. The chief works by Booth, Chatman, Iser, and Rabinowtiz are referenced in these studies.

11 The temporal 'discourse setting' of Matthew's narrative of the magi (around 85 CE) is distinct from the temporal setting of the story itself (around 6–4 BCE).

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Pliny presents Nero as an emperor who thought the magi's knowledge so valuable that he wanted to acquire it himself (*Natural History* 30.6.16–17). Suetonius, however, says that Tiberius banished all astrologers from Rome in 19 CE (*Tiberius* 36). We do not know whether Matthew's readers would be expected to know this literature or be aware of the specific matters to which they refer, but the accounts do bear witness to the general perception of magi in the social world where the narrative was produced. That witness is ambiguous, telling us that magi were considered to be persons who possessed special knowledge, the value of which was controversial.

The second tier of information, more specifically relevant for estimating how Matthew's readers might have been expected to regard magi, is offered by Jewish literature. The verdict here is decidedly negative. 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.[12] For convenience, we may just consider the impact of two prominent midrashim. First, a number of sources identify Pharaoh's sorcerers in Exodus as magi (e.g. *b. Sanh.* 101a; *Midrash Rabbah* 1.9 on Exod 1.22; Philo, *Vita Moysis* 1.92). In the midrash, as in the book of Exodus itself, these magi/sorcerers are essentially bunglers who provide the story with an element of comic relief. They are able to throw down staffs that become snakes but their snakes are swallowed by Aaron's (Exod 7.10–12). They are sometimes able to duplicate the actions of Moses and Aaron that bring plagues upon the land (Exod 7.22; 8.7), but by doing so they only make the situation worse (in the midst of a plague of frogs, magicians who can produce *more* frogs are not what the Pharaoh needs). At other times, they fail completely (Exod 8.18) and eventually they themselves become plague victims (Exod 9.11). Wise men? No. They are fools.

Does this seem an overstatement? Well, then, let us look at the Balaam

12 This remains true even if, as some contend, astrology was sometimes accepted within first-century Judaism. On this, see James H. Charlesworth, 'Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Palestinian Synagogues', *HTR* 70 (1977) 183–200; plus references cited in W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 14; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 1.229; Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2 vols; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 1.236–9. The more spectacular evidence dates from a later period – the zodiac floor of Beth- Alpha is from the 6th century CE. At any rate, it is entirely possible (thought not necessarily logical) that Jews could have adopted some Judaized version of astrology while continuing to regard the magian version (from which their own system was derived) as false wisdom and foolishness. Many Rabbinic writings condemn Gentiles as 'worshippers of stars' (*b. Sanh.* 59a; *b. Abod.Zar.* 3a; *Sipra* on Lev 20.7), which indicates that a distinction between astrologies could have been drawn over what attitude was adopted with regard to the zodiac. The fact is (whether it makes sense to us or not), even if Jewish writings from this period sometimes seem to approve of some type of astrology, they never approve of whatever it is that magi were thought to know or practise.

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midrash, as presented by Philo in *Vita Moysis* 1, a story which identifies this figure as a magus and then delights in exposing him as the 'most foolish of all men' (293).[13] Philo introduces Balaam as one who was 'far-famed as a soothsayer' and 'particularly admired' in that regard (264). Thus, he pays homage to the view held by some in the Greco-Roman world who respected the knowledge of magi. But then Philo proceeds to reveal how undeserving Balaam was of such respect. The incident with the donkey and the angel is telling. Balaam's inability to see the angel 'was a proof of his insensibility', since 'the unreasoning animal was shown to be superior in sight to him who claimed to see' divine things (272). Balaam characterizes himself as 'ignorant' (273) and this description is readily confirmed in his subsequent inquiry as to whether he should turn back, for, as Philo comments, 'why should he ask about a matter so evident, which in itself provided its own demonstration and needed no confirmation?' (274). When the time comes for Balaam to curse Israel, a genuine prophetic spirit does fall upon him, but the result is that it banishes 'utterly from his soul his art of wizardry – for the craft of the sorcerer and the inspiration of the Holiest might not live together' (277). Still, when Balaam speaks the words of God (blessing Israel), he does so unwittingly, 'understanding nothing' (283). Eventually, he comes to despise his old art, realizing how worthless it was (287). The short narrative comes full circle with a concluding comment on his ironic celebrity, as Balak calls the magus 'most foolish of all men', and remarks that he must now return home with 'deep disgrace, having brought ridicule upon "the lore of knowledge" upon which he had once prided himself' (292). On the lips of Balak, the latter comment is clearly ironic: the king regards Balaam as 'foolish' because he has lost out on rewards that would have come if he had cursed Israel as commanded, but Philo presents the magus as foolish in a broader sense: he is a ridiculous figure whose useless art is easily thwarted by God and exposed for the nonsense that it really is.

I have treated the Philo citation in some detail because of all Jewish writers relevant to the discourse setting of Matthew's narrative, Philo is typically regarded as the most quintessentially Hellenistic. If the Greco-Roman world provided mixed reviews as to how the knowledge of magi ought to be evaluated, while the Jewish world typically rendered a negative judgement on this issue, we might have thought Philo would be a bridge figure. If *any* Jewish writings roughly contemporary with Matthew's Gospel were to view the knowledge of magi positively,

13 Balaam and his company are also called magi in the *Palestinian Targum*. For that matter, the sources that identify Pharaoh's sorcerers in Exodus as magi often name Balaam as one of these sorcerers (*b. Sotah* 11a; *Midrash Rabbah* 1.9 on Exod 1.9). *Sepher ha-Yashar* names Jannes and Jambres (cf. 2 Tim 3.8) as the Pharaoh's chief magi and identifies them as Balaam's sons. See Judith R. Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* (BJS 47; Chico: Scholars, 1983) 75–113.

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wouldn't they be his? But no! Even Philo thinks that magi are fools and that their knowledge – celebrated by the ignorant – is but an artificial system (σοφιστείαν, 277). They are experts at nonsense, learned perhaps, but certainly not wise.

The third tier of information comes from the LXX scriptures themselves, a source even more important for our task than Philo or other Jewish literature. The midrashim that present Balaam and Pharaoh's sorcerers as magi are important because they reveal a strong tendency to disparage magian knowledge within a context fairly immediate to that of Matthew's social world. Still, we do not know for certain that Matthew's readers would have actually known these midrashim or that the associations presented there would immediately affect their estimation of the characters introduced in Matt 2.1. We do know, however, that Matthew's readers are expected to know the LXX, and there is within those scriptures one story in which magi figure prominently. It is the passage from Dan 2 in which King Nebuchadnezzar summons his magi (2.2, 10) and orders them to interpret his dream. Here, also, the magi are presented as ineffectual. Their learning and their art do not enable them to know what needs to be known. Their role in the story is to serve as foils to Daniel who receive true knowledge from God. Daniel is presented as the bearer of true wisdom; magi and other so-called 'wise men' (σοφοί, 2,27) are exposed as fools.

Taken together, these three tiers of information reveal that Matthew's readers are probably expected to regard magi as persons who were learned only in matters that the readers would regard as nonsense. Matthew's readers are expected to regard magi, generally, not as wise men but as fools.

How would Matthew's readers be expected to regard wisdom?

We are challenging the conventional understanding that Matthew's readers are expected to regard the magi as wise men to whom God chooses to reveal the Christ. In addition to the point just made (that magi are not regarded as wise men in the literature most relevant to this narrative's discourse setting), we may ask whether such an identification would be consistent with this narrative's ideological point of view concerning the relationship between wisdom and divine revelation.[14] A key text is Matt 11.25. Jesus says,

> I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise (σοφῶν) and the intelligent (συνετῶν) and have revealed them to infants.

In short, God hides divine truth from the wise and reveals divine truth to those who lack wisdom. This perspective – stated so well in this single verse – is preva-

14 I am intentionally defining our interest more narrowly than Matthew's understanding of wisdom in general, a topic on which full monographs could and have been written.

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lent throughout the narrative. John the Baptist claims that God is able to raise children of Abraham from stones (3.9). Jesus says (quoting scripture) that God brings forth praise from the mouths of nursing babies (21.16). Infants, stones, sucklings – all are images of those who have nothing to offer, nothing to commend themselves. God creates or reveals what is needed, preferring apparently to write the divine will on almost blank slates.

The point is illustrated in the very selection and education of Jesus' disciples. He does not call scribes who, at least, would already know the scriptures and need only to be instructed in their proper interpretation. He calls fishermen (4.18–22) and tax-collectors (9.9) who do not appear to know anything of relevance to their mission. Not once anywhere in this Gospel are Jesus' disciples ever depicted as knowing the scriptures or the will of God. The only time that they come close is especially revealing. They know that 'Elijah must come first' (17.10) but they do not know that this teaching comes from scripture. It is only something that 'the scribes say'. The disciples are depicted as ignorant 'blank slates' whom Jesus continually teaches, revealing to them what they need to know. As the story unfolds, we witness some progress. Sometimes, at least, they do understand (13.51; 16.12; 17.13).

The religious leaders of Israel know not only 'that Elijah must come first' but a great many other things as well: that the Christ is to be born in Bethlehem (2.4–6); that Moses commanded the giving of divorce certificates (19.7); that the scriptures commend levirate marriage (22.24); that the Christ is to be the son of David (22.42); that it is unlawful to place blood money in the temple treasury (27.6), and so on. I submit that Matthew's readers are expected to regard such knowledge (as opposed to the astrological arts of the magi) as true wisdom. Knowledge of scripture . . . knowledge of the law . . . knowledge of the will of God – *these* are what mark people as truly wise. People who have such knowledge may genuinely be regarded as 'wise and intelligent' in contrast to people like the foolish magi who know nothing worth knowing.

But – here is the surprise! – Matthew's story depicts a world in which God chooses to reveal divine things to those who do not know anything of value and to hide the truth from those who are wise and intelligent. So, in his ministry, Jesus not only teaches his know-nothing disciples, but also refuses to teach the scribes, Pharisees, and other religious leaders of Israel. He insists that they are wrong about various things but does not try to correct them in a way that would bring them (like his disciples) to a renewed understanding. He condemns them without bothering to call them to repentance.[15] His philosophy concerning them can be summarized in the following directions to his disciples; 'Leave them alone' (15.14).

15 Note, by way of comparison, that in Luke's Gospel Jesus' criticisms of the religious leaders frequently conclude with a summons for them to change their ways ('Go and do likewise', Luke 10.37) and sometimes with a promise of the benefit they will receive if they do so: 'Do this and you will live' (Luke 10.28); 'Everything will be clean for you' (Luke 11.41); 'You will be

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We may note that Matthew does esteem Sophia herself highly (11.19), recognize that Solomon was a wise man favoured by God (12.42), identify Jesus as one who possesses wisdom (13.54, and refer mysteriously to wise people (σοφοί) whom Jesus will send to Israel after Easter (23.34). This is all in keeping with an apocalyptic perspective that allows for a sacred past that will be recovered through divine intervention in the near future. The same is true with regard to the Matthean perspective on political power. Matthew apparently believes that all kingdoms of the earth are currently under the rule of Satan (4.9). There is not a single present-day ruler in his Gospel who exemplifies godly behaviour. Still, Matthew can make occasional reference to rulers in the past who are not to be regarded as tyrants: David (12.3), Solomon (12.42), and 'the queen of the South' (12.42). Jesus can also be identified in some sense as the true king (21.5; 24.34), and some day his followers will sit on thrones (19.28). It is not considered contradictory to present those who currently possess royal power as invariably opposed to the ways of God (22.25) while holding that such power *can be* (indeed *has been* and *will be*) possessed by the godly. Similarly, Matthew seems to think that those who currently possess wisdom are opposed to the ways of God, though it need not always be that way.

Accordingly, Jesus' shocking words in 11.25 really do seem to represent an underlying evaluation of wisdom that is fundamental to this narrative: those who are wise and intelligent are rejected by God for no other reason than that they are wise and intelligent. The reason, I suspect, is that wisdom is viewed as a form of power and in this story people who are powerful can be rejected for no other reason than that they are powerful. Wise men (like kings and political rulers) exemplify those who are first in this world: they will be last. Those who lack such wisdom represent those who are last: they will be first.

Matthew's readers are expected to share this ideological point of view regarding wisdom and its antithetical relationship to divine revelation. For this reason alone, they would not be likely to regard the magi as people who are wise. Indeed, if Matthew's μάγοι are simply to be equated with the σοφοί of 11.25 (as many Bible translators apparently think), then we are left with a story in which the Father *does* reveal the Son to the wise and intelligent, a story that depicts God as doing the very thing that Jesus says God does not do. But if, as suggested above, Matthew's readers are assumed to regard magi as fools, as people who know nothing about anything that is worth knowing, then the story in Matt 2 fits well with the Gospel's ideological point of view. The presentation of the Christ child to ignorant fools is

repaid at the resurrection' (Luke 14.14). Nothing like this is ever found in Matthew, where Jesus makes no more effort to minister to the religious leaders than to the demons he exorcises. They are 'plants that the heavenly Father did not plant', destined to be uprooted in time (Matt 15.13). Jesus informs them that they are going to hell, and that is really all there is to it (Matt 23.33).

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in line with the creation of children of Abraham from stones (3.9), with the evocation of praise from sucklings (21.16), with the theological education of fishermen (4.19), and with the revelation of divine truth to infants (11.25).

Characterization

We need to check these suppositions against a close reading of the magi story itself. We discover that, indeed, one of the chief character traits ascribed to the magi in Matthew's narrative is 'ignorance'.

Readers are introduced to the magi as characters who have come from the east to ask 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?' The fact that they are introduced as characters asking a question is significant: such narrative rhetoric emphasizes what they *don't* know (the location of the child) over what they *do* know (that a significant child has been born). The wording of their question indicates further that they do not really know the significance of this child. They 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 (27.11, 29, 37).[16] Even Herod is able to perceive that what the star they saw really portended was the birth of 'the Messiah' (2.4).

The magi get their answer and are sent off to Bethlehem to search diligently for the child, but as it turns out, they do not have to do this. The star now directs them, going before them and stopping over the very house where the child is. There is no thought here of learned astrologers computing the location based on a confluence of planets or constellations. As presented in Matthew's narrative, the leading of this star is so obvious that it requires no scholarly interpretation. It points out the exact house where Jesus has been born. As a sign, it appears to function as a divine portent so blatant that any fool could follow it.

Finally, the narrative suggests that Herod initially dupes the magi with regard to his plans to kill Jesus. Matthew's readers are expected to regard Herod's stated intention of worshipping Jesus (2.8) with suspicion – especially since the narrator has offered them the inside information that Herod was troubled by news of Jesus' birth (2.3). But the magi give no indication that *they* are suspicious. The plot is averted not through their wisdom or cunning, but because God intervenes and warns them in a dream not to return to Herod.[17]

16 Matthew's narrative does present Jesus as king in an ironic (21.5) or eschatological (25.34, 40) sense, but the magi appear to intend the designation to be taken literally. Notably, the precise title 'king of the Jews' is used in Matthew only by Gentiles. Contrast 'king of Israel' in 27.42.

17 Some interpreters have tried to tie this revelation in a dream to magian wisdom, since the latter may have included dream interpretation as well as astrology. But the immediate narrative context suggests the magi's dream was similar to those of Joseph, in which God gave

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We may say, then, that Matthew's narrative presents the magi as ignorant in comparison with Herod (who knows the star portends a messianic rather than a normal political figure), in comparison with the chief priests (who know the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem), and in comparison with the readers (who know that Herod is up to no good). The magi are, in fact, the most ignorant characters in this part of the story. They seem to know less about what has happened or about what it may signify than anyone else. Still, God brings them to the Christ, while Herod – despite his government intelligence – is unable to find the Christ, and the chief priests – despite their scholarship – do not even care to try.

Conclusion

The narrative does not portray the magi as wise men whose learning leads them to Christ but as ignorant people to whom God reveals the Christ. This characterization is consistent with the readers' assumed knowledge (which regards the so-called learning of magi as insignificant) and with the readers' assumed ideology (which holds that God offers revelation to the ignorant and withholds it from the wise).

Nevertheless, a potential for identifying the magi as wise men is created by a narrative gap when Matthew presents these magi as having somehow concluded from a star that they should come to Jerusalem and worship the one born king of the Jews. Although we hear nothing at all about the magi's ability to interpret omens or about their scientific understanding of the heavens, many readers have taken the text as *implying* that the magi used their learning (which did have something to do with stars) to figure out the meaning of a phenomenon that would have been lost on less educated people. Matthew's readers, however, would probably not to be expected to fill the narrative gap in this way. Readers who think the way the narrative appears to presuppose they will think would be inclined to bridge the narrative gap involving the manifestation of the star in other ways. The later behaviour of this star would likely suggest to such readers that the initial revelation, like the latter one, involved a portent so obvious that anyone could have understood it.

I am suggesting that Matthew's implied readers are probably not expected to read this story and conclude, 'These magi are wiser than the chief priests and the scribes of Israel – I guess studying Persian astrology is more important than learning the scriptures.' Nor are they expected to conclude, 'Jesus was wrong when he said that God hides divine truth from the wise and intelligent. Actually, God

clear directions which required no esoteric skill to be understood (1.21; 2.13). Granted, no angel of the Lord is referenced here, so I would not press the point too far in either direction. Matthew's reader, however, is expected to know (and to regard as authoritative scripture) the Daniel story, where magi are specifically presented as failures at dream interpretation (Dan 2).

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prefers scholars and calls them first to worship the Christ.' No, I think the implied readers are expected the respond, 'God revealed the truth about the Christ to a bunch of pagan fools while those who were wise enough to figure it out for themselves missed it.' Just like Jesus said.

Fools become wise

I have suggested that the 'expected reading' of Matthew's narrative views the magi not as wise men but as characters who were learned only in matters of foolishness. This not only parallels the perception of magi offered by other Jewish stories from this period but was in fact the dominant reading of the text for centuries.

In the patristic and medieval periods, the magi's learning was often simply ignored. They were depicted as foreigners, as pious, and – after Constantine – as models of godly rulers. When their learning was addressed, however, it was universally denounced. Their so-called science or art was regarded as false knowledge, even as a false religion. It did not aid them in coming to the Christ but rather was rejected after they came to the Christ.[18]

We see this Christian evaluation of magian learning in the depiction of Elymas in Acts 13.6–11, as well as in the *Didache*, which commands Christians not to act the part of a μάγος (*Did.* 2.2). But let us focus on specific interpretations of Matthew's text. Justin reads Matt 2 as a story that depicts magi as 'turning from superstition to the adoration of the true God' (*Dialogue* 78.9). He does not think the magi were wise men whose study of the stars enable them to decipher a heavenly portent revealing the secret of Christ's birth. He thinks they were superstitious people brought by God to abandon the nonsense they once called knowledge.

Among early witnesses, the reading of Ignatius is even more intriguing than that of Justin. Ignatius provides us with a response that is close (as close as we can get) to that of Matthew's original audience. He writes within a single generation of the narrative's composition in a social location similar to that in which it was composed.[19] He writes:

> A star shone in heaven beyond all the stars, and its light was unspeakable, and its newness caused astonishment, and all the other stars, with the sun and the moon, gathered in chorus around this star, and it far exceeded them

18 Surveys of some of this literature are found in U. Riedinger, *Die Heilige Schrift im Kampf der griechischen Kirche gegen die Astrologie* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1956) 142–6; and in Lowther Clarke, *Divine Humanity*.

19 Many scholars, of course, think Ignatius and Matthew were actually members of the same community – the church at Antioch. On the close social and theological relationship between the two, see John Meier, 'Antioch', in Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 11–86.

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> all in its light; and there was perplexity, whence came this new thing, so unlike them. By this, all magic was dissolved and . . . ignorance was removed (*Eph.* 19.2–3).

Ignatius's description of the star and its effects amounts to a midrash, going well beyond what is in Matthew's text. Two facets of his interpretation, however, are especially interesting. First, he assumes on the basis of Matthew's narrative that what the magi saw in the East was indeed a heavenly portent so astonishing that it might potentially attract the attention of anyone, not just those with specialized knowledge. Second, he thinks the specific effect of this star's appearance was a dissolution of all magic (μαγείας), which in context must refer (at least) to the so-called science of the magi. In short, Ignatius appears to have read the Matthew story as describing an event in which God took pity on the foolish magi and by means of a supernatural revelation dissolved their ridiculous 'science' and removed their ignorance. The fact that this revelation involved a star, a sign in the heavens, is seen as wonderfully ironic – what better way to expose the nonsense of star worshippers!

Augustine also considers in some detail how the magi discerned from a star the insight that Matthew attributes to them (Sermon 374). It was not a deduction based on their so-called knowledge of stars. He decides, like Ignatius, that what the magi saw in the heavens was something 'new and unprecedented', something their science did not take into account.[20] This prompted them to ask themselves what such a sign might mean. 'They certainly heard the answer', the bishop of Hippo concludes, 'evidently from angels.' That's right – angels are introduced into Matthew's narrative gap, angels who tell the magi, 'The star you saw is the Christ's; go and worship him where he has been born.'[21] Given this interpretation, Augustine quite easily adopts Ignatius's second point as well, viewing the magi's adoration of Christ as an implicit renunciation of their former beliefs. About a decade after the sermon just quoted, he proclaimed that the 'star confounded the futile calculations and divinations of the astrologers, when it pointed out to star-worshippers the creator of heaven and earth as the proper object of worship' (Sermon 201).[22]

This sort of reading appears to have been almost unanimous in the early and medieval church.[23] One searches in vain for any interpretation that corresponds to

20 This assumption was ubiquitous. Augustine's contemporary in the East, Ephraem, thought the magi saw an angel in the star. The book of Seth said the star was 'almost in the form of a little child, with a picture of the cross above him'. And, after Constantine, the 'star' sometimes became a chi-rho in artistic representation of this story. See Trexler, *Journey of the Magi*, 27 for references and discussion.

21 John E. Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn: New City), 3.10.324.

22 Ibid., 3.6.87.

23 For other early examples, see especially Origen, *Con. Cels.* 1.60 and Tertullian, *De Idol.* 9.

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what is so popular today, namely one that views the learning of the magi as an asset that helped them to find the Christ. Rather, that so-called learning typically represents a false understanding from which they must be converted. The gifts of the magi are often understood as tokens of such a conversion. Frankincense and myrrh, it is asserted, were the instruments of their trade and the gold presented to Christ was that which they had received for the practice of that trade. Thus, their presentation of these items is a token of repentance equivalent to the burning of magic books in Acts 19.19.[24]

Of course, I do not want to contend that all these elaborations are in line with the reading of the text expected of Matthew's implied readers.[25] Dramatic descriptions of the celestial manifestation, appeals to angelic interpreters, identification of the meaning of the gifts – all these elements of reception history represent attempts at filling narrative gaps and resolving ambiguities. I want us only to note that for a long time readers seem to have filled these gaps and resolved these ambiguities in ways that regarded magi not as wise men but as foolish people. Matthew's magi seem almost universally to have been regarded as ignorant. Ignatius uses the very word 'ignorance' to describe the state from which God called them. Augustine even applies Isa 1.3 to them: 'In the Magi, the ox began to recognize its owner, and the donkey its master's manger' (Sermon 204).[26] The reference is reminiscent of Philo's ironic comment (above) that the magus Balaam was less keen than the beast he rode. To use the modern idiom, these magi were 'dumb as an ox (ass)'. That's how most readers viewed them for centuries.

So when did this change? There are hints in the tradition of subversive counter-readings all along. The strongest of these comes from John Chrysostom who complains in a fourth-century sermon that some Christians infer from Matt 2 that astrology an be trusted (*Hom. on Matt.* 6.4). He clearly regards this as a misunderstanding of the text, but his notation of it serves as a reminder of the fluidity of interpretation and, perhaps, the inevitability of deconstruction. Some scoundrels, from the golden-throated preacher's point of view, were taking the most clear prooftext against astrology anywhere in the NT and twisting it so as to make it appear to support what it actually denounced.[27]

24 See Lowther Clarke, *Divine Humanity*, 47.

25 Davies and Allison offer four reasons why the thesis for a polemic against astrology in this text fails (*Matthew*, 1.229). These are not really convincing, but at any rate, I do not claim that the text presents such a polemic. I think that Matthew's readers were simply assumed to regard magian wisdom (which probably included some form of astrology) as foolishness. The story, then, does not so much present them as being converted as enlightened.

26 Rotelle, *Works of Augustine*, 3.6.99.

27 Albertus Magnus is said to have entertained some astrological conjectures in his interpretation of this story and Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly actually maintained that the incarnation was

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Still, the earliest reference I can find that actually extols Matthew's magi as wise men is in the writings of the Venerable Bede in the eighth century. For him, they were paradigmatic theologians, searchers after truth whose quest brings them to Christ. Notably, Bede does not endorse astrology. He extols the magi as symbols of the knowledgeable while ignoring what, historically, would have been the specific content of their knowledge. For example, he offers a new, rationalist interpretation of the gifts. Instead of occult wares that must be surrendered, the items became practical offerings that the alert magi knew would be needed to supply understandable, if somewhat worldly, needs: gold to relieve the poverty of the peasant parents; incense to sweeten the odour of the stable; and myrrh to kill the worms in Jesus and strengthen his body. Bede also stressed the magi's ecumenical character, identifying them as symbols of the three sons of Noah and, hence, as representatives of the three continents of the earth (Asia, Europe, and Africa). Together, they signify the wisdom of the whole earth.[28] Bede, of course, is recognized as the forebear of a major intellectual movement. He not only wrote his definitive *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* but also numerous books on natural phenomena. He was, truly, a Renaissance man before the time; how interesting, then, that his interpretation of the magi does not seem to surface again until the Renaissance proper, and then it flourishes. Let us consider the work of two otherwise diverse figures.

Roger Bacon (*c.*1214–*c.*1292) was an English philosopher and scientist who specialized in mathematics and physics, especially optics. He considers the magi in a special section of his major scientific work, *Opus Maius*, under the heading 'Application of Mathematics to Sacred Subjects'. Bacon rejects any astrological doctrine of determinism but holds that in this instance the heavens contained signs of God's work that could be recognized by ancient astronomers. Thus, God 'willed to arrange his affairs in such a way as to show rational souls by means of the planets certain things which he foresaw or predestined' (1.288). This has a double significance. On the one hand, divine approval of science is expressed; on the other, independent corroboration of Christian mystery is obtained; 'we truly have great solace in our faith, when the philosophers who have been led only by the exercise of their reason agree with us' (1.276). The latter quote is a shocking revelation. Suddenly, the magi are 'philosophers'. They are led not by a miracle but by 'the exercise of their reason'. Exemplars of all 'rational souls', their successful quest

in part due to heavenly and stellar influence ('per celi et astrorum virtutem'). On such 'peculiar references' among medieval authorities, see Stephen M. Buhler, 'Marsilio Ficino's *De stella magorum* and Renaissance Views of the Magi', *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990) 348–71, esp. 360.

28 The Venerable Bede, *In Matthaei Evangelium expositio,* in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J. Migne, 92.9–132, esp. 13–15. Ecumenicity has its limits, as Gentile wisdom is contrasted with Jewish obtusity.

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illustrates the facility of scholarship to uncover divine truth, which is attested in nature.[29] Notably, the church did not take 'great solace' in Bacon's disclosures but imprisoned him for the last fifteen years of his life.

Marcilio Ficino (1433–1499) was an Italian priest whose translations and commentaries on classical authors are usually credited with generating Florentine Platonism, which had an enormous impact on subsequent European thought. His sermon on the magi, *De stella magorum*, was extremely influential, for it was taken up by his contemporaries Philippe de Mornay, Robert Parsons, and Sir Walter Raleigh and was frequently cited throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Ficino, the magi demonstrate the existence of 'a gentile revelation' parallel to that of the Hebrew scriptures.[30] The magi appear to have possessed a body of knowledge whose origin must be in God and which was able to lead them to some apprehension of divine truth. In fact, Ficino declares, the star of Bethlehem was a comet, which explains its curious behaviour – its movement across the skies and its disappearance and re-appearance as it coursed through the elemental sublunar spheres. The magi themselves were 'oriental astronomers' capable of discerning this comet and of interpreting its movements. Of course, the comet was 'non causa Christi, sed signum', that is, only a sign and not a cause of the divine events. Ficino, like Bacon, rejects astral determinism, but does allow that God sent these primal scientists a message in their own language. The story provides divine validation for the acquisition of pagan learning.[31]

We may pause to recognize how slim the exegetical evidence would be for these claims. On what textual grounds can the magi's response to the star be credited to the exercise of reason or science? Are not these introductions as tendentious as Augustine's importation of angels? What prompted such then-novel interpretation? Trexler notes:

> this new imagination of the magi occurred not only in the wake of early modern hermeticism but also at about the time when the first court-sponsored academies of intellectuals were taking form in western Europe, bodies which later centuries would describe as scientific priesthoods also able to calculate the future.[32]

29 Buhler, 'Marsilio Ficino', 360–1. Citations are from the 1928 Burke translation of Bacon, as quoted (and slightly amended) by Buhler.

30 On this, see also D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1972) 3–10.

31 See Buhler, 'Marsilio Ficino'. For an interesting comparison with Ficino, see the 1638 work of Jacques d'Auzoles Lapeyre, *L'Epiphanie, ou Pensées nouvelles à la Gloire de Dieu touchant les trois Mages* (Paris, 1638). He proposes that the three magi were in fact Melchizedek, Enoch, and Elijah (three Hebrew prophets who were thought never to have died). Thus, they could be respected as true wise men in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. While avoiding association with the *wrong kind of wisdom*, they could still be celebrated as possessors of true intellectual power.

32 Trexler, *Journey of the Magi*, 189.

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At any rate, the magi came to be regarded as generic representatives of secular learning. The story actually became a favourite biblical paradigm for demonstrating how education leads to truth. The magi became astronomers or scientists – like the heretical Copernicus, they were representatives of those who through secular science were able to see the truth that eluded religious authorities. As such, they could be regarded as academicians or scholars by interpreters who would have denounced the tenets of actual magian lore as superstition. From the example of the magi, the seventeenth-century Bishop Lancelot Andrewes deduced that 'There is no starre, or beame of it; there is no truth at all, in human learning or Philosophie, that thwarteth any truth in Divinite; but sorteth well with it, and serveth it'.[33]

These magi were less representatives of Persia than of ancient Rome, which the Renaissance sought to recapture. This is pictured explicitly in the well-known painting of Domenico Ghirandaio called *Adoration of the Shepherds*. While the focus of the work is on its titular heroes, one corner of the painting reveals the magi en route to Bethlehem, passing under a Roman triumphal arch inscribed to Pompey. Likewise, an anonymous woodcut from about 1500 sets the adoration itself in Rome and presents at least one of the magi dressed in the armour of a Roman soldier.[34]

In the period of the Enlightenment, readings that viewed the magi as 'wise men' came to be regarded as the only 'academically correct' way of understanding this story. This does not mean that such readings prevailed. The populace continued to emulate royalty rather than learning, to the distress of Voltaire, who griped that 'everywhere, the feast of the Kings is celebrated, nowhere that of the Magi'.[35] It is highly unlikely that the deist Voltaire thought people should be celebrating a feast devoted to observance of the zodiac. Rather, in suggesting that magi are more worthy of honour than kings, he was using the word 'magi' as a generic symbol for scholars, that is, for people like him.

Such an interpretation served well the ideological interests of intellectual renewal but, as we have seen, ignored any consideration of the discourse setting of Matthew's narrative and stressed construction of what is not in the text (the magi's ability to interpret the star) over what is present (the magi's inability to find the Christ without explicit direction). Still, the reading has persisted[36] and sur-

33 Lancelot Andrewes, *XCVI Sermons* (London, ²1632) 136. Cited in Buhler, 'Marsilio Ficino', 370.

34 These works are displayed and discussed in Trexler, *Journey of the Magi*, 122. Not pictured there but also significant is Botticelli's *Adoration*, which portrays members of the Medici family as the magi.

35 Voltaire, 'Épiphanie', in *Questiøns sur l'Encyclopédie par des amateurs* (Paris, 1771) 5.225–8. Cited by Schoebel, *L'histoire des rois mages*, 98.

36 As always, a subversive undercurrent can be detected. This time, it has tended to surface in mysticism, especially (for some reason) among female visionaries, whose contributions are

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vived to the present day where, in one form or another, it is endorsed by almost all modern scholars. Raymond Brown thinks the magi 'represent the best of pagan lore and religious receptivity that has come to seek Jesus through nature'.[37] Davies and Allison see the magi as 'eastern intellectuals'. Indeed, 'it is readily apparent that the magi in the First Gospel play a favourite, well-attested role, one they played often in the Graeco-Roman world. They are the mysterious wise foreigners who, having mastered secret lore, are able to recognize who it is that will be king.'[38] Richard Horsley describes them as '*the*' figures in the East' (emphasis his) who would have the necessary wisdom to know what the sign in the heavens meant.[39] Hengel and Merkel identify Matthew's magi as 'the intellectually elite of the Gentile world' and understand the point of the story as being to offer a redemption of Hellenistic wisdom through its subjection to Christ.[40] Such examples can be multiplied. Most telling, perhaps, is the simple fact that many modern versions of the Bible think 'wise men' (German *Weise*) is a suitable translation for μάγοι in Matt 2.1, 7, 16 (making the term an identical synonym for σοφοί in 11.25; 23.34).[41]

once again preserved for us by the indefatigable Richard Trexler (*Journey of the Magi*, 190–3). Exemplary are Anna Katrina Emmerich (1774–1824), whose visions were recorded by the German romantic poet Clemens Brentano, and Therese Neumann (1898–1962). Brentano described Emmerich's magi as fundamentally 'childish' (*kindlich*), as in 'Oh how stirring is the good humor and childish simplicity of these living kings'. Trexler regards these visions as 'reeking with modern anti-intellectualism, in which the magi ... are admirable precisely because they are rubes'.

37 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 158. Brown fills the narrative gap left by 2.2 with a tour de force no less daring than that of Ignatius or Augustine. Somehow he knows that the magi were able to 'recognize the salvific import of the Davidic star' (182). The text, of course, gives no indication that the magi connected the star with anything Davidic, much less salvific.

38 Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1.230–1. Divine revelation, then, seems to play no role. The magi found the Christ because they were smarter (or at least better educated) than other people. This entire case depends on a (barely) unstated proposition that regards Matthew's narrative has having more in common with Greco-Roman literature than Jewish literature, an interesting turn – to say the least – for Davies. Once, he thought the story paralleled the Exodus account: 'the Magi from the East are led to kneel at the feet of the greater Moses ... their power was broken at the advent of Christ, just as the sorcerers had been vanquished by Moses'. See W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1964) 79. How this scholar came in the course of a quarter-century to view the story as a vindication of magian wisdom rather than a vanquishing of the same would no doubt make an interesting tale.

39 Horsley, *Liberation of Christmas*, 58. He assumes that this non-narrated act of revelation was unlike all the narrated acts of revelation in Matt 1–2 in that it was an esoteric natural phenomenon requiring specialized academic knowledge to interpret.

40 Hengel and Merkel, 'Die Magier aus dem Osten', 152, 165.

41 It is an old tradition, going back to Luther's translation in Germany and to the King James Version in English (which preserves it in both the RSV and NRSV). This reading was explicitly defended in the 1940s by R. C. H. Lenski, then a notable (if conservative) scholar: 'They were

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So: scholars discover in the story a blessing of scholarship. This is not surprising – I for one agree with the sentiments expressed by Bishop Andrewes above. But would Matthew? I think not. Nor do I think that a blessing of scholarship is what Matthew's readers are expected to find in this text. The ideological evaluation of wisdom presumed for Matthew's narrative is not friendly to scholarship. Readers who believe the way Matthew's implied readers are expected to believe would not be motivated to find such a message. But post-Renaissance, post-Enlightenment scholarly readers are motivated to do so – in the same way that post-Constantinian political readers were motivated to find a blessing of royalty. The reading of Matthew's narrative that regards the magi as wise men whose learning enables or at least assists them in finding the Christ is as unexpected as that which regards them as kings. Like the latter, it is a reading that developed through the exploitation of narrative gaps via imposition of ideology foreign to the world of the story and to the discourse setting of the narrative.

not sorcerers, conjurers, soothsayers, or the like. Their popular designation as "wise men" well defines what μάγοι really signifies. The narrative presents them as astronomers.' See R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg, 1943) 58. Just to be certain, I sat in the R. C. H. Lenski Reading Room in the library at the institution where I teach (the same institution where he once taught) and I read Matt 2 in English and in Greek. I could not find anything in 'the narrative' that presents the magi as practising astronomy.

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