Welcome back for this, the ninth day of Christmas. Today I am continuing my series on the echoes and the symmetries of the Nativity and infancy narratives in the Gospels. I am going to be returning to the story of Matthew 2 to look at the characters within that chapter once again, particularly the characters of the Magi. Now, the Magi come from the East. They may be associated with places like Persia or Babylon, that sort of area. And this is significant, perhaps, given the context of some of the messianic texts that we have referenced from the Old Testament. Those texts were given in the context of invasion from those countries—from Assyria and from Babylon. But yet, here, they are presented as visitors who bring with them worship, who bring with them gifts to the newborn King of the Jews.

Other things to notice. We have already talked about the parallels with the Exodus, but with this theme reversed: now, the magicians are coming from the east to worship the deliverer of the people, the new Moses, whereas Pharaoh and his court are Herod with the chief priests and the scribes. So, there is a reversal there. The Magi follow the star. They follow this light that leads them on this journey into Israel, to worship the King there. And that is, again, a significant parallel, with Israel being led by the pillar of cloud and fire into the Promised Land, through the wilderness.

What other connections can we see here? Well, I think one of the most obvious ones is with the story of Solomon and the queen of Sheba. In 1 Kings 10, we read,

Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to test him with hard questions. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels that bore spices, very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she spoke with him about all that was in her heart.

And it goes on, talking about his wisdom and then all the different aspects of his kingdom, and his servants, and his houses. Later on, it goes on to say,

“Blessed be the Lord your God, who delighted in you, setting you on the throne of Israel! Because the Lord has loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness.”

Then she gave the king one hundred and twenty talents of gold, spices in great quantity, and precious stones. There never again came such abundance of spices as the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. Also, the ships of Hiram, which brought gold from Ophir, brought great quantities of almug wood and precious stones from Ophir. And the king made steps of the almug wood for the house of the Lord and for the king’s house, also harps and stringed instruments for singers. There never again came such almug wood, nor has the like been seen to this day.

Now, this should be very familiar to us from the story of Solomon, but when we read the story of Christ and the visit of the Wise Men, there are some notable parallels here, not least the gifts that are brought and the one that comes to see the king of whom they have heard tidings from abroad. And we also see them returning to their own country at the end of it: it is bracketed in a similar way.

So, what is the significance of this? Well, Solomon was the wise son of David, and people came from overseas to meet him. This is a sort of foreshadowing of the nations coming in and being blessed by Israel. And in Deuteronomy, we see that the nations were supposed to see the wisdom of Israel and come to it as a wise and understanding people, that no other people had a law quite like they did, and that they could learn from them as foreigners.

Here we see wise men come from the east—again, wisdom themes. It is important to recognize that these were sages. The Magi were associated with thinking about wisdom. And these are themes that are very familiar to us from reading the story of Solomon and reading something like Ecclesiastes or Wisdom—that Solomon is associated with wisdom. And he attracts wise men from different parts of the world, and he attracts the queen of Sheba, who is interested in finding about his reign and his wisdom. In the same way, the Magi come from the east to find out about the wisdom of this one who has come, Jesus Christ, who is Wisdom incarnate. So, there is an important theme there that we see developed.

Then there may be other things that are going on within these texts. There are some echoes that maybe connect it to the end of Christ’s story that are perhaps less pronounced, but which are worth reflecting upon. I do not know quite what to make of them yet. One of the things that we see within the beginning of Matthew that we do not see for the rest of Matthew, until near the end, is reference to dreams, warning dreams. Joseph has a number of warning dreams. And then the Wise Men have a warning dream. And what we have in the case of Matthew is one other dream that is mentioned later on, and that is the dream of Pilate’s wife, who warns him not to be involved with Christ, because she has suffered many things in a dream concerning that man. It says,

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, “Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him.”

But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.

So, there is a similar situation. There is a threat to Jesus from Herod and his court, from the chief priests and from the scribes—the leaders of the people. This is the same group that is associated with the attempt to take Christ’s life in his infancy. There is a very significant parallel here. There is an attempt to take Christ’s life.

Following that, in the context of that, there is a dream—a warning dream—given to a Gentile that could be involved in delivering Christ. And yet it does not follow through. It is as if it is a possible route that was never taken. There is this line of hope that is thrown out there that Pilate could have grasped hold of, but he does not. And so, perhaps we were supposed to read that in parallel with the story of the Wise Men—that the Wise Men responded to the dream, and they went against Herod, whereas Pilate did not respond to the dream given to his wife and go against Herod and the people. And for that reason, there is a different end to the story at this point.

Other things that might be interesting: the reference to “King of the Jews.” Again, there are no further references to Christ as the King of the Jews in the Gospel of Matthew until the end. There is a reference at the beginning and there is a reference at the end. Now, of course, “King of the Jews” contrasts with Herod itself, but it also creates this connection between these two parts of the story. So, Christ is proclaimed King of the Jews and he is sought as the King of the Jews by the Magi. And then, at the end, he is the one who is ridiculed and ironically called “King of the Jews”, a title put above his cross as well. And so, there is a similar theme going on there as well, and I think that is probably something that we should notice.

Now, the interesting one that I am not sure what to make of is the connection between the bringing of spices at the beginning and end of Jesus’ life. What we have at the end of Matthew is not a bringing of spices, which is interesting. But we do have this in other gospels. And so, if it is a literary connection that Matthew is drawing, he does not draw it within the text itself. I am bit uncertain of what to make of it, because in the other gospels, we have spices being brought to the tomb, spices that were associated with the tomb. And that is something that the women bring on the morning of the Resurrection, and it is something that Joseph of Arimathea brings for the tomb, with Nicodemus as well, in John’s gospel.

These are curious details. These are figures from outside the group: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. It is interesting that they should be involved at that point. In some ways, that might be some parallel with the wise men, but I do not think it is drawn in a literary form within the text of Matthew itself. So, I am not sure what to make of it.

What else could we say on this? Well, I think that that connection maybe highlights the significance of the Joseph character again. Joseph is the one who rescues the body of Christ, just as Joseph rescues the infant Christ and brings him into Egypt; so Joseph of Arimathea takes the body that would have otherwise been mistreated and buried in a pauper’s grave or something like that. But he takes that body and he wraps it, and he makes it safe. Again, that is an interesting detail connecting Joseph at the beginning and Joseph at the end of the Gospel.