Midrash

Matthew 2:1 “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’”

At the midnight service on Christmas Eve many years ago, my friend and mentor, the Most Reverend Richard Holloway, at that time the Primus of the Anglican Church in Scotland, began his sermon in the cathedral in Edinburgh by revealing that an

ancient manuscript had recently been discovered in the Middle East, one which scholars, he said, dated to about 70 A.D.

He explained that, while scholars disagreed about its authenticity, all agreed that it was a remarkable and interesting document. It appeared to be an autobiographical meditation, written as an old man, by one Jonathan the son of Simon, the innkeeper at Bethlehem at the beginning of the first century. An American biblical scholar, Professor Capote, he went on, had made a translation of the document and, instead of a sermon, Richard was planning to read his translation of that text.

It started like this: "I, Jonathan son of Simon, of Bethlehem in Judaea, wish to set down my memory of events that are now being spoken of and written about, most recently in a strange text called, *The Good News*, according to Matthew, which has recently come to my attention . . ."

The sermon Richard preached that night was published in the Edinburgh newspaper a few days later, and Richard started getting letters from people all over the world, asking how they could acquire copies of the translation of this historic document. There was, of course, no historic document.

Richard was simply following an ancient tradition, by making up a story in order to further a particular message or meaning about an important individual or event. He had even

planted a clue about what he was doing in the text of his sermon. He gave the name Capote to the biblical scholar who had translated the document, because the American author Truman Capote had pioneered modern versions of this ancient technique in his popular book, *In Cold Blood*, about a multiple murder in a Kansan farmhouse.

That book, which was later made into a movie, was neither pure fiction nor pure fact, so the critics dubbed it as "*faction*". He used the form of fictional narrative, including imaginative reconstructions of lengthy, unrecorded conversations, to get inside the minds of the killers of this hideous event, to give the reader an actual 'feel' for the story as it unfolded in all its very real complexities. In a modest way, Richard's Christmas sermon that year was a similar exercise.

The Hebrew word for this technique is *midrash*, from a verb meaning 'to search out, to seek, to enquire' further. All religious traditions develop this kind of literature of imaginative responses to their sacred story, with some kind of further elaboration of the characters and the events and their meaning. It is human nature for us to want more information about people and stories that are important to us, as we reflect upon their meaning for our lives. There is a lot of midrashim, or imaginative construction of this sort, in the second century

of the Christian Era, books like the Gospel of James which considers the simple question of what was Jesus like as a child, or the Gospel of Mary, elaborating on the Resurrection Appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdeline and her role in the early Church. There is also, I suspect, some midrash within our New Testament books themselves. Thus, if we want to understand the Bible properly, we have to read it within its own literary conventions. For example, many scholars believe today that the so-called Gospel of John is largely midrash. It is a long and imaginative theological construction that is the fruit of years of pondering by the author on the simple question of who was Jesus really? So not surprisingly all of the so-called "I am" statements of the New Testament Gospels, statements like "I am the good shepherd" or "I am the way and the truth and the life," all of those "I am" statements are found only in that Fourth Gospel, where the author has actually put the words into the mouth of Jesus, so as to have Jesus help the reader understand who the Gospel writer thought he was. There is then a mixture of fact and fiction in this gospel, as in all midrashim. For Jesus really existed, and these gospel sayings may give us a better explanation of who he was, even if he didn't actually say these things.

Therefore, one way of interpreting today's story of the Magi then is to see it as belonging to this same kind of

literature, as midrash. It is an extended exercise in theological code, and you will only really get the message if you know the background of the story and the characters, just as Richard's Christmas sermon really only intrigued people who already knew something about the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew and the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem in a stable behind an inn. If you didn't know those stories, why would you care what the son of some innkeeper at that time saw or knew?

Now the beloved story of the magi occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew, and scholars believe that the author of that Gospel was a Jew writing to a Jewish audience. So the author employed one of the favorite midrash techniques used by the New Testament writers which was, of course, to take great events from the Old Testament and repeat or echo them in a different context, in order to reveal to the reader how Jesus assumed the same role as the great heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures, such as Moses or Abraham. The reading from the Gospel of Matthew that we have just heard clearly echoes and develops several themes from the Old Testament.

For example, the Magi themselves are obviously the literary descendants of the very real "magicians, the enchanters, Chaldeans and the diviners" who appear repeatedly as opponents to the prophet Daniel (1.20; 2.2), whose book was very popular

at that time among Jews in the Holy Land. So, in our story, the present-day Magi follow a westward-leading star from Mesopotamia to Jerusalem, along the route that Daniel, at that time in exile in Babylon, longed to return home in Judea. There is also an allusion here to the prophecies of Balaam, a Mesopotamian magi mentioned in the book of Numbers (24.17), who turned his face towards the wilderness and predicted a star shall come out of the house of Jacob and crush the enemies of Israel, something which the Jews in Jesus' day very much hoped would soon happen to the Romans. So Jewish readers familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures would recognize these parallels of a star out of the house of Jacob and magi from the East.

This practice of using Old Testament stories to illustrate who Jesus was is especially true for that "slaughter of the innocents" by King Herod which happens next in the story, which is reminiscent, of course, of the Pharoah's slaughter of the first-born males among the Hebrew slaves in the Book of Exodus. Here again, the reader has to be familiar not only with the story of Moses' birth in Exodus, but also with other popular contemporary Jewish writings at that time, in order to really see the parallels, writings like the Jerusalem Targum, which elaborated on the story of Moses' birth found in the Bible. In that text, Pharoah is warned by 'his wise men and sorcerers,' that is by his 'magi,' that a child was about to be born among

the Hebrews by whose hand would be destruction of all of Egypt. Thus, Herod's 'slaughter of the innocents' in Bethlehem mirrored Pharoah's slaughter of the male babies of the Hebrews, each act done simply by the King or Pharoah to save himself and his throne, after a warning provided by some magi. Hence, Jesus can be seen here as a new Moses of some kind. Indeed, where the escape for his life for Moses is fleeing *from* Egypt, but for Jesus in our story his escape from slaughter is fleeing *to* Egypt. In the end, the various details of the story of Magi echo divine images and patterns from the past to help reveal and explain their present reality, amidst the ongoing longing by the Jewish people for someone to save them from the Romans, just as Moses once saved the Jewish people from the Pharoah.

Accordingly, I believe, that Matthew intends this story as a realistic parable of sorts, one that is powerful and clear in its meaning, but not necessarily as actual factual history as we understand it today, more like Capote's "faction" to help the reader understand the underlying meaning of events and people, in this case of Jesus as the savior of the Jewish people. This parallelism is perhaps true of all midrashim, in the end telling stories that reveal much about the characters and the events to those who know those ancient legends and stories. Thus, Christian midrashim seeks to explain to the reader who Jesus really was and the implications of his life.

And so, one day I asked my Bible Study group why do we go on and on with the Santa Claus myth long after we discover as older children that it simply isn't true? The answer given was that the story of Santa Claus captures the meaning of the Christmas season, in spirit, if not in fact. Thus, similarly the story of the Magi can be seen as full of significant meaning, but maybe not so much of historical fact. Amen.