

The Marriage of the Magi: Rereading Matthew 2:11

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Anyone who has sung “We Three Kings” knows a way of reading Matthew 2:11 that is as popular as it is traditional. Interpreters from Origen to Martin Luther drew the same allegory: the gift of gold represents Jesus’ kingship, frankincense his divinity or priesthood, and myrrh his atoning death. But against such neat symbolism, John Calvin protested:

Almost all the commentators indulge in speculations about those gifts...I see no solid ground for [the allegorical] opinion. It was customary, we know, among the Persians, when they offered homage to their kings, to bring a present in their hands. The Magi select those three for the produce of which Eastern countries are celebrated.¹

In his view, that is, the magi simply brought gifts from their homes of appropriate value for a newborn king. Modern critical scholarship, though skeptical of the magi’s historicity, also doubts that Matthew intended the threefold allegory.²

One suspects these exegetes are talking past one another. We need to distinguish between readings which ask what the author, in his context, intended by the gifts, and readings which ask what true and useful meaning Christians may derive from the text. On the latter score, the traditional allegory does well, vividly illustrating Christ’s threefold office. But this kind of contemporary application of Scripture is strongest when we can anchor our interpretation in the author’s context. What we are after is a spiritually edifying and personally relevant way of reading Matthew 2:11 which remains faithful to what Matthew himself might plausibly have intended. In what follows, I will examine why the traditional allegory, while poetic, is implausible on these grounds and then offer a new reading.

So how might Matthew and his readers have understood the gifts? Gold, costly then as now, could well serve as a symbol for royalty. And frankincense, with one notable exception, is in the

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Hebrew Bible almost exclusively used in worship and might easily symbolize divinity or priesthood. But Matthew’s context gives no suggestion that, to quote the hymn, “its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom.” There is no reason to think an original reader of Matthew’s Gospel would link myrrh with burial; this is where the traditional allegory becomes implausible.

First, Matthew’s Gospel itself gives no suggestion he intended myrrh as a symbol of death. In fact, a change from Mark indicates the opposite. In Mark 15:23, one of only two uses of the word myrrh (*smyrna*) in the New Testament, the crucifying soldiers offer Jesus wine which was *esmyrnismenon*, “mixed with myrrh.” Matthew might easily have retained this participle, linking the third gift and the Crucifixion. But instead, he changes Mark’s wording: in 27:34, the wine is *meta cholest memigmenon*, “mixed with gall.” If Matthew intends the magi’s myrrh as a kind of prophecy of the Crucifixion, he has dropped the callback right when the prophecy is fulfilled.

If Matthew does not explicitly link myrrh and death, perhaps his cultural context would have made this connection obvious. John 19:39, the other instance of *smyrna*, describes the burial of Jesus, with Nicodemus bringing “a mixture of myrrh and aloes” to anoint Jesus’ body; at first glance, this seems to suggest just such a cultural connection between myrrh and death. However, the following verse tells us that everything was done “according to the burial custom of the Jews.” First-century Jewish custom

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 137-138.

2. See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-1997), 1:249-251, as well as John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 117 and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 75-76.

typically did not feature embalming with myrrh.³ Corpses were often anointed with scented oils, perfumes, and spices,⁴ and myrrh might sometimes be among them, but this is hardly enough to suggest a cultural connotation of death, given that Jews, influenced by Greek culture, used these same spices in many other contexts.⁵ We might as well say flowers represent death in our own culture because they are sometimes left in cemeteries.

Neither does *smyrna* in the Septuagint version of the Hebrew Bible have any connection to mortality. Exodus 30:23 includes myrrh in the recipe for the tabernacle's incense, Psalm 45:8 describes the king's myrrh-scented robes, Esther 2:12 mentions myrrh as a cosmetic, Sirach 24:15 likens Wisdom to myrrh's "sweet smell," and the Song of Song's six uses of *smyrna* (3:6, 4:6, 4:14, 5:1, 5:5, 5:13) are all romantic or erotic. None of these verses give any evidence that first-century Jews would naturally link myrrh with death.

Another Greek word, *myron*, is sometimes conflated with myrrh but properly refers to scented ointment, which might include true myrrh but has a much broader meaning.⁶ This is the "very costly ointment" of Matthew 26:6-13 and parallels, which is explicitly described as a preparation for burial in 26:12. But given that Matthew uses both *myron* and *smyrna* in his Gospel, we should treat them as distinct; this burial use of *myron*, therefore, should not determine our reading of *smyrna* in 2:11. At most, we can say that *myron* might connote burial in some circumstances and might have a vague association with *smyrna*, but this is quite a tenuous basis for the traditional allegorical reading of 2:11.

Our goal, then, is a new theological interpretation, one which takes into better consideration how myrrh functioned culturally in Matthew's day. I will start by examining how myrrh has in the Septuagint a primarily romantic or erotic connotation. If this is so, then Matthew's familiarity with the Septuagint suggests 2:11 should be read exegetically in this light: the magi's gifts foreshadow Matthew's marital image of Christ the bridegroom.

The Song of Songs uses several forms of *smyrna*, mostly to describe the body or sexuality of the female lover. Several references are unambiguously erotic. The male voice tells us, "I entered the garden, my sister, my bride; I gathered my myrrh with my spices" (5:1). This is, to say the least, sexually suggestive. A few verses later the woman declares, "I rose to open up for my beloved; my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers were filled with myrrh, on the hands of the bolt" (5:5). The full context of vs. 2-6 may present "an impressionistic picture of sexual intimacy," with myrrh

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taking pride of place as an erotic symbol.⁷ Something similar recurs in 5:13, but here the description is of the male lover: "His cheeks are like bowls of spice that produce perfumes; his lips are dripping lilies full of myrrh," perhaps a reference to kisses.⁸ More important is the following verse, which describes how "his hands are engraved, golden," and v. 11: "His head [i.e.: hair] is gold." Verses 5:11-14, that is, use myrrh and gold to describe the male lover's beauty and sexuality.

Even more striking is the Song's repeated, explicit pairing of frankincense and myrrh. After an erotic description of the woman's body, the man proclaims, "Before the day blows away and the shadows move, I will go by myself to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense" (4:6). The mountain and hills may suggest the lover's breasts, forming a parallel with v. 5.⁹ The male lover then uses a garden metaphor to describe his partner's sexuality in 4:13-14, listing several spices, including frankincense and myrrh.

Song 3:6 describes an ambiguous figure "coming up from the desert"; their litter is figuratively linked with Solomon and is "perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the perfumer." The Song continues to describe the litter itself, mentioning gold in v. 10. Critical opinion differs as to the identity of the litter's occupant,¹⁰ but the identification is not terribly important here. What matters is that the Song often mentions all three of the magi's gifts, and several times it mentions two or even all of them together. The Greek terminology is the same as that in Matthew 2:11, and all the Song's uses are romantic or sexual.

The failure of earlier exegetes to connect Matthew 2:11 with these explicit parallels in the Song may have stemmed from their unease with the poem's sexuality.¹¹ This gap in traditional exegesis

3. Wilhem Michaelis, "σμύρνα, σμυρνίζω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VII, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 457-458.

4. Byron McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 48.

5. These included for bathing, before exercise (for men), and after dining. Deborah Green, "Sweet Spices in the Tomb: An Initial Study on the Use of Perfume in Jewish Burials," in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context*, ed. Laurie Brink and Deborah Green (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 161-163.

6. Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, 1:249.

7. J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 192.

8. Exum, *Song*, 206.

9. Exum, *Song*, 167.

10. Exum, *Song*, 145-146.

11. Richard Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 13.

is even more striking when we compare it to the enthusiastic use of Isaiah 60:6 to interpret Matthew 2:11 by many commentators. The prophet's inclusion of gold and frankincense among the "wealth of the nations" brought to Israel was enough to make this, along with Psalm 72, the dominant paradigm for reading Matthew 2:11 throughout much of the history of interpretation. But if a single conjunction of two gifts is enough to establish a connection,¹² what are we to make of the many parallels in the Song of Songs?

Esther 2:12 and Psalm 45:8 reinforce this same sense given to myrrh in the Song, though neither mentions the other two gifts. Esther 2:12 describes the yearlong preparation required for concubines: "six months of being anointed with oil made from myrrh [*smyrino*] and six months with aromatic spices and women's cosmetics." This regimen is exaggerated for literary effect, and no doubt costly myrrh adds to the sense of luxury. Psalm 45:8 describes the "myrrh and oil of myrrh and cassia" anointing the king's garments, perhaps akin to the perfume of Song 3:6; the erotic feeling is reinforced when the psalm immediately shifts to address the king's concubines.

Based on the evidence of the Septuagint, then, I contend that Jews from around Matthew's time would have associated myrrh much more strongly with romantic or sexual love than with death, especially when mentioned alongside frankincense and gold. This raises an obvious problem, however, since the setting of Matthew 2:11 certainly has no romantic or sexual dimension. First, note that when New Testament authors reference the Hebrew Bible, "a shift in meaning inevitably takes place;" the allusion retains something of the original sense while adapting to its new context.¹³ Gifts reminiscent of the Song of Songs do not demand a meaning *identical* to the Song. Second, I believe we can read this adapted meaning of the gifts "forward" into the rest of the Gospel narrative. Matthew's original readers, primed by the Hebrew Bible for some sort of romantic sense of myrrh, frankincense, and gold, would then be left wondering when this expectation might be fulfilled.

I believe Matthew provides this fulfilment in his use of bridegroom imagery in 9:15, 22:1-14, and 25:1-13. By repeatedly characterizing Jesus as the bridegroom, the Evangelist offers us a way to view the relationship between Christ and believers, one based in the romance and sexuality first suggested by 2:11's gifts. Matthew 9:15 is relatively simple. Drawing on Mark 2:18-22; it introduces the image of Jesus the bridegroom. The picture alludes to passages like Isaiah 62:4 and Hosea 2:19-23, which characterize the bond of love and fidelity between God and Israel as akin to marriage. Of course, the story's focus is fasting, and the bridegroom image is only an illustration. But the fact that Mark and Matthew could deploy the image in this way suggests that early Christians would readily have identified Jesus with the bridegroom: Jesus' response only works if we realize that he is talking about himself.

Matthew 22:1-14 is more instructive because it suggests that Matthew may have thought of Christ in explicitly marital terms.

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The passage begins, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son" (22:2). Having just heard Jesus tell another parable about himself as a "son" in 21:33-41, readers are well-poised to identify him with the son in this parable, too. And notably, the parallel in Luke 14:15-24 does not mention a wedding. As with 9:15, the point of Matthew's parable is not to develop the image of Christ as a bridegroom, but the image suggests that readers would have no trouble making this symbolic association.

Another uniquely Matthean passage, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13, reinforces the image of Jesus the bridegroom. The essential point is the same as above: the implicit but obvious identification of Jesus with the parable's groom suggests that Matthew and early readers were comfortable placing Jesus in this role. Besides reinforcing the bridegroom image, the parable asks readers to identify with the bridesmaids in their desire to be with Christ. The parable invites us to consider our relationship with Christ within its framework. This is so even though the bridesmaids are not, of course, the ones marrying Christ.

With all this in mind, we can say confidently that Matthew and his readers would likely recall some of the romantic and erotic resonances of gold, frankincense, and myrrh in the Hebrew Bible. And his frequent marital imagery shows that Matthew was not averse to speaking of Christ in romantic terms. This renders plausible, but does not demand, the following theological interpretation.

The magi's gifts foreshadow the relationship between believers, both corporately and individually, and Christ. This union may be compared with marriage in its commitment and love and with sexuality in its intensity. Matthew 2:11 thus stands in continuity with such language in the rest of the New Testament and Christian tradition. So, while the Gentile magi do represent the nations drawn into a new relationship with God through Christ, their gifts invite us to understand that relationship as akin to romantic or sexual love. This is spiritually rewarding. Historical comparisons of the magi to foreign dignitaries doing obeisance

12. Indeed, Psalm 72 mentions only *one* of the gifts, gold, in v. 15.

13. Sungho Choi, *The Messianic Kingship of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 88-89.

to a king¹⁴ are all well and good, but they are not very useful to modern Christians looking for a model for their own spiritual lives. Interpreting their gifts as representative of romantic love is much more immediate and may be a helpful corrective for mainline Protestants unfamiliar or uneasy with a more mystical theology of the church and believers as Christ's Bride.

A full analysis of marital imagery for Christ and the church in the New Testament and Christian tradition is beyond our scope, but a few examples will show the rich possibilities. Ephesians 5:21-33, though opening with an exhortation for wives to "be subject to" their husbands, continues to a long analogy of Christ's love for the church. The emphasis is on this love, not the hierarchical nature of the relationship; v. 28 implies that Christ loves his bride the church as his own body, a love which is proven through his willingness to die for her (v. 25). Verse 31 also quotes Genesis 2:24 to characterize the strength and fidelity of this bond: the author "interprets the 'man' as Christ and the wife to whom he is joined as the Church and the two together in their insoluble connection as 'one flesh.'"¹⁵ I am reminded of the Song's frequent statements of committed, exclusive love, as in 2:16's "My beloved is mine and I am his." We might read the magi's gifts, expensive as they are, as expressions of similar commitment.

A less familiar voice comes from the fifth century Syrian Mar Narsai, whose verse homily "On the Sanctification of the Church" is filled with poetic variations on this theme. Although he makes no explicit reference to Matthew 2:11, parallels are suggestive. "The Bridegroom, Son of the Most High, betrothed the Church of the Nations, embracing her through his love, and he lifted up her head among her enemies."¹⁶ This verse recalls the magi's role as representatives of the Gentile nations called to faith in Christ, nations with whom the vast majority of today's Christians identify. Narsai also acknowledges the mutuality of this marriage, with passages such as "The love of the Bridegroom for the Bride fixed him on the cross, and the affection of the Bride drove her after the crucified Bridegroom."¹⁷ Divine love brings forth the response of human love, just as divine grace produces the magi's response of gifts and worship.

What of the spiritual possibilities for individuals? Mystics across time have described their relationship with Christ in marital, romantic, and erotic language. One of the greatest, John of the Cross, demonstrates the utility of bringing Matthew 2:11 into this conversation. Stanza 18 of his "Spiritual Canticle" shows the motif as the soul speaks of her Beloved:

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There he gave me his breast;
there he taught me a sweet and living knowledge;
and I gave myself to him,
keeping nothing back;
there I promised to be his bride.¹⁸

The stanza speaks to the soul's passionate and committed love for Christ and to the same mutuality we observed in Narsai and the magi. John is "taught a sweet and living knowledge" which enables his own self-giving to God, just as God's revelation through the star brings the magi to Bethlehem and enables their gifts and worship. And, although John does not refer to Matthew 2:11 in any of his writings, he uses the image of myrrh and incense drawn from Song 3:6 in *The Living Flame of Love*. "If a soul directs to God its loving desires, which are as fragrant to him as the pillar of smoke rising from the aromatic spices of myrrh and incense, God sends...his divine inspirations and touches" to draw the soul into deeper love for him.¹⁹ If we read the magi's gifts in this way, representing their "loving desire" for God, we have reached a spiritual application that is both mystical in its intensity but also quite practical: gold, frankincense, and myrrh may be out of reach, but anyone can offer God their "loving desires." As Christina Rossetti put it in another Christmas favorite, "What I can I give Him—give my heart."

We may not be mystics, enraptured with God's love, but the metaphor of Jesus the bridegroom of the church or the soul is powerful and well-attested throughout Scripture and our tradition. Finding a hint of it at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel provides a fresh way to read a familiar story. My intention is not to replace the traditional allegory of the magi's gifts nor to suggest that my own proposal is likelier than modern scholarship. Instead, a romantic reading of the gifts, based as it is on the Hebrew Bible and textual evidence from the rest of Matthew's Gospel, can stand alongside other readings as a plausible and meaningful way for us to reflect on our own relationships with Christ.

14. As in Davies and Allison, *Commentary on Matthew*, 1:236. Cf. Nolland, *Matthew*, 111.

15. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary*, trans. Helen Heron (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 254.

16. Mar Narsai, *Homily 33 on the Sanctification of the Church*, trans. Amir Harrak (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2018), 12.

17. Mar Narsai, *Homily 33*, 18.

18. St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: ICS Publications, 1991), 47.

19. St. John of the Cross, *Collected Works*, 684.