

There are at least two ways of approaching Scripture. I'm going to loosely categorize them as the Engineer's way and the English Major's way. The hypothetical engineer wants to know the facts of the situation and how these fit with other known facts; the English Major is more interested in metaphoric layers of symbolism in the passage.

This morning's reading is especially troubling to the engineer. There are more unanswered questions than there are certainties with this narrative. Where did the magi come from? Were they wise men from a different religion or Jews who lived in one of the countries to the east? Were they actually spiritual teachers or were they magicians? Were they astrologers who cast fortune by the stars or were they early astronomers? Were there three of them or did they just bring three gifts? When did they come? Did they show up as the Christmas cards show when Mary and Joseph were still camped out in a stable? Or several months or years later? Did they actually come on camels? In fact, did they come at all? Can any of this be considered factual?

I hope I won't offend the engineers when I say that I think the English Major's approach to be a more fruitful line of approach. This is a wonderful story. And it has many layers of rich symbolism.

Three (think Trinity) magi (I go for spiritual teachers from a different religion, in other words, Gentiles) come to Judea because they have seen a new star which they believe indicates the birth of a king.

This is Matthew's account of the nativity which is quite different from Luke's. Here we get none of the details of Mary and Gabriel, of the lack of room in the inn nor the angels and shepherds. Matthew tells us that Joseph had a dream in which an angel told him that Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was to be called Jesus. Then, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem (which is important because that's where

the Messiah was prophesied to be born) the Magi show up in Jerusalem, looking for the one born King of the Jews.

So Matthew immediately places Jesus in the cosmic realm. This is not just a baby. This is one whose birth causes changes in the solar system. One whose birth stirs up not just the whole of Jerusalem, but Gentiles from a long way away.

But the arrival of the magi causes some big problems. These are not shepherds who can be disregarded. These are high status foreigners who go straight to the top. They go to Herod.

Herod is an interesting character. He was the son of a high-ranking Jewish official, and became governor of Galilee when he was about 25. Seven years later, he was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman senate. However he had to wrest control of the country from another ruler, which he did with the help of Roman forces supplied by Mark Antony. However, his reign was not an easy time politically. He was a vassal of the Romans and faced internal opposition and intrigue including from his mother-in-law who was in cahoots with Cleopatra. (You can read all about it on Wikipedia.)

We can only imagine that Herod was disturbed when these foreigners show up saying that a child had been born King of the Jews. This is his title. He is King of the Jews, not some child. Before he knows it all the ignorant peasants will be claiming this child as rightful king and there will be a very unpleasant uprising. Then his masters, the Romans, will be down on him like a ton of bricks. So he is disturbed. The Greek verb here means “to stir up, trouble, disturb with various emotions.” Herod was stirred up and, we read, “all Jerusalem with him.” Is Matthew suggesting that the whole of the city is supportive of Herod, that they experience the same feelings – or does this news create excitement and

unrest with some hopeful that this will be the end of Herod who was known as much for his brutality as for his ambitious building projects? We don't know, but clearly it's unwelcome news for the king. It's Herod who makes the connection between this news and the Messiah or Christ... he calls a council meeting to see where the Christ is to be born.

Then Herod has a secret meeting with the magi. Exactly how old do they think the child is? He wants to find out everything he can from them and then send them on their way asking that they bring him information so that he too can go to worship the new king. For me this has shades of a children's fairy tale. Perhaps Little Red Riding Hood, "What big teeth you have Grandma" "All the better to eat you with my dear."

But Herod is a fearsome enemy. Once he realizes that the magi have double-crossed him, he sets out to find the child, the threat to him as "King of the Jews." But God has intervened in two dreams. The first warned the Magi to head home without letting Herod know, the second warned Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and get out. They headed to Egypt and stayed there until after Herod died.

Now comes the really upsetting part. We don't hear about this in today's readings.

Herod sent soldiers to kill all the boys of two years or younger in Bethlehem and its vicinity.

Somehow this makes it a very modern story. It's not a fairytale anymore. It's Syria, Myanmar, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Sutherland Springs Texas. Nearly 1300 children die from gunshots in this country every year.<sup>1</sup> That's certainly more than Herod's men killed in that little town of Bethlehem. The entire town probably had less than

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/19/health/child-gun-violence-study/index.html>

1300 inhabitants at the time. Each year another almost 6,000 children in this country are injured by guns but survive.

You don't need me to tell you that this is not ok and that we need to work diligently for a world where killing children, even by accident, is unthinkable.

But let us go back to our English Major's approach and ask about the symbolism of this dreadful and devastating massacre.

I see a parallel between the glorious and exacting pageantry of the three magi arriving with their gifts that would be of little use to the average Bethlehem household but appropriate for a king whose life will apparently end in tragedy, followed by the tragedy of the massacre, with Jesus the Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem followed so quickly by his betrayal, torture and death.

We prefer to remember Easter than Good Friday and we prefer to remember the three kings than the slaughter of the children. Yet both are part of the story of the Christ, and both are part of human life.

I have a golfing friend who says, "No good shot goes unpunished." In the vagaries of the game, that often seems true. Is that what's happening here, that the triumphal and the glorious is met by an equal and opposite reaction of pain and tragedy?

I think it's more complex than that, but here I'm just grasping at understanding. It seems that death and birth are intricately connected. I'm not saying that where there's a birth there has to be a death. But that in some mysterious way death is truly a rebirth and birth is a form of death. It's a paradox.

It's a paradox that Christ's death brings us life and it's a mystery that we are joined to his death and new life in the waters of baptism.

This connection between great joy and deep despair is part of the poignancy of human experience. It also speaks to us of the nature of God. Not that God is waiting to punish every good shot, but that in the nature of God is this deep place of suffering and joy which are intermingled like the water and blood that came from Jesus' pierced side.

And perhaps that's why it's so hard. We are drawn to the joy. We want three kings and Easter bunnies. But in order to touch the glorious resurrection and the joyous incarnation we also need to accept the agony of the cross and the despair of the massacre.