

The Fly in the Ointment: What does Myrrh Foreshow in Matthew 2:11?

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Abstract

Popularised by Prudentius, the traditional threefold significance of the gifts of the Magi has a long history going back at least as far as Irenaeus. But does it go back to Matthew? His Infancy Narrative is pervaded with quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament. Yet the latter never shows any interest in the funerary significance of myrrh. Rather it shows myrrh as a commodity so precious that it is frequently associated with royalty. This fits in with the emphasis in Matthew 1-2 on Jesus as the 'king of the Jews'. However, the Old Testament also shows myrrh being used in sacral and erotic contexts. Under the ruling significance of kingship, therefore, the gifts may have other levels of meaning: priest, God, and, in the case of myrrh, lover.

Keywords: Magi, myrrh, funerary, regal, sacral, erotic

Solemn things of mystic meaning:
Incense doth a God disclose
Gold a royal child proclaimeth,
Myrrh a future tomb foreshows.

Or does it? Prudentius¹, the fourth century author of the hymn from which this stanza is taken, was almost certainly inspired by what was, even then, a long-standing tradition interpreting symbolically the three gifts of the magi in Mt 2:11. As early as the second half of the second century, Irenaeus had written:

‘Myrrh, because it was He who should die and be buried for the mortal human race; gold, because He was a King, and frankincense, because He was God...’ (AH 3.9.2.).

¹ Born 348. The translation is that of Fr. E. Caswall of the Birmingham Oratory as given in EH 40.

Soon afterwards, we find Origen writing in the same vein:

The gold being offered as to a king, the myrrh for one who would die, and the frankincense to God' (*Contra Celsum* I, 60).

From then on it became a commonplace. It was, and is, a legitimate and edifying homiletic application of Matthew's text, but does it represent his original intention?

My doubts were first raised when trying to explain the gifts and their traditional 'meaning' to children. The obvious modern parallel to bring home the idea of myrrh as foreshowing the tomb is that of the gift of a coffin! Once one begins to think in these terms, however, the discordant nature of the traditional interpretation becomes apparent. It is not the prescience of the magi that is a problem; in the context of a story where they are led by a star to the infant Jesus this is simply par for the course. What is troubling is the fact that, unlike Mark, Matthew does not otherwise introduce the idea of Jesus' death at an early stage in his gospel. The controversy section, which includes the reference to the 'taking away' of the Bridegroom, and which, in Mark, is an important signpost to the end erected almost at the beginning (Mk 2:1-3:6), is broken up in Matthew and delayed until chapter 9 (Mt 9:1-17; 12:1-14). It is true that, with Mark, Matthew refers in passing to the Baptist's arrest when Jesus begins his public ministry (Mt 4:12; Mk 1:14). However, unlike Mark who recounts it in chapter 6, his account of the beheading of the Precursor is postponed until chapter 14. Even the mention of the disciples' persecution in the Sermon on the Mount is linked to Jesus' sake rather than his example (Mt 5:11).

Certainly a note of suffering and death enters the Infancy Narrative with the story of the slaying of the Innocents. Some see this as foreshadowing Jesus' ultimate destiny. In their commentary on Matthew, for example, Davies and Allison claim that 'Matthew wants the end foreshadowed in the beginning.'² They see a similar foreshadowing in the mention of the 'chief priests and scribes' who are found in the synoptic tradition above all in the passion narratives.³ However, this is not persuasive. The chief priests were present in Jerusalem and the natural counsellors to whom Herod would turn in a matter of this kind. In any case, it is the chief priests and *elders* who are the typical opponents of Jesus in his passion (Mt 26:3, 47; 27:1, 3, 12, 20; 26:57 – 'scribes and elders'!) though the chief priests and scribes are mentioned in two of the passion predictions

² Cf. Davies and Allison (1988), p. 254.

³ *Ibid*, p. 240.

(Mt 20:18, and 16:21 [with the elders also]), and it is they who are indignant at Jesus' reception during the Triumphal Entry and his conduct at the Cleansing of the Temple (21:15). In fact, however, the whole episode of Herod and the children, rather than looking forward to the Passion, looks *back* to Moses and Egypt – a typology we shall be looking at shortly.

In this connection, it is telling that, whereas the verb ἀνείλεν (from ἀναίρειω) is used by Matthew to describe Herod's action in 2:16, he never uses it in his Passion Narrative, unlike Luke who uses it twice.⁴ If he were intending a parallel, this is a strange omission. In such a context, it is *prima facie* unlikely that myrrh is employed as a singular reference to Jesus' future death. Moreover, as Davies and Allison point out, if Marcan priority is accepted, then a death blow is delivered to this interpretation by the fact that Matthew changes Mark's 'wine mingled with myrrh' (ἔσμυρνισμένον οἶνον, Mk 15:23) into 'wine...mingled with gall' (οἶνον μετὰ χολῆς μεμιγμένον, Mt 27:34). Had he intended the supposed funerary significance of the gift of myrrh, he would surely never have done this. Additionally, it is worth pointing out that, like Mark and John, in the description of the anointing at Bethany, designated as a pre-burial procedure (Mt 26:17), Matthew uses the word μύρον for the myrrh⁵ instead of the σμύρνα of 2:11. Again, this does not suggest that he was conscious of any parallel.

None of this should surprise us when we observe that myrrh is never used in the Old Testament in funerary contexts.⁶ Indeed, the only example of such a usage in the whole of the Bible is in Jn 19:39 where the context is certainly funerary but the emphasis on the royalty of the person being buried. This chimes in with one of the major contexts in which myrrh is to be found in the Old Testament, that of kingship. More generally, of course, myrrh was simply a commodity that was foreign, exotic and, therefore, precious.⁷ It thus formed part of the cargo of the Gileadite

⁴ Lk 22:2; 23:32. It is used frequently in Acts.

⁵ Mt 26:7, 12; cf Mk. 14:3, Jn 12:3. μύρον was used for liquid myrrh, σμύρνα for both powdered and liquid forms. We do not know enough about Jewish funerary customs in Palestine to know whether either or both was habitually used when burying the dead. We cannot argue from the special case of Jn 19:39.

⁶ And this despite the possible etymological link with *mar*, the Hebrew word for 'bitter'.

⁷ Van Beek (1960), pp. 86-95, speaks of the economic and political value of myrrh (and frankincense) in South Arabia. Tight security was needed (p. 86); production and distribution was big business comparable to the oil industry today (p. 92); and the wealth accrued went to the building of cities equal in size and grandeur to those of the Fertile Crescent (p. 93). The Dubai phenomenon is not a new one! For a general account of myrrh, cf. Moldenke (2002), pp. 82-6; for frankincense, cf. pp. 56-9.

merchants in Gen 37:25.⁸ As such, however, it was a normal component of gifts or tribute to kings and rulers. In Gen 43:11, it is part of the gift sent by Jacob to Joseph, known at this stage only as Pharaoh's viceroy in Egypt, while in 1 Kgs 10:25 it takes its place among the gifts sent by 'all the earth' to Solomon. It is also associated with 'Solomon' in the Canticle of Canticles, where we find the majority of references to it, as well as with the king of Ps 45:8.⁹ Such associations could well have played their part in Matthew's thinking.¹⁰

But this is not the only context in which we find myrrh in the Old Testament. In Exod 30:22-31, it is the first component in the receipt for the 'holy anointing oil' to be used in the consecration of the sanctuary, its vessels and its priests.¹¹ Barbiero reckons that this sacral significance is part of the picture in some of the references in Canticles, especially those where myrrh is linked with the equally holy frankincense.¹² A similar nuance is evident in Sir 24:15 where of Wisdom it is said that she 'gave forth the aroma of spices, and like choice myrrh (σμύρνα) I spread a pleasant odor, like galbanum, onycha, and stacte (στακτὴ), and like the fragrance of frankincense (λιβάνου) in the tabernacle'. There is also very evident, however, a third significance, which comes out most clearly in Canticles, the text which most often refers to myrrh, but which can also be found elsewhere, and that is the erotic significance. In Canticles, it is a frequent metaphor in a variety of erotic contexts. In Ct 1:13 and 5:13, it symbolises or refers to the male lover; in 3:6-7, 4:6, 4:13 and 5:5, it refers to the body of the woman or her emotions; while, in 5:1, gathering myrrh is one of several metaphors for sexual union.

The interesting thing is that in many of these cases, as well as being erotic, the image often shares some of the other nuances we have seen to attach to myrrh. Thus, the description of 'Solomon's' litter, like a column of smoke, in Ct 3:6 is loaded with royal and sacral as well as erotic significance.¹³ We see a similar picture in the relevant texts outside Canticles. They can be simply erotic, such as Prov 7:17 where the loose woman perfumes her bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon, or, again, they can have multiple significance. Thus as well as being erotic, Ps 45:8 enjoys, as we have seen, a regal setting. The same is true of Est 2:12,

⁸ Cf. Rev 18:13. It is this general significance that Luz sees in the magi's gifts: 'the most likely meaning is that the magi bring the child the most costly gifts possible'. Cf. Luz (2007), p. 114.

⁹ Note also its use by King Ahasuerus' women in Esth 2:12.

¹⁰ Moldenke (2002), p. 84, claims, without reference, that 'Persian kings wore it in their regal crowns'.

¹¹ We can surely assume that it is this oil, or something similarly special, that would have been used for anointing kings and prophets. They hardly just rustled up a cruse of bog-standard oil out of the kitchen!

¹² Barbiero (2004), p. 81.

¹³ 4:6 also combines the sacral with the erotic. Cf. Barbiero (2004), p. 170.

while Sir 24:15 combines the sacral with the erotic.¹⁴ What we have, then, are three strong Scriptural ‘meanings’ to attach to myrrh, none of which, it may be noted, has any connection with suffering or death.¹⁵

The Old Testament background is important here because, even more than in the rest of his gospel, Matthew’s Infancy Narrative is pervaded with its language and imagery. The Genealogy (1:1-16) sets the story within the history of salvation from the time of Abraham; Joseph is portrayed as a dreamer after the manner of his patriarchal namesake and he goes down to Egypt; the account is saturated with allusions to both David and Moses;¹⁶ and four out of ten of Matthew’s explicit quotations from the Old Testament are found here. If the magi’s gifts, and the myrrh in particular, are significant,¹⁷ then this significance is surely to be found in Scripture. But which of the scriptural nuances of myrrh is intended here? Is it a gift for a king, a priest, a god even, or, perhaps, a lover?

The royal option is by far the most likely since Matthew’s Infancy Narrative continually emphasises the true royalty of Jesus which is contrasted with the bogus royalty of Herod.¹⁸ The opening verse identifies Jesus as ‘Christ’ and Son of David.¹⁹ His genealogy is right royal: he numbers not only David but fourteen other kings of Israel and Judah among his ancestors, including Solomon, Hezekiah and Josiah.²⁰ He is the one who will save his people from their sins.²¹ His birth is foretold by what was probably taken to be a royal prophecy.²² He is born in David’s city of Bethlehem (2:1), and the link between this and ruling is made

¹⁴ In the Song of Wisdom in Sir 24:3-22, Wisdom is portrayed as a desirable woman.

¹⁵ Another possible significance of myrrh that has been suggested, in view of its use as a medicine, is to indicate Jesus the Healer. Cf. Ephraim, *Comment. Diat.* 2.25 and Marco Polo, *Travels* (1972), pp. 58-9. However, apart from the fact that such use is not represented in the Old Testament, it is hard to see why this one aspect of Jesus’ activity should be singled out for emphasis here.

¹⁶ Brown (1999), p. 113, notes the parallels with biblical traditions about Moses, pp. 114-6, the parallels with the non-biblical traditions. Cf. also Davies (1966), pp. 78-83; Davies and Allison (1988), pp. 192-3; and Goulder (1974), pp. 236-9.

¹⁷ Hemer (1986), p. 64, argues that this must be the case because myrrh is not connected with the fulfilment of the prophecy of Is 60:6. It must, therefore have been included for its significance. This is possible though its frequent link with frankincense in other biblical texts, especially Canticles, should not be discounted.

¹⁸ Cf. Davies and Allison (1988), p. 193: ‘One of the central issues of 1.18-2.23 is kingship. Who is the rightful heir to the throne of Israel?’; p. 227: ‘our evangelist is interested in contrasting [Herod’s] rule and kingdom with the rule and kingdom of Jesus the Davidic Messiah’.

¹⁹ ‘Christ’ is repeated in 1:16, 18 and 2:4.

²⁰ Contrast Luke’s genealogy in Lk 3:23-38 which gives David as the only royal ancestor.

²¹ In the context and in the absence of other indications such a Saviour would be a king in the Graeco-Roman world like Augustus.

²² If Is 7:14 was not read as a royal prophecy, then it would have been read as foretelling the birth of the son of a prophet.

clear in the combined prophecy from Mic 5:2/2 Sam 5:2 (2:6) which includes the words ‘ruler’ and ‘govern’.²³

Furthermore, if the magi’s star is meant to allude to Num 24:17, that too is a ruler prophecy – and one uttered by a foreign seer!²⁴ The magi, the kind of people who were thought to announce the birth of kings in the Hellenistic world,²⁵ specifically ask for the one who is to be born ‘king of the Jews’ (2:2). Herod, whose own kingship is emphasised,²⁶ promises to come and offer *proskunesis* (2:8), something the magi themselves do on entering the house (2:11). While it is true that in Judaism, there was a tendency to think prostration proper only in the worship of God,²⁷ the custom of *proskunesis* before kings and potentates was common in the ancient Near East²⁸; this is surely what is intended here. Furthermore, as well as these direct references to kingship, there are others less direct. We have mentioned the Moses/Egypt typology.²⁹ Far from presenting an alternative picture to that of the royal Davidic Messiah, the Moses allusions actually confirm it, for at this time there was a widespread tradition that Moses too was a king.³⁰ It is hard to avoid the conclusion, therefore, that, in Matthew’s eyes, the magi’s gifts were suitable for the birth of the king of the Jews, with *all three* symbolising kingship.

Davies and Allison seem to be arguing along these lines when they observe that ‘the three gifts are the symbols of loyalty and submission’³¹ However, they go further and refine the picture into one of the firstfruits of the eschatological pilgrimage and their submission to the one true God’.³² This would indeed chime in with current eschatological expectation. Tobit prophesied that ‘many nations will come from afar to the name of the Lord God, *bearing gifts in their hands, gifts for the King*

²³ The word ποιμαίνει translated ‘govern’ or ‘rule’ literally means ‘shepherd’, and can be seen as a link between the David and Moses typologies. Cf. Davies and Allison (1988), p. 243, who cite Is 63:11.

The words in 1 Samuel were originally addressed to David while Mic 5:2 receives a messianic interpretation in the Targums. Cf. Cathcart & Gordon (1989), p. 122.

²⁴ The fact that the star was seen at its rising - ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ (2:9) - may be a further messianic, and so royal, indication since ἀνατολῇ was taken from Num 24:17 and used as a translation for מָלֵךְ in the messianic texts Jer 23:5, Zech 3:8, 6:12.

²⁵ Davies and Allison (1988), p. 230.

²⁶ He is referred to twice as ‘king’, in 2:1 and 2:3. The various Targums on Num 24:17 insert ‘king’ or ‘anointed one’. Cf. Davies and Allison (1988), pp. 236, 234.

²⁷ Davies and Allison (1988), p. 248.

²⁸ Cf. Davies and Allison (1988), p. 236; Luz (2007), p. 114. In any case, the fact that Herod too declared himself willing to ‘worship’ the new-born king suggests that deity is not in question here.

²⁹ For a full review, cf. Allison (1993), pp 140-65. The most transparent allusion is that between Mt 2:19-21 (Jesus’ return from Egypt) and Ex 4:19-20 (Moses’ return to Egypt). Cf. Brown (1999), pp. 113-116.

³⁰ Cf. Meeks (1967).

³¹ Davies and Allison (1988), p. 248.

³² Davies and Allison (1988), p. 249.

of heaven' (13:11) while in *Sibylline Oracles III*, from the mid-second century BC, it is proclaimed that 'from every land they will bring *incense and gifts to the house of the great God*. There will be no other house among men...' (*Sib. Or. III*, 772-4). In this, they were simply developing the thought of Trito-Isaiah:

A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense (φέροντες χρυσίου καὶ λίβανον οἴσουσιν), and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Such a perspective cannot be far from Matthew's mind.³³ Despite his Jewishness and his frequent particularism, he is more than conscious of the universal implications of the gospel, concluding his own version with the great commission to all the nations (Mt 28:19). In this sense, the end would certainly be being foreshadowed in the beginning. But there are problems with this interpretation. None of the above texts envisages the presentation of gifts to a human being, let alone to the Messiah. In each case they are being brought to *Jerusalem* as sacral gifts *for the Lord*.³⁴ Yet it is hard to believe that Matthew is here identifying the infant Jesus with God *tout court*. He has indeed noted the interpretation of the name Emmanuel as 'God with us' (Mt 1:23), but he has not given any indication of what this might mean. At this stage it could signify no more than it did in the original prophecy of Isaiah. Otherwise Matthew has consistently presented Jesus as king so there is something of a mismatch here, especially if the meaning of all three gifts is seen as identical.³⁵ The only text that lends support to the idea of the eschatological pilgrimage and yet at the same time retains the focus on the king-Messiah is Ps 72:10-11, 15:

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts (δώρα)! May all kings fall down (προσκυνήσουσιν) before him, all nations serve him!...Long may he live, may gold (χρυσίου) of Sheba be given to him! May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all the day!

³³ Especially since, as Brown notes, he would surely have been aware of the practice of potentates from the East coming to Jerusalem and Rome with gifts for Herod and Nero. Cf. Brown (1999), p. 174.

³⁴ Cf Ps 68:30.

³⁵ We should note that Luz has cast doubt that there is an allusion here to Is 60:6 and the eschatological pilgrimage because the reminiscence is not unambiguous and no reference is made to the context of Is 60:6. Cf. Luz (2007), p. 114. However, as we have seen, the tradition is much broader than this one text, and the context of Is 60:6 may well be precisely what is being referred to in the star bringing the magi to Jerusalem. Cf. Is 60:1 – 'Arise, shine [*viz.* Jerusalem], for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you'.

It is worth noting that only gold is mentioned here, but the reference to gifts and *proskunesis* helps to establish the intertextual link with Mt 2:11. Tradition ascribed this psalm to Solomon³⁶ and it was probably regarded as messianic in the first century.³⁷ It would, therefore, have allowed Matthew to link the tradition of the eschatological pilgrimage of the Gentiles to the Lord with that of the tribute of the nations to the Messiah. While confirming the regal nature of the three gifts, this opens up the possibility that they have more than one level of significance.

Psalm 72 also opens up the possibility of a Solomon-Jesus typology here according to Davies and Allison.³⁸ This would be a more particular version of the interpretation that sees the gifts as royal. However, while it is true that Ps 72 has a Solomonic connection in the tradition, it is not quite clear what that is. Moreover, the frankincense and myrrh which appear in Canticles ‘in connection with Solomon’³⁹ are hardly relevant here since they are not gifts. Had Matthew intended a parallel with Solomon, it is hard to see why his visitors come from ‘the East’ (Mt 2:1), since although Solomon’s wisdom was wiser than the wisdom of all the people of the east, none of his visitors is said to have come from there. If a parallel were really being sought, the magi would surely have come from Sheba⁴⁰ or even from ‘the whole earth’.⁴¹

The other reasons given by Davies and Allison for their suggestion are equally unconvincing.⁴² Associations of gold and incense or the eschatological pilgrimage with the Temple are only tenuously connected with Solomon in so far as he was the builder of the pre-Exilic sanctuary. (The references to Nehemiah concern the post-Exilic sanctuary which was not connected with Solomon). Certainly, Solomon was presented with gold and myrrh – but not frankincense – by visitors from foreign lands, including Arabia, but there are no clear allusions to this in Matthew’s narrative. It is hard to work back from the three male magi to the Queen of Sheba whose wisdom seems to have been of a different order. In any case, she, like his other visitors, wanted to hear *his* wisdom. Finally, Davies and Allison’s use of evidence from the *Testaments of the*

³⁶ MT, לְשֹׁלֹמֹן; LXX, εἰς Σαλωμων.

³⁷ The Targum certainly regards it as such. Cf v. 1: ‘O God, give the *halakoth* of your justice to the anointed king’ (Stec [2004], p. 139). We should note, however, that Justin believed that the Jews referred this psalm to Solomon. Cf *Trypho* 34; 64.

³⁸ Davies and Allison (1988), p. 250.

³⁹ Davies and Allison (1988), p. 250.

⁴⁰ 1 Kgs 10:1. Interestingly, in his reference to the Queen of Sheba in 12:42, Matthew describes her as the ‘Queen of the *South*’ who came ‘from the ends of the earth’.

⁴¹ 1 Kgs 10:24.

⁴² Davies and Allison (1998), pp. 250-1

Twelve Patriarchs is as problematic as that from late texts like the *Testament of Solomon* and, still more, ‘late Jewish tradition’ are inadmissible. In any case, it is doubtful whether Matthew would employ Solomonic typology here. Such typology is not common in Christian exegesis because the figure of Solomon in the Old Testament is such an ambiguous one.⁴³ Perhaps we should note that, although in Jesus Matthew sees ‘something greater than Solomon’, he records Jesus’ as saying that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of the lilies of the field (Mt 6:29)!

Given, then, that the most likely interpretation of the three gifts is simply the symbolising of Jesus’ kingship but that there may be other levels of significance at work, what can we add? In view of the sacral significance of both incense and myrrh,⁴⁴ it is possible to see either or both of them as symbolising priesthood⁴⁵ or even divinity. Interestingly, Barker sees the gold too as sacral because the Temple vessels were made of gold.⁴⁶ (She could have added that the façade of Herod’s Temple was also decorated with gold.)⁴⁷ She is thus able to subsume all the gifts under the category of Temple/High Priest/God. In principle, this is not impossible. However, holiness is not the most obvious significance of gold, and yet gold is the first gift.

Moreover, as we have seen, Matthew is intent on emphasising Jesus’ kingship, not his priesthood. In any case, Barker’s argument is unfortunately marred and obscured by the association of assorted texts from a variety of dates and backgrounds, the lack of proper referencing and an opacity of style, not to mention wild speculation and numerous errors of fact. Disconcerting too is the unusual mixture of extreme historicism and unrestrained symbolism. To return to myrrh, however, in view of its use in anointing, it could even be seen as prophetic,⁴⁸ thus allowing the neat distinction among the gifts as representing king (gold),

⁴³ Unlike David, Solomon did not repent of his sexual peccadilloes and, worse, they led him into the unspeakable sin of idolatry.

⁴⁴ For myrrh, cf *supra* CR; for frankincense, Lev 2:1 (on sacrifices) and 24:7 (on the Bread of the Presence) are typical. Van Beek (1960), p. 82, notes the large number of small domestic incense burners discovered in Palestine. Cf. Jer 17:26 for incense as a sacral gift in an eschatological context. There is a further refinement in that as well as being available in liquid form, myrrh could be found as powder and in that form used as incense! Its sacral credentials cannot be faulted. Cf. Michaelis *TDNT* vol. 7, p. 458; Van Beek (1960), p. 83. Interestingly, like myrrh, frankincense could also be used in connection with burials. Cf. Moldenke (1952), p. 58. It is surely coincidence that its leaves are star-shaped! Cf. *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴⁵ Which as in the case of the Moses traditions could easily be part of kingship.

⁴⁶ Barker (2008), p. 118.

⁴⁷ Cf., for example, Jos, *BJ*, 5.205.

⁴⁸ Cf 1 Kgs 19:16, Ps 105:15 and Is 61:1. The last case is not certain, however. Grelot has argued persuasively that it refers to priestly anointing. Cf Grelot (1990). Some Qumran texts refer to prophets as anointed: CD 2.12; 1QM 11.17.

priest (frankincense) and prophet (myrrh). It is unlikely that this is the case here, though, as Matthew does not seem to emphasise Jesus' function as priest or prophet either here or elsewhere in his gospel. One small detail is, however, worth mentioning. The 'house' into which the magi entered (2:11) has often aroused interest. Matthew has not mentioned it before, and it hardly harmonises with Luke's account of no room at the inn not to mention the tradition of Jesus' birth in a cave.⁴⁹

However, if we go back to the text from the *Sibylline Oracles* that mentions the pilgrimage of the Gentiles, we see that they bring their gifts 'to the house of the great God', that is the temple in Jerusalem. It was often referred to as a 'house' because it was the dwelling place of God. Matthew himself refers to it as such in 21:13. Could he be alluding to it here, thereby implying that in entering the house where the infant Jesus was, they were entering the house of God with their gifts? Strangely, despite her interest in Temple theology, Barker (2008) does not notice this. Instead she looks to a variety of texts, mostly later and Christian, to develop a theory that the magi were bringing the lost treasures of Eden and the First Temple to the new Adam and High Priest. The only text that could possibly be relevant here is the *Apocalypse of Moses* which tells of Adam's removal of various spices from Eden on his expulsion (*Apoc Mos* 29.4-6). However, neither frankincense nor myrrh is specified, and gold is not in question.

There is, though, yet another possibility. Given that by far the largest number of uses of myrrh in the Old Testament are in an erotic context, is it not possible that in this case it symbolises Jesus as Bridegroom – a royal Bridegroom certainly, a divine Bridegroom possibly, but a Bridegroom nonetheless? This is not as outlandish as it sounds, for Matthew, like John, makes more of the tradition of Jesus as the Bridegroom than the other two evangelists.⁵⁰ As well as including the Bridegroom pericope which is common to the synoptic gospels, he also recounts the Parable of the Wedding Feast,⁵¹ with the notable addition of the episode of the Wedding Garment, and the Parable of the Ten Virgins in both of which Jesus is cast unmistakably as the Bridegroom. Added to this there are a number of minor allusions which keep the theme running throughout the gospel after its first explicit appearance in chapter 9. Thus in 12:39 and 16:4, Jesus describes his unbelieving coreligionists as 'an adulterous generation'. In 19:1-12, following Jesus' declaration on the

⁴⁹ Cf. Hagner (1993), p. 30.

⁵⁰ Ford (1967), unaccountably forgetting the Fourth Gospel, states that 'All three evangelists refer to Christ as Bridegroom, but it is St. Matthew who appears to bring this theme to a climax'.

⁵¹ In Lk (14:16-24), this is simply the Great Banquet with no nuptial nuances.

sanctity of marriage based on the creation/one flesh argument that is used in the key nuptial passage in Ephesians,⁵² he tells the disciples that ‘there are some who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’. This may mean that not only are they giving anticipatory witness to the eschatological age in which ‘they neither marry nor are given in marriage ...but are like angels (22:30)’, but that this witness consists in individual spiritual ‘marriage’ to Christ the Bridegroom. Similarly, Jesus’ remarks about life ‘in the resurrection’, the absence of ‘ordinary’ marriage may be because of the consummation of the marriage between Christ and the Church (22:30). The substitution of ‘Tell ye the daughter of Zion’ in the quotation from Zechariah 9:9 at 21:5 (cp Jn 12:15) is taken, significantly, from Isa 62:11, a highly nuptial context, where it is immediately followed (v 12) by the promise (to Jerusalem) that ‘you shall be sought out, a city not forsaken’. In such a context, the allusion of the myrrh to Jesus as future Spouse of the Church is not to be excluded, though like the other priestly, prophetic, even divine possibilities, it must surely be subsumed under the category of king, something which would fit well with the royal lover of Canticles and the royal and divine lover of Ps 45.⁵³

Poor Prudentius, then, must return to his pen and replace the funerary interpretation. We can only suggest the new choices open to him. The most obvious and safest would be:

Solemn things of mystic meaning
 Incense doth a *king* disclose,
 Gold a royal child proclaimeth,
 Myrrh a future *realm* foreshows.

Yet he might be tempted to go for the classical threefold division of Christ’s functions:

Solemn things of mystic meaning:
 Incense doth a *priest* disclose,
 Gold a royal child proclaimeth,
 Myrrh a future *seer* foreshows.

And, if he were really bold, he might take the erotic option:

⁵² Eph 5:21-32.

⁵³ We must, therefore, disagree with Hagner (1993), p. 30, when he says that ‘the “decoding” of the three gifts – that gold reflects Christ’s kingship, frankincense his deity, and myrrh his suffering – is irrelevant to Matthew’s intentions’. He is correct only as regards his parenthesis.

Solemn things of mystic meaning:
Incense doth a God disclose,
Gold a royal child proclaimeth,
Myrrh a future *Spouse* foreshows.

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