

Isaiah's prophecy is called Wonderful Counsellor before he is called Prince of Peace?

Our Lady in Scripture—III: The Child and his Mother (Matthew I and 2)

BENET WEATHERHEAD, O.P.

As it stands now, the infancy narrative of the first gospel is the work of the Greek writer who perhaps translated and certainly expanded the original Aramaic gospel of the apostle Matthew. But equally certainly he did not invent the episodes which he has used to construct it; they came to him, perhaps already somewhat moulded or schematized, from the traditions of the earliest communities. His narrative falls into two parts, coincident with our two chapters; the first traces and proves the Davidic descent of Jesus, the true king of Israel; the second narrates his danger from the actual usurping king, Herod. Within the narrative in its final form, there are secondary themes; in the first part, the defence of the purity of Jesus' mother, in the second, the homage paid to him by the Gentile world and its co-operation in preserving him. The whole narrative is commanded by and written round the fulfilment of prophecy, an important element in the defence and theology of the primitive Church, and in particular of the first gospel, as it was of Jesus himself. This reference to the scriptures could be made in two ways, either explicitly by quoting the passage that was fulfilled or implicitly by writing the narrative in such a way that it echoed the passage of scripture.¹ In doing this the writer was likely, without depreciating the historical basis of his narrative, to mould the scriptural text or the details of the event or both towards one another in order to emphasize the bond of prophecy and fulfilment or to bring out the

¹See René Laurentin, *Structure et Théologie de Luc I-II*, Paris 1957. pp. 93-96.

divine meaning of the recent events he was describing. One example from elsewhere in the first gospel will illustrate this. In Mt. 21. 2, at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus sends disciples to find an ass and a colt, where Mark and Luke in their accounts have only the colt; this is because Matthew is going in a moment to quote the prophecy of Zech. 9. 9, which mentions both ass and colt, though in fact in the prophecy the double mention is due to the parallelism of Hebrew poetry and only a single animal is really meant. The first gospel has moulded the detail to fit the prophecy even more closely, and so underline its fulfilment and the light it throws on the events of Palm Sunday. For the most part, the infancy narrative of the first gospel uses the first, the explicit, way; the infancy narrative of Luke, the second, the implicit, way.

But the narrative of Matthew, though it appears to be composed, after the genealogy, round five quotations from scripture, is not quite as simple as that. It has been suggested² that the five prophecies fall into two groups, indicating two sources, the one concerned with Joseph, the other with Herod: the three episodes of the Joseph group show clear signs of an underlying schematic framework, realised in each, even to some extent in the form of the words: of the two concerned with Herod, the first is much the longer and shows signs itself of being composed of two traditions,³ the one to do with a star which appeared in Jerusalem and caused perturbation there, the other to do with a visit of Gentile sages led perhaps by astrological observation. Whether or not these were originally two distinct events and traditions, perhaps fused in tradition before being combined with the Joseph group, the narrative of the Magi is different in character from the rest of the sources used and is written in the allusive way more characteristic of Lk. 1-2 than the rest of Mt. 1-2.

We are concerned with these texts as they throw light on the life and significance of our Lady, and this they do on three levels: (a) the deliberate defence of her purity made by the final writer, the Greek

²W. L. Knox, *The Sources of the Synoptic Gospels, II: St Luke and St Matthew*, London 1957, pp. 121-128.

³The episode is twice as long as any other in ch. 2; the disappearance and re-appearance of the star are awkward, the text has been adjusted to allow the prophecy of Micah to be introduced and play its part. On the other hand, if the Magi were led by an astral phenomenon, it could hardly have indicated the exact dwelling-place and enquiries of some kind would have been necessary. The writer of Mt. 1 and 2 certainly presents the phenomenon as miraculous, but may perhaps have allowed Num. 24. 17 to mould the details of his account.

compiler-editor of the narrative as it stands now; (b) the background of her marriage to Joseph as indicated by his source; (c) the further suggestions of her significance implicit in the allusive character of the writing, whether this was due to the final writer or already found by him in his sources, especially in the story of the Magi.

(a) *The genealogy of the child and the virginity of his mother. Mt. 1.*

The primary purpose of the genealogy in Mt. 1. 2-17 is to show that Jesus was descended from David and Abraham and was thus the heir to the messianic kingdom. This descent was justified by his being acknowledged by Joseph, who became his legal father. Although a current of Christian tradition holds that our Lady also was descended from David and that our Lord was therefore descended physically from him, this is either unknown or unimportant to the writer, whereas Joseph's descent is emphasized by the address of the angel, v. 20. The messianic character of the genealogy is further indicated by the manner in which it is set out. It is schematized (apparently at some cost to literal accuracy) into three periods of fourteen generations each, the first from Abraham to David, the second from David to the exile, the third from the exile to Jesus, 'who is called the Christ'. It is impossible to settle with certainty the conflict with the genealogy given by Luke, and various explanations have been put forward for the schematization and the figure fourteen. Fourteen is twice seven, a sacred number throughout the Bible; it is also the sum of the consonants in David's name according to Hebrew reckoning. But more plausible are the suggestions raised by comparison with later rabbinic texts:⁴ here on the one hand the schema of three times fourteen is applied to the history of the Davidic kingship, from Abraham to David, David to its downfall, its downfall to its restoration in the person of the Messiah; and on the other hand the glory of Israel is compared to the waxing and waning of the moon, fourteen days to each half of the cycle, waxing from Abraham to Solomon, waning from Solomon to the Babylonian captivity. The culmination in Solomon should be noted. The reign of David would represent the height of Israel's power, the reign of Solomon her glory. A similar paradigm explains the schematization made by the writer of Mt. 1-2 and gives it an undertone of the symbolism of light which is present elsewhere in the early chapters of this gospel.

In addition, however, to the main purpose and any possible symbolic

⁴References are given by P. P. Levertoff and H. L. Goudge in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. by Charles Gore, London 1928, on this passage in Matthew.

undertone, a second purpose is explicit in that the writer has introduced the names of four women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and 'the wife of Uriah'—into his tautly schematic text. None of these four was certainly of Hebrew descent; Ruth was a Moabite, Tamar and Rahab probably Canaanite, and the wife of Uriah like himself a Hittite; and three of them offended against sexual morality, Tamar disguised herself as, and Rahab was, a harlot, and Bathsheba's adultery with David is emphasized by the phrase 'the wife of Uriah'. The purpose can hardly be other than to remind contemporary Jewish calumniators of Jesus and his mother that the royal line included the sons of four women not even of Jewish ancestry, three of whom were no better than they should be. Even if their calumnies were true they had no right to be so high-minded. But their calumnies were not true; and the writer proceeds to the first of his episodes, vv. 18-25.

This performs the same double function as the genealogy in reverse order, vindicating the virginity of Mary and making possible the completion of the marriage ceremony and thus the adoption of her child into the royal line. It is Joseph who names the child, making him his son in the eyes of contemporary Judaism and, for the writer, clinching the genealogy. In its present form, the apologetic note, the witness of Joseph to Mary's virginity, appears to be dominant, but within this, and perhaps more evident in the story in an original form, is a short elementary annunciation to Joseph, sparse compared with Luke's annunciations to Zechariah and Mary, but equally definite as to the miraculous conception of the child. The source from which the writer of Mt. 1-2 drew his Joseph story and the circle in which Luke's infancy narrative received its form were both convinced that the conception of Jesus was brought about by the power of God; but whereas the angel of Luke promises the kingdom of David to the child for ever, the angel of Mt. 1 foretells that the child will deliver his people from their sins, a prophecy of the passion.

Nevertheless, much that is written out in Luke is alluded to here in the quotation from Isaiah 7. 14: 'behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel'. This prophecy is found in that smaller collection within the book of Isaiah to which modern commentators have given the sub-title 'the Book of Emmanuel' since it contains the three prophecies regarding that mysterious figure. The first is the one from which the present quotation is taken. The second of them (Is. 9. 2 ff.) is quoted later in Mt. 4. 15-16 and must have been present in the writer's mind already. It begins with an association of

light with the birth of the child who is to reign with justice and in peace—'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light'—and proceeds to give the child a fourfold title that sums up and magnifies the qualities of David and Solomon, for all their faults the two most glorious of the child's ancestors — 'Wonderful - counsellor: Mighty-hero: Everlasting-father: Prince-of-peace'. The miraculous child of Isaiah's prophecies is endowed with heroic royal attributes, and that child is now to be born of Mary.

(b) *Joseph and Mary*—Mt. 1. 18-25.

We are not told in the first gospel where Joseph and Mary lived at the time of their betrothal; from it, taken by itself, it would appear that they lived in or near Bethlehem and only went to the obscure Nazareth to be safe from Herod's successor, Archelaus. But this concentration on Bethlehem is due to the writer's interest in the royal descent, in linking David's heir to David's city and substantiating this with the quotation from Micah which the scribes are made to produce for Herod, Mt. 2. 6. He does not contradict the details given by Luke. What is more important is that the situation and the intentions of Joseph are entirely credible and in accordance with Jewish law and custom. Betrothal was virtually marriage and only needed to be completed by the bridegroom's claiming his bride and taking her from her parents' home to his own. To be found to be with child during the interim immediately suggested the suspicion of adultery. Joseph, perhaps less conscious of his own honour than of the purity of the royal line, hesitated to accept her finally as his wife. It appears from the words of the angel that he needed to be re-assured, that, in fact, Mary had either not told him or not convinced him of the truth. It seems most likely that she, conscious of the divine mystery into which she was caught, maintained her reserve with her husband to be and trusted in the mercy of God to make her future with him possible. Joseph was a just man, but in what did his justice consist? It must be understood in the light of the rest of the gospel, not merely the meticulous observance of every precept of law and tradition, but an observance from the heart of the deeper spirit of that law, as found, for example, in Deut. 6. 4-9. Nevertheless, faced by a mystery to which he had not as yet the key, he was prepared to proceed with the more merciful of the two ways of dealing with an unfaithful wife or bride: he could have brought her before the village court, on whose condemnation she would probably have suffered grave penalties; instead he was planning to give her a private divorce, leaving her shamed but safe in her parents' home. How

far our Lady was aware of his intentions we do not know. Once the mystery was revealed to him and his faith engaged in it, he completed the marriage ceremony and became the guardian of the child and the child's mother in the dangerous situation that arose later.

(c) *Homage and perils. Mt. 2.*

The historical basis of the episodes woven together in the second chapter is not to be questioned: parallels are known for the visit of the Magi; the massacre of the children of Bethlehem is consistent with the known cruelty of Herod; movement of artisans between Palestine and Egypt with its large Jewish community is obviously plausible, and from Old Testament times on, refugees from Palestine had found shelter in Egypt. The main thread of the narrative is the revelation to Herod of his rival and the escape of the child from the consequent danger: in these dangers the child's mother is so closely associated with him—the phrase 'the child and his mother' appears four times in the eleven verses, 13–23—that they appear almost to form a unit. From this aspect the narrative appears to have been composed deliberately to echo the childhood of Moses—danger from tyrant, massacre of children, safety in (the household of a princess of) Egypt—and the similarity is emphasized by the conscious verbal echo of Ex. 4. 19: 'They are dead, all those who sought your life', in Mt. 2. 20: 'They are dead, who sought the child's life'. Moses takes his wife and children back to Egypt, Joseph takes his wife and the child back to Palestine. A further parallel is found in a Jewish legend recorded by Josephus; in this, Pharaoh is warned by an astrologer that an Israelite is soon to be born who will abase Egypt and exalt Israel, upon which Pharaoh orders the drowning of all Israelite boys born at that time. The important thing to note is the influence of the danger from the tyrant on the course of the narrative and on the secondary allusion: if Mt. 2 is written in this allusive way we may expect to find other allusions of a similar nature.

Just as the child's mother is associated with him in his dangers, she has been associated with him in the homage paid by the Gentile sages. But in the story of the Magi several impulses are at work; the revelation of the hidden child motivates the narrative of the rest of the chapter; Herod's cunning enquiries bring to light the prophecy of Micah, an additional proof that Jesus is the messianic son of David; the Gentile sages recognize the true king of the Jews while the Jews do not. Whether or not the original basis of the episode was a story about Herod that introduced the prophecy of Micah and in which the Magi did not figure, there do appear to be allusions to the Old Testament

either written into it by the final author of Mt. 1-2 or perhaps already worked into it in the traditional sources from which he took it. These are principally three:

- (i) The oracle of Balaam—Num. 24. 17.
A star shall come forth out of Jacob,
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.

This oracle is given by a seer from Mesopotamia (Num. 22. 25); it prophesies, under the image of a star, a ruler of Israel who will dominate the small kingdoms round about; one of these kingdoms is Edom. The final author of the gospel may well have understood the star as separate from the ruler who is to wield the sceptre (in the same way that he understood the ass and the colt as separate in the example quoted earlier) and have read into the name Edom the person of the tyrant who was oppressing Israel at the time of Jesus' birth, for Herod was an Edomite through his father Antipater. We have also the association of a phenomenon of light with the coming of a messianic ruler.

- (ii) Homage by Gentiles—Is. 60. 1, 3, 6.
Arise, shine; for your light has come
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you . . .
nations shall come to your light
and kings to the brightness of your rising . . .
they shall bring gold and frankincense
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord . . .

The parallels with the story of the Magi are sufficiently obvious, but there is an effective verbal echo which is lost in the English translation. In the gospel, the Magi come from the East and announce that they have seen the star 'in the East'. But although the same word is used both times, in the second instance it is in the singular and can (and perhaps should be) translated 'in its rising'. In the Greek of the Septuagint the verbal echo extends further and includes the word translated 'come forth' in the oracle of Balaam.

- (iii) Homage of Gentiles to the king of Israel—Ps. 71. 10, 15.
The kings of Tarshish and of the islands
will render tribute to him,
the kings of Sheba and Saba
will bring gifts . . .
he shall be given gold from Sheba.

The psalm recalls the age of Solomon and its grandeur and applies it to the era of the ideal king who will rule with justice and in peace.

Among the features of Solomon's reign which it recalls is the visit of the Queen of Sheba, of whom we read that besides much gold she brought spices, perhaps myrrh as well as frankincense. Myrrh and frankincense are associated as perfumes in one of the poems of the Canticles, in which the litter (perhaps throne) of Solomon is described and in which Solomon and his mother are mentioned, apparently in a scene of enthronement and acclamation.

It is, of course, impossible to say for certain how many of these allusions were deliberately intended by the writer. But the gifts offered by the Magi convey 'the image of a young and brilliant monarch in all the glory of his coronation'⁵ and the contrast with the court of the hated Herod may well have been intended. One last suggestion may be offered. The childhood of Christ has been presented as that of the new Moses. It may also be written with allusion to the enthronement of Solomon, for the queen of the south 'came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here' (Mt. 12. 42). At the time of his coronation Solomon and his mother were both in danger from a usurper (1 Kings 1. 11-12) and after his coronation he associated his mother with himself in such a way that she seems to share in the homage paid to the king, 'The king rose to meet her and bowed down to her; then he sat on his throne, and had a throne brought for the king's mother: and she sat on his right'. It could possibly be that the imagery of enthronement and homage in the story of the Magi alludes to the enthronement of Solomon, the homage paid to him and his mother's share in it. 'And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him'.

⁵F. W. Green, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, Oxford 1936, p. 111.