CHAPTER SIX


Narrative Linkage and the pre-Matthean Basis

There has been more than one attempt to analyse the confluence of traditions found in the episode of the Magi (Mt. 2,1–12). This section of Mt. has been divided into distinct thematic strands by M. Hengel and H. Merkel,1 and by scholars such as E. Lohmeyer, C.T. Davis and others.2 As a result the theological significance of the Magi-episode has been rather thoroughly examined. And a conclusion has been reached with surprising (almost unprecedented!) unanimity:—namely, that the arrival of these mysterious visitors to “do reverence” indicates for the evangelist a Gentile parallel to the fulfilment of prophecies from the biblical world. In his theological framework they form almost the perfect exemplification of the central message, a saviour born for all mankind: and the further themes and tensions which we shall find in our own examination will continue to reflect the associated challenge of that message to Jewish and Jewish-esoteric thought.

The arrival of the Magi “following a star” immediately raises the problem of the basis of their religious hope in its natural/cosmic dimension; their connection with Zoroastrianism, as indicated by their name, raises that of the background of ideas and the possible influence of the Saoṣyant-prophecy of Zarathustra prior to the evangelist’s theological synthesis; and there is the related possibility that the virgin-birth expectation may have played a part in attracting their story to the infancy narratives. The discovery of the birth-legends in CG V/5 (specifically

2 For these and for the development of Lohmeyer’s views by A. Paul, see further Brown, Birth of the Messiah pp. 111 and n. 32; 178ff.; 191–192.
Kingdom helps clarify and resolve several of the issues involved, and particularly the matter of a virgin-birth.

First of all, however, we have already noticed that the prototype of the “main” Matthaean infancy-narrative, the Farîdûn-legend, contained a figure, Kāva the Blacksmith: he first goes to petition the Dragon-king, is interrogated by Azidahāk, but does not lead him to the hero-child—rather he takes the child’s side and later helps in his triumphant return, carrying a banner with religious and royal associations and hailing him as the Ruler of the world in place of the evil usurper (above, pp. 122–123). We may therefore freely recognize the truth of Davis’ stress on the close narrative link between the Magi-story and Mt.’s main storyline. It is too simple, from the standpoint of our source-analysis too, to think of a mere intrusive addition by the evangelist. At the same time, we can hardly overlook the expansion of the narrative by extensive material that stems from a different source or, better, from a partly independent “section” of an already composite Vorlage. We can equally agree on the other hand with R.E. Brown on the need (contra the schematisation by Hengel and Merkel) to balance the weight of each episode, subordinating some of the material to the fundamental narration rather than treating it all on a level. The theme of the Magi, in short, needs to be fitted into the established framework, the outline already built up.

Brown at any rate substantially concedes that it must be right to suppose a distinctive background to the Magi-material, which does break the line of the “main” Matthaean narration. It is somewhat ironic, however, that he distances his reading here from further possible Moses-associations, insisting now on the difference between beneficent and hostile Magi in the plots, when he has just conspicuously argued in the just the opposite way about Pharaoh. As for the actual source to be posited, J.E. Bruns has pointed perceptively to the story of the Queen of the South in I Kgs. 10 as a close model for the Magi’s visit. The Queen of Sheba comes “from the ends of the earth” (Mt. 12,42) to hear the wisdom of Solomon; the Magi’s wisdom finds its goal in bringing them to the newborn King of the Jews. The gifts

3 Whether or not one believes in the once fashionable idea of an ancient Iranian Männerbund (popularised by S. Wikander), the rallying to the “Kaviani” banner does seem to indicate some affirmation of religious and national loyalty.

4 Brown op. cit. p. 114 n. 43.