

The Magi Story through the Eyes of Pasolini: a Bakhtinian Reading

Christopher Fuller

To be published in *The Nativity for the 21st Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Forthcoming)

Few figures outside of Jesus have attracted as much attention in the Gospels as the Magi who visit first King Herod and then Jesus in Matt 2:1-12. They have inspired popular devotion through the visual arts and song and they have been exploited to fortify political power.¹ Within contemporary popular culture they are three wise kings from the exotic east who bring gifts to the baby Jesus at the manger in Bethlehem. The power of their popular portrayal obscures several facts from Matthew's text; their number is not specified, they are not identified as kings, they do not visit Jesus at the manger (the shepherds do in Luke 2:8-20), and there is dispute about their identification as "wise men." Given their status in Christian tradition, it is no surprise that the Magi frequently appear in Jesus films. This essay will examine how Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 film, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (henceforth referred to as *The Gospel*), provides a carnivalesque reading of the Magi in the First Gospel.

I. The Magi in the Gospel of Matthew

The word "Magi" is a plural form of the Latin *magus*, derived from the Greek term *magos* (plural *magoi*). Magi are not exclusive to the First Gospel, appearing in other literature from the Old Testament (Dan 2:1-13) and the New Testament (Acts 13:6-12). The *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defines a *magos* as a "wise man

¹ See Richard C. Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

and priest, who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts.”² Since Matthew explains that the Magi arrived from the East, they have commonly been identified as Persian or Median priests or astrologers. Others have speculated that their origins are in Arabia, Babylon, the Syrian desert, or Asia Minor.³

Because there is no reference outside of the Gospel of Matthew to these Magi or their visit to Jesus, some question the historicity of the story. Raymond Brown argues that an understanding of the historical context within which Matthew wrote his gospel provides evidence of verisimilitude but not history.⁴ This context includes messianic expectation that a descendant of David would arise to rule Israel, general interest in astronomy and the relationship between celestial occurrences and human events, documented astral events during the period, the reputation of Magi in general among Jews and Gentiles as possessors of special powers, and news of Eastern rulers bearing gifts as tribute for rulers in Rome and Jerusalem.

Brown and others argue that that likely background for Matthew’s narrative is the story of Balaam in Numbers 22—24.⁵ In this tale the Moabite King Balak summons the diviner Balaam to place a curse on Israel in order to impede its advance through the plains of Moab. Balaam comes “from the east” (the same phrase in Matt 2:1 describes the origin of the Magi) with two servants (Num 22:22). Rather than curse Israel, he

² W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (ed. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich; 3d ed. rev. F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 608.

³ For the range of choices, see Ben Witherington III, “Birth of Jesus,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 72; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (SacPag 1; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 42; Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (ABRL; rev. ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 168-70.

⁴ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 189-90.

⁵ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 193-96; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew* (WBC 33; Dallas: Word Books, 1993) 48-49; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (trans. David E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 37; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 27.

frustrates Balak's plans by assuring him of Israel's future greatness (Numbers 23—24). The Greek translation of Num 24:17 in the Septuagint describes Balaam as speaking an oracle, proclaiming that a "star will rise from Jacob, and a man will stand forth from Israel." During the Second Temple period, this verse had been applied to the Messiah.⁶ Finally, when Balaam completes his oracles he returns to his home. Thus, Brown argues that this story provides the narrative impetus for Matthew's story of the Magi. An evil king seeks to use a foreign seer to destroy his enemy only to have the seer honor the greatness of that enemy. This same seer proclaims that, like the rising of a star, a descendant of Jacob will come forth to rule Israel. After completing his oracles, the seer returns home.⁷ Brown's argument is strengthened by Philo's description of Balaam as a *magos*.⁸

It has long been noted that the non-Jewish Magi foreshadow Jesus' command in Matt 28:19 to "make disciples of all nations" and, as such, prefigure the role of Gentiles in the early Christian community. Brown argues that the story derives its Gentile emphasis from implicit allusions to Isaiah and the Psalter.⁹ Isaiah prophesies that "the wealth of the nations shall come to you [Jerusalem]. 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, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD" (Isa 60:5-6). The psalmist extols, "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations

⁶ The *Damascus Document* (CD 7:18-20) applies it to the kingly and priestly messiah of the Dead Sea Scrolls community; so John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 80-82.

⁷ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 194-96.

⁸ Philo *Life of Moses* §276.

⁹ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 188. See also Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (trans. Wilhem C. Linss; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 139; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 105; Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (The Bible & Liberation Series; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 81. Biblical translations are generally quoted from the NRSV.

give him service” (Ps 72:10-11). Brown concludes that the blending of the Balaam story with these scriptural allusions defines Jesus as the “son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1) in whom all the nations of the world will be blessed (Gen 18:18) just as Matt 1:18-25 explains how Jesus is the “son of David” (Matt 1:1).

Brown surmises that it is later Christian tradition that promotes the Magi to kings through reflection on Ps 72:10-11 as a scriptural background for their story. Though early visual representations provide anywhere from two to twelve Magi, the overwhelming tradition of three derives from the number of gifts that they bring to Jesus. Subsequent Christian tradition will also provide names for the three Magi.¹⁰

Neither Kings nor Wise Men

That the Magi were not kings is acknowledged by scholarly consensus. What has also attained popularity is the translation of *magoi* as “wise men” because as non-Jews they were able to recognize the coming of Israel’s redeemer when the nation’s own leaders could not do the same.¹¹ However, through a careful narrative-critical analysis Mark Alan Powell challenges this argument.¹²

Powell addresses the Magi by discerning what the text expects the reader to know about them through intertextual knowledge. This reader to whom the text addresses itself is often called the implied reader. As Powell acknowledges, the implied reader would be expected to understand Matthew’s direct citations of and allusions to the Old Testament. However, just because a reader is able to discern the allusions to Isa 60:5-6 and Ps 72:10-

¹⁰ The names differ. The best known names in the Western Christian tradition are Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar.

¹¹ The KJV, NKJV, NJB, RSV, NRSV, translate *magoi* as “wise men.”

¹² Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

11 and understand that the Magi come to Jesus in a manner like kings does not make them literally kings. Powell argues that the intertextual relationship between the Magi and the Old Testament texts provokes an association between Magi and kings but not in the way that contemporary Christians have come to understand.

After reviewing Greco-Roman and Jewish midrashic literature as well as the reference to Magi in the Greek translation of Dan 2:2, 10, Powell concludes that Magi in the ancient world are portrayed as lowly servants to kings and subject to these kings' political machinations. They are figures without power who heed the whims of the powerful. Furthermore, they are portrayed as Daniel's enemies and would have, therefore, been perceived in a negative light by the implied reader.¹³ Powell then discerns the negative portrayal of royalty and power within the Gospel of Matthew. According to Powell, "In Matthew's narrative, exponents of worldly power, be they political or religious, are invariably aligned with Satan, while the powerless are presented as followers with whom Jesus' disciples must identify."¹⁴

Powell concludes that the behavior of the Magi when they meet Jesus falls within the characterization of servants in the First Gospel rather than kings. Therefore, Matthew's narrator uses the allusions to Ps 72:10-11 and Isa 60:5-6 to create a contrast between the behavior of kings and the behavior of the Magi. The implied reader's expectations are overturned by having Jesus worshipped by servants rather than kings.¹⁵

Powell then addresses the more common understanding of the Magi as wise persons with similar results. He first notes that while it is assumed that the Magi employed their special understanding of astrology to find Jesus, the narrative nowhere states this. In fact, it has them ask Herod where the king of the Jews was to be born.

¹³ Keener, *Matthew*, 99.

¹⁴ Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star*, 144.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 146-47.

Thus, they used what would have been common knowledge at the time that unusual astral events signaled the birth of a great person.¹⁶ Again, Powell surveys Greco-Roman and Jewish literature to conclude that the implied reader would probably regard any special learning or powers of the Magi as ridiculous.¹⁷ Further, the Magi's question to Herod conveys their misunderstanding of Jesus since they attribute to him a political title ("King of the Jews," Matt 2:2) used by others in the narrative who do not understand Jesus or his mission (Matt 27:11, 29, 37). Finally, Powell argues that the role of the star in the narrative is so overtly presented that virtually anyone could follow it. The Magi do not know, as does Herod, the messianic significance of the star. They do not know, as do the Jewish leaders, that the king of the Jews is to be born in Bethlehem. They are not aware, as is the reader, of Herod's malignant intentions. Therefore, the Magi are "the most ignorant characters in the story."¹⁸ Interestingly, the Monty Python movie picks up on this quality of the Magi by having them visit the wrong manger at the beginning of *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979).

From the preceding analyses Powell concludes that Matthew overturns the implied reader's expectations by presenting the Magi not as "representatives of the best of pagan lore and religious perception"¹⁹ who seek Israel's Messiah based on their "secret lore"²⁰ but as pagan fools who know nothing and are ignorant before Israel's God. Yet, to them God reveals the truth about Jesus. This agrees with the remainder of Matthew's narrative which proposes Galilean fishermen as judges of the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28) and a kingdom that requires its inhabitants to be like children (18:13; 19:14).

¹⁶ See R. A. Rosenberg, "The Star of the Magi Reconsidered," *Biblica* 61 (1972) 105-9.

¹⁷ See also Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 74-75.

¹⁸ Powell, *Chasing*, 155.

¹⁹ David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 25.

²⁰ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew I-VII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 230.

The strength of Powell's argument lies not only in his reference to intertextual opinions about Magi and their practices but also his insightful intratextual analysis that demonstrates the manner with which Matthew's narrator fashions a conflict between the high and powerful who should be wise and the low and ignorant who, in fact, have access to the kingdom. This social and theological inversion demonstrates Jesus' admonition that "the first will be last and the last will be first" (19:30; 20:16).

II. The Magi in *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*

When examining Pasolini's film of *The Gospel*, it is important to address the common misconception that the movie is a faithful visual retelling of the First Gospel. For example, when it awarded the film its highest honor, the *Office Catholique Internationale du Cinéma* (OCIC) declared, "The author—without renouncing his own ideology—has faithfully translated, with a simplicity and a human density sometimes moving, the social message of the Gospel—in particular the love of the poor and oppressed—sufficiently respecting the divine dimension of Christ."²¹ This perception of fidelity was propagated by Pasolini as he worked on the film. In a letter he stated that his idea was to "follow the Gospel of Matthew point by point" and that he would "faithfully translate it in images without an omission or addition to the story."²² However, five years after the film, Pasolini suggested that his intentions were other than fidelity:

²¹ Quoted in Barth David Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem* (New York: Vintage, 1995) 453.

²² Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo/Edipo Re/Medea* (Turin: Garzanti, 1991) 16. See the English translation in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, ed. Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988) 508-9.

I did not want to reconstruct the life of Christ as it really was, I wanted to do the story of Christ plus two thousand years of Christian translation, because it is the two thousand years of Christian history which have mythicized this biography, which would otherwise be an almost insignificant biography as such. My film is the life of Christ plus two thousand years of story-telling about the life of Christ.²³

Pasolini's shift in objectives is one small manifestation of his provocative and obdurate personality.²⁴ It also affirms that a careful analysis of the film reveals that Pasolini omits important sections of the First Gospel, rearranges other sections, and employs visuals and music in a manner that foregrounds the film as a work of interpretation rather than as a faithful translation of the story.²⁵ Therefore, it should be expected that *The Gospel* offers a critical visual commentary on Matthew's nativity story and not a sense that what the viewer "sees is the way it must have been."²⁶

By the time the Magi visit the baby Jesus in *The Gospel*, the viewer has already encountered several unusual scenes in the film. Omitting Matthew's genealogy in 1:1-18, it begins with no words of introduction and proceeds in silence for twenty-five seconds with a series of extreme close-ups that cut between Mary and Joseph. Except for atmospheric noises, the silence extends for the next two minutes of the film until the angel appears to Joseph. One is also struck by the headwear of the Jewish leaders which, in its excessive size, calls attention to itself. However, one is not sure why such headwear is necessary; its purpose is left unexplained. When the Magi eventually appear

²³ Oswald Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (Cinema One 11; Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1969) 83.

²⁴ For biographies of Pasolini see Enzo Siciliano, *Pasolini*, trans. John Shepley (New York: Random House, 1982); Schwartz, *Pasolini Requiem*.

²⁵ For more detailed examinations of Pasolini's omissions, rearrangements, and use of visuals and music, see Christopher C. Fuller, "'Udiste che fu detto..., ma io dico che...': Pasolini as Interpreter of the Gospel of Matthew" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 2002) 15-25; Zygmunt G. Barański, "The Texts of *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*," in *Pasolini Old & New*, ed. Zygmunt G. Barański (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999) 281-320.

²⁶ "Best of the New Films," *Catholic Film Newsletter*, 26 February 1966, 1.

in the film, the spectator thus expects an uncommon rendering of their encounter with the newborn king.

The Magi first appear with an establishing shot that views them from behind as they enter Jerusalem. Pasolini retains the Christian tradition of three Magi. With the next cut the camera does not follow them but surveys the busy marketplace which they traverse on their way to visit Herod. It eventually finds them as they pass through the city gates. The camera tracks the Magi from behind providing no close-ups until over a minute after their arrival in the film. Eventually the camera reveals them with extreme close-ups as they ask the location of the birth of the king of Jews. The camera then cuts to a tight close-up of Herod that is followed by three more extreme close-ups of Jewish leaders. The final close-up includes a slow pan that reveals three more Jewish leaders in extreme close-up. No words are spoken during this sequence. Eventually the Jewish leaders explain where the king of the Jews is to be born and Herod commissions the Magi to find him.

The scene then cuts to a hillside. The camera looks up as the Magi descend down the hillside to visit Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. A series of shot-reverse-shots cuts between the descending Magi and the holy family as it anticipates its visitors. Here Pasolini follows the First Gospel and not tradition by having the family at their home, not a manger. When the Magi are midway down the hillside a song begins. A somber voice intones, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child... alone... alone... alone."²⁷ The song continues to play until the Magi depart. After the visitors kneel in reverence before Jesus, Mary hands the infant to the center Magus who holds the child in close-up. After the Magus lifts up the child in homage, the camera cuts to a series of close-ups, first Joseph, then Mary, and then the crowd that surrounds the Magi. Eventually the Magi

²⁷ An edition of this negro spiritual song was published by William E. Barton, *Old Plantation Hymns: A Collection of Hitherto Unpublished Melodies of the Slave and the Freedman, with Historical and Descriptive Notes* (Boston: Lamson, Wolfe, 1899).

encounter the angel who leads them home away from Herod's machinations. The presence of the Magi in the film spans approximately eight minutes of screen time.

There are several striking elements to these two sequences. First, they abound in extreme close-ups most often focusing on smiling faces, particularly in the encounter between the Magi and the holy family. Second, *The Gospel* is unique among Jesus films by portraying the Magi descending down a hillside to visit Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Finally, the song's focus on a "motherless child" who is "alone" provides an arresting aural juxtaposition to the infant Jesus who is clearly with his mother and not alone. Unlike the cohesion of visuals, sound, and narrative that one finds in the Hollywood cinema, *The Gospel* provides no obvious criteria by which the spectator can cogently assemble these disparate auditory and visual fragments.

Allusions to Biblical Paintings

Pasolini's distinctive visual interpretation of Matthew's nativity story is an example of what he called stylistic contamination. In the screenplay to *The Gospel* he states that it was his intent to evoke the "figurative inspiration" ("Ispirazione figurativa") of several artists.²⁸ For Pasolini this entailed the deliberate framings of scenes in ways that visually quote works of art. It also included the use of music in a manner that was often contrapuntal to the visuals and narrative. In so doing he believed that he contaminated one work of art with another.

His particular focus, which first manifested itself in his poetry, was to mix both high (painting) and low (cinema) forms of art to produce a new type of expression. He believed that the contaminated work alerted the spectator to the work as a social construct, thus requiring his or her participation in the making of meaning. Pasolini

²⁸ Pasolini, *Il Vangelo*, 20.

wrote of the necessity of an active spectator not only in the act of interpretation but in the act of authoring itself. "For the author, the spectator is merely another author."²⁹ Thus, as Maurizio Viano notes, *The Gospel* invites the spectator "to judge a relationship between an objective reality (Matthew's text) and the subjective rendering of it (Pasolini's images)."³⁰ This approach stands in contrast to the dominant Hollywood paradigm which seeks to seamlessly weave narrative, visuals, and sound into a coherent narrative that absorbs a passive spectator.³¹

The descending arrival of the Magi is where Pasolini employs visual contamination in his interpretation of Matthew's nativity. Through the diagonal movement of the Magi Pasolini visually cites Bartolo di Fredi's *Adoration of the Magi* (1380). This allows Pasolini both to contaminate the scene and also visually to display the action of contamination as the movement from high to low. The visual contamination continues with the prostration of the Magi before Mary and the baby Jesus which evokes Masaccio's *Adoration of the Magi* (1426). In both instances the spectator encounters where Pasolini tells the story of Jesus plus two thousand years of story-telling about Jesus.

Visual allusions to biblical art are a common motif in Hollywood films to appeal to the piety of the audience. For example, the Last Supper scene in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) clearly alludes to Da Vinci's "Last Supper" (1498). Pasolini undermines this appeal by overlaying this visual contamination with his unusual choice of music, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." What further contributes to the song's mutinous effect is that it is an English-language recording by the American blues

²⁹ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 269.

³⁰ Maurizio Viano, *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini's Film Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 140.

³¹ For a discussion of the classical Hollywood style, see David Bordwell, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

artist Odetta in an Italian film. It introduces not only a conspicuous contrast to the visual imagery but also a juxtaposition of cultures.

Finally, there are the abundant close-ups in these two scenes, as well as throughout the film. Viano helpfully notes that they are motivated by physiognomic rather than psychological reasons.³² This insight identifies Pasolini's longstanding interest in representations of the body in his cinema. Pasolini's writing and cinema betray an intense interest in the body and its function as the site where cultural discourses intersect with one another.

The Significance of the Body

For Pasolini, the body is an integral part in human communication. He arrives at this insight through his theory of cinema as the written language of reality. He attempts to clarify this assertion by arguing that the cinema "does not evoke reality, as literary language does; it does not copy reality, as painting does; it does not mime reality, as drama does. Cinema *reproduces* reality, image and sound! ... Cinema expresses reality with reality."³³ If this explanation appears unsatisfactory, he confuses it further by arguing that "*reality is, in the final analysis, nothing more than cinema in nature.*"³⁴

Because the cinema visually records material reality, it is a language "which compels the enlargement of the concept of language."³⁵ Pasolini argues that the cinema contributes a consciousness of visual signs that differs from the written-spoken element of human language. This consciousness also reveals the inadequacy of an understanding of language that relies solely upon written-spoken signs. While in literature we are

³² Viano, *A Certain Realism*, 139.

³³ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 133.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 198 (with his own emphases).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

accustomed to perceiving the word as written-spoken without audio-visual qualities, cinema exploits this quality (what Pasolini calls the “kineme”) as the linguistic sign *par excellence*.³⁶

An understanding of human language is incomplete without the body as the tablet upon which material reality is inscribed as a language. Pasolini argues that this non-verbal signifier is nothing more than the verbal expression of the reality that the cinema records and expresses. If editing is the means through which the cinema communicates reality, the body is the principle material expression of this reality. Pasolini even asserts that human “action in reality” is the *first* language of humanity and that the written spoken languages “are nothing more than an integration of this first language.”³⁷

Pasolini's theoretical examinations of the body as a linguistic signifier in the cinema find ample expression in his cinema. One of the most consistent visual tropes throughout his films is a visual examination of the body in whole and in parts. Robert Stam notes its obvious presence in the bodily discharges, the voyeurism, and the gentle visual caresses of the three films that constitute the “Trilogy of Life”: *The Decameron* (1971), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *Arabian Nights* (1974).³⁸ However, it is present throughout his cinema from the extreme close-ups of *Accatone* (1961) to the cannibalism of *Hawks and Sparrows* (1966) and *Pigsty* (1969) to the sexual deliverance of *Teorema* (1968) to the dismemberments of *Medea* (1970) and to the mutilations of *Salò or 120 Nights of Sodom* (1975). Throughout much of Pasolini's cinema, particularly in the “Trilogy of Life,” the bodies of lower-ranking people exhibit a joyous disregard for

³⁶ This separation of the visual from the oral (phoneme) and written (grapheme) qualities of language establishes the cinematic sign as an “im-sign.” It is the im-sign that enlarges our concept of language by focusing on the body which functions through physiognomy, behavior, and action as a linguistic signifier equal in communicative impact with the spoken and written word.

³⁷ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 198-99; see also 204, 234.

³⁸ Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (Parallax Re-Visions of Culture and Society; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 236.

modern western social order which Pasolini believed had been subsumed by technology. In this manner, the Magi emerge in *The Gospel* as bodily signifiers of an alternative order which confronts the spectator through visual and aural stylistic contamination. The task is now to translate Pasolini's filmic elements into interpretive escorts through the text of Matt 2:1-12. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque provides the most useful framework to address this task.³⁹

III. Bakhtin and the Carnavalesque

In his 1965 book, *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explores the carnivalesque as literary expression.⁴⁰ Carnival is not associated with a specific date as much as it represents a sense about the world. According to Bakhtin, it is “an extraordinarily flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things.”⁴¹ More than an actual representation of a carnival, he argues that the carnivalesque is a literary strategy that has been influential during all periods of literary development. It flourishes during the Renaissance as a force of opposition against the static unchanging worldview of medieval culture. Bakhtin argues that Socratic expression—an exploration of truth that allows for multiple distinct voices to intersect with one another (what Bakhtin calls “dialogism”)—forms the basis of the carnivalesque in opposition to a singular controlling point of view and its ready-made truth (what Bakhtin calls “monologism”).

³⁹ On the theories of the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) applied to the Bible, see Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction*, SBL Semeia Studies 38 (Atlanta: SBL, 2000).

⁴⁰ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1965], trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁴¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, *Theory and History of Literature* 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 166.

The carnivalesque has its origins in the festive forms of expression of popular culture. As a form of expression it gives voice to languages that are excluded by official (and monologic) discourse. It celebrates the “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order; the marked suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”⁴² Emanating from popular expression, it combines the sacred with the profane, the high with the low, the great with the insignificant, and the wise with the foolish. It takes the shape of plays, feasts, literature, and other popular celebrations populated by rogues, clowns, and fools who embody otherness in relation to official society.

For Bakhtin, the works of François Rabelais (died 1553) represent the summit of carnivalistic literature. In Rabelais’ literature and visual works by painters like Hieronymus Bosch and the elder Breughel, the carnivalesque emerges as a penetration of lower genres into the higher levels of literature. Through this mixing of high and low forms “the exalted and the lowly, the sacred and the profane are leveled and are all drawn into the same dance.”⁴³ The result is a new creation. “Carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world—the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom.”⁴⁴

Parody is the form through which the carnivalesque is most often expressed. According to Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson, parody undermines authority “with pretensions to be timeless and absolute.”⁴⁵ Bakhtin adds that “the process of parodying forces us to experience those sides of the object that are not otherwise included in a given

⁴² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10, 121. See also Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.

⁴³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 160.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁴⁵ Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Poetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) 435.

genre or style.”⁴⁶ This is achieved through laughter which is as prevalent in culture as seriousness. It does not achieve this by denying seriousness. Rather, it acts as a liberating force that purifies seriousness of its monologic pretensions. More than just a state of mind, laughter serves as an active defense mechanism that describes the way that humans see the world. Emerson notes that laughter “helps us to accomplish that most difficult task, to see ourselves as very minor players in a multitude of other people’s plots.”⁴⁷

The carnivalesque also has to do with the permeation of the boundary between the self and world. This boundary is grounded in the body, particularly its orifices or what Bakhtin calls the “lower bodily stratum.”⁴⁸ The carnivalesque valorizes all of the functions of these strata (eating, drinking, defecating, and sexual activity) to degrade all that is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract and relocate them in the material world. Bakhtin calls this “grotesque realism.”⁴⁹ He writes that “all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images.”⁵⁰ Thus, the carnivalesque celebrates the body as a site of multiplicity and dispersion and as the organic center of the world.

The bodily strata also function as the site where the self opens out into the material world. As open permeations between the self and the organic, they are always incomplete. Carnival’s emphasis on the grotesque body and its orifices celebrates what is open and cannot be finalized. They form the basis of what Bakhtin calls a “laughing truth” that mocks serious closed systems and inverts their hierarchical structures. The stress is on becoming rather than completion. Bakhtin writes that “the inner movement

⁴⁶ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," in *The Dialogical Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 41-83, here 55.

⁴⁷ Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) 196.

⁴⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 370-71.

of being itself was expressed in the passing of one form into another, in the ever completed character of being.”⁵¹ This stress ignores what is closed about the body and emphasizes those aspects that protrude beyond the body’s own boundaries.

The grotesque body not only refers to the individual but also to the body as a social collective instilled with an orientation to social inversion. As a collective it is immortal. According to Bakhtin, the liberation and openness of the carnivalesque forms persons at the lower levels of society into a collective that mocks the higher order through festivals and the arts. This process creates an understanding within the collective grotesque body of its role in history. Bakhtin argues that “in the grotesque concept of the body a new, concrete, and realistic historic awareness was born and took form: not abstract though about the future but the living sense that each man belongs to the immortal people who create history.”⁵² Thus, the grotesque body is not a passive bystander to events but participates in them.

The Image of the Banquet

One manner through which the carnivalesque celebrates the body is through the image of the banquet. Eating and drinking represent an important manifestation of the grotesque body. Bakhtin notes, “The encounter of man [*sic*] with the world which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and important objects of human thought and imagery.”⁵³ He also notes that the popular-festive banquet through which this encounter is expressed is not the same as images of private eating, gluttony, or drunkenness. It must take place within a social context for it to express the carnivalesque.

⁵¹ Ibid., 32.

⁵² Ibid., 367.

⁵³ Ibid., 281.

The banquet represents a joyful triumph over the world as persons devour without being devoured. For Bakhtin it is, by its nature, a celebration of victory over hierarchy and its social constraints. It achieves this by mixing the profane and the sacred, the lower and the higher, and the spiritual and the material with a great deal of freedom. Though Bakhtin rarely writes about the Bible, he does note that the bodily nature of the banquet provides the opportunity to embrace and renew much of the contents of the Bible. While it is beyond the scope of this study, Bakhtin's celebration of the banquet as the location of the grotesque inversion of hierarchy provokes one to reread the Gospel narratives that describe Jesus' table fellowship as well as the use of food in the Bible as possible expressions of the carnivalesque.

There is much in Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque that resonates with Pasolini's movie of *The Gospel* as a visual interpretation of the First Gospel. As a concept that describes the mixing of high and low forms, it is evocative of Pasolini's notion of stylistic contamination. It also provides a conceptual framework to describe Pasolini's use of contamination as an encounter with materiality, particularly through its bodily expression.

IV. Carnivalesque Fools in Search of a King

One of Pasolini's significant omissions in *The Gospel* is the eschatological discourse of Matthew 24—25. This discourse begins in 24:3, opening a new section of Matthew's literary narrative.⁵⁴ In this section Jesus tells his disciples of the "birth pangs" of the coming end of the age (24:8). Though he cannot tell the disciples the time (24:36),

⁵⁴ Fred W. Burnett, "Prolegomenon to Reading Matthew's Eschatological Discourse: Redundancy and the Education of the Reader in Matthew," *Semeia* 31 (1985) 91-109, here 98; Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 234.

he does lay out the signs that signal the end of the age (24:4-44) and his return as the Son of Man to bring final judgment. Jesus then follows these statements with a series of parables that emphasize the importance of this final judgment. However, Pasolini only includes 24:1-2 in *The Gospel*. The result is that by omitting 24:3-50 and all of chapter 25, the film considerably strips Jesus of his eschatological orientation--his promise of the future--and more firmly grounds him in the present.

With Bakhtin's assistance we can view *The Gospel's* world as one that awaits the arrival of the carnivalesque, not the *eschaton*, as the fulfillment of God's promise. Naomi Greene describes it as one populated by the landscapes and peasant faces of the poor in conflict with the imposing appearance of the Jewish leaders which "suggests the rigidity and power that adhere to any reigning Establishment."⁵⁵ Into this world arrives Jesus who becomes the carnivalesque made flesh. The absence of the eschatological essence of Jesus' ministry in *The Gospel* emphasizes this dimension. The film presents him as the rogue Messiah of the material world whose presence overturns the official authority of Herod and the Jewish leaders.

Bakhtin is reported to have declared, "And the Gospels are carnival too!"⁵⁶ He also wrote, "The literature, including rhetoric, of certain eras like Hellenism and the Middle Ages is flooded with various reduced forms of laughter, though we have ceased to be aware of some of them."⁵⁷ Unfortunately, he never addressed these assertions beyond their provocative brevity. Through its presentation of Jesus and those who respond positively to him like the Magi, *The Gospel* agrees with Bakhtin and argues that the carnivalesque is present in the First Gospel.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Naomi Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 76.

⁵⁶ Reported by V. N. Turbin, as quoted in Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, 37.

⁵⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 135.

⁵⁸ We may also note the grotesque humor in the saying about the speck and the log (Matt 7:3-5).

According to Powell, Matthew intends his readers to view the Magi as holy fools who are ignorant within the biblical view, not wise.⁵⁹ However, his emphasis on the narrative constraints imposed upon the implied reader prevents him from appreciating the carnivalesque potential that resides in the Magi as holy fools. In *The Gospel* they embody stylistic contamination that provokes the spectator to active contemplation rather than passive reception. In particular, Pasolini's prolific use of close-ups imparts his affection for the body in his cinema and in so doing calls to mind Bakhtin's emphasis on the bodily nature of the carnivalesque. The surplus of smiling faces in these close-ups also underscores the laughing subtext of carnival. In this manner the spectator encounters the carnivalesque quality of stylistic contamination.

Curiously, there has been no examination of the profusion of smiling faces throughout *The Gospel*. They are presented to the spectator silent and without explanation as the expression of the peasant people who come into contact with Jesus and his ministry. Within a Bakhtinian conceptual framework, they come into view as those points where the "merry" time of the carnivalesque breaks into the world. This is a time of laughter "which kills and gives birth, which allows nothing old to be perpetuated and never ceases to generate the new and the youthful."⁶⁰ As much as the miracles, perhaps even more so, these smiling faces bear Jesus' ministry as bodies that traverse the boundary of a world ruled by hierarchy to one that testifies to the victory of the future over the past.⁶¹

When we evaluate Powell's and *The Gospel's* insights through a Bakhtinian lens, the carnivalesque potential of the Magi in the Gospel of Matthew comes into view. They illustrate David McCracken's contention that the carnivalesque appears in the Gospels in

⁵⁹ Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star*, 155.

⁶⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 211.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 256.

the manner with which the normal world is turned upside down through Jesus' ministry.⁶² Matthew's text provides no physical description of the Magi, so the reader is not confronted by the body and its openings into the world. Therefore, the carnivalesque does not manifest itself in Matt 2:1-12 in a grotesque fashion but as potential to be actively sought by the reader in the remainder of the narrative. Bakhtin reminds us that the carnivalesque is "an extraordinarily flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things."⁶³ Carnival is as much a strategy as it is an actual representation of the carnivalesque. However, this does not mean that the body is not entirely absent from the Gospel text.

Walter Reed argues that the carnivalesque in Matthew's narrative emerges when Jesus shares table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors (9:11).⁶⁴ Matthew 11:19 emphasizes this feature by describing the criticism of Jesus as a glutton and drunkard for his table practices. This analysis reflects Bakhtin's emphasis on the importance of the banquet within carnivalesque literature. It is a concrete manifestation of the comic. Again, this is less about overt laughter than how one views the world through the comic activity of the carnivalesque. Banquet scenes mix the profane and the sacred, the lower and the higher, and the spiritual and the material to portray victory over hierarchy and authority.

Reed identifies a covert example of the carnivalesque but does not explore its presence elsewhere in the Gospels. Therefore, he fails to understand the carnivalesque also as potential in the narrative preceding scenes of Jesus' table fellowship. Jesus'

⁶² David McCracken, "Character in the Boundary: Bakhtin's Interdividuality in Biblical Narratives," *Semeia* 63 (1993) 29-42, here 38-39.

⁶³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 166.

⁶⁴ Walter L. Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature according to Bakhtin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 82.

scandalous behavior with sinners and tax collectors creates tension within the textual world of the narrative. However, it also attains its capsizing comic force within the world of the reader through the carnivalesque potential of the Magi. They not only foreshadow the role of the Gentiles in the future of the Christian community, they also adumbrate the parodic nature of this community by leading the procession of the festival of fools who respond to Jesus' ministry.