



Jheronimus Bosch, *The Adoration of the Magi*, triptych, oil on panel, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Copyright of the image ©Museo Nacional del Prado

Jeanne van Waadenonjen

### **Sin and evil in *The Adoration of the Magi* by Jheronimus Bosch**

The idea that Jheronimus Bosch was obsessed with evil, or at least ‘favored an emphasis on the presence of evil in the world,’<sup>1</sup> is one of those persistent prejudices dogging the Flemish late fifteenth/early sixteenth-century artist. Its origin lies in early sources that portray Bosch as a painter

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Silver, ‘Jheronimus Bosch and the Issue of Origins,’ in: *Jheronimus Bosch and his Sources*, ‘s-Hertogenbosch 2007, p. 50. Larry Silver, ‘Jheronimus Bosch and the Issue of Origins,’ electronic *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 1 (2009), no.1.

of hellish monsters.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, the view that he was obsessed with evil had repercussions for the interpretation of his works. A case in point is the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Prado Museum in Madrid. This *Adoration*, in which ‘the presence of evil is manifest,’ forms the central panel of a triptych with donor portraits on the inner and outer wings, indicating that it was made to grace an altar at which masses were celebrated and prayers recited for the salvation of the donors. The central panel’s subject, the adoration of the Magi, is celebrated in the liturgical Feast of the Epiphany, which commemorates the physical manifestation of Christ to the gentiles. Its significance is explained in a well-known sermon by Pope Leo the Great delivered on the occasion of the Feast of the Epiphany, which was later incorporated in the Roman Breviary.

Dearly beloved brethren, we recognise in the wise men who came to worship Christ, the first-fruits of that dispensation to the Gentiles wherein we also are called and enlightened. Let us then keep this Feast with grateful hearts, in thanksgiving for our blessed hope, whereof it doth commemorate the dawn. From that worship paid to the new-born Christ is to be dated the entry of us Gentiles upon our heirship of God and co-heirship with Christ. Since that joyful day the Scriptures which testify of Christ have lain open for us as well as for the Jews. Yea, their blindness rejected that Truth, Which, since that day, hath shed Its bright beams upon all nations. Let all observance, then, be paid to this most sacred day, whereon the Author of our salvation was made manifest, and as the wise men fell down and worshipped Him in the manger, so let us fall down and worship Him enthroned Almighty in heaven. As they also opened their treasures and presented unto Him mystic and symbolic gifts, so let us strive to open our hearts to Him, and offer Him from hence some worthy offering.<sup>3</sup>

The adoration of the Magi was a joyful event, for Christ was born to redeem mankind from its sins. Why, then, have scholars presumed that in his *Adoration* Bosch sought above all to express that the world is dominated by evil?

At first sight, Bosch’s *Adoration of the Magi* seems to follow an iconographical tradition that represents the separate feasts of the Nativity and the Adoration in a single picture, one reflecting widely known sermons on the Epiphany by Leo the Great and Augustine:

Not very many days ago we celebrated the birthday of the Lord; today, with no less fitting solemnity, we celebrate the revelation which marked the beginning of His manifestation to the Gentiles. On Christmas day, Jewish shepherds saw the newly born Infant; today, Magi coming from the East adored Him. For He, the cornerstone, the peace of two walls arising from no small difference,

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<sup>2</sup> Karel van Mander, *Schilder-boeck*, Haarlem 1604, f. 216v.

<sup>3</sup> Leo the Great, *Sermon 32, On the Feast of the Epiphany, II*, cited from *The Roman Breviary*, Edinburgh/London 1908, (tr. John, Marquess of Bute, K.T.), vol. 1, p. 334.

namely, that concerning circumcision and uncircumcision, was born so that they might be united in Him who became our peace and who made both one. This union was prefigured in the shepherds of the Jews and the Magi of the Gentiles. Then and there began what would later increase and bear fruit throughout the world. Let us, then, with spiritual joy consider these two feasts of the Nativity and the Manifestation of our Lord as sources of our happiness. The Jewish shepherds were led to Him by the angelic message; the Gentile Magi, by a guiding star.<sup>4</sup>

The stable where the Holy Family found shelter, directly under the star that guided the Magi, forms the centre of the composition. Mary with the newborn Christ child in her lap sits under its overhanging roof, surrounded by the three Magi and the shepherds. Upon closer inspection, however, a number of less traditional – and in the eyes of many scholars alarming – elements can be discerned. What fired the imagination and fuelled speculation on the part of scholars is the bearded semi-nude man with very pale skin and a ruddy face standing on the threshold of the stable. His curious attire includes a transparent tunic and a red mantle, and a gold chain running to his upper right arm. A sore on his leg is visible through a reliquary-like crystal cylinder in a gold mount. Hanging from his waist is a bell fastened to a ribbon decorated with toads. He wears a crown-shaped headdress with a colourful veil consisting of a turban structure covered with thorns and a crystal vessel containing a flower on top. His left arm is slung around the doorpost to which he seems fastened by the gold chain. In his left hand he holds a helmet-like object adorned with apish creatures catching white birds and a being with a pointed hat looking in the direction of the Child and presenting a gift. One of the men in the dark interior clasps our mystery man's shoulders as he steps out of the darkness into the light. Who is he, and who are his companions?

One interpretation holds that he is Balaam, a pagan Old Testament prophet who prophesied the coming of Christ,<sup>5</sup> while another identifies him as the Antichrist.<sup>6</sup> In medieval art and literature

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Hugo van der Goes, *The Adoration of the Magi* (Monforte Altarpiece), Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; *The Adoration of the Magi*, attributed to the Master of the Virgo inter Virgines, triptych, Museum, Salzburg; Jan de Beer, *The Adoration of the Magi*, triptych, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. The two feasts are connected in several sermons for the Epiphany, e.g. Augustine, 'Sermon 201,' in: *Sermons on the liturgical seasons* (Fathers of the Church, vol. 38), New York 1959, (tr. Sister Mary Sarah Muldowney), p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Walter S. Gibson, *Hieronymus Bosch*, London/New York, 1973; Allen S. Farber, *Bosch's Prado Epiphany*, published online: [employees.oneonta.edu>arth](http://employees.oneonta.edu>arth).  
For Balaam, see a homily by St Jerome (Bk. I Comm. on Matth. II): 'In order that the Jews might be confounded by hearing from the Gentiles of the birth of Christ, the star rose in the East. They knew that it would come, by the prophecy of Balaam, whose successors they were.' Cited from the Roman Breviary 1908 (note 3), I, p. 350; Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea* (ed. Th. Graesse) Leipzig 1931, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cap. XIV. De epiphania domini, p. 89; and Dirck van Delf, *Tafel van den Kersten ghelove. Deel 2: Winterstuc* (ed. L.M.Fr. Daniëls). Antwerp / Nijmegen - Utrecht 1937, XLII, v. 9-12, pp. 314-315.

<sup>6</sup> Lotte Brand Philip, 'The Prado Epiphany of Jerome Bosch,' *The Art Bulletin* 35(1953), no. 4, pp. 267-293. She is followed by Carl Linfert, *Hieronymus Bosch*, Cologne 1970, p. 126; Hans Holländer, *Hieronymus Bosch*, Cologne 1975, p. 61; P. Reuterswärd, *Hieronymus Bosch*, Uppsala 1978, p. 103; Claude Henri Roquet, *Jerôme Bosch et l'étoile des mages*, Paris 1995, p. 89; Paul Vandenbroeck, 'Jheronimus Bosch: de wijsheid van het raadsel,' in: Jos Koldewey, Paul Vandenbroeck, Bernard Vermet, *Jheronimus Bosch: alle schilderijen en tekeningen*, Rotterdam

Balaam is found in connection with the birth of Christ, since he prophesied that ‘a star shall rise out of Jacob and a sceptre shall spring up from Israel’ (Numb. 24:17) and is therefore considered the precursor of the Magi.<sup>7</sup> However, Balaam is never depicted half-nude and wearing a crown-like hat. Although as a pagan soothsayer he is an ambivalent personage, nothing in his ‘biography’ can account for the strange features of the figure in Bosch’s painting. The same is true of the Antichrist, a false prophet and Christ’s enemy. There is no representation of him in art that even remotely resembles the figure in Bosch’s *Adoration*. If Balaam can be connected to the adoration of the Magi by way of his prophecy, the coming of the Antichrist was a sign of the imminent end of time and the last judgment.<sup>8</sup> What could induce the beholder of Bosch’s *Adoration* to identify the bizarre figure with the Antichrist?

An answer to this question is offered in an interesting yet misleading article by Lotte Brand Philip published in 1953, which still captivates the art-historical imagination.<sup>9</sup> Brand Philip begins promisingly enough by examining two remarkable details, namely the chain and the pale body – whiteness as a symptom of leprosy – both referencing Jewish legends of the coming of the Messiah. According to one legend the Messiah is chained, while in the other he is a disease-stricken pauper and an outcast, in accordance with the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53:3. Brand Philip goes on to state ‘That the Jewish Messiah in Bosch’s *Adoration* stands for a symbol of the Synagogue is obvious from the way in which he and his companions are placed in the traditional settings of the *Adoration*.’<sup>10</sup> Her question about ‘where the Jewish Messiah occurs in Christian ideology’ and deciphering of the many symbolic details of the building led her to conclude that the entire scene – the dilapidated hut, the Jewish Messiah with his companions and the large donkey’s head in the stable – is an elaborate illustration of evil.<sup>11</sup> According to Brand Philip, ‘In Christian ideology the Jewish Messiah occurs only once. He is the Antichrist, the false prophet who will be sent to the Jews as a punishment because they refuse to believe in the true Messiah.’<sup>12</sup> And this is precisely where her theory derails. The Antichrist is a pseudo-Messianic figure, a false prophet, whereas the

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2001, p. 156. Larry Silver, *Hieronymus Bosch*, Munich 2006, pp. 171-175; Margaret A. Sullivan, ‘The timely art of Hieronymus Bosch: the left panel of the Garden of Earthly Delights,’ *Oud Holland*, 127 (2014), p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> The Bible citations in this paper are from the Douay-Rheims Bible, < <http://drbo.org/>>.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XX, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Brand Philip (note 6), pp. 267-293. Debora Higgs Strickland, *The Epiphany of Hieronymus Bosch: imagining Antichrist and others from th Middle Ages to the Reformation*, London/Turnhout 2016. See also Esperanza Aragonés Estella, *Un judío rojo o porqué no es el Anticristo el personaje de la Epifanía de la Epifanía del Bosco*, Academia.edu 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Brand Philip (note 6), p. 269.

<sup>11</sup> Brand Philip (note 6), pp. 269-270.

<sup>12</sup> Brand Philip (note 6), p. 270.

Jewish Messiah is the promised Messiah of the prophecies in the Old Testament.<sup>13</sup> For the Jews this Messiah has yet to come, for the Christians he is Christ, the fulfilment of the promises.<sup>14</sup>

Isaiah, more than any other Old Testament prophet, foretells the coming of the Messiah, his birth, his passion and his victory over death.<sup>15</sup> Many a patristic writer penned lengthy commentaries on the Book of Isaiah to demonstrate that his Messianic prophecies properly concern Christ. They were incorporated in the liturgical texts of the Mass and Divine Office.<sup>16</sup> Bosch and his contemporaries would have been conversant with Isaiah's prophecies, which surely provided the material for the artist's enigmatic figure. For instance, the verse 'And he shall grow up as a tender plant before him, and as a root out of a thirsty ground' (Isa. 53:2) inspired the flower, a tender plant protected by the crystal cylinder. According to a Bible gloss, this plant refers to Isaiah's equally well-known prophecies of Christ's birth from a virgin, 'And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root' (Isa. 11:1). The Virgin Mary, the 'thirsty ground' mentioned above, is alluded to in Isaiah 7:14: 'Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.'<sup>17</sup> The verse 'he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows: and we have thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted' (Isa. 53:4) gave rise to Bosch's leprous figure. And, 'But he was wounded for our iniquities, he was bruised for our sins' (Isa. 53:5) could account for the toads – a standard symbol of sin – on the ribbon.

Should these verses afford explanations for the whiteness of the figure's body, the sore on his leg, the flower in the crystal cylinder, the toads, and the thorns covering the headdress (the thorns symbolising Christ's passion), they fail to account for others, such as his ruddy complexion or the red mantle, which is not exactly the dress of an outcast, but rather of a king.<sup>18</sup> For these particulars we must have recourse to another of Isaiah's well-known prophecies, that of Christ's victory over his enemies.<sup>19</sup> 'Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bosra, this beautiful one in his robe, walking in the greatness of his strength. I, that speak justice, and am a defender to save. Why then is thy apparel red, and thy garments like theirs that tread in the

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XVIII, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Leonard Geddes, 'Messiah,' in: *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York 1911, vol. 10, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10212c.htm>>.

<sup>15</sup> See note 12.

<sup>16</sup> M. Manion & Bernard J. Muir (eds.), *The Art of the Book: its Place in Medieval Worship*, Exeter 1998, pp. 11-152, esp. pp. 117-119: 'The lesson from Isaiah (53:2-5) which concludes the matins, recalls to mind the mystery of the Passion as such, [...] As the principal hour of the Office, matins thus directs the reader to contemplate the sufferings of Christ in a spirit of compassion and hope.'

<sup>17</sup> *Bibliorum sacrorum cum glossa ordinaria... et postilla Nicolai Lyrani*, IV, Venice 1603, col. 443.

<sup>18</sup> *Het boek van Sidrac in de Nederlanden* (edition J.F.J. van Tol), Amsterdam 1936, p. 197: 'Die meeste vernaemde cledinge die es dats root, want dats coninclijc ....' See also W.A. van der Vet, *Het Biën bouc van Thomas van Cantimpré en zijn exempelen*, 1902, p. 366.

<sup>19</sup> *Bibliorum sacrorum* (note 16), cols.499-500.

winepress?’ (Isa. 63:1-2). According to a Bible gloss, ‘this beautiful one’ has a red face.<sup>20</sup> However, the red face, which contrasts so strongly with the white body, can also be explained in yet another way. Several forms of leprosy are described in a fourteenth-century medical treatise, including

Nicolaus de Lyra. “High Priest.”  
Illustration from *Postilla super Biblia*.



*alopicia* or *vulpus*, whereby the sufferer has a red face and a white body.<sup>21</sup> However that may be, the afflicted servant of God of Isaias’s prophecies won his battle. The nude body covered by a red mantle brings to mind images of the victoriously risen Christ, as Brand Philip too touched on.<sup>22</sup>

Explanations can also be found for various other elements in the picture, such as the ribbon with a bell and the turban-like headdress, the doorpost, the embrace, and the chain, the helmet, and the myrrh. Take the ribbon with the bell: Charles De Tolnay, whose interpretation of the bizarre character as a kind of prefiguration of Christ found little following, noted that it evokes liturgical vestments.<sup>23</sup> Part of the liturgical garments of the high priest, described in Exodus (28:39) and illustrated in Nicolas of Lyra’s

*Postilla super Biblia*, are a turban-shaped headdress and a robe embellished with little bells and pomegranates at the hem. The ribbon might allude to the pallium, a liturgical vestment worn by popes and (arch) bishops; the bell to the Elevation of the Host; and the toads to the fact that Christ was crucified ‘to exhaust the sins of many’ (Hebr. 9:28).<sup>24</sup> As for the doorpost to which our semi-nude figure is chained, De Tolnay observed that it alluded to the Cross upon which Christ was bound to die and overcome death (suggested by the skull concealed in a gap in the wall on the left behind the stable).<sup>25</sup> The embrace would then signify that the sacrifice was a voluntary act, and the chain the bonds of sin, of death.<sup>26</sup> The helmet he holds is made of the same material as the kind of

<sup>20</sup> The phrase *iste formosus in stola sua* has the following gloss (*Bibliorum sacrorum*, [note 17], col. 502): ‘*Formosus in stola. Formosum calidum. Unde formosus quasi calidus, quia ex colore rubeus et roseus efficitur vultus, et inde speciosus.*’ Familiarity with this gloss could account for the ruddy face.

<sup>21</sup> Johan Yperman, *Cirurgie* (ed. E.C. van Leersum), Leiden s.d. [1912], p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> Brand Philip 1953 (note 6), p. 267.

<sup>23</sup> Charles De Tolnay, *Hieronymus Bosch*, Baden-Baden 1965, p. 372.

<sup>24</sup> Adrian Fortescue, ‘Canon of the Mass,’ in: *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York 1908, vol. 3, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03255c.htm>>.

<sup>25</sup> De Tolnay 1965 (note 23), p. 372.

<sup>26</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, Grand Rapids, MI (Christian Classics Ethereal Library), vol. 1, p. 44: ‘Whereof S. Leo the Pope saith: After the passion of Jesu Christ, the bonds of death broken, he was transported from infirmity to virtue, from mortality to perpetuity, and from villainy to glory.’ This seven-volume edition, published in

fanciful pauldron covering the shoulders of the Magus kneeling nearest him, whereby he is associated with this Wise Man and his gift of myrrh. The lower part of the pauldron features a relief depicting Manoah's sacrifice to the Lord after the annunciation of the birth of Samson, who would deliver Israel from its enemies, the Philistines; this is a prefiguration of the incarnation of Christ, who came to free humankind from the bonds of death. Finally, myrrh, used for embalming the dead, signifies that the Christ Child was truly human and, therefore, bound to die.<sup>27</sup>

All of the above suggests that the enigmatic figure is in fact the embodiment of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, a prefiguration of Christ, the true Messiah, 'at once the Suffering Servant and the Davidic King, the Judge of mankind and its Saviour, true Son of Man and God with us. On Him is laid the iniquity of us all.'<sup>28</sup> He is the merciful and faithful priest before God, 'a propitiation for the sins of the people' (Hebr. 2:17); and the high priest of the New Covenant (Hebr. 5).<sup>29</sup> The transparent tunic signifies the veil of Moses, which prevents the Jews from seeing Christ. 'For, until this present day, the selfsame veil, in the reading of the old testament, remaineth not taken away (because in Christ it is made void). But even until this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. But when they shall be converted to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away' (2 Cor. 3:14-16).

Yet more details afford greater insight into this reading of Bosch's depiction. Visible in the right corner of the crossbeam of the 'cross' embraced by the Jewish Messiah is an 'orderly' sheaf of wheat, and further up, directly below the roof of the dilapidated structure, is a 'disorderly' bunch of straw or tares, or weeds, with little flowers fastened to a beam. They allude to the parable of the tares or cockle in Matthew 13:4-30 (already suggested by Brand Philip), which will have been familiar to Bosch and his public for it forms part of the text of the liturgy of the Mass of the fifth Sunday after Epiphany. On that day, Christ is introduced as the Lord who patiently awaits the growing of the good and the bad seeds to separate the wheat from the tares at the end of the age, a reference to the Last Judgement. Perched on the upper crossbeam in a dark corner under the roof not far from the bunch of tares, an owl – with its prey – peers out at the viewer. This nocturnal bird

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1900, is F. S. Ellis' modern update of a 1483 Middle English translation, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/voragine/goldleg1>>.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine 1959 (note 8), p. 73: 'Hence, from the Magi He accepted not only gold because He deserved to be honored, and frankincense because He merited adoration, but also myrrh because He was going to be buried.' See also Jacobus de Voragine (note 26) I, p. 22, or the hymn of the Lauds in the Office of the Epiphany: 'Offerings of mystic meaning! Incense doth the God disclose; Gold a Royal Child proclaimeth; Myrrh a future tomb foreshows.' The Roman Breviary (note 3) I, p. 338.

<sup>28</sup> Geddes (note 14).

<sup>29</sup> Jacobus de Voragine (note 26), I, p. 38: In the *Legenda Aurea* we read: 'And how he was sacrificed that was in us appeasing God, S. Austin in the book of the Trinity saith thus: [...] And the same doctor saith yet of this sacrifice, how we be to God reconciled: Jesu Christ is the priest and the sacrifice, he is God and also he is the temple, he is the priest by whom we be reconciled, God, to whom we be reconciled, and the temple in whom we be reconciled, the sacrifice of whom we be reconciled.'

that shuns light is a well-known symbol of the evil forces of the dark, the devil. In a homily incorporated in the office of the fourth day within the Octave of Epiphany, Gregory the Great therefore cautioned his ‘dearly beloved brethren’ as follows:

it behoveth us to be ever fearful and watch, having continually before the eyes of our heart, on the one hand, the guilt of our doings, and, on the other, the judgment at the latter day. It behoveth us to think how that awful Judge will surely come, Whose judgment is hanging over us, and hath not yet fallen: the wrath to come is before sinners, and hath not yet smitten them: and the Judge yet tarrieth in order that, when He cometh, there may haply be less to condemn.<sup>30</sup>

A number of figures, their faces expressing stupor and incredulity, are visible in the dark interior behind the Jewish Messiah. These companions are the Jews who refused to see their Messiah in Christ, in contrast to the shepherds and the gentiles who came and acknowledged the Christ Child as King and the true God. While their Messiah steps from the darkness (of the Old Testament) into the light (of the New Testament), the Jews remain in the dark. The fire glowing in the otherwise tenebrous interior brings to mind another of Isaiah’s prophecies: ‘Behold all you that kindle a fire, encompassed with flames, walk in the light of your fire, and in the flames which you have kindled: this is done to you by my hand, you shall sleep in sorrows’ (Isa. 50:11). This foretells the ruin and misery of the Jewish people as a punishment for their denial of Christ as the true Messiah.<sup>31</sup> A parallel to this is found in Bosch’s omission of the ox, contrary to tradition, with only the ass in the stable. According to the Bible glosses, in Isaiah’s verses ‘The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel hath not known me, and my people hath not understood’ (Isa. 1:3-4) the ox represents the Jews, who know God and the Law, and the ass the pagans, whose burden of sin Christ takes away.<sup>32</sup>

If the Jews manifest stupefaction and incredulity, the shepherds express stupefaction and joy. The shepherds climbing up a tree at the right – an iconographic motif derived from Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem – and on the roof of the stable are not symbols of evil intentions, namely that

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<sup>30</sup> Gregory the Great, 10<sup>th</sup> homily on the Gospels, cited after the Roman Breviary 1908 (note 3), I, p. 347.

<sup>31</sup> *Bibliorum sacrorum* (note 17), IV, col. 428. See also the Mass of Good Friday, which commemorates the Crucifixion. After the singing of the Passion from the Gospel according to John, prayers are said to the almighty and eternal God for humanity. For the gentiles that ‘they leave their idols and convert to the living and true God and his only Son Jesus Christ,’ and for the Jews that ‘acknowledging the light of thy Truth, which is Christ, they may be delivered from their darkness.’

<sup>32</sup> *Bibliorum sacrorum* (note 187, IV, cols. 13-14. See also Augustine 1959 (note 8), Sermon 204, p. 79: ‘In the persons of the shepherds and of the Magi, the ox began to recognise his owner and the ass his Master’s crib. From the Jews came the horned ox, since among them the horns of the cross were prepared for Christ; from the Gentiles came the long-eared ass, since it was concerning them that the prophecy had been made: “A people, which I knew not, hath served me: at the hearing of the ear they have obeyed me”’ (Ps. 17:45).



they came as thieves and robbers as suggested by Brand Philip.<sup>33</sup> Rather, they are conveying their eagerness to see Christ:

And behold, there was a man named Zacheus, who was the chief of the publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was, and he could not for the crowd, because he was low of stature. And running before, he climbed up into a sycamore tree, that he might see him (Luke 19:2-4).

That Zaccheus is worthy of emulating was expressed by the fourteenth-century Flemish scholar and mystic Jan van Ruysbroek:

When such a man contemplates all this, he is moved beyond all measure with desire to see Christ his bridegroom, and to understand what is His own interior nature: though he understands Him in His works, that seems to him not to be enough. Then he must do as Zacchaeus the publican did, who wished to see what Christ was like. He must run faster than all the crowds, who are the multitudes of God's creatures, who make us little and low, so that we cannot look at God. And he must climb up the tree of faith.<sup>34</sup>

New growth, namely the sprouts of an olive tree, can be discerned behind the tree trunk with broken branches that the shepherds are climbing up. The trunk and the greenery refer to the well-known allegory of the olive tree in Romans 11:17-25, mentioned in a sermon on Epiphany by Augustine:

Hence, the Magi bore witness to the King of the Jews at His rising, that is, at His birth, and Pilate at His setting, that is, at His death, so that in the kingdom of heaven with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the progenitors from whom the Jews drew their lineage, they might feast, not as legitimate offspring of these three, but as engrafted upon their stock through faith so as to prefigure the wild olive to be engrafted upon the olive tree of which the Apostle speaks. Therefore, by these same Gentiles He was sought, or at least acknowledged, not as the king of the Gentiles, but as the King of the Jews, because the wild olive came to the olive tree, not the olive tree to the wild olive. Nevertheless, the branches deserving to be broken off, that is, the unfaithful Jews, [...] Therefore, the shepherds come from nearby to see; the Magi come from afar to adore. This is the humility on account of which the wild

<sup>33</sup> Brand Philip 1953 (note 6), pp. 276-277.

<sup>34</sup> Jan van Ruysbroec, *Die cierheit der gheestelijker brulocht* (ed. J.B. Poukens and L. Reyens).

<[https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/ruus001diec01\\_01/ruus001diec01\\_01\\_0001.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/ruus001diec01_01/ruus001diec01_01_0001.php)>, p. 1,141: 'Alsoe dese mensche diet aen siet, soe werdet hi utermaten seere beweghet Cristum sinen Brudegom te siene ende te kinnen, wie Hi is in Hem selven: al kint hine in sinen werken, dat en dunct hem niet ghenoech. Dan sal hi doen alsoe die publicaen Zacheus dede die Jhesum begerde te siene wie Hi ware. Hi sal vorelopen alle die scaren, dat es menichfoldicheit der creatueren: die maken ons cleyne ende cort, dat wij Gode niet ghesien en connen. Ended hi Sal clement open boom des gheloofs....' English translation from Jan van Ruysbroek, *The Spiritual Espousals*, (Classics of the contemplative life), London 1952, (tr. Eric Colledge), pp. 81-82.

olive merited to be engrafted upon the olive tree and to bear olives contrary to its nature, because it merited to change its nature through grace. For, although the whole world through the influence of the wild olive was becoming wild and bitter, enriched by the grace of the grafting it has become resplendent.<sup>35</sup>

It has been observed that the Adoration evokes the celebration of Mass, of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.<sup>36</sup> Bosch constructed the composition such that the Virgin and Child are visually isolated from the Magi and the shepherds. Only the gold statuette, which represents Abraham's Sacrifice, prefiguration of the Eucharist, mentioned in the canon of the Mass, has been allotted a place within the boundaries of the sacred space in which Mary stands for the altar with the Christ Child as the living host. An opening in the wall behind them affords the shepherds a glimpse of the sanctuary. In Bosch's time, the laity could follow the celebration of Mass at the high altar only from behind the rood screen, which separated the sanctuary from the rest of the church. In a triptych of *The Adoration of the Magi* attributed to the Master of the Virgo inter Virgines, the shepherds similarly watch the Virgin and Child being adored by the Magi through an opening in a wall.<sup>37</sup> There is no reason to interpret the shepherds as a symbol of evil and perdition nor their behaviour as furtive, foolish and sinful.<sup>38</sup> In a sermon on the Epiphany Augustine accounts for the shepherds' conduct as follows:

Perhaps the shepherds, less conscious of guilt, rejoiced more readily in the thought of salvation, whereas the Gentiles, burdened with many sins, sought pardon with greater submissiveness.<sup>39</sup>

In order to explain certain elements of the Wise Men's attire, attention was drawn to the reputation of the Magi as magicians and astrologers in a negative way.<sup>40</sup> This, however, is not how the Magi are presented in, for example, the lessons of the breviary or in the *Legenda Aurea*:

<sup>35</sup> Augustine 1959 (note 4), Sermon 201, p. 69. See also *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, Tractate 42 (John 8:37-47), par. 5: 'We then have become Abraham's seed by the grace of God. It was not of Abraham's flesh that God made any co-heirs with him. He disinherited the former, He adopted the latter; and from that olive tree whose root is in the patriarchs, He cut off the proud natural branches, and engrafted the lowly wild olive' (Romans 11:17).

<sup>36</sup> Brand Philip 1953 (note 6), p. 280, following De Tolnay.

<sup>37</sup> Salzburg Museum, inv. no. 214-32.

<sup>38</sup> Brand Philip 1953 (note 6), p. 277; Silver 2006 (note 10), p. 175.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine 1959 (note 4), Sermon 203, p. 76. The shepherdess on the roof looks in the direction of the scene of a man and a woman attacked by wolves on the right wing, while her outstretched left arm directs the eye of the beholder towards the Child, creating thus a link between the Child and the people attacked. This brings to mind a homily by Ambrose incorporated in the Roman Breviary (1908 [note 3], I, p. 277) as the eighth lesson of Christmas: 'Behold the beginning of the Church. Christ is born, and the shepherds watch; shepherds, to gather together the scattered sheep of the Gentiles, and to lead them into the fold of Christ, that they might no longer be a prey to the ravages of spiritual wolves in the night of this world's darkness.'

<sup>40</sup> Yona Pinson, 'Bruegel's 1564 *Adoration*: Hidden Meanings of Evil in the Figure of the Old King,' *Artibus et Historiae*, 15 (1994), pp. 109-127, esp. p. 109; Silver 2006 (note 10), p. 168.

When our Lord was born, the three kings came into Jerusalem, of whom the names be written in Hebrew, that is to wit Galgalath, Magalath, and Tharath. And in Greek Appelius, Amerius, and Damascus. And in Latin Jaspas, Melchior, and Balthasar. And it is to wit that this name Magus hath three significations. It is said illuser or deceiver, enchanter, and wise. They been illusers or deceivers because they deceived Herod. For they returned not by him when they departed from the place where they had honoured and offered to Jesus, but returned by another way into their country. Magus also is said enchanter. And hereof be said the enchanterers of Pharaoh, Magi, which by their malefice made their marvels by the enchanting of the craft of the devil. And S. John Chrysostom calleth these kings Magos, as wicked and evil-doers. For first they were full of malefices, but after they were converted. To whom God would show his Nativity, and bring them to him to the end that to sinners he would do pardon. Item, Magus in same wise. For Magus in Hebrew is said doctor, in Greek, philosopher, and in Latin, wise, whereof they be said Magi, that is to say great in wisdom. And these three came into Jerusalem with a great company and great estate.<sup>41</sup>

According to the Dutch theologian and writer Dirc van Delf, the Magi were ‘wise pagan doctors, who knew the stars and their course.’<sup>42</sup> Because they were astrologers they discovered the guiding star, and because they were wise they ‘who had neither been taught by the prophets’ predictions nor instructed by the testimony of the law’ understood that this star was the one in Balaam’s prophecy and they set out to look for and find the King of heaven and earth.<sup>43</sup> The finery of each of the Wise Men features details referencing both a pagan past and conversion. Pointing to an evil – godless and lawless – world are the birds with human heads, cruel harpies, on the hem of the black Magus’ tunic, and a big fish devouring a smaller one on the hem of his page’s robe.

For empires are ordained by God to keep justice on earth. Were there no justice, people would be like the fishes: the strong would eat the weak and the big ones would eat the little ones.<sup>44</sup>

In the Dutch version of Thomas of Cantimpre’s *Bonum universale de apibus* the harpy is a bird with a human face but no human virtues, for it is extremely vicious. However, when the harpy killed the

<sup>41</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, (note 26), pp. 18-19.

<sup>42</sup> Dirc van Delf, *Tafel van den Kersten ghelove. Deel 2: Winterstuc* (ed. L.M.Fr. Daniëls) (Neerlandia), Antwerp / Nijmegen - Utrecht 1937, XLII, v. 24-25, p. 315: ‘wise heydenssche meesters, die den sterren kenden ende haren loep wisten.’

<sup>43</sup> Leo the Great, Sermon 36, in: Philip Schaff & Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Buffalo (NY) 1895, (tr. Charles Lett Feltoe), vol. 12. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360336.htm>>.

<sup>44</sup> *Het Boek van Sidrac* (ed. J.F.J. van Tol), Amsterdam 1936, p. 62: ‘Heerscapien sijn van Goids geboden omme te hou- [14] dene gherechticheit in eerterike. Want en ware gheen gerechte, die [15] liede souden sijn na die wise vanden visschen: die stercken souden [16] eten2) die crancken ende de groote souden eten die clene.’

first man it met in the desert and afterwards saw its face reflected in the water, it realised that it had taken the life of a creature like itself and was filled with remorse to the end of its days.

Harpy that is the human race come to such a brutal sin, that it kills its Lord, Creator of all, who to redeem it had taken on the shape of a human being and had come into this world's desert.<sup>45</sup>

Another reference to a lawless pagan world is the helmet in the Messiah's hand decorated with ape-like creatures catching white birds. These are pygmies, found among the monstrous races that form part of the marvels of the East. They are a race of dwarfs, unfamiliar with civilisation and laws, engaged in a continuous fight with the cranes intent on destroying their crops.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the oldest Wise Man's helmet, resting on the ground, features what appears to be a scene of a pagan ritual: two kneeling figures with outstretched arms hold up a mirror-like roundel. It is close to the king's gift, the gold statuette portraying Abraham's Sacrifice. Like the fanciful pauldron of the middle Magus and the censer held by the black Wise Man, the statuette alludes to their conversion. Along with the Sacrifice of Manoah, the relief on the middle Wise Man's 'pauldron' features the Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-14). The queen visited Solomon to test his wisdom with difficult questions, and showered him with costly gifts when he answered them to her satisfaction. In the *Biblia Pauperum*, the queen's visit to King Solomon 'figuratively denotes the gentiles coming to Christ.' The black Magus's censer bears a representation of Abner before David, whose meaning in this context is explained in the *Biblia pauperum* as follows:

According to 2 Kings III:6-21 Abner, Saul's captain came to David in Jerusalem to bring back all the people that followed the house of Saul. This is a prefiguration of the coming of the three kings to Christ to do him homage.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the birds picking at fruit on top of the censer and on the oldest king's crown are not purely ornamental but also have symbolic meaning. They are difficult to identify, as they might represent either mythological or just ordinary birds. In any case, picking birds can stand for both carnal and spiritual desires.

<sup>45</sup> Wouter A. van der Vet, *Het Biënboec van Thomas van Cantimpre en zijn exempelen*, The Hague 1902, p. 60: 'Arpia is „dat menschelike geslachte", dat gekomen is „tot so onmenscheliker sonde, dat hi dode sinen here, scepper alre dinge, die tot sijne verlossinge aengenomen had die gedaente des menschen ende gecomen was in die woestijn deser werlt".' *Jacob Van Maerlant's Naturen Bloeme*, (ed. Eelco Verwijs) (Bibliotheek van Middelnederlandsche Letterkunde), Groningen 1878, III, v. 247-278, pp. 178-179.

<sup>46</sup> *Jacob Van Maerlant's Naturen Bloeme*, (note 43), I, v. 366-376, pp. 19-20. Albert Magnus, *De animalibus libri XXVI* (ed. H. Stadler, Münster 1915-1920), XXI, 2 for the opinion that the pygmies are not human beings, since they know neither civilisation nor laws.

<sup>47</sup> *Biblical Pauperism* (facsimile ed. by Avril Henry), Aldershot 1987.

The pagans came to acknowledge the Christ Child as the King of heaven and earth – prefigured in the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon and the story of Abner before David. In so doing, they would be freed by Christ from sin, alluded to by the eldest of the Magi’s gift, the gold statuette representing Abraham’s sacrifice which rests on toads at the feet of Mary and the Child. The details of the attire of Bosch’s three Wise Men characterise them not as evil beings, but rather as gentiles who did not know God and the Law before they knew Christ.<sup>48</sup> Far from being evil-doers they are presented as exemplars. According to Leo the Great, ‘the story of the magi [is] not only a bygone fact in history, but of everyday application to ourselves.’<sup>49</sup> Like the Magi, the faithful should offer gold, incense, and myrrh, that is, love, prayer, and the mortification of the flesh to Christ.<sup>50</sup>

Then let us pray unto Almighty God that this day showed him to these kings [...], that at the reverence of this high and great feast he forgive us our trespasses and sins, and after this short life we may come to his everlasting bliss in heaven. Amen.<sup>51</sup>

As the above reading and interpretation of the many fascinating and seemingly mysterious figures and details in the central panel of the *Adoration of the Magi* triptych have attempted to demonstrate, Bosch’s references to a lawless pagan world do not reflect the obsession with evil so commonly imputed to him, but rather express the significance of the Feast of the Epiphany, that is hope of the forgiveness of sin and of eternal life.

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<sup>48</sup> Eph. 2:12: ‘That you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the conversation of Israel, and strangers to the testament, having no hope of the promise, and without God in this world.’

<sup>49</sup> Leo the Great (note 43).

<sup>50</sup> Jacobus de Voragine (note 26), p. 22: ‘The fourth for the gold signified direction or love; the incense, orison or prayer; the myrrh, of the flesh mortification. And these three things ought we offer to God.’

<sup>51</sup> Jacobus de Voragine (note 26), p. 23.