



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 The Shepherds' Adoration
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 34-40)
- 📖 The Magi's Adoration
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,
pp. 32-33)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Nativity in Art

The shepherds' and Magi's adoration of the Christ Child are key elements of the larger nativity cycle, the story of the birth of Jesus. How does the traditional iconography used to depict these two stories in art reveal the theological depths of the Nativity?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

Reflection

When we hear Luke's story of Christ's birth, how can we "resist being swept back into a sentimental stupor recalling Christmas days of past childhood?" Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons ask. For Luke's original auditors, however, the story's setting and characters were wild and unsavory, associated with danger. The angels' message of peace was proclaimed not over a quaint scene, but to violent people working in a countryside known as a haven for vagabonds and thieves. In the shepherds' rush to the Manger and their return "glorifying and praising God," we see the Messiah's power to lift up the lowly, despised, and violent.

But the shepherds were not the only group to adore the Christ child. The Magi—wise men, or astrologers, who were very different from the shepherds—were also summoned to Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-12). Their story, when put beside the Lukan account of the shepherds, emphasizes the radical inclusivity of Christ. Both the lowly, menial shepherds and the sophisticated, scholarly Magi were welcomed at the Manger to worship.

Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1483-1485) and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) integrate elements of traditional iconography to offer perceptive interpretations of these biblical stories. Hornik and Parsons discuss the following elements in Ghirlandaio's painting, which was influenced by Hugo van der Goes's Portinari Altarpiece.

- ▶ *The infant Christ is placed on Mary's soft cloak* to emphasize the intimacy and relationship between them, as opposed to the distance apparent in the Portinari Altarpiece. Mary is depicted not only as a woman reflecting on the Savior, but also as a mother watching over and praying for her son.
- ▶ *The lamb in the standing shepherd's arms* connects Christ's birth to his passion. It not only identifies the figure's occupation, but also symbolizes Christ's atoning sacrifice as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).
- ▶ *The use of a sarcophagus for the manger* is a unique, somewhat heavy-handed, allusion to Christ's death.
- ▶ *The inscriptions on the sarcophagus and the triumphal arch* introduce the theme of the successive reigns of the Hebrews, the Romans, and Christ. The inscription on the arch cites the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem, and the inscription on the Roman sarcophagus—"...the urn which contains me shall produce a God"—points to the victory of Christianity over the heathen world.

Gentile da Fabriano's altarpiece *Adoration of the Magi*, Hornik explains, is similarly full of meaning.



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- ▶ *That the altarpiece was designed for use in a sacristy (where the clergy robe themselves and prepare for Mass) is fitting: just as Christ became manifest to the Magi, he is revealed to the faithful in worship through the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper.*
- ▶ *The rapt attention of the ox, which is a traditional symbol for the Gentiles, emphasizes the devotion of the Gentile visitors as they remove their crowns and kneel to the newborn king.*
- ▶ *Christ's manifestation to the Magi, a supernatural event, is situated within amazingly precise observation of the natural world. Hornik calls attention to the predella, the horizontal panel beneath the central composition, where scenes of the shepherds' visit, the flight into Egypt, and the presentation in the Temple "instance a sophisticated use of atmosphere (the Nativity may be the first painted night scene) and the casting of shadow determined by an identifiable light source."*

Study Questions

1. Review Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* for iconographic elements. Do you notice any significant details that you missed before? How is the painting different from Hugo van der Goes's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, which greatly influenced it?
2. How does Ghirlandaio depict the political significance of the Nativity in *Adoration of the Shepherds*? Compare the artist's interpretation to the presentation of the political import of Christ's birth in the Gospel of Luke.
3. Both Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* use the background to provide temporal depth to the main story. Discuss the theological meaning of these elements in each painting.
4. What is the theological significance of the sophisticated use of light and shadow in the predella of *Adoration of the Magi*?

Departing Hymn: "A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep"

A Lamb is born among the sheep,
sing, sing nowell.
The shepherds' Shepherd lies asleep,
sing, sing nowell.
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
now sing, sing nowell.
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
now sing, sing nowell.

Eternity breaks into time,
sing, sing nowell,
while angel choirs sing songs sublime,
sing, sing nowell.

Refrain

The Light into the darkness shines,
sing, sing nowell,
as heaven now with earth combines,
sing, sing nowell.

Refrain

David W. Music (2011)
Tune: A LAMB IS BORN

The Nativity in Art

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (on Ghirlandaio's painting)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To survey the traditional iconography in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*.
2. To enrich understanding of the Nativity stories through the theological interpretations of them in these paintings.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christmas and Epiphany (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. Search online for detailed images of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1483-1485) and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) to enhance your discussion of the artwork.

Begin with a Story

In his novel *Helena*, based on the life of the Emperor Constantine's mother, Evelyn Waugh has Helena praise the Magi as exemplars of those who are "late comers" to Christ because of their sophistication and education. He writes:

"[Helena] forgot her quest and was dead to everything except the swaddled child long ago and those three royal sages who had come from so far to adore him.... 'Like me,' she said to them, 'you were late in coming. The shepherds were here long before; even the cattle. They had joined the chorus of angels before you were on your way. For you the primordial discipline of the heavens was relaxed and a new defiant light blazed amid the disconcerted stars.

"How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculating, where the shepherds had run barefoot! How odd you looked on the road, attended by what outlandish liveries, laden with such preposterous gifts!

"...You too found room before the manger. Your gifts were not needed, but they were accepted and put carefully by, for they were brought with love. In that new order of charity that had just come to life, there was room for you, too. You were not lower in the eyes of the holy family than the ox or the ass.

"You are my especial patrons,' said Helena, 'and patrons of all late-comers, of all who have a tedious journey to make to the truth, of all who are confused with knowledge and speculation, of all who through politeness make themselves partners in guilt, of all who stand in danger by reason of their talents....

"For His sake who did not reject your curious gifts, pray always for all the learned, the oblique, the delicate. Let them not be quite forgotten at the Throne of God when the simple come into their kingdom.'" (Evelyn Waugh, *Helena*, [Chicago, IL: Loyola Classics, 2005] 208-210)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for welcoming all people – Jews and Gentiles, lowly and exalted, shepherds and Magi – to worship him at his Nativity.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 2:1-20 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study is designed to be a hinge between your focus on the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, in which the stories of the shepherds and Magi respectively are featured. Through the study of art, Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons highlight theological emphases in and relationships between the stories of the shepherds and the Magi.

Alternatively, you may divide the material in this study, discussing Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* in your series of studies on Christmas, and discussing Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* later when you focus on the Epiphany season. If you do this, use the "Begin with a Story" feature with the latter study.

Study Questions

1. Ask members of the group to brainstorm a list of significant iconography, details, and elements of composition in Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds*. They might notice Jerusalem and Rome in the background; a bustling train of horsemen (presumably the Magi) headed towards the Manger; the sheaf of wheat beneath Christ's head (representing the Eucharist); symbols of Christ's death—the sarcophagus/Manger and goldfinch (associated, because of the thistle seeds it eats, with Christ's crown of thorns); the revealing postures and attitudes of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds; and so on.
Compare the composition of Ghirlandaio's painting with the altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes. Note the differing placements of Joseph, Mary, and Christ, and depictions of the shepherds. How do these artistic choices communicate theological interpretations of the story?
2. Ghirlandaio depicts successive reigns of the Hebrews, the Romans, and of Christ through iconographic elements: the arch representing the triumph of Rome's paganism over Judaism and the Hebrews, and the sarcophagus of Christ's Manger signifying the victory of Christianity over the heathen world. Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons say the artist "makes the audacious claim that the transition of dominance from the Romans to Christianity is to be found not in Emperor Constantine's conversion or his mighty Christian army, but rather in the birth of a child who is first adored by lowly shepherds rather than cosmopolitan Magi." For Ghirlandaio, Christianity triumphs not through political power, but the humility of Christ who condescends to become human and die on the cross.
Luke's interest in politics is more concerned with legitimizing Christianity, then a tiny Jewish messianic set, within the larger Roman Empire—"trying to forge a way for the movement to survive while at the same time holding true to its central tenets."
3. Hornik and Parsons interpret the background of Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* in this way: "The most distant hill on the right is believed to be Jerusalem with the Dome of the Rock visible. In the center of the background is a view of Rome, which includes the Torre delle Milizie and the mausoleum of Hadrian. Therefore, the two world empires, Hebrew and Roman, are now in the background to the beginning of Christ's new kingdom." In this visual depth the artist communicates temporal depth, not only representing the transition of empires, but also depicting the entourage of the Magi on their travels to Bethlehem. Discuss how the artist uses this depth to depict the all-encompassing invitation of the Incarnation.
4. Prepare a large image for members to study the three scenes in the predella of Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*. The scene on the left of the Nativity, Hornik writes, "may be the first painted night scene"; the shadows are cast by an identifiable light source—the glory of God surrounding the angels announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds. In the next two scenes—the flight into Egypt and the presentation of Jesus in the Temple—the Holy Family can be identified by their similar dress; the composition and lighting of these scenes are more traditional.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.