THE FIRST ADVENT IN PALESTINE

REVERSALS, RESISTANCE, AND THE ONGOING COMPLEXITY OF HOPE

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8

UNEXPECTED HOPE

Herod, Magi, and a Star

Bethlehem | Matthew 2:1–12

Travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem requires you to cross a checkpoint to pass through the separation wall between Israel and Palestine's West Bank. The first time I approached the checkpoint, I was in a tour bus with women from different backgrounds and various strands of the Christian tradition, eager to meet peacemakers in the region. Crossing into occupied territory usually means your bus is boarded by Israeli soldiers, rifles in hand—not what most expect on a journey to Bethlehem. For the women on the tour, it signaled that we were entering fraught space—that the West Bank, and whatever lay behind the separation wall, was dangerous.

But just past the checkpoint there unfolded a landscape familiar to me: inviting scenes of shops with goods stacked high and pouring out onto the street, some with fruit stands, others with legs of lamb or beef hanging from hooks. People bobbed and weaved around the displayed inventory and friendly shopkeepers. Men sat out

front of shops, playing games. Women surveyed produce and chatted. The streets brimmed with life, not unlike the East African streets I was accustomed to back home. As we drove along these narrow roads, I felt my shoulders drop and my breathing slow. There was nothing more to fear in Bethlehem than in my hometown or in any number of cities I've visited, where life brims even amid political strife.

Still, there was little doubt we'd crossed over into another kind of terrain: the red warning signs, bullet-holed walls, and uneven roads told the story of an occupied land, a less-resourced place.

On a subsequent visit, when I returned with Claude, our taxi driver, Naïef, offered to show us the Banksy graffiti painted across Bethlehem, starting with the well-known wall art of a man throwing not the Molotov cocktail you might expect, but a bouquet of flowers.[1] I'd seen the work cropped on postcards, so the surprise of seeing it at least ten feet tall on the side of a petrol station was awe-inspiring. It remains an iconic image of nonviolent resistance. Then Naïef took us to see smaller works across the city, including one of Mother Mary tossing hearts on a nondescript cinder wall, as well as the symbol of a dove in a flak jacket carrying an olive branch at the center of a busy intersection[2]—each one an artistic missive scribbling a message of hope against the hard gray of occupation.

After we saw the Banksy flower piece, our new friend took us to the Walled Off Hotel to view more artwork by the artist.[3] At the hotel, we shared tea in bone china cups on a lovely patio an arm's length from the separation wall, the dissonance purposeful and clear. Naïef told us what life was like growing up in Bethlehem before the wall. As he watched its construction cutting through Hebron Street, he became aware of the immediate and long-term separation that would prevent his family from visiting Jerusalem from that time on. We mused in hope about a day when the wall would come down, like the Berlin Wall had, and he could visit Jerusalem again.

Next, Naïef drove us to Shepherds' Field, the place he believes Jesus was born. And for the best look at Bethlehem, he drove us up to Herodium. He raved about the view, which, of course, was Herod's point. An ancient surveillance state required such a panoramic perspective of the population to track their movements and anticipate any resistance.

Despite all Herod's surveillance efforts, though, he never did see the star.

In his advent narrative, Matthew describes that bright star appearing, pointing to a promise for all occupied lands from west to east, ancient and contemporary. And those in this account who come from the East, from another land and religious tradition—the magi—are the ones who crack open our understanding about hope in

hard places, about resistance, and about the necessity of stars.

Occupied territories like Bethlehem bristle with tension. The air is thick with the fragrance of oranges and olives, but also with the political dynamics that burden residents and put perceptive visitors in a state of constant vigilance. But even amid these troubled communities, tangible signs of hope are found, energizing resistance and subversive action.

When pilgrims travel, as the magi did, from faraway places in a spirit of solidarity, hungry for an infusion of hope to bring back to their own hard landscape, Matthew's narrative comes alive with the fraught political climate that nonetheless hosts hope, not only for its inhabitants, but for the wise wayfarers from the East.

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For centuries, opposition to Hellenization had reached beyond the West into the eastern regions. When Alexander the Great defeated the Persians in 330 BCE, he brought the influences of the West to their world. Even as subsequent generations longed for a return to indigenous culture and Persian leadership, the discontent did not materialize into a peasant movement against Greek economic exploitation, as it did in Palestine. Still, many elites, like the magi, carried within themselves a spirit of resistance to the Hellenization of their land.[4]

Like many in the ancient Near East, Persians believed that kings were connected to divinity. To claim a foreign king was to dethrone not merely their own political leader but their god. Many people held a deep desire to return to rulers who would respect their Persian kin and ways—and their god.

This is the landscape the magi traveled, navigating peril and promise. As sages who stewarded wisdom as well as other kinds of local and civic knowledge, magi had access to power in cultivating resistance traditions in Persian lands. They pushed against the Hellenization of their culture and religion, working for a future restoration.[5] And a rising star in the sky gave them reason to believe regime change was possible. They were even willing to go westward, like Abraham of Ur, to a place they did not know—a move likely rooted in resistance. Perhaps in the sign of an indigenous king to be restored to the Judean throne, they recognized a hope not unlike their own for a restored Persian ruler. The magi discerned the possibility of hope.

The magi followed with openness and hunger, unaware of where the star would ultimately lead. Going toward the west, toward enemy territory, took courage. Against the headwinds of the ruling regime in Persia and generations of subjugation, they slipped away to find and honor another ruler. When the star took them to Herod's doorstep, they entered undaunted. We will soon learn that they resisted collaborating with that ruler too.

Then, following the star again, they came to a small village in Judea, an outpost of Rome's empire. There they found the young king. They honored him, recognizing his authority. They presented gifts, including Persian gold, known to be a prized commodity in the ancient Near East and internationally.[6] That the magi traveled to find a new king, carrying gold along with them, points to the political freight of their mission. Their travel, their gifts, their homage to the Bethlehemite king pointed to possible treason. But they weren't looking in Judea for a king for themselves, just perhaps for one who could thwart the Hellenizing overlords of the West and so bolster their hope: for if it could happen in Judea, it could happen in Persia.

They found the king in a most unexpected place. The elite functionaries must have been surprised that the star guided them to such an ordinary, even lowly family. But they believed this child was the origin of a new regime that might also signal their future freedom. And they worshipped him.

Herod had requested that they return with news. Instead, they went home another way, taking with them another treason-worthy gift: new hope.

As the original superpower of the ancient Near East, Persia had been expansive and wealthy.[7] After defeat by Alexander the Great, Persians, and the magi as their priestly and political connective tissue, harbored deep memories of their once-dominant kingdom.

Some of the people welcomed the Greek imperial influence even as it unraveled local culture and religions. Others saw resistance as futile, so they accepted Hellenistic ways. But the magi held on to traditions and their national identity. What did they have but stories, wisdom, relationships, and occasional access to elite leaders? Without a Persian king, their influence had waned. However, their skills, connections, and continued proximity to informal power brokers allowed them to build a small measure of clandestine subversion. The magi kept stories alive and propagated prophecies in and beyond Persian lands. And it was their resistance work in their own homeland that brought them to this intersection with the Holy Family.

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For the people of Persia, peace and local rule were not durable. Cyrus the Great had inaugurated his own grand peace—perhaps the first that Persians had known—in 550 BCE. His reign over Persia, from Central Asia to Mesopotamia and stretching as far as Egypt, has been called the Pax Persica for the time of relative peace across the lands he ruled.[8] The peace lasted about two hundred years, ending with the arrival of Alexander the Great from Macedonia. Whether the peaceful rule was delivered by Cyrus or Caesar, or the short-lived season of self-rule by the Maccabees, the militaristic and economic violence wrought by empires never delivered liberation

for all. What remained was the longing for a lasting peace without imperial oppression.

As the Persians yearned for peace, so did the people of Roman Palestine. And God excluded neither from the signs and wonders of the first advent. Centuries after the end of the Persian peace, a star rose in the east. It rose in the aftermath of Persia's days as the first superpower and rose over the ashes of their cities burned and temples pillaged by Macedonia. The star appeared as the magi were likely on the cusp of giving up hope that Persian culture and faith could be saved. Yet they kept looking at the skies and retelling the prophecies of an indigenous leader coming to the throne again. When that star rose, so did their hopes.

Some ancients thought of stars as celestial beings. And some call magi astrologers, minders of the stars. So the connection of stars and magi in Matthew's narrative seems natural. Outside forces, in the sky and in the East, conspired to participate in the advent of God on earth.

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Matthew's Gospel announces the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem as happening during the reign of Herod, the same ruler whose cadre of advisors missed the birth announcement in the sky. Perhaps building projects and maintaining the status quo had distracted them.

But when that star rose, sages from the East set off from Persia hungry for hope. They believed, like most

at that time, that the star likely indicated the birth of a significant person—a ruler, perhaps. Maybe as they followed it, moving toward the west, then toward Judea, then homing in on the city of Jerusalem, where they met Herod, they began to discern that the king they sought was the King of the Jews. Perhaps they were familiar with Jewish prophecies and saw them as coinciding with their hopes for liberation in their own homeland.

Entry through the city gates of Jerusalem must have made clear that this was very much Herod's world. As foreign dignitaries of sorts, they presented themselves at the palace, where they could expect to be received by the ruler. Magi were not mere religious sages. They were men of stature, conversant with and perceptive about the machinations of empires and transitions of power. When magi spoke, people listened—because thrones might be at stake.

"Where is the new King of the Jews?" the magi asked Herod, the current king of the Jews. Unnerved by the question of a rival king, especially coming from visitors outside his realm, Herod leaned in and listened. "We saw his star and have come to worship him"—*worship* being the familiar expression for showing homage to a political superior.[9] That they reserved their tribute for the new king, not Herod, would have troubled him further, since he had known nothing to that point of a potential usurper. Eager to know the true nature and location of the threat to his throne, he asked what else they knew

about this king. This was not an innocent inquiry about his successor, but a plot emerging on the spot to protect his power by removing anyone who stood in his way, as he had done with his brother-in-law, Aristobulus III.[10]

Herod brought in his scribes and priests to ask them where this king was to be born. *Where* was the operative word. Where—so the magi could worship. Where—so Herod could eliminate the threat. The advisors told him of the prophecy of Micah, that a child was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea.[11] The outsiders may have known the time, but the insiders knew the place.

Herod passed that information on to the magi, even as he inquired further about the star and calculated his next move. He instructed the sages to report back, ostensibly so he could join them in honoring the new king.

After the magi took their leave, Herod gathered his circle of advisors, men both religious and political who benefited from Herod's tenure. All felt threatened—or, as Matthew tells it, frightened—by the news. *Frightened*, similar to how Zechariah and Mary had been troubled by Gabriel's sudden appearance. But here the fear is not a well-placed response to God's messenger, but the fear associated with a looming loss of privilege. A new king would mean reconsidering current loyalties and recalibrating allegiances, an upending of established economic arrangements.

The magi left Jerusalem, but they didn't need to rely on the words of Herod's advisors, as the very star they

had followed from the East reappeared. Once again, they rejoiced at the celestial guide, which now led them to the small town of Bethlehem. The star aligned over the house where Joseph and Mary were living with their son. Even the cosmos conspired to reveal the political winds changing with the advent of the new king.

When we went to Banksy's Walled Off Hotel, I ventured upstairs to the gallery and viewed the collection of Palestinian art housed on site. There, for the first time, I encountered the work of Sliman Mansour. He offers a visual connection to aspects of Palestinian culture in ways that open up ideas, rather than reducing them to tropes.

Mansour entered the world in a small town just north of Ramallah, a year before the State of Israel was formed. When he was barely four years old, his father's death necessitated Mansour's and his mother's move to Jerusalem. When he was older, he moved just south to Bethlehem, where he attended the Evangelical Lutheran School. But what he remembers vividly—and what shows up in his paintings in the work of cultural memory-keeping—are the days spent with his grandmother in the Palestinian countryside. With only basic materials at hand, beginning with the mud she formed from the land, she made beehives and chicken coops. No wonder those memories lived on in Mansour's imagination for years

to come. In his visits he also listened to his grandfather speak of his love for Palestinian literature and folklore, words and ideas that saturated the young boy's mind. In Mansour's earliest years the influences of place, soil, and story began to shape his understanding and impact his artmaking.

Before Mansour could board a plane to realize his dream of attending the Chicago Art Institute, the Six-Day War broke out. Life as he knew it ended.[12] It was in the heart of occupied Jerusalem that he was forced to continue his art education. Instead of the opportunity to flee subjugated space, he now learned to navigate it and even create new works in a place of tension.

During the occupation of his homeland, the place of his family history and creativity, Mansour discovered an unexpected element emerging for his artwork as Palestine became, as he said in an interview, a land "full of contradiction and full of problems."[13] When, in the 1960s and '70s, the Israeli administration isolated artists from one another and from the international arts community, Mansour deepened his work with the politics of place and local culture, infusing it with resistance. Even as the government confiscated art and restricted artists' movements within Palestine, his artistic sensibilities became more fully shaped through the land, the people, the literature, the call for justice, and the mud.

At one point, as Mansour tells it, he was taken to police headquarters and questioned. Asked why he

created political art—art that depicted the artifacts of Palestinian life like olive trees, villages, people in traditional dress, and Jerusalem—he listened as an officer "suggested" to him, "Why not just paint pretty flowers? Even I would buy one of your paintings." But that did not suit Mansour. The officer made it clear that artists like him were not even allowed to use the colors of their flag (black, red, green, and white) in any of their artwork. "How can we paint a watermelon, then?" one fellow artist asked. "You can't," came the response.[14]

Upon learning of this exchange, Palestinian artists began painting watermelons as a symbol of resistance to the occupation. And Mansour continued creating images that reflected the reality he remembered from the past and experienced in the present.

I stood in front of Mansour's canvases in the gallery and saw the Palestinian land awash in color, telling the story of a good life that was, and that could be again on the other side of occupation. Terraced olive groves, a favorite theme, manifested a familiar feature of the landscape I'd come to love. Each brushstroke revealed a connection to this tree, tended with fidelity by families from generation to generation. The presence of the olive tree in Mansour's works told of the fruit's necessity, its durability, even its refusal to fade away under decades of hardship. It resonated with the life I witnessed as I traveled the West Bank—abundant orchards, bowls piled with olives on the breakfast table, golden olive oil flooding

plates of fresh labneh and za'atar. The olive trees spoke of life despite hardship.

One recent painting showed a terraced grove torn asunder, trees inverted and set aflame with burnished hues. This, Mansour seems to say, is how the land feels now. Yet the trees remain even in their distress connected to the land as a perpetual symbol of resistance. There remains a stubborn hope, even as the orchards burn. In Mansour's work I see another route home, much like in the story of the magi. This work is a way to tell hard truths about life and loss. It creates room for lament, but also hope for a future shaped by Advent's peace, where trauma can be transformed and goodness reclaimed by those who have never stopped loving and stewarding their homeland.

As the conflict between occupation and Palestinian artists intensified in the decades following the Six-Day War, artists like Mansour were emboldened to create fresh work reflecting the truth of their life in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. They created prints for posters and wider distribution. They created smaller works of art that could be smuggled in cars, circulated from place to place to avoid the inevitable confiscation.[15]

More than once in this season Mansour was put in prison by Israeli officers for incitement.[16] Studio 74, his art gallery in Ramallah, was shut down and all artwork on display confiscated four hours into a new exhibit. Still, he created. Still, he told the truth of his history.

Then the Intifada broke out across the West Bank in 1987, a resistance movement sprouting from the anguish of the Palestinian people.[17] They boycotted Israeli goods. Mansour and his colleagues[18] eschewed Israeli art supplies and opted for indigenous materials like wood, leather, henna, found objects, and mud as a sign of both solidarity and resistance.

Mansour transformed the mud of his youth into material that reflected the cracked reality of life under occupation. His artwork became known around the globe.

"The life you live here forces you to deal with these problems, and little by little, you find yourself a political artist," Mansour said about his evolution into that role. "It was not a decision I made," he added. But his art gives Palestinian people everywhere "a home, homeland, and future."[19]

Whether seen in the West Bank or the diaspora, Mansour's art shines like the star over a humble home in Bethlehem, hope in the dark of troubled landscapes the world over. Indeed, as the occupation prompted creative responses and a deeper seeing from Mansour and other artists of the region, they all arose like guiding stars, pointing the way.[20]

Whether in Banksy's graffiti on a petrol station or at a random intersection, or in Mansour's work in cultural memory and symbols of hope displayed at the Walled Off Hotel art gallery, I saw that the art tells the story of the

current Herod and his collaborators and enforcers. Here, the advent storytellers are honest about Herod, and also honest about the presence of stars that we follow to find hope in hard places.

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Artwork like Mansour's speaks to political reckoning. It is the kind of reckoning we also witness in the Matthew narrative, as the magi offer gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Holy Family.[21] As they entered the home, the magi greeted the mother and child, then prostrated themselves in a gesture of humility and honor by which they acknowledged the *true* King of the Jews. To reduce this act to only a religious ritual or a spiritual moment misses the point—the point that made Herod shudder. The magi dared to worship a rival ruler; they dared to acknowledge him as the true heir to the title "king."

When the magi left the house, they found a place to stay the night. A dream warned them of Herod's intentions, which they had likely suspected already. They would not play into Herod's hands nor put the young king in peril.

Taking leave of Bethlehem of Judea, the magi followed an alternate route home, a clandestine exit—their journey made, this time, without the assistance of a star.

In the telling of Advent, it's easy to miss the political intrigue in the magi's visit to the child. Often the story is told as a worship narrative, in which foreign sages travel

from the East to worship Jesus, validating his place as the true Prince of Peace. But truer to this story is a star, a birth, a narrative that sends the magi home with visions of liberation for their land too.

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The first advent delivered a sign of tangible hope for people near and far: Judeans, Galileans, Persians. Maybe in Bethlehem, today a city of church bells alongside calls to prayer, this hope is more tangible among Christians and Muslims living as neighbors—embodying the lingering hope on offer for all, still.

In today's wearied world, hungry from east to west with the hunger of mági and shepherds alike for relief to come from a different kind of king, another sort of peace is familiar to us. It's a hunger that artists like Sliman Mansour portray as they, like stars, energize our resistance and offer direction to our deepest hopes.

The star of the first advent connects to ordinary people and a hard political and economic landscape. It is, for outsiders, a guide to a newborn king, a reminder that if hope can be birthed in Judea, it can be birthed in Persia too.