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Decolonising wisdom: Re-reading the Magi as professional knowers beyond Israel in Matthew 2:1–12

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This article offers a decolonial rereading of the Magi in Matthew 2:1–12 as legitimate professional knowers whose epistemic authority is affirmed within the biblical text. Often regarded as marginal figures, the Magi nonetheless play a decisive role by recognising Christ's birth through disciplined cosmological knowledge, even before Jerusalem's elites do. Drawing on decolonial theory, postcolonial biblical interpretation and epistemic justice, the study critiques dominant Israel-centred epistemologies that marginalise non-Israelite and Indigenous knowledge. It argues that Matthew presents the Magi as trained experts whose ways of knowing are guided, not rejected, by divine revelation. In dialogue with African and Basotho epistemologies, the article shows that epistemic plurality is intrinsic to scripture. The Magi thus challenge theological monopolies and open space for Indigenous knowledges as partners in contemporary theology and religious education. This rereading calls for inclusive pedagogies that honour epistemic diversity and foster intercultural dialogue. The study contributes to decolonial biblical scholarship by demonstrating how both scripturally affirmed and theologically necessary forms of epistemic plurality challenge inherited monopolies of theological authority.

Contribution: This article advances decolonial biblical scholarship by reframing the Magi in Matthew 2:1–12 as divinely affirmed professional knowers. It foregrounds epistemic plurality within the biblical text and brings this insight into dialogue with African, particularly Basotho, epistemologies.

Keywords: African theology; Basotho cosmology; coloniality of knowledge; decolonial biblical interpretation; epistemic justice; Indigenous knowledge; Magi; Matthew 2.

Introduction

The narrative of the Magi in Matthew 2:1–12 occupies a marginal, yet theologically decisive position within the Christian canon. Brief and easily overshadowed by more dominant Christological texts, the episode nevertheless performs a critical theological function within Matthew's infancy narrative (Willis 2013). It introduces non-Israelite sages, foreign professionals trained in the interpretation of cosmic signs, who recognise and respond to the birth of Jesus before Jerusalem's political authorities or religious elites. Here, 'professional' denotes socially recognised and disciplined expertise in antiquity (Hein 2020:45–46; Ossendrijver 2015:228–229; Sim 1999:991–992). It refers to sustained training and practice rather than modern institutional credentialing or certification. In doing so, the text destabilises assumptions about the location of legitimate theological knowledge and anticipates Matthew's wider concern with the inclusion of outsiders in God's salvific purposes (cf. Mt 8:11; 28:19).

Despite this narrative significance, dominant traditions of biblical interpretation have often failed to take seriously the epistemic status of the Magi. Historical-critical and theological readings have tended to privilege Israel-centred, scriptural and later ecclesial forms of knowing, while treating the Magi's knowledge as either symbolic, preparatory or theologically inferior. As postcolonial biblical scholars have noted, such interpretive hierarchies mirror broader patterns in which Christian theology authorises certain epistemologies while marginalising others (Sugirtharajah 2001:222–225, 2012:171–172). The Magi are thus frequently romanticised as exotic visitors or reduced to narrative devices for Gentile inclusion, rather than recognised as professional knowers whose expertise is both disciplined and divinely affirmed.

This marginalisation of non-Israelite knowledge cannot be separated from the coloniality of power and knowledge that continues to shape theological discourse. Quijano (2000:541) argues that coloniality operates by naturalising Eurocentric epistemologies as universal while rendering other knowledge systems local, irrational or primitive. Mignolo (2011:159–163) extends this critique by demonstrating how Christian theology became complicit in epistemic domination, positioning itself as the sole arbiter of truth and revelation. Within such a framework, biblical texts are often read in ways that reinforce epistemic monopolies rather than expose their fragility. A decolonial rereading of Matthew 2, therefore, is not merely an exegetical exercise, but an intervention into the politics of theological knowledge production.

From a decolonial perspective, the Magi narrative offers a counter-epistemology within the biblical text itself. Matthew portrays the Magi as learned specialists, likely astrologer-astronomers or court scholars from the East, whose disciplined reading of the cosmos leads them to theological truth (Davies & Allison 1988:228–229; France 2007:125). Their knowledge does not derive from Israel's scriptures, yet it proves sufficient to discern the birth of the Messiah. Ironically, it is the Jerusalem elites, custodians of the written tradition, who possess textual information but fail to act upon it. As Luz (2007:113–115) observes, this narrative reversal exposes a tension between possessing religious knowledge and embodying discernment.

Reading the Magi as legitimate professional knowers has particular resonance within African contexts, including Basotho epistemologies, where knowledge is often mediated through cosmology, communal memory and embodied practice rather than solely through written texts. Basotho Indigenous knowledge systems have long recognised the cosmos, ancestral wisdom and ritual specialists as legitimate sources of moral and spiritual insight (Mapesela 2004:321–323). Yet, under missionary and colonial Christianity, such epistemologies were frequently dismissed as pagan, superstitious or incompatible with Christian faith. The Magi narrative challenges this dismissal by presenting cosmological knowledge as a site of divine encounter rather than theological error.

By foregrounding the Magi's epistemic integrity, this study seeks to contribute to African and decolonial theologies that resist the reduction of Christianity to a single cultural or epistemological form. As Sugirtharajah (2012:171–172) argues, the Bible itself contains multiple epistemic voices that resist theological closure. In this light, the Magi may be read as biblical prototypes of what African theology has long asserted: that God's self-disclosure is not confined to one people, one text or one mode of knowing.

The aim of this article is therefore to reread the Magi as legitimate professional knowers whose epistemic authority is affirmed within Matthew's Gospel. The purpose of such a rereading is to challenge colonial and exclusivist models of theological knowledge by opening space for the recognition of Indigenous and African epistemologies as dialogical partners in theological reflection. The study is guided by the following research questions: *How are the Magi portrayed as professional knowers in Matthew's Gospel, and what forms of expertise and discernment do they embody? What does their recognition of Christ reveal about the plurality of legitimate epistemologies affirmed within the biblical text? Finally, how does a decolonial reading of the Magi disrupt Christian monopolies on theological knowledge and reframe contemporary theological engagement in African contexts such as Lesotho?*

Theoretical framework: Decoloniality and epistemic justice

While postcolonial and decolonial approaches share critical concerns, this study primarily adopts a decolonial orientation because of its focus on epistemic authority and knowledge hierarchies. It is grounded in decolonial theory and the concept of epistemic justice, which together provide a critical lens for interrogating how theological knowledge is produced, authorised and marginalised. Decoloniality, as articulated by Aníbal Quijano (2000) and further developed by Walter Mignolo (2011), exposes the enduring structures of power that outlived formal colonialism and continue to shape knowledge hierarchies within modernity. For Quijano (2000:533), coloniality of power operates by classifying peoples, cultures and knowledges according to a Eurocentric matrix that privileges Western rationality while rendering other epistemologies inferior or derivative. Knowledge is never neutral. It is deeply entangled with historical processes of domination and exclusion.

Mignolo (2011:168) extends Quijano's insight by emphasising the coloniality of knowledge as a theological and epistemic project. He argues that Western Christianity played a central role in shaping a global epistemic order in which certain forms of knowledge—particularly textual, doctrinal, and institutional approaches—were universalized and treated as normative. This epistemic universalism was sustained through the suppression or domestication of alternative knowledge systems, especially those rooted in cosmology, ritual practice and embodied experience. Decoloniality therefore calls not merely for the inclusion of marginal voices, but for a fundamental rethinking of what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is authorised to produce it.

Applied to biblical interpretation, decolonial theory reveals how Western Christian theology has frequently universalised its own epistemological assumptions. Historical-critical methods, confessional readings and ecclesial traditions have often been treated as neutral or objective, while Indigenous, African and non-Western interpretive frameworks are regarded as contextual or secondary (Sugirtharajah 2012:68). This dynamic has shaped the interpretation of biblical texts themselves, privileging Israel-centred, scriptural and clerical epistemologies while marginalising narrative moments that affirm alternative modes of knowing. As a result, texts such as Matthew 2:1–12 are often read through a theological lens that neutralises their epistemic challenge.

To address this imbalance, the study draws on the concept of epistemic justice, particularly as articulated by Miranda Fricker (2007:1). Epistemic justice concerns the fair recognition of individuals and communities as knowers and the ethical responsibility to resist forms of epistemic injustice that undermine their credibility or interpretive resources. Fricker (2007:17, 147) identifies testimonial injustice, where speakers are discredited because of prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where marginalised groups lack recognised interpretive frameworks to make sense of their experiences. In theological contexts, epistemic injustice occurs when certain knowledge systems are dismissed not on theological grounds, but because they fall outside authorised epistemic norms.

Epistemic justice provides a crucial bridge within a decolonial framework between historically dominant Western epistemologies and marginalised Indigenous ways of knowing. It enables a critical reassessment of whose knowledge is affirmed within the biblical text and how interpretive traditions have either honoured or silenced that affirmation. Recognising non-dominant epistemologies is not an act of theological relativism, but an ethical and hermeneutical responsibility grounded in the plurality already present within scripture itself (Okon Ating, Umotong & Ignatius 2025:135).

Within this framework, the Magi function as a biblical case study of epistemic plurality sanctioned by divine revelation. Matthew's Gospel presents them as professional knowers whose disciplined engagement with the cosmos leads them to Christ. Their knowledge, though external to Israel's scriptural tradition, is neither corrected nor condemned by the narrative; rather, it is guided, affirmed and ultimately integrated into the story of salvation. God communicates with the Magi through the same epistemic structures they utilise, such as astral observation and dream interpretation, thereby validating their way of knowing and understanding the world. (Mt 2:2, 12) (Powell 2000:48).

From a decolonial and epistemic justice perspective, this narrative disrupts theological monopolies on knowledge and challenges the assumption that divine revelation is mediated through a single epistemic tradition. The Magi embody a form of knowing that is professional, ethical and responsive to divine interruption, offering a biblical precedent for recognising Indigenous and African epistemologies as sites of genuine theological insight. In contexts such as Lesotho, where Basotho cosmological and ritual knowledge has been historically marginalised by missionary Christianity, the Magi narrative invites a re-evaluation of theological authority and calls for a more plural, dialogical approach to knowing God.

Research methods and design

The methodology proceeds in four stages: (1) a close narrative-critical analysis of Matthew 2:1–12, attending to plot development, characterisation and epistemic contrast between competing modes of knowing; (2) the application of a decolonial framework to interrogate hierarchies of authorised knowledge and the privileging of Israel-centred epistemologies; (3) evaluation through the lens of epistemic justice, examining how credibility, recognition and authority are differentially assigned to various knowers; and (4) a dialogical engagement with African, particularly Basotho, epistemologies grounded in cosmology, initiation and ancestral mediation.

The analysis examines how the Magi, Herod and Jerusalem's religious elites are constructed as knowers, and how their respective forms of knowledge are narratively evaluated. Historical-critical scholarship on the *magoi* as astrologer-astronomers and learned specialists is engaged heuristically to clarify the plausibility and professional character of their epistemic role (Davies & Allison 1988; France 2007), without re-inscribing Western interpretive dominance.

The reading is informed by decolonial theory and the concept of epistemic justice, which are employed in a complementary manner: the former to expose structures of epistemic hierarchy, and the latter to assess the distribution of credibility and recognition within the text and its interpretive history. This combined lens enables a critical rereading of Matthew 2 as a potential challenge to epistemic monopolies and opens space to reassess the Magi's epistemic status within the narrative.

Finally, the study places the Matthean narrative in dialogical comparison with Basotho Indigenous epistemologies through a comparative theological approach. This engagement draws on secondary anthropological and theological sources and does not claim primary ethnographic research. Its aim is to illuminate epistemological resonances rather than construct direct cultural analogies.

Overall, the methodology adopts a critically dialogical approach in which both the biblical text and Indigenous epistemologies are brought into mutual interrogation, thereby challenging inherited assumptions about theological knowledge and authority.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

The Magi in Matthew 2: Textual and historical considerations

Matthew's reference to the μάγοι [*magoi*] in 2:1–12 immediately situates the narrative within a complex historical and epistemic world. The Greek term μάγοι [*magoi*] does not denote kings, as later Christian tradition would have it, but refers more broadly to learned specialists associated with the interpretation of signs, particularly within Persian, Babylonian and wider Eastern intellectual traditions. As indicated in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

and Other Early Christian Literature (Bauer et al. 2000:608–609), μάγος [*magos*, pl. *magoi*] can refer to 'wise men', 'astrologers', or 'magicians', often linked to the interpretation of dreams and celestial phenomena. This semantic range is also reflected within early Christian literature: Acts 8:9–24 presents Simon Magus as a practitioner of magical arts, while Acts 13:6–11 describes Elymas as a *magos* associated with false prophecy. Beyond the New Testament, texts such as the *Didache* (Holmes 2007:355–359) and *The Shepherd of Hermas* (Holmes 2007:468–471) reflect broader concerns about distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate forms of spiritual or esoteric knowledge.

Similarly, *A Greek–English Lexicon* (Liddell & Scott 1996:1073) traces the term to Persian origins, denoting members of a priestly class skilled in ritual practice, astronomy and the reading of omens. Classical sources therefore describe the μάγοι as astronomers, astrologers, scholars, and ritual experts whose professional role involved observing the movements of celestial bodies and interpreting their significance for earthly affairs (Davies & Allison 1988: 224–225; France 2007:63–64). Matthew's use of this term therefore signals recognised scholarly and ritual expertise rather than superstition or popular mysticism, positioning the μάγοι as credible epistemic agents whose disciplined knowledge enables them to perceive and respond to the significance of Jesus' birth even before Jerusalem's religious elites.

The Magi's journey to Jerusalem is precipitated by their observation and interpretation of a star, a detail that underscores their professional identity as expert readers of cosmic signs. In antiquity, astronomy and astrology were not sharply divided disciplines; both formed part of a coherent cosmological framework in which the heavens were understood to communicate meaning (Hughes 2015:112). Matthew does not foreground or interrogate this epistemology; rather, the narrative presupposes its legitimacy and presents the Magi's interpretive competence as sufficient to initiate a journey that culminates in recognising Christ. Their knowledge is not presented as complete or infallible, but it is shown to be reliable enough to lead them towards the locus of divine revelation.

Crucially, Matthew constructs a deliberate contrast between the Magi and the political and religious authorities in Jerusalem. Herod, though positioned at the centre of political and scriptural knowledge, responds to the Magi's inquiry with anxiety and manipulation. The narrative thus juxtaposes authorised, text-based knowledge with the Magi's cosmological interpretive practice, highlighting differing modes of recognition rather than a simple absence of knowledge. The chief priests and scribes, for their part, possess direct access to Israel's scriptures and can accurately cite Micah 5:2 regarding the Messiah's birthplace (De Jong 2015:274). Yet, despite this textual knowledge, they do not accompany the Magi to Bethlehem nor respond with worship or obedience. As Luz (2007:74) observes, Matthew exposes a disjunction between scriptural literacy and faithful action.

This contrast reveals a central irony in Matthew's narrative strategy. Outsiders, equipped with non-Israelite epistemologies, recognise the significance of Jesus' birth and respond with costly commitment, while insiders, those institutionally authorised as guardians of religious knowledge, remain passive, fearful or hostile. The Magi travel great distances, offer gifts and ultimately alter their route in obedience to divine warning. Herod, by contrast, mobilises violence, and the religious elite remain inert. The narrative thus subverts expectations about where true theological insight resides (De Jong 2015:273).

From a decolonial perspective, this irony carries profound epistemic implications. Matthew's Gospel does not depict the Magi as deficient knowers who must abandon their epistemology in favour of Israel's tradition. Instead, their way of knowing is affirmed and redirected through forms of communication meaningful within their epistemic world. They are guided by the star and, as the text explicitly notes, warned in a dream. Within the narrative's theological horizon, these forms of guidance can be understood as divine accommodation to the Magi's epistemic world (Mt 2:2, 12). This stands in stark contrast to later theological traditions that would dismiss cosmological or ritual knowledge as incompatible with Christian faith (De Jong 2015:288).

By presenting the Magi as effective knowers and the Jerusalem elite as textually informed, yet narratively unresponsive, the Gospel of Matthew challenges any theology that equates religious authority with institutional proximity or textual possession, instead foregrounding the distinction between epistemic legitimacy and epistemic performance. The Magi narrative thus anticipates the Gospel's broader critique of religious power and foreshadows its affirmation of marginalised knowers (cf. Mt 11:25; 21:31) (Keener 1999:96). For contemporary readers, particularly in contexts where Indigenous and African epistemologies have been historically delegitimised, this text offers a powerful biblical precedent for recognising wisdom beyond established theological centres. By affirming the Magi's professional expertise, Matthew disrupts epistemic hierarchies that have historically marginalised non-Israelite or Indigenous knowers.

The Magi as professional knowers

Within this historical setting, the Magi's knowledge can be analysed in terms of disciplined observation, interpretive skill and ethical responsibility. To describe the Magi as *professional knowers* is to recognise that their knowledge is neither accidental nor purely intuitive, but grounded in disciplined practice, interpretive skill and ethical responsibility. While the term '*professional*' is heuristic, it reflects historically attested structures of specialised training and recognised scholarly authority in ancient Near Eastern *magoi* traditions. In the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds, professional knowing referred to socially recognised expertise acquired through training and sustained practice (Rochberg 2004:12–13). The *magoi* in Matthew 2 function within this framework as specialists in cosmological

interpretation, a role well attested in Persian and Babylonian contexts (Davies & Allison 1988:225–227; France 2007:63–64).

To further appreciate their professional status, it is important to consider the broader cultural and institutional setting of the *magoi*. In Persian and Babylonian societies, the *magoi* occupied esteemed positions as court astrologers, astronomers and ritual experts who underwent rigorous training in astronomical observation, calendrical calculation and divinatory practices (Gutas 1998:9; Rochberg 2004:12, 30). Their knowledge was not merely theoretical but deeply embedded in state and religious institutions, granting them significant social authority and responsibility for interpreting cosmic signs that guided royal decisions and public rituals (Barton 1994:43). Ukpong (2002:25–28) emphasises that knowledge is inherently contextual and socially embedded, while West (2003:2–5) similarly highlights that meaning-making practices are always located within social and ideological contexts. In addition, Dube (2000:3–6) draws attention to the ways in which imperial contexts shape, but do not invalidate, alternative forms of epistemic authority. These insights underscore that the Magi's expertise was formalised, disciplined and socially sanctioned, reinforcing Matthew's portrayal of them as legitimate professional knowers rather than peripheral or mystical figures. Such a context enriches the understanding of the Magi's epistemic authority as grounded in long-standing traditions of scholarly and ritual expertise (France 2007:64).

The Magi firstly demonstrate disciplined observational expertise. Their recognition of the star is not portrayed as a miraculous insight granted indiscriminately, but as the result of trained attentiveness to celestial phenomena. As Luz (2007:111) notes, Matthew assumes rather than explains the Magi's epistemic competence, suggesting that their form of knowing is intelligible and credible within the narrative world of the Gospel. Ukpong (2002:25–28) similarly emphasises that knowledge is always socially and culturally situated, arising from embodied competence within specific contexts rather than abstract universality. In the same vein, West (2003:2–5) underscores that meaning-making is rooted in concrete practices of interpretation shaped by social location and community-based knowledge systems. Read through these lenses, the Magi's observational skill can be understood as a culturally and institutionally formed epistemic practice, not merely individual intuition. The star is meaningful precisely because the Magi possess the professional capacity to read it within their established cosmological framework.

Secondly, the Magi demonstrate interpretive skill. Observation alone does not yield meaning; it requires hermeneutical competence. The Magi interpret the star as signalling the birth of a king and act decisively on that interpretation by undertaking a long and costly journey. Their knowledge is therefore practical and performative, oriented towards truth and response rather than speculation (France 2007:63). Ukpong (2002:25–28) similarly emphasises that interpretation is always contextually generated, arising from socially embedded frameworks of meaning rather than abstract or neutral reasoning, while West (2003:2–5) highlights that interpretive competence is formed within concrete communities where knowledge is practised, negotiated and enacted. Read in this light, the Magi's interpretive act reflects not only individual cognition but also a socially situated epistemic practice shaped by established cosmological traditions.

Thirdly, the Magi embody ethical responsibility, a core dimension of professional integrity. Their willingness to travel, to engage political authority and to offer costly gifts reflects an ethic of accountability to the truth they have discerned. When warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they revise their course of action (Mt 2:12). This revision demonstrates epistemic humility, a readiness to allow new revelation to correct previous assumptions (Fricker 2007:91). In postcolonial perspective, Dube (2000:3–6) similarly reminds readers that epistemic processes are always shaped within power-laden imperial contexts, yet such contexts do not invalidate alternative forms of knowledge or ethical agency; rather, they disclose the need for critical attentiveness and responsible discernment within asymmetrical structures of authority.

This posture contrasts sharply with epistemologies that equate authority with infallibility. The Magi's knowing is provisional and open-ended, yet no less legitimate for that reason. Importantly, Matthew does not portray the Magi's epistemology as exhaustive or self-sufficient. Their knowledge is shown to be genuine and effective, yet partial. It is capable of discerning the birth of the Messiah, but requires supplementation through Israel's scriptures and divine dream revelation to reach its proper fulfilment. Thus, their way of knowing is neither repudiated nor absolutised; it is affirmed as legitimate while remaining open to further illumination. This narrative dynamic resists both epistemic dismissal and epistemic self-sufficiency (Hughes 2015:33). In this way, it functions as a counter-narrative to both anti-intellectual theologies that distrust expertise and clerical models that monopolise theological authority. Matthew affirms a form of professional knowing that is intellectual, ethical and receptive to divine intervention (Luz 2007:112).

Knowing God outside Israel: A decolonial reading

The Magi narrative makes a striking theological claim within Matthew's narrative framework: that genuine knowledge capable of orienting human beings towards Christ may arise outside Israel's covenantal and scriptural boundaries. The Magi arrive in Jerusalem as bearers of extra-biblical knowledge derived from their own astronomical and interpretive traditions, yet this knowledge is portrayed as providentially significant within the unfolding of the Gospel story. Their epistemic journey is not depicted as originating from Israel's scriptures, but neither is it dismissed; rather, it is taken up and redirected towards Christological fulfilment. Scripture then functions not as the origin of their insight, but as a supplementary interpretive key, identifying Bethlehem

as the Messiah's birthplace (Mt 2:5–6), and thereby integrating their prior discernment into Israel's scriptural horizon (De Jong 2015:274).

The description is 'theological' not because the Magi's knowledge is explicitly said to originate from God, but because Matthew's narrative constructs and evaluates the significance of diverse epistemic trajectories in relation to the divine purpose disclosed in Christ (De Santos 2014:188–196; Mignolo 2011:x–xii; Segovia 2000:36–42). In this sense, theology operates at the level of narrative meaning-making rather than as a claim about the immediate source of the Magi's knowledge. Read through a decolonial epistemological lens, this episode disrupts any single epistemic monopoly on truth (De Santos 2014:x–xv; Mignolo 2011:xii) by suggesting a pluriform field of knowledge in which different traditions of knowing are brought into dialogue. In line with Global South hermeneutical insights that emphasise socially located epistemologies (Dube 2000:12–18; Ukpong 2002:17–32; West 2003:73–78), the text can be read as resisting epistemic confinement of divine significance to a single cultural or institutional knowledge system, instead portraying truth as emerging through encounter, translation and interpretive convergence.

This portrayal challenges Christian exclusivism and supersessionist assumptions that locate divine revelation solely within Israel or, by extension, the church. While the chief priests and scribes possess textual knowledge, they fail to act upon it. The Magi, by contrast, respond with worship and obedience. As Davies and Allison (1988:228) observe, Matthew deliberately juxtaposes scriptural competence with moral and theological inertia.

From a decolonial perspective, this narrative destabilises epistemic monopolies. Quijano's (2000:533–535) concept of the coloniality of knowledge illuminates how Christian theological traditions have historically universalised particular epistemologies while rendering others inferior. Mignolo (2011:9–11, 45–50) similarly argues that Western Christianity has often been implicated in epistemic domination through its historical alignment with claims to universal truth. Against this backdrop, the Magi narrative can be read as an internal site of epistemic plurality within the Matthean text, rather than as evidence of an external epistemological system.

However, this reading does not presume a position outside Christian theological discourse. Rather, it operates as an immanent critical engagement within the textual and interpretive world of Christian theology, attending to tensions and discontinuities already present in the Gospel narrative itself. The decolonial lens therefore functions not as an external corrective imposed upon the text, but as a hermeneutical resource that makes visible the multiplicity of epistemic trajectories already at work within it. In this sense, the study does not seek to abandon Christian theological epistemology, but to interrogate its internal heterogeneity, particularly where the Matthean narrative itself appears to unsettle any claim to epistemic exclusivity. This approach aligns with decolonial readings that emphasise 'epistemic disobedience' not as external rejection, but as critical re-reading from within dominant traditions (Mignolo 2011:44–48).

The narrative suggests that God does not require the Magi to abandon their knowledge system in order to encounter Christ. Instead, divine revelation meets them within their epistemic world, through a star and through dreams (Mt 2:2, 12). This interaction reveals a dynamic relationship in which divine revelation both affirms and transforms the Magi's professional knowledge. Their epistemology is not rendered obsolete or wholly superseded; rather, it is validated and corrected through God's communicative acts. As scholars such France (2007:63) and Luz (2007:114) observe, the star and the dream function as divine interventions that affirm the Magi's interpretive framework while simultaneously guiding them beyond their initial understanding towards the fuller revelation of Christ's birth. This suggests that their knowledge is neither entirely autonomous nor passively receptive but actively engaged in a dialogical process with divine disclosure.

The Magi's openness to correction, demonstrated by their obedience to the dream's warning to avoid Herod, exemplifies epistemic humility, a readiness to revise their course in light of divine guidance (Fricker 2007:91). Thus, Matthew portrays a model of knowing that is professional, ethical and receptive to ongoing divine interruption, emphasising that legitimate epistemologies can be both culturally rooted and divinely oriented. This theological affirmation stands in tension with colonial missionary practices that dismissed Indigenous cosmologies as pagan or pre-Christian (Sugirtharajah 2012:87).

The narrative therefore resonates strongly with Indigenous and African epistemologies, which, though diverse, frequently locate knowledge in cosmology, ritual practice and communal discernment. African theologians have long argued that God was present in African cultures prior to missionary Christianity (Han & Beyers 2017:6–7; Ramose 2002:324). The Magi provide a biblical analogue for this claim, revealing that epistemic plurality is not a modern imposition on scripture but a feature of the biblical witness itself. For instance, Basotho initiation practices involve elders and ritual specialists whose authority is recognised communally and is closely tied to cosmological and ancestral knowledge, demonstrating disciplined and socially sanctioned ways of knowing (Matobo, Makatsa & Obioha 2009:7–8).

Discussion

Implications for contemporary theology and religious education

Three major implications emerge from this rereading. The Magi narrative carries significant weight for contemporary theology, particularly within African and Global South contexts, as it affirms Indigenous wisdom traditions as

legitimate sites of theological insight rather than merely objects of evangelisation. This recognition aligns with African theological efforts to reclaim marginalised epistemologies as resources for Christian reflection (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018:3–5; Umaru 2024:8–10). At the same time, it challenges dominant models of religious education that prioritise catechetical transmission over dialogical engagement, for when religious education assumes a single authorised epistemology, it risks reproducing what Fricker (2007:147) terms hermeneutical injustice by excluding alternative interpretive frameworks. The Magi invite pedagogical approaches that foster epistemic hospitality, critical dialogue and openness to multiple ways of knowing.

Beyond pedagogy, the narrative provides a model for interreligious and intercultural engagement. The Magi neither reject Israel's scriptures nor surrender their epistemic identity; rather, they integrate multiple sources of knowledge while remaining responsive to divine guidance. This posture is particularly relevant in religiously plural societies such as Lesotho, where Christianity coexists with enduring Indigenous epistemologies. By modelling openness and integration, the Magi demonstrate how diverse knowledge systems can coexist ethically and theologically without erasure or domination, offering a template for intercultural and interreligious discernment today.

Moreover, the narrative raises ethical questions about professionalism in theology. The Magi exemplify humility, attentiveness and openness to correction – virtues often undermined by theological arrogance and institutional self-certainty. Their willingness to revise their course in response to divine warning challenges contemporary theologians and religious educators to exercise epistemic authority responsibly rather than defensively, cultivating knowledge with ethical integrity (Sugirtharajah 2012:82). Taken together, these pedagogical, intercultural and ethical dimensions reaffirm the article's central decolonial claim: that Christian theology must move beyond epistemic monopolies towards practices of learning, discernment and professional responsibility that honour the epistemic plurality already affirmed within the biblical text.

Conclusion

Towards a plural and decolonised theology of knowledge

This study has argued that the Magi should be reread as divinely affirmed professional knowers whose epistemic authority challenges colonial and exclusivist models of theological knowledge. Matthew's Gospel does not portray them as marginal curiosities, but as effective agents of discernment whose knowledge leads them faithfully to Christ.

Theologically, the Magi narrative affirms that God's revelation is not confined to a single epistemic tradition. Scripture itself testifies to a plurality of legitimate ways of knowing, including those rooted outside Israel's covenantal framework. To deny this plurality is not an act of faithfulness, but a narrowing of the biblical witness.

While this rereading holds particular significance for African and Indigenous contexts historically marginalised by dominant Christian epistemologies, its implications are universal. The affirmation of epistemic plurality calls the global church to recognise the legitimacy of diverse cultural, experiential and intellectual traditions as authentic sites of divine encounter and theological insight. Such recognition challenges all Christian communities to practise epistemic humility, foster dialogical engagement and resist monopolistic claims on truth.

From a decolonial perspective, justice begins with listening. The Magi thus stand as enduring figures of decolonised wisdom, inviting the entire church to honour and learn from knowledge at the margins. This rereading therefore demands that: (1) biblical scholars critically attend to non-Israelite epistemologies; (2) theological educators incorporate Indigenous and diverse knowledge systems into curricula; and (3) churches worldwide affirm local wisdom traditions as partners in theological reflection and spiritual formation. Future research might explore other biblical figures whose epistemic plurality challenges dominant interpretive hierarchies, further supporting decolonial and intercultural approaches in theology. In this way, the Magi continue to illuminate pathways towards a theology that is both faithful to scripture and accountable to the plurality of human experience.

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Rasebate I. Mokotso: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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