

Excerpt from *Helena* by Evelyn Waugh

In this Epiphany-tide scene near the end of his novel *Helena*, Evelyn Waugh paints a picture of the elderly Empress Helena kneeling at the Divine Liturgy on the Feast of Epiphany. Helena sees in and through the sacred ministers the very Magi themselves and through them the need of all those in power to acknowledge their true Lord and Master:

The low vault was full of lamps and the air close and still. Silver bells announced the coming of the three vested, bearded monks, who prostrated themselves before the altar. So the long liturgy began.

Helena knew little Greek and her thoughts were not in the words nor anywhere in the immediate scene. She forgot even 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.

“This is my day, she thought, “and these are my kind.”

. . . “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 among the disconcerted stars.

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

. . . “You are my especial patrons,” said Helena, “and patrons of all late-comers, of all who have had 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.”

