

Advent #5
Two Kingdoms Collide

We love the angels proclaiming, the manger scene, the baby Jesus, the shepherds and the Wise Men, along with chestnuts roasting on an open fire and dreaming of a white Christmas.

But what we may overlook is the fact that the birth of Christ was troubling for some. God coming to earth, even as a baby, represented a clash of kingdoms. It is two world colliding. We like to keep our world's apart – the world of everyday life vs the world of religion.

Christmas is about the two world's colliding, and everything blows up.

Jesus is not “just another new kid in town” and Herod knew it.

NEWS FLASH – Herod was right to feel threatened, and you and I should feel that way too.

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” 3 When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

5 They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH,
ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH;
FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER
WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’ ”

7 Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found *Him*, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.” 9 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over *the place* where the Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned *by God* in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

Let's explore the historical context before we see the implications of what the text is teaching.

Andreas Kostenberger : The First Days of Jesus.

WHEN WAS Jesus BORN?

Jesus was born during the time of King Herod who died during the Spring of 4 BC, (3757 Hebrew calendar) so Jesus was born prior to that. (it's ok to 'hiss' every time you hear the name Herod)

When you consider the accounts of the events around, the birth of Jesus and the account of Luke 3 describing the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist, we can estimate that the earliest time of his birth would have been in December 5 B.C. So, it is quite possible that it was sometime in the years 6 or 5 B.C.

Jesus was born toward the end of the 70 year reign of Herod. This king was described as famous, dangerous, brilliant, paranoid, successful, cruel, and lucky (a true politician). He was the client king under Roman rule from 37-4 BC.

Although he was a mere commoner, he was tapped by Rome to be their man in Judea. He was known for his cruelty and his will to survive the political power struggles of his day. The historian, Josephus, commented that, “the man's character had nothing human to recommend it”.

Herod had 10 wives, many children (some whom he had killed), and many enemies. He came to power after a struggle with a rival supported by the Parthians. Rome backed Herod, and Herod had his rival killed. It is fair to say that Herod was always looking out for those who might be a threat, so when he heard about the birth of a king, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

THE WISE MEN

Were there really three?

The text doesn't indicate. We get three based on the three gifts that were given, gold, frankincense, and wait,..... there's myrrh

Were they really WISE?

Depending on the context, the Magi could represent wise men, priests of some sort, interpreters of dreams, sorcerers, but most likely astrologers. They were probably viewed favorably in their home country, which could have been Persia, Babylon, or Arabia. Remember that the Jews had been exiled into Babylon MANY years earlier, and though some returned to Israel, many stayed and integrated into the society. Jewish scholars mingled with Babylonian scholars to discuss all sorts of issues – secular and religious. People have been looking at the stars and astrological activity for thousands of years.

The Magi were not the first notable visitors to come to visit an Israelite king. 1 Kings 10 tells of the Queen of Sheba who came to pay homage to Solomon bringing gold, spices, and precious stones. The gifts given to Jesus point back to the promises of Psalm 72 and Isaiah 60 which speak of rulers and wealth of the nations coming to pay homage to the son of David.

There is also a pointer to glory of Christ seen in Rev 21

22 I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

Those texts and the passage in Matt 2 show how the Magi stand in the biblical trajectory of the nations coming to faith in the God of Israel.

Jesus himself refers to the visit of the Queen of Sheba as a rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees who were seeking a sign from him.

Matt 12:42 *The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*

Jesus knows that Gentiles will worship Him even if the people of Israel won't. Revelation 15 speaks of this as the overcomers sing the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb saying:

*“Great and marvelous are Your works,
O Lord God, the Almighty;
Righteous and true are Your ways,
King of the nations!
4 Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name?
For You alone are holy;
For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU,
FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED.”*

WHAT DID THEY KNOW?

They knew that there was a king of Israel who had been born, and it had something to do with a star.

The exiled Jews from the days of Daniel and Jeremiah would have their writings and oral traditions to share with their counterparts in Babylon. The Magi may have been familiar with the prophecy from Balaam in

Numbers 24 that “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” They could have connected that prophecy with unusual astronomical phenomena they were observing. (A. Kostenberger).

Obviously, they didn’t know the exact details of the meaning of the star, so they stopped at the capital of Israel to get more information. They seem to be a bit naïve about what impact this would have on Herod. Coming to tell the sitting king that they want to “worship” the newborn king is a risky business. Even if they simply mean to “pay homage” to him, it is risky. Herod doesn’t take kindly to rivals for the throne.

A new king would mean the end of Herod, his rule, his line, and his cronies. “All Jerusalem was troubled” “All Jerusalem” represents the embedded ruling class elites. They didn’t want to lose their positions of power and riches.

EX: It’s the same as today – when there is a change in the balance of power in Washington, a lot of people are troubled. It happens in companies, in professional sports, universities, churches, and blended families.

Herod calls on his own ‘wise men’, the best and the brightest scholars of the Jewish texts to identify the place of the birth of this new king. They explained that it had all been prophesied in Micah 5:2. The small town of Bethlehem has a rich lineage as the hometown of David.

EX: You can imagine the billboards at the town city limit sign – “Welcome to Bethlehem, home of David the giant killer, shepherd, Psalm writer, and Israel’s greatest King”.

At this point Herod’s true motive is not yet revealed..

. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.

It seems that Herod was convincing as it took a word from God in a dream to warn them about the danger posed by Herod.

The are warned by God to slip out of the country without returning to Herod.

Advent is about celebrating His first coming, as a baby. But the baby was the newborn KING. Herod was right, even though his motives were wrong.

The baby, born to be king, is a threat to EVERY human who sets him or herself up on a throne, real or imaginary. That includes ALL OF US.

So far in Matthew, we’ve seen that Jesus is the Savior. He is Immanuel, God with us. We like those ideas. They don’t require much on our part other than an honest recognition of our condition and need. We like being forgiven by a savior and we like the idea of God being with us.

Here in chapter 2 of Matthew, this birth narrative introduces something that calls for a response of respect, honor, obedience, and worship. The baby is a KING. To be in a right relationship with a king means that one must obey. Herod knew that and he was troubled. He liked being obeyed, and he was aware that his kingship was limited by the Emperor of Rome. Herod knew what obedience and loyalty were due to the one at the top of the chain of command.

We, who have been raised in a Republic, don’t understand Kingship per se. As Christians we may give lip service to Christ as King, but do we really want a king? We want ‘God with us’ on our terms, not HIS.

C.S. Lewis offers this reflection in “The Case for Christianity”

I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realize what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks on to the stage the play is over.

God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream?

—C.S. Lewis

Neither Herod nor the Magi knew what we know... The baby king is THE KING OVERALL.

Revelation 17:14 These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.”

He came as a baby to fulfill all righteousness and die, but he’s coming back in righteousness as King to Judge the nations.

Revelation 19:15 From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. 16 And on His robe and on His thigh, He has a name written, “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Don’t be lulled into thinking that the baby in the manger is safe. He’s not safe, but He’s good. The manger scene is not a call to a warm feeling. The manger scene is a call to worship Christ as King. Knowing Him as king is a call to participate in His kingdom. It is a call to follow Him and love Him above all else.

Jesus is deadly serious about His glory and our Joy in knowing and following Him.

Three RESPONSES:

Herod’s –He was outwardly religious and put on a façade of honoring God, but he wasn’t really into submission to the true God. Hearing the news, he was troubled, full of fear, plotted against the newborn king.

Magi – When they arrived and found the child (probably not a new born) they bowed in wonder and worshiped.

Those are our options in this life until Jesus returns. The king has been born, so there are kingdoms in conflict –

The kingdom of SELF vs THE Kingdom OF Christ
Autonomous self vs Repentant faith
Suppressing the truth vs Following God’s truth
A heart darkened by pride vs Honoring God with thanks
Worshipping the creature vs Worshipping the Creator
We sacrifice to earn a place with God vs Jesus is the sacrifice

The third response comes at the final return of the King

Unbeliever at the return of Christ – Lewis continues speaking of the return of Christ, the king...

For this time, it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature.

It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.

God with us, the baby born as King, invites us to share His supper with Him.

Don’t come as a Herod – knowing the external rules and rituals to follow while your heart and your life are opposed to Christ. It’s easy to do because no one knows your heart. But God does.

Come LIKE Magi to worship in wonder, to take of the bread and cup that Christ has given us for the strengthening of our souls.

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