

The Cast | People Engaged in the Story of Jesus Christ

The Magi

Matthew 2.1-20

January 21, 2018

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "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." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: '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.'"

Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. 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." 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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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. And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE."

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead."

Today we return to our study of the Four Gospels and the cast – i.e. the vast array of characters whose lives intersect with the life of Jesus Christ. After Jesus was born a rapid succession of

events unfold that are packed with meaning. We're not told too much about the first 30 years in the life of Jesus Christ (the four Gospels are not strictly biographies in that way).

But we are given some information about the days after that first Christmas and as we look at these events, we'll find that almost everything recorded here in Matthew's account is significant not only setting the course for the whole story that's to come but really alerting us to the whole nature of the what Jesus Christ has come to do...of who He is and of what it means to be His follower and a member of His movement.

So let's:

#1 Meet the Assemblage of Characters

#2 Make the Unifying Connections

#3 Move in the Alternative Kingdom

1st - Meet the cast – three main actors: Joseph, the magi and Herod. Joseph the dreamer has been warned in a dream not to break the engagement with his fiancé who is pregnant with a baby that is not Joseph's baby. And Joseph is told in his dream that this Child is the long awaited Savior and that he and his fiancé have been chosen to parent the Christ-child and are to name Him "Joshua" which means "YHWH is salvation". So Joseph and Mary are married (1.24).

Chapter two opens and the baby is already born in Bethlehem. (Luke informs us that Joseph and Mary were there to register for a census in Joseph's ancestral home.) And now enter the magi, from the East looking for One "born King of the Jews..."

They have seen some sort of astronomical sign (e.g. a comet or an exploding star or an alignment of stars) and coming probably from Persia ("magi" is most likely a loan-word from Persian and we know that once the Jews lived in Persia – remember Esther and Nehemiah and remember that Daniel spoke of this Messiah Prince who would come at a designated time [Dan 9])...and NOW this group of philosopher, astronomers/astrologers, spiritual seekers come looking for this One...and they don't come to Bethlehem but to the capital city, Jerusalem. Their astronomy can only take them so far.

And they begin asking questions around the capital, "Where is this One born King of the Jews? ...We have come to worship Him." And that inquiry makes people in Jerusalem very nervous because they know that King Herod won't like that...AND the government of Rome won't like that (Remember Israel was occupied by a foreign government and they couldn't just come up with their own king...Rome did that FOR them.)

And pretty quickly, news gets to Herod and he is terrified or "troubled" (v. 3). So Herod calls his own wise men – Jewish religious scholars – and asks them if their Scriptures say where this Messiah will be born. And they point him to an ancient prophecy (from 700BC); Micah says it will be out of Bethlehem that this Shepherd King will come.

So Herod sends the magi there – he figures they will be able to find the exact location if they only knew the town – and then he lies to them and says that he wants to join them in worshipping this King of the Jews.

So, they go there and find the family and they worship him (Ps 2.10ff) and present him with gold, frankincense and myrrh (Notice, BTW, three gifts but not necessarily three wise men – sorry!)

But now the magi also are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod and they go home (back to Persia or wherever) by an alternate route. Then Joseph has a second dream warning him to get out of there quickly and go far away to Egypt. So, Joseph the dreamer goes into Egypt to save his family.

And when Herod finds out he's been duped, he was furious and he orders the "slaughter of the innocents" – death to all the boys two years and younger in and around that little village of Bethlehem (that's apparently when the magi first saw the star – v. 7). Scholars think probably something like between 15 and 40 little boys were torn from their parent's arms and executed.

And then Herod dies and, in Egypt, Joseph has a third dream to exit Egypt and return to Israel and then a fourth dream...a warning not to avoid Bethlehem or Jerusalem because Herod's son was reigning there (and there could be a grudge) so the little family moves to the region of Galilee and to a rough little town called Nazareth.

So, what are we to do with these characters? Well in some ways they're simply the actors in this little piece of very important history. There's nothing very sentimental in Matthew's account. Stanley Hauerwas calls it "unapologetically realistic". The previous chapter ends with these sparse words: "she gave birth to a son and he called his name Jesus." None of the tender details that Luke includes about Mary pondering these things in her heart or the four songs in Luke; Matthew is plain. It's a record...history...Joseph, not Mary is the main actor.

The magi are, of course, often sort of embellished and there are all kinds of traditions about them but Matthew tells us very little about them. They're just there in the record because they were... just... there and Matthew's trying to tell the story as it happened and he includes them in the cast because they... were... there.

And then there's Herod, the other main character and the other "king of the Jews". He was a real historical figure and known for his paranoia and vindictiveness and his outbursts of violence. It's all very consistent with everything else history has to say about Herod the Great...the puppet-king on the outskirts of the Roman Empire trying to keep a lid on those rambunctious Judeans...trying to control.

And yet at another level, these main characters do carry a kind of symbolic and moral weight. Joseph is an example of a righteous man. He wants to protect Mary even when it appears she has wronged him; doesn't want to disgrace her. And then, he simply follows directions; he's a man who carries out his calling. He's a good dad and a good husband. So... follow his example in the way you carry out your callings.

Herod, on the other hand, is, of course, a negative example. He's a man addicted to power. He's easily threatened and murderously insecure. He hates God and therefore he hates people. He lies quite easily and convincingly ("I'd like to go worship Him too!") and when he sees people as obstacles to his well-being he simply disposes of them like they were bugs.

So, don't be like Herod...(that's a sub-point of today's message...one application: Don't be like Herod.)

Then the magi: we do see them as an example of sorts – we also give gifts at Christmas (isn't that where the tradition started?) We could look at their spirit of inquiry I guess...and find something admirable about their seeking ("wise men still seek Him").

But beyond these moral details, we're supposed to see the bigger picture and we're supposed to make some very significant connections here that sort of bring together the whole story of the Bible.

The Old Testament ended on such a disappointing and unresolved note, a big tangled knot, like something was missing. And here that something begins to emerge. The whole story of the Old Testament will connect to this hub and all these themes and unfulfilled promises and expectations find their nexus here.

In addition to the three main actors there are another 5 or 6 minor characters that play smaller parts. Among them...hardly mentioned but in the background...is God. He's whispering from the distant past through His prophets (Micah, Hosea, Jeremiah). He's ordering the signs in the heavens and He's untying the knot and moving His story to its amazing conclusion. Barely mentioned in the account but here God is quietly stepping into time and space as the main Character of the Big Story.

Joseph the dreamer reminds us of Joseph the dreamer of Genesis fame. The first Joseph dreamed dreams and his dreams brought him into Egypt and there he saved his family (and saved the world!) And now God is bringing the story full-circle: a New Genesis, 12 new tribes, a new salvation at the hands of a dreamer, a New Joseph who goes into Egypt to save his family...and the world.

And a New Exodus: by the prophet Hosea (11.1; 700BC) God looks back on the first Exodus when He brought His adopted people, His instrument for the salvation of the world out of Egypt – “out of Egypt, I called My son.”

Matthew recognizes that this New Joseph going into Egypt with Mary and Jesus signals a New Exodus. This baby is the instrument for the salvation of the world. His name means that (“salvation”) and He is the True Israel, the personification of everything Israel was supposed to have been but failed to be.

He is the only begotten Son, the perfect image of the Father, the true manna that comes from heaven and is born in “Beit Lehem” – the house of bread. He is the true vine, the true temple, the true dwelling place for all God’s people, the everlasting city, the perfect tabernacle, the true rest and true home, the light of the world, the Servant of the Lord, the Son called out of Egypt to initiate a New and Final Exodus.

Was Hosea writing about Israel or about Jesus Christ? Yes! Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Israel and everyone who is in Christ is also in the true Israel of God (Gal. 3.7, 29, 6.16; 1 Pet 2.5-9; Hos 1.10).

And when the magi from the East come bringing their treasure to Him...it connects us to that period of Old Testament History called “the Restoration”.

As with Cyrus, the Persian king who provided the materials for the restoration of the Temple and walls, so NOW the treasures of the nations are surrendered to the True Temple, Revelation 21: “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it...and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it” (24-26) – Jesus Christ IS that True Temple!

These are the nations, the magi, the Persians, those who cannot find God on their own (who need to hear Micah’s prophecy so they can find Bread in “Beit Lehem”) and when they find Him they bow to Him. This is God conquering the nations by weakness, fulfilling the promise to Abraham, “In you will all the nations be blessed...”

This is the New Joshua...born to open the Promised Land and born to give His life and conquer us not by force but by love.

So what do all these connections mean for us? Well, we are called to seek the kingdom and the kingdom we seek is not governed by a paranoid, insecure liar who consults magicians and priests and scientists and who will commit any atrocity to stay in power. We seek a kingdom ruled by the Weakling of Bethlehem. He hails not from the center of human power but from the “house of bread”. He is the “Shepherd King” who weeps with Rachel and who was born into a

world where babies are killed and mothers cry inconsolably, where the poor are trampled and...He steps into all that.

His kingdom is very different from the reign of Herod. Herod rules in fear and he uses terror and violence to hold His subjects in line. But this Shepherd King is born a stranger to fear and He is born to absorb violence – the Prince of Peace who “God and sinners reconciles...”

The man of the world (Herod) is vainly trying to make himself invulnerable because he’s insecure. But this King in the manger makes Himself completely vulnerable and becomes totally dependent on a young couple to care for Him. God in Jesus Christ becomes vulnerable...and you see where THAT got Him? ...crucified and... exalted over everything...born in the “house of bread”, He becomes bread for the whole world!

People who follow Him must make themselves vulnerable. That’s the way we move in this alternative kingdom. We become secure enough to humble ourselves. We become free to stop grabbing for our rights and our due...we become not passive but...confident, inquisitive, attentive agents of mercy and we get that way by coming before Him...seeing our need for God to become a Baby...and live in our place...die in our place...Worshiping Him...we become like Him.

Will you make yourself vulnerable (in His kingdom) or will you protect yourself in the kingdom of Herod? Will you control your world (at any cost!) or will you trust in the unstoppable and beautiful plan of God who invites you – even today – to join the Story and join the cast? That’s the question today...and every day.