



## Meditation— Matthew 2.<sup>1-3, 7-11</sup>

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Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,<sup>2</sup>saying, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him”

<sup>3</sup>When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him...

<sup>7</sup>Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup>And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, “Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.”

<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. <sup>11</sup>And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

This traditional Christmas story introduces us to three main characters whose careers overlapped in meaningful ways: Jesus, Herod, and wisemen of indeterminate number, who we will treat as one character. Here is what we know or can surmise about these three figures from Matthew’s second chapter.

We begin with the Magi. As their name suggests, they were likely from Persia where they engaged in some form of religious philosophy and were thought to possess the gift of divination and prophecy. Through the exercise of study, thought, and discernment, they were able to identify some celestial event as harbinger of a new “king of the Jews” about to be born. This celestial event led them to travel to Jerusalem where they hoped to locate and pay homage to the new king. Being informed that the child was more likely in Bethlehem, they travel there, where they found the child, worshiped him, and bestowed gifts suitable for a king. Then, seemingly discerning Herod’s nefarious reasons for sending them to find the child, the Magi returned home without reporting to Herod as he had requested.

Now, for Herod. The Roman Senate had appointed Herod a client king of the Roman empire, with Judah as his fiefdom. Given Herod’s questionable claims to the throne in the eyes of the populace and his unpopularity, Herod and his administrators were very alarmed upon hearing of the Magi’s inquiry into a new Jewish king.

After summoning the Magi, Herod sent them to Bethlehem where they were to find the child and report back to him. Realizing that the Magi had departed without reporting back, Herod had all children under three executed in an attempt to kill the would-be king.

This brings us to the third and principal character, Jesus. In this narrative, we learn that Jesus is to be “king of the Jews.” We learn that he was born in Bethlehem. We learn that his birth was occasion for the

death of many children. We learn that Jesus was delivered from this same fate by becoming a refugee in the Egypt.

What are we to make of this story? Many things, no doubt. While Jesus is surely the principal character in this tale, he is passive throughout. There are two active participants: the Magi and Herod. What can we learn from their actions?

The Magi were discerning, relying on promptings and scriptural direction to achieve their wish to see and pay homage to Judah's future king. But their discernment extended beyond this. Their discernment extended to discerning Herod's insincerity and nefarious plans. Their discernment played a small role in Jesus' rescue from Herod's violent impulses and intents. Through them, we are reminded of the importance of discernment. We are reminded of the importance of relying upon divine directions and forces often outside ourselves or our control. We are reminded of the importance of relying upon God to achieve our own desires and being a benefit to others.

When it comes to Herod, the text seems to focus not just on the man, Herod, but on his position and title. "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod *the king*, the narrative begins. "Where is he that is born *King* of the Jews?" ask the magi. "When Herod *the king* had heard these things, he was troubled." Herod did not hear good news in the Magi's revelation, he heard coup news. After some investigating, Herod learned where and when the would-be king was to be born and so sent the magi off to discover the child, uncover the plot. When the magi "had heard *the king*, they departed."

Thus, with this text, we are faced with, among other things, a political document. With Herod, we are reminded of the insecurity of, and dangers posed by this world's leaders. The rulers of this world are jealous of their positions of power. They do not lightly give them up. They are not slow to use violence against those whom they see as a threat. In addition, they seem to naturally intuit, as Mary spiritually discerned, that Jesus is, at the very least, a nuisance, and, at most, a threat to their power: "He hath put down the might from their seats."<sup>1</sup>

Politics does not fill us with fuzzy feelings of sentimentality so prevalent during the Christmas Season and might seem to have no place in Christmas narratives. Yet, this beloved Christmas narrative with much else in the Bible most certainly sees Jesus as a political figure. It reminds us that Jesus is "King of the Jews." Indeed, he is King of Kings, King of the world. Though the nations of this world find this gulling and resist bending the knee to him, they will yield, eventually.

This narrative reminds us that there is a very real tug of war for the hearts and minds of humankind. In this war for influence and power, we have to ask ourselves, "How friendly or hostile to my Lord are the earthly powers under whose influence I live? To whom does my allegiance rightfully belong? Who is my king?"

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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