

Bible Studies for Life Series for December 30: Bowing before the Savior

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Bowing before the Savior

- Matthew 2:1-12

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This story is particular to Matthew, we do not find it in any of the other Christmas narratives. Some take that to mean it is an artificial construction, a later addition and not a valid part of the Christmas story. But the early church found itself in serious conflict with the astrology cults around it, so it is not likely to have invented a story in which those who could be construed as astrologers are shown in a favorable light.

The primary theme of this story comes in its contrast. In particular, there are two kings and two kingdoms contrasted. The “three kings” who come from the east are not technically kings and are better understood as magi. “Magi” is originally a term for a Persian priestly class but later became used for magicians and astrologers.

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Matthew presents Jesus as the true king of the Jews in contrast to the unworthy king Herod. Herod hardly was a popular leader among the Jews, at least in part due to his ethnicity. It was not uncommon for the Romans to allow native rulers in the territory and that is the case with Herod. Herod was an Edomite, and it was but one of many reasons the Jews despised him.

Herod was absolutely paranoid. His power was held tenuously and he feared anyone who might take his kingdom. You did not want to get on the wrong side of Herod the Great. Herod's power corrupted him, and the more power he had, the more he wanted.

One of Herod's first acts was to have 46 members of the Sanhedrin, or the Jewish ruling party, executed. He killed at least two of his wives, all of their extended families and three of his sons. Caesar Augustus said of Herod that it was better to be his pig than his son. Prior to his death, he decreed that 300 prominent Jews be killed as soon as he died. He determined that if there would be no mourning over his death at least there would be mourning at the time of his death. Fortunately for those who might have been on his list it does not seem that this decree was carried out.

Herod also embarked on a building program as fantastic as any before or after. He built hippodromes, amphitheaters and the port of Caesarea where the Roman administration in Palestine was housed.

But the greatest contribution to Jewish society was the restoration of the temple. It was by no means an expression of his faith, rather it was an attempt to soothe his subjects. The temple was decorated with white

marble, gold and jewels. It was said of the temple, "Whoever has not seen the temple of Herod has seen nothing beautiful."

What a powerful contrast to the opulence of Herod is the birthplace of Jesus. If you were going to look for a king, the palace would be the logical place to start. It should not be surprising that the magi started in a royal setting surrounded by the finest things and the most important people. But the magi did not find him there; they found him in a stable. The son of God, the king of kings, born in a manger intended as a feed trough. No royalty was anywhere to be found. The first visitors were not kings or Pharisees, they were shepherds, unwelcome members of first century society. Not a single priest showed up. What a contrast in kingdoms.

The magi were faced with a choice; to which king would they bow? They could stay with the would-be king or they could find the real king. They could be a part of a kingdom of tyranny or follow the king who says come unto me all you who are weary, and I will give you rest. They could follow the king who kills to keep his power or the king who by his power invites all into his kingdom. It is a contrast that forced the magi to choose and calls us to choose as well. This contrast also introduces two other themes in the story.

Jesus' own people were absolutely indifferent to his birth. Herod calls together some of the Jewish religious leadership to inquire of this new king, and they are absolutely clueless as to what has happened. It takes three Gentiles looking for the king to even cause them to think about what might have happened. Although the high priests would have believed in stars as signs of births and things to come, they were not even looking for the coming of the Messiah.

Matthew begins and ends his Gospel with worship. He begins with Gentiles coming to pay homage to the king and ends with Jesus' disciples worshipping him on the mountain. This is a consistent theme throughout

Matthew; that Jesus is worthy of our reverence. Not only is Jesus worthy of the reverence of a king, he is worthy of our worship as Lord.

The contrast of kings and kingdoms forces us into the same position the magi were in: Which king will we follow? Whether we will admit it or not, being confronted by the incarnate God forces us to deal with that revelation. We can be indifferent as were the Jewish leaders Herod called together or we can respond with our worship and our lives as the magi.

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