

Jesus' Visitors

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[0 : 00] While I was in England for three years, one of the jobs I had was for marking exam papers, sometimes setting them as well, for tertiary students training to be religious education teachers, among other things.

And periodically we'd ask for paragraph answers, short paragraphs, answering brief questions. And I remember one paper, one of the questions was, who was Herod the Great?

And the person who answered obviously didn't know much about Herod the Great because their answer was, a powerful man who won many battles. And that was it. Well, it could have been Napoleon, or Alexander the Great, or Idi Amin.

Needless to say, they didn't pass, or at least that question. I don't remember the rest of the exam. Though it's true, of course, that Herod was a powerful man. And I suppose, in one sense, he won many battles.

He was a manipulator. He manipulated Mark Antony, and also Caesar Augustus. He was an opportunist. He sought his chance to become king of Palestine, and raced over to Rome, and won the favor of Caesar Augustus, and became the king of the area.

[1 : 16] Though it took another three years, until 37 BC. Before he was able to quell the opposition against him. He was never really acceptable to the Jews, though, who lived in Palestine.

He himself was only a half-Jew. He was half-Edomite as well, what in those days was called Edumean. The Edomites, for centuries, had been the enemies of the people of Israel, the Jews. He was called king. But it was a title that rested rather uneasily with the Jews of the nation. They didn't like him being king because he wasn't of the descent of King David, and he wasn't a pure Jew.

He was very unpopular. Though he was a good administrator, and though he organized effective famine relief, nonetheless, he was an unpopular person. He inflicted on the people very high taxes in order to fund his lavish building projects.

He built an underwater-based harbour in Caesarea, north of what's today Tel Aviv. The harbour was incredible for the technology and the engineering of his day.

[2 : 29] He poured concrete underwater, which set underwater. Something that was almost unique in the ancient world. In order to appease the Jews, he renovated the temple in Jerusalem.

A lavish project. Extending the Temple Mountain. If you go to Jerusalem today and you look at the Wailing Wall, most of the stones that you see, and certainly to the right end, are Herod stones.

So good was the engineering that even today you cannot put a knife between some of the huge stones. Huguer than at Stonehenge in England. But they're so well designed and fit together that you cannot fit something between them.

He built fortresses all over the land. Again, at Caesarea on the coast, in Jerusalem, a palace.

Samaria, he built a fortress and named it Sebast in honour of the Roman Emperor, in order to keep his favour.

A place called Machaerus, he built a fortress. Machaerus is in modern-day Jordan, the other side of the Dead Sea. It was there that his son, another Herod, killed John the Baptist.

[3 : 35] He built a fortress at a place called Masada, made famous because a few decades later the Jews bravely resisted against the Romans in 70 AD, before having mass suicide, in order to deny the conquering Romans the pleasure of defeating them in battle.

It was Herod's palace, a summer palace, a three-tiered, lavish palace, on the north side, the shady side of Masada, the rock, overlooking the Dead Sea.

He built a palace at Jericho, and in other places as well. And today, if you go to Israel and you look around, many of the ruins you find, and many of the most lavish and ornate, are Herodian ruins,

from this great man.

Yes, indeed, he was Herod the Great. A great builder, a great leader, a great ruler, a great administrator, a great tyrant as well, a megalomaniac in fact. And in his later years, paranoid at any threat there might be to his rule and reign.

Probably in his later years, during the time when Jesus was born, he suffered illness, which led to him being subject to fits of rage and cruelty against those who were closest to him.

[4 : 47] He killed many of his own children, because he was afraid that they might just happen to rise up against him, and bring about a coup that would bring him down. He killed his favorite wife, Mariamne.

Most of us know the story, and Matthew goes on to tell us, as we'll see next week, about how he killed all the children of Bethlehem, under two years old, because he was worried about who this king of the Jews was.

It fits exactly with the character of Herod the Great that we know from other sources as well. A tyrant, a despot, a megalomaniac, somebody he inflicted with paranoia.

Just before his death, he ordered that as he died, others of his children were to be killed, and as well as that, hundreds of the leading Jews of the day, in Jerusalem, were to be killed.

Not because he feared a coup, because when he was dead, it wouldn't matter. But rather, because when he died, he wanted people to be crying and wailing in the streets. And he knew that despite all his leadership and so-called greatness, that when he died, he would hardly be mourned by any.

[5 : 49] So he had hundreds of others killed, so that when he died, there would indeed be wailing and mourning. No wonder that Caesar Augustus said of him, it is safer to be Herod's pig than his son.

When he died, his province was divided in three amongst three of his surviving sons. Philip in the north, who built the city called Caesarea Philippi later on.

He ruled over the area of Syria and the Golan Heights. Herod Antipas over Galilee in the north of the land. That's the Herod that was alive when Jesus was crucified.

It's the Herod who ordered John the Baptist's death. And the other son, Archelaus, to rule over Judea in the south. Even worse than some of his brothers or half-brothers.

So bad that the Romans removed him and put their own governor there. Hence, in the time of Jesus, there was a Roman procurator, by that time called Pontius Pilate. Herod the Great died in 4 BC.

[6 : 59] And Jesus was born during his reign. The 6th century monk who tried to calculate the year nought to start the years that we know is now 1997, got it wrong.

He was out for a few years. Jesus was born sometime before 4 BC. Possibly even as early as 7 or 8 BC. Matthew chapter 2 begins that it's in the time of King Herod after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.

The contrast begins. King Herod the Great. The great tyrant, the great despot. And Jesus the baby born in the time of King Herod.

And wise men, literally magi, come from the east to Jerusalem and they ask, where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? King Herod the King and the baby born King of the Jews.

Not the baby born to be King, that he would grow up and then be made King, but rather the baby who is born King. He's King already. He's born as a King. And he is the one they're seeking.

[8 : 06] And the contrast is being drawn between Herod and the baby Jesus. Herod of course was seen to be an illegitimate King of the Jews because he wasn't a proper Jew, a half-Jew, a half-Igumean.

But here now arises a baby who is born King of the Jews, a threat to Herod, certainly, from all that we know about him in history as well as in the Bible. A threat and a contrast.

No wonder the paranoid Herod went and killed all the babies of Bethlehem later in the chapter. He was terrified, verse 3 says. When King Herod heard this, he was frightened. We could translate it as paranoid or terrified.

And so he inquired about where this baby was to be born. And those who told him, the chief priests and scribes, in verse 4, they knew their Old Testaments.

Herod didn't. They knew the prophecy in Micah that was our first reading today, that in the town of Bethlehem, Ephrathah, that's the town of Bethlehem in the tribal area of Judah, there would be born.

[9 : 09] The Messiah. So Herod sends these Magi on their way. He sends them to Bethlehem to find out the baby and he gives them a blatant lie. He says to them, you find out where he is and come back and tell me so that I too may go and worship him.

We don't need to know the rest of the story to know that Herod is lying. He was a despot. He was out to get any stop, any threat to his reign. The Magi, of course, were not to know that and they go away assuring him that they'll return and tell him.

But of course, they get a warning in a dream, a special dream and they're told not to go that way and so they head home without telling Herod where the baby was.

The time Jesus was born, Bethlehem was a fairly insignificant town. It's in the tribal area of Judah when the people of Israel settled in the land under Joshua 1400 years before.

They divided the land into 12, into the tribes of, named after the sons of Jacob. Bethlehem's in the tribal area of Judah. Jerusalem in the area of Benjamin.

[10 : 20] And yet they're only five miles apart. Five miles from Jerusalem south to Bethlehem, into the Judean wilderness, into the high country, fairly desolate country, looking down over on a clear day to the Dead Sea and into Jordan.

It's near Bethlehem that Jacob's treasured wife, Rachel, died and was buried. We read that in the first book of the Bible in Genesis. And today as you travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, there is a shrine marking Rachel's tomb, a modern shrine, probably not the accurate place, but nonetheless close by.

It's in Bethlehem that a man called Boaz lived in about perhaps 1100 BC. He, we know, in the Old Testament married a lady called Ruth. And as we saw last week from Matthew 1, ancestors of a man called Jesse, one of whose sons was named David, who became the great king of Israel. Yes, you see, David was born in Bethlehem. It was never his capital. It was never his center of operations. It was never a major city. But it was his place of birth. An insignificant town.

And yet where was born the major king of the people of Israel. I suppose it's a bit like going to a little place like Barrel. Insignificant apart from the fact that Don Bradman was born there.

[11 : 42] Or Dungog where Doug Walters was born. Another insignificant town and yet it's somebody's birthplace. The birthplace of somebody famous. The town remains insignificant as Bethlehem did.

Even though it was the birthplace of the great king David. And Bethlehem was prophesied by the prophet Micah 750 years before Jesus was born that the Messiah would be born there.

Would come from there. A ruler, a shepherd even. Would come from there to rule over God's people. It took 750 years for that promise to be fulfilled. When Jesus indeed was born there.

Some people try and accuse Jesus of reading his Old Testament and then trying to fulfill himself the things that were there. To contrive situations so that he could direct the Old Testament to himself.

But of course it's very hard for a baby in the womb to orchestrate being born in Bethlehem to fulfill a prophecy made 750 years before. Indeed ironically the fulfillment of that prophecy came about because the Roman Empress Caesar Augustus decreed a census.

[12 : 47] Hardly knowing that his decree to send the people of David back to their own town Bethlehem would actually bring about the fulfillment of a prophecy hundreds of years before. But as we saw last week and at Christmas as well it's very clear that in Jesus' birth come the fulfillment of many of the promises of the Old Testament reminding us of just how faithful God is.

That what he promises he keeps. What he promises he fulfills. Maybe hundreds of years later but God is faithful and he keeps his promises even if it takes 750 years.

Well you can catch the 22 bus from Jerusalem to Bethlehem the Arab bus it's pretty cheap it's pretty dirty as well. Cost me one and a half shekels the last time I was there but I was a student on a discount then.

Probably cost you a little bit more but probably only about a dollar to get there. And as you approach Bethlehem and look south out the left window of the bus you see what looks to be like a little volcano.

A mountain that just sort of comes out of nothing with a flat top. But it's not a volcano. There aren't volcanoes there. It's a man made mountain. It's 2000 years old and it was built by Herod the Great.

[14 : 03] Why build a mountain? Because in fact in the center of the mountain is a fortress.

Another palace. He built a tower on a little hill and then had the tower filled in so that it would be safe with a 360 degree lookout.

You would walk up the outside and then in the inside and then down into the inside of the mountain were the rooms and the palace. Kept cool I guess on the inside but more importantly safe.

Oh he had all his luxuries there as well because down the bottom of the mountain there was the swimming pool and the horse racing center. But the security he wasn't so important for them. And it was an important place Herodian because it was just close to Jerusalem.

The capital. That's where any coup would come from. And Herod wanted a place that he could get to in a hurry. Where he could be safe from those who might plot against him.

And so he built the Herodian. And Bethlehem this insignificant town lay in effect in its shadow. The Magi come to pay homage to the king.

[15:10] But they don't go to the Herodian to Herod's palace. They go to the insignificant town that overlooks it. To Bethlehem. To a child who's perhaps as old as two but probably younger.

What a contrast between two kings. The king who lusts for power. The king who hates. The king who fears. The king who's paranoid about any opposition.

The king who boasts. The king who is full of self-aggrandisement. But compare him to the king who is humble. Lowly. Born in a stable.

Born a common birth. The self-effacing baby king. The king who brings love and joy and as the prophecy from Micah said peace.

And the irony is that real power and real authority derive from the baby king born in Bethlehem. Not from the hardness and hatred of Herod but from the babe of Bethlehem.

[16:15] Herod indeed may be great but Jesus is greater. Herod may claim to be king but Jesus is the legitimate king of the Jews.

And if we were to read through the rest of Matthew's gospel we see the nature of what true kingship is about. The king who rides into Jerusalem acclaimed by the crowds not on a chariot or a horse not with soldiers and arms but on a donkey humble and lowly.

There is the king and the one who dies under a sign on the cross. This is Jesus the king of the Jews. Pilate's statement tinged with irony may be mockery but full of truth the one who dies as king. The one who's mocked by the other criminal on the cross. He is the king of Israel let him save himself and come down from the cross. But of course this is kingship this is real kingship that is not going to save itself but rather dies to give life to others.

how different to Herod who killed others in order that he might stay alive. The one who dies in order to bring life to others.

[17:32] That's true kingship. What a contrast to Herod is Jesus Christ. There's meant to be a warning here I think. Herod's greatness is an obvious folly.

The stupidity of the man trying to seek his own glory and yet live in such fear of others. And yet in many ways so like much of our world ever since and today as well.

A world that pursues its own strength its own power its own glory its own aggrandisement but a world that pursues what really in the end is seductive and alluring.

It promises much but delivers little. Its rewards are fleeting. and elusive. There is much about our world that seeks the sort of power that Herod had and wanted and coveted and tried to protect and yet in the end that's not real power and it's not real glory.

It fades and disappears. And whilst on one hand Jesus looks weak and in his death is totally impotent it seems there is real power and there is real authority and there is real kingship and a kingship that lasts forever.

[18:52] Herod tried to save his throne but he couldn't even be bothered to save his soul. As Jesus would later say what will a prophet a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul.

Herod's the great example of that but he's not alone. The world is full of people who seek their own glory but fail to save their soul.

If there's a contrast between Herod and Jesus there's also one between Herod and the Magi who come. Traditionally we think of them as three kings. We sing the carol We Three Kings of Orient Are.

Tradition has it they were kings because in the Old Testament there was a prophecy in Isaiah and also in the Psalms that kings would come and worship the Messiah and offer him gifts. But we're not told in the New Testament that they were kings.

It's just a tradition that developed from the second or third centuries A.D. We more likely think of them as wise men and indeed that's how it's translated in the reading that we had today.

[19 : 58] Wise men came from afar from the east. But not wise in the sense of being university lecturers or philosophers or something like that. These are Magi astrologers perhaps involved with magic.

It's where our word magic comes from. Maybe they were interpreters of dreams. It's that sort of wisdom that is being spoken about when they're called wise men.

Traditionally of course we think of them as being three. That's only because they had three gifts. There might have been a dozen or more. There might only have been a couple. But they offered three gifts. And they were directed by a star.

Was it a supernova or some exploding star that was special that would bring bright light in a particular place? We cannot know. Some think it was Halley's Comet but that was 11 BC a bit early for Jesus' birth.

Most people who try and find some regular answer to the problem of what the star was argue that it happened in 7 BC when Jupiter and Saturn were in alignment in the area of the sky called Pisces.

[21 : 07] There's an attractive theory that Jupiter is the world ruler Saturn applies to Palestine in the Sabbath day and Pisces is about the end days. And so bring all three together you end up with a world ruler from Palestine in the last days of the world.

A very appealing and attractive theory. Certainly in 7 BC the alignment happened three times during the year. And maybe that explains how they came from one point to another and then later in the year came the alignment in the bright star again which led them further ultimately to Bethlehem. But it's an appealing theory but probably irrelevant. We don't know that it's the answer and it doesn't really explain how a star would lead to a particular place.

Probably not the actual house more likely the village or the town of Bethlehem. It seems probably the Magi arrived in Bethlehem knew it to be the town a small town and then asked around to find out where was the baby born king of the Jews.

But whether natural or not whether scientists or astrologers or astronomers can give us an answer to this star or not doesn't matter. But what is important is the fact that even the stars even the sky is directing attention to Jesus Christ born king of the Jews in Bethlehem.

[22 : 27] It's not saying that we can find our destiny in the stars but it's acknowledging the fact that the creator God who made the stars uses the stars to bring glory to Jesus Christ to bring others to him.

That even the creation acknowledges that Jesus is the Lord the saviour the king of the Jews. Not much different to later on in Jesus life when the wind and the waves even obey him.

The stars indeed in effect are paying him homage when he is born in Bethlehem. We don't know how soon after Jesus was born that these magi came.

Traditionally we think of it being 12 days after Christmas tomorrow the 6th of January Epiphany the orthodox Christmas day. But that tradition really only stems from the 3rd or 4th century AD from Augustine.

The implication in Matthew's gospel from the fact that Herod goes to kill the babies who are up to 2 years old suggests that Jesus could even be up to 2 years old at the time when the magi come. They come to a house in verse 11.

[23 : 35] No stable or manger is mentioned but that needn't necessarily mean that Jesus is no longer in the manger for often stables were part of houses. He's called a child which does suggest somebody a touch older than a baby an infant maybe but then again the word has got a broad meaning and maybe it still could include the fact that Jesus is a baby.

If he's been there for a couple of years or nearly that why haven't Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth their hometown but maybe they didn't return because there was good work here. Maybe that's why they're still in Bethlehem. We don't know and it doesn't matter. We do know they brought gifts gold frankincense and myrrh expensive gifts to this little baby.

Christian tradition likes to see some significance in the gifts gold for a king incense for a priest and myrrh to embalm the body a foretaste of Jesus death on the cross.

That's what we sing in that carol. Born a king on Bethlehem plain gold I bring to crown him again frankincense for Jesus have I God on earth yet priest on high myrrh is mine it's bitter perfume tells of his death and calvary's gloom.

[24 : 58] It's nice to think of that significance of Jesus being king priest and dying on the cross but probably the magi didn't think of that when they offered those gifts.

Gold frankincense and myrrh were expensive things to offer the best when only the best will do. what a contrast between these magi and herod and the other Jewish rulers herod the pharisees the scribes the chief priests they're only five miles away eight kilometers half the distance from Doncaster to the city and yet they didn't even lift a sandal to get there they knew their old testaments but they couldn't be bothered going to find the promised messiah of the old testament themselves their failure to believe in Jesus was not due to ignorance apathy if anything they knew it but they did nothing and the magi not even Jews they were Gentiles they were not descendants of Abraham they came from the east from Arabia or Persia or Babylon we don't know where but they came a long distance traverse so far to get there they knew far less about Jesus but they traversed far more and they came and they paid homage and they offered expensive gifts in a sense it's a foretaste of Jesus life he came to his own but his own received him not the Jews the Jewish leaders the Pharisees the scribes Herod and so on they didn't receive him but to those who did receive him he gave power to become children of God not only to Jews though he was the Jewish Messiah but to any and everyone who comes to him in faith and repentance he gave power to become children of God Magi Gentiles representatives of the world beyond Judaism coming to worship the Jewish Messiah because they knew that in this Messiah promised of old in the Jewish scriptures was indeed the salvation of the world born king of the Jews yes but born the savior of the world amen and theirs is an example for us Herod is a warning not to be like him apathetic preoccupied with our own glory and success but in a sense to be like the Magi for most of us I guess are Gentiles by birth the effort to worship Jesus is worth it no matter how far we have to travel to worship him it's worth it because of who he is no cost involved in honoring Jesus Christ is too great the effort of being his disciple and following him is worth it the gifts that we offer him even the best and most lavish and most expensive are worth it the worship we offer Jesus is worth it because he was born not only king of the Jews but the savior of the world as that carol goes on to conclude glorious now behold him arise king and god and sacrifice heaven sings out alleluia amen the earth replies to Gombri childish ad plate