

"A Cast of Characters" Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany of Our Lord 2023

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

There are quite a few characters in the account of the visit of the Wise Men. There are the wise men themselves. There is King Herod. There are the chief priests and scribes of the people. Finally, there is the Holy Child and His mother Mary. As we once again hear about the visit of the wise men, we shall see that God invited unlikely visitors to worship the Christ while others, who should have known better, ignored the new-born king altogether.

The record of this event begins with the introduction of the wise men. The Gospel account informs us that wise men ... these mysterious strangers ... arrived from the east. The original Greek word μάγοι indicates that they were not kings but were more likely teachers or advisers to the ruling class.

As far as how many wise men came to worship, our traditions talk of three because there were three gifts, but the Bible does not say. The bible does not give us precise details of their origin, although they likely came from Persia. We can assume that they were financially well off. The gifts that they gave to Jesus weren't cheap. People who could give away gold, frankincense and myrrh, were probably people of means.

These wise men made an impression on the people of Jerusalem when they came. They probably traveled with servants and

"A Cast of Characters" Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany of Our Lord 2023

bodyguards. So, it is likely that the entire group was large. They quickly attracted the attention of King Herod.

In scripture we read that “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” (Matthew 2:3) Now King Herod was a real piece of work. He wasn’t Jewish. He was a puppet king of the Roman empire, so the Jews hated him. Given the hatred that the Jews had for Herod, paranoia was actually a very healthy state of mind for Herod. Herod was a savvy and ruthless politician who managed to stay on the good side of several Roman Emperors. He was a cruel, but able ruler in his prime, but dementia set in toward the end of his life. The combination of paranoia and dementia was bad. Back that paranoid dementia up with the military might of the Roman Empire and you have a very dangerous man.

Now, they didn’t have Wikipedia back then, so Herod had to have other resources when he questions about the local culture. That is where the chief priests and scribes of the people fit into the picture. Since there were no photocopy machines, the scribes spent their days making copies of the Scriptures. You can imagine that they knew the Scriptures very well after writing them down by hand over and over again. The priests were men who carried out the ceremonies commanded by those same Scriptures. They had knowledge of the

"A Cast of Characters" Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany of Our Lord 2023

Scriptures because they had to follow the Scriptures in their calling as priests. It made sense for Herod to rely on these men when he had religious questions about Jewish culture.

So, the basic story is this: a caravan of fairly well-to-do strangers and their servants pulled into Jerusalem. They immediately began asking about the true heir to the throne in Jerusalem. The insane puppet king of the Roman Empire who was not the rightful ruler heard about them and decided that their questions were a danger to his rule. He needed to nip this sort of thing in the bud. This threat to his reign needed to die.

Herod began to scheme: "I've got to play along with these strangers so I can find out where to send the assassination squad." That is when Herod gave his Biblical scholars an odd request. He assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. Note that he did NOT ask about the King of the Jews, but the Christ.

The people who really puzzle me, though, are the chief priests and scribes of the people. Herod is crazy. You don't expect him to make sense. On the other hand, the chief priests and scribes of the people supposedly believed the words that they gave to Herod. They knew the prophecy and they got it right. How much trouble would it be to send a

"A Cast of Characters" Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany of Our Lord 2023

few people with the wise men? If this really was the Messiah, wouldn't it be worth it to know. Nevertheless, there is no mention that any of them left Jerusalem.

Here we see God work through a star to draw the least likely people ... strangers from an entirely different country ... to draw them to their savior. At the same time the chief priests and scribes of the people ... people who practically had God's promises memorized ... people who should have known better ... these are the ones who ignore the questions of the wise men and miss out on meeting with the savior.

There is a warning for us here in Matthew's Gospel account. Our own sinful nature often tempts us by saying, "I've read and heard from the Bible my entire life. I pretty much know all the stories. I pretty much know all the teachings that I need to know." Such words tempt us to become like the chief priests and scribes of the people who missed out on precious time in the presence of their savior. God invites us into His presence to give His gifts to us ... to bless us with forgiveness and eternal life. Yet the temptation remains for us to say, "Been there. Done that."

The account of the magi following the star reveals three different attitudes toward Jesus and His Word. There was Herod who was afraid of Jesus and wanted to kill Him. There were chief priests and scribes

"A Cast of Characters" Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany of Our Lord 2023

who didn't really care about Jesus. Then, there were the magi who followed God's revelation in the star and looked upon the human face of God their savior.

These attitudes are still with us today. There is still that small remnant of those who ... like the magi ... attend to God's revelation by the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. There are those who ... like the chief priests and scribes ... just don't care. And there are those who ... like Herod ... actively hate Jesus and seek to destroy His church.

As we hear God's Word, we learn that the only safe way for God's Kingdom to come to us is through this child that the magi worshipped. It is He who lived a perfect life in our place. It is He who took our sins to the cross. It is He who rose from the dead and opened the way to eternal life. This child that the magi worshipped is the one and only way for God to come to us without burning us forever for our sins. This child is the one who has purchased forgiveness, life, and salvation and then gives these things to us as a gift.

The gifts of this child are for all people. In fact, Epiphany is sometimes called the Gentile Christmas for that very reason. For it is on this day that God led the Gentile magi to the Christ-child. This account tells us the Christ is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Thus, Jesus is the savior of all people ... Jew and Gentile alike.

"A Cast of Characters" Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany of Our Lord 2023

How blest are those whom God leads by His Word. The Holy Spirit has opened the Scriptures to them and in those Scriptures, they see the child whom the magi worshipped. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they see that this child is the savior of all. By the gift of faith, they receive the eternal blessings of this child's salvation. God leads them by the star of His holy Word to His Son, Jesus Christ, and preserves them forever in His salvation. Amen