

Tiny Town for Baby's Birth • Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:6

The year was 6 B.C. and Herod the Great was on the throne. He was great by many measures, one of the primary characters of ancient history. He had a lengthy rule, but in many ways fulfilled the description of a despot in all the things that he did. His biography is a lengthy list of misdeeds and intrigue in order to gain and to keep power. He married ten different wives; he fathered a lengthy list of children; he struggled with indecision about who ought to succeed him and whether his kingdom ought to be subdivided. He wrote six different wills defining which of his sons should be his successor. Throughout his lengthy reign, he dealt with some of the most famous characters of history — Julius Caesar, Octavius, Brutus, Cassius, Antony and Cleopatra, with whom he had a special rivalry because their two kingdoms bordered one another.

Although he was called the King of the Jews, Herod was in fact himself not really a Jew. He was an Idumean by birth, a half Jew at best. So his claim to the throne was not one of heredity but rather one of politics. Through cold-blooded murder, through some strange twists in the course of history, through the endorsement of the Roman Senate and the appointment of the Roman Caesar, he was a king and did in fact rule as a puppet monarch over Palestine.

In order to keep that power, he had to constantly engage in wars and intrigue. For example, in the rivalry that went on between Octavius and Antony, he would sometimes side with Antony and sometimes with Octavius in the hope that he would end up on the right side, which didn't always happen. Then, exhibiting his amazing astuteness for politics, he would convince the winner that he really was on his side all along and somehow be able to survive the military and political turmoil. When his wives became his competitors, he had them put in shackles for years at a time. When previous holders of the throne in Palestine became competitive, he had them executed. His own sons he had murdered and executed because he thought they were gaining too much political power.

In spite of all that he did, there were those who thought that compared to the other ancient monarchs, he was mostly a good guy and that he made some significant positive contributions. He kept Rome off of many Hebrew backs during those de-

cares prior to the birth of Jesus. He enabled Palestine to maintain a certain level of autonomy. He continued many of the Hebrew Jewish traditions. He rebuilt the temple, or at least initiated the elaborate and expensive rebuilding of the temple originally built by Solomon.

Herod's capitol city was Jerusalem. Not a large city by today's standards like Tokyo or Mexico City or New York City, but it was large for an ancient city. It was not as large as Rome, but significant in the place that it held. It was cosmopolitan and sophisticated because it was on the trade route, the crossroads of that part of the Roman Empire. There were people in the marketplace on just about any day of the week who had come from as far to the west as Spain, as far to the east as Persia, or even perhaps as far as India or China. You could hear people speaking in Latin or in Greek or in Hebrew or perhaps in Egyptian or one of the other African tongues. There were people who had all different types of garments and who represented all different types of monarchies.

Jerusalem was, in a sense, a combination of the very best and the very worst. The very best in that there were godly people, men and women who read the Old Testament diligently and sought to live by its principles and its laws, who faithfully sacrificed in the temple as had been prescribed under Moses. There were those who prayed daily waiting for the Messiah to come and genuinely believed that the Old Testament prophecies were true.

But also in that city there was corruption, political intrigue, prostitution, idolatry and the military occupation of Rome. The Romans considered Palestine as part of the Empire, even though under the puppet monarch, Herod.

Herod had a long reign. Almost 70 years old and in failing health, he was fighting to retain power.

He decided that he would move south, at least temporarily, to the city of Jericho, because there

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were warm therapeutic baths. He thought that maybe if he were to soak in those baths that eventually he could regain some measure of health and strength. There were those who, sensing his weakness, saw it as an opportunity to rebel against some of the iron rule that he had given. For example, two Jew-

ish Rabbis, one named Matthias and the other named Judas, thought it an absolute sacrilege that Herod had put an eagle on the gates of the temple. So in defiance, they actually climbed up the gates and ripped the eagle off. Herod, showing that he was as tough as ever, had them caught and burned alive.

Herod was concerned that when he died the people might celebrate because his rule had come to an end. He put out an invitation all over Palestine that the elite of the country — the most famous and powerful politicians, theologians, business persons, intelligentsia, teachers and religious leaders — come to the city of Jericho. They all came and were invited into the hippodrome that he had built in the city of Jericho. Once in there he had them put under guard and left orders that on the day that he died they were all to be killed. That way he would guarantee there would be no celebration in Palestine at his death, but there would be universal mourning across the country because their leadership had all died.

The story goes on and on. He was worried that his son, Antipater, might overthrow him. So he petitioned Rome for permission to have his own son executed. Caesar gave that permission so he had Antipater executed. Herod was frightened that he would lose his power; he was frightened that he would die. There was economic difficulty and threats of insurrection.

In the middle of all this, Herod had another problem:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

(Matt. 2:1-3)

He was disturbed because it was one more problem, one more competitor in all of these that were trying to take away his throne. This one was allegedly a legitimate competitor, for all of the others were merely political rivals. If this child was a full blooded Jew and in the line of David, he realized there might actually be followers who would try to overthrow him, maybe even try to overthrow Rome, and put this newborn king on the throne. He was disturbed. Those who knew about it in Jerusalem were disturbed as well because there were many who were dependent upon Herod for their power

and for their perks, and they didn't want to lose out to some new king. Even those who hated Herod were worried that it could divide the country and cause instability to the government. They worried that this new king might be as bad or worse even than Herod.

The Magi who came to the big city knew nothing of all this. They were from a place far away where the newspapers did not carry the local politics of Palestine. They probably didn't even know Herod's name. They had no idea of the political problems that he had. They were simply magicians and astrologers, followers of horoscopes. Unlike much of our Christmas art and music, they really weren't kings in the sense of being heads of government. In those days there were many thousands of Magi. They were a priestly cast in Babylon and Persia. They spent their time gazing at the stars and trying to predict national and individual prophecies of the future.

They had been studying a particular star that did not quite fit their charts so they decided to follow it. They were in total ignorance of the Old Testament, of its prophecies, and were not followers of Yaweh God. Somewhere enroute they picked up a new notion. Maybe on a caravan they met a Jew who knew some of the Old Testament prophecies. For whatever reason, they concluded that the star they were following was leading them to the birthplace of a new king for the Jews.

When they arrived in the big city of Jerusalem, they started checking around and decided that the place to go was to the palace itself. There, talking to a guard or to someone in probably the lower echelons of the palace hierarchy, they asked if anyone knew the place where the king had been born. Whoever got that message passed it along to a superior who passed it along to another superior who eventually whispered in the ear of King Herod. Herod by then was quite paranoid about all of these threats against his throne. So he insisted that these Magi who otherwise would have been lost in the crowds of the big city of Jerusalem be brought into his presence. The Magi asked Herod where the king was to be born but he didn't know anymore than they did. Herod wanted to know about him as much as the Magi did because he wanted to kill this baby king — just as he had killed all of the other competition.

Then Herod did what ancient people do and we in our era still do, he called on the experts. He brought in the theologians, the Bible scholars, the chief priests, and asked them where the King of the

Jews was to be born. He really didn't need to do that. He probably could have gone to almost any religious Jew out in the market place or in the countryside and asked the question and gotten a quick answer.

They all knew about Micah, a prophet that had lived 700 years before, a prophet in the tiny little town of Moresheth. Micah was a small-town guy. He was a very minor prophet in comparison to Isaiah in ancient Israel. Micah didn't live in the big city. Micah wasn't well connected. Micah didn't have the sophistication that Isaiah had. Isaiah traveled to the capitols. Isaiah knew the heads of state. Isaiah spoke powerfully and prophetically to nations. Micah lived in the little town and preached there and wrote his words down, but they were from God. They were painful words of doom. He told his own people that when you sin against God, while the punishment and consequences might not instantly come, they will eventually come. He told them that the personal and collective sins of Israel will be judged by God himself. It was a sure thing. His prophecy was bleak and painful.

But in the midst of this bleak and painful prophecy, he wrote some words of hope, saying:

But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. (Micah 5:2)

Oh, they all knew that. And so there was no difficulty at all for the experts to tell Herod and the Magi. They didn't quote Micah quite precisely.

For example, they updated their terminology — for no one in those days referred to Bethlehem as Ephrathah anymore, but instead used the province in which it was located, Judea. So they said it would be in Bethlehem, in Judea. The rest they paraphrased, saying that a messiah would be born and that he would be a shepherd over the people of Israel. Unlike Herod who had fleeced the sheep, the messiah would be a shepherd who would love the sheep and who would care for them.

Bethlehem. That was a stunning idea for Herod. Of all places, Bethlehem was almost the most unlikely place. Oh, it's true that King David had been born in Bethlehem, but that was 1,000 years earlier. Bethlehem had decreased in importance and deteriorated in population in that 1,000 years. It was out of the way; it was unimportant. When the trade

caravans would go back and forth between Herod's Jerusalem and Cleopatra's Egypt, they would go through the city of Hebron; that was the main route. It was off that route that you'd find Bethlehem located on a craggy outgrowth of the Judean Mountains on the eastern edge of the wilderness, the desert. It was a place of little significance. It was a place of little population. It was a place of almost no economic importance. It was a tiny, unimportant town. In fact, so insignificant, that every time anyone mentioned it, which was hardly ever, there always had to be an explanation given because there were two Bethlehems, Bethlehem in Zebulun and Bethlehem in Judea.

But it was Bethlehem — this out-of-the-way place, this has-been town, this non-city — where the most significant event in all of history had taken place. The king was born! No ordinary king, for ordinary kings have their life begin nine months before their birth. Not this king! This king, Micah had said long ago, had origins that are from ancient times. Herod didn't understand that. Surely the Magi didn't. I'm not even sure that the Bible scholars and chief priests understood it, for that child born was ancient even in Micah's day, 700 years earlier, because he was God. That which had been supernaturally predicted seven centuries before had actually happened.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and

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found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said,

"Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matt. 2:7-12)

There was another special message that came to Mary and Joseph to take the child quickly out of

town, to quickly escape to Egypt because Herod had done something typical of his character and absolutely despicable. He had ordered that all male children born within a two-year period in and around Bethlehem be immediately executed to make sure that any threat to this old man's throne was taken care of.

So while Christmas may to us conjure up words of joy and happiness and birth, many mothers and fathers of that time thought of Christmas for the rest of their lives not as birth, but as death. Not as joy, but as grief. For their hopes were also tied to their baby boys and their hopes had been killed with a sword.

I find some powerful principles in this ancient story. I find here the principle that God rules history. I am astounded to discover that he rules it in the smallest of details, not only who but when and where. Hundreds of years in advance he has it figured out to the finest of details. He knows when his Christ will be born and where and to whom and he lays it out in precision and makes sure that all of the pieces fit precisely together as they should. And he gives us an annual Christmas reminder that he still is the God who rules history. He still is the God, not only of the sweeping changes of the world from China to Czechoslovakia, but also of the finest details in even the most out-of-the-way places. He is the God who manages the affairs of history down to us and to our lives. Precisely when we think that the world in general and our own biographies in particular are spinning hopelessly out of control is precisely the time when we need to remember that God rules history as much today as he did back then. God rules history and God draws unlikely persons to himself.

I count the Magi to be among the most unlikely of all. When you read those sometimes dreary laws of the Old Testament, you find what God thinks of sorcery, of the occult, of astrology, of horoscopes, and magic. You find that it was strictly forbidden. You find that in certain instances it was a capital offense and required execution. You will find that in the community of the Hebrew people, God would have nothing to do with anyone that participated in those practices. And yet that is what the Magi did for a living. They weren't readers of scripture; they weren't religious people – they were superstitious to the core. They gave their lives to gazing at the stars and trying to understand history and everything, not by God and revelation, but by the movement of the celestial bodies. They were not Jews,

the chosen people; they were gentiles. They were as heathen as heathen could be. Not pursuing after God, but pursuing after some heavenly light that they thought was most unusual from anything they had ever seen before. And yet those are precisely the ones whom God drew to his son and therein I find great hope.

I discover that God draws to himself and to his son those who are not squeaky clean, those who do not have everything all figured out and everything in place, those who are not always the insiders, but the outsiders. He still seeks modern Magi to come to his Son. He is the God that rules history. He is the God that draws unlikely persons to himself.

He is also the God who acts in out-of-the-way places. For while it may seem that history is made in places with names like Rome, London, Washington, Moscow or Jerusalem, the truth is that he is the God of the places we have never heard of before. It is those of us whose names will never be recorded in the important places in history, who live in the out-of-the-way places like Bethlehem in Judea, who the Hound of Heaven is pursuing to bring to Himself.

Now, a moment for the personal. With whom would you identify in the old Christmas story? Would you say this Christmas you are more like Herod who sought to eliminate the Christmas Christ from his life or would you say you are more like the Magi, willing to leave home and everything else in order to go as far as necessary to find him, to worship him? After almost 2,000 years, the same choice is being made all over again.

I end the telling of the Christmas story with the telling of another story. It, too, is a story about the big city and about a tiny town. It's not an ancient story, but a modern story and a true story. The story begins on the outskirts of a tiny town in rural Brazil, in a one-room house with a dirt floor, where poor people lived. The furnishings are as simple as can be, a wood burning stove in the middle of the room, two wooden pallets that serve as beds on opposite sides, walls with two decorations, an out-of-date calendar and a crucifix.

In that house for many years has lived a woman named Maria. She was widowed shortly after her daughter Christina was born. She had offers of remarriage, but declined them all, determined that she would raise her daughter alone. With a fierce independence she went to work and tried to make ends meet. Her life was harsh, hard, but by the time Christina was 15, things had leveled out some. While

they were still very poor, at least Maria, in her job as a maid, had a consistent income and so there was a predictability about there being food for them to eat. Also it was getting to be about the time that Christina was herself old enough to go to work and so there would be an additional contribution to the income of the family.

Christina was beautiful — long black hair, olive skin, perfect complexion, dancing-darting eyes, contagious laughter, attractive personality — so that the offers of marriage to her were many. But she made a decision that she would be unlike the other teenagers in her little tiny town, and she would not marry young as just about everyone did. She was determined, with some of that independence of her mother, to make it on her own. In fact, her dream was that some day she would go to the big city of Rio de Janeiro and there she would have all the excitement that that city held.

Her mother hated it when she talked like that, she knew too much about the city and her daughter knew so little. She wondered how her daughter would fare with sinful and sophisticated people. She wondered where her daughter would live, what her daughter would do. Although she feared what her daughter would do, because she had heard the stories about pretty young girls from tiny towns who went to the big city and in desperation did what they had to do in order to make enough money to live.

Maria's worst nightmares came true when she woke up one morning and looked across the one room that was their house and saw that the pallet that was used for a bed was empty. She knew where Christina had gone, and so she took all of her savings, all of the money that she could put together, and she went and bought a bus ticket to Rio. With some of the little money she had left over, while she waited for the bus, she went into a drug store where there was one of those photo booths where you put in coins to have your picture taken in four different poses. One after the other, she put in every coin she could until she had a whole pile of pictures of herself. It was then that the bus came and with her ticket, very little money left and with this pile of pictures, she went to Rio.

When she got there she asked directions to find the places where the street walkers live and where

the prostitutes practiced their trade. One by one, as best she could, she went to every bar, every hotel, every restaurant. She would either go up to the mirror in the lobby or go into the ladies' room and write a note on the back of the picture of herself and tuck it into the mirror frame or tape it to the glass. On the street, in telephone booths, she would attach one of the pictures to the wall or the phone itself until eventually the pictures were gone and her money was used up. Then she got back on the bus and went back to her tiny rural town and waited.

It was some weeks later one morning that Christina was coming down the stairs of a dilapidated hotel. Her appearance had changed, her hair was disheveled, the sparkle was out of her eyes, there was no laughter, she seemed years older than her

teenage years. As she walked across the lobby she was startled to have her attention drawn to a familiar face in a picture on the lobby mirror. She walked over to it and there, with a tighten-

ing in her throat, tears filling her eyes, she saw the picture of her mother. She took it, turned it over and read the message that her mother had written to her. "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." She did.¹

Christina came home. Will you? Will you come home this Christmas to Jesus?

"Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." ... Will you come home this Christmas to Jesus?

¹ Max Lucado, "Come Home" from No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, pp. 157-160.

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