

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: WEEK 2

CHRISTMAS HEROES
THEN COMES THE VILLAIN
MATTHEW 2:1-16
12/10/2017



MAIN POINT

Jesus is the exact opposite of the villain we see in Herod.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Who is your favorite movie or comic book villain, and why?

What are some of the characteristics that you think make a “good” (as in entertaining, especially bad) villain?

Every good story has the conflict of a villain, someone whose passion in life becomes about bringing down the story’s hero. For the Christmas story, that villain is Herod. When Herod heard about the birth of Christ, his anger burned within him because of his jealousy and selfishness, instead of the submission and worship Jesus’ birth should generate. Through Herod, we see the protective, self-motivated, and evil traits of a villain that stand in direct contrast to the submissive, humble, and good nature of Jesus.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 2:1-6.

Herod is often mentioned in passing in Christmas stories. What do you know about him?

Herod was made King of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. Herod was known to be politically savvy, ambitious, and clever. He was wealthy, administratively oriented, and a great builder. Herod took on grand projects, including building the temple which began in 20 B.C. and lasted until near his death. Herod loved power, taxed heavily, and operated his empire on suspicion.

What do you know about the wise men from your familiarity with the Christmas story? What do you think motivated the wise men to journey so far from home to investigate another religion’s Messiah?

What do the wise men reveal about Jesus in their question to King Herod?

Who were these wise men? The term “Magi” referred to individuals who held positions of authority for centuries in the

ancient Near East. They were not kings, but they counseled kings as important members of the royal courts. The wise men were Gentile dignitaries who traveled hundreds of miles to worship and honor the One born “King of the Jews.” If the wise men had studied ancient religious texts from the region, they might have been familiar with various Old Testament prophecies about Jesus. Their questions showed that the child they were seeking was no ordinary baby—He was something much more, and Herod was troubled by the implications.

To whom did Herod turn next for answers about this baby the wise men sought? What did the wise men understand that the Jewish rulers missed?

Herod turned to the ruling Jewish religious elite to find answers for the questions that troubled him. The priest and scribes gave a matter-of-fact answer to Herod’s question. They were able to answer because they devoted much of their lives to knowing the teaching of Scripture, yet they did not seek to find this baby themselves. Intellectual knowledge had not made a meaningful change in their hearts. In a sense, Herod understood the significance of the wise men’s visit better than those who should’ve celebrated it most.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 2:7-16.

Herod played along with the wise men’s quest in order to get what he wanted. Do you ever identify with Herod’s motives? Explain.

How have you missed the work of God because you were too set on having your own way? Why is half-hearted obedience a poor cover up for a changed heart?

Herod, the priests, and the wise men all had a chance to respond to Jesus. Matthew means for us to compare the three groups. What can we learn from the variety of responses?

In verse 8, we read that Herod deceptively played along with the wise men’s plan to worship the Messiah. But God had other plans. As Scripture indicates, the wise men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod (v. 12). Once Herod found out he’d been disobeyed, he “became furious” (v. 16). Verse 16 describes Herod’s reaction to the wise men’s disobedience. His anger and rage culminated in the murder of innocent children. Matthew shows us three people with front-row seats to God’s work. It is ironic that the pagan wise men from the East were the ones who treasured God’s work and decided to press into what He was doing in Bethlehem, rather than the Jewish religious elite.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Herod’s anger, resentment, and jealousy got in the way of God’s work. What in your life most often becomes a barrier for God to work?

How can we lovingly point one another to the truth when we are stuck in a place of sin like Herod or half-hearted belief like the Jewish authorities? What might that process look like here?

The people looking for Jesus in Matthew 2 were the people whom most wouldn’t have thought would find truth in Him. Who is an unexpected person who might want to hear the truth about Jesus from you?

PRAY

Ask that God would keep you from sin and help you see His work for what it is. But praise God for

being bigger than sin and circumstances, that He overcomes our sin with His grace and work in our lives. Ask God to help you see and identify those in your sphere of influence who are open to hearing God's truth.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 2:1-16

2:1. The wise men were magi. Eastern magi mixed Zoroastrianism with astrology and black magic. They are described in Dan 2:2,4-5,10, where they are associated with diviner-priests, mediums, and sorcerers. The term "magus" (sg of "magi") appears only once in the NT. It describes the sorcerer whom Paul portrayed as a "son of the Devil, full of all deceit and all fraud, enemy of all righteousness" (Ac 13:6-10). The magus of whom Paul spoke would have held beliefs that were similar to those of the wise men. Thus, the summons of the magi to visit Jesus demonstrates God's intention to save Gentiles from their futile religions. As an adult, Jesus cast out demons and broke Satan's grip on beleaguered people. Here we see that even in His infancy, Christ plundered Satan's kingdom and set captives free. The east may refer to Babylonia or Persia.

2:2. The question posed by the wise men was an unintentional challenge to Herod's reign. Jesus was born King in the sense that He was from David's line and thus King by birthright. Herod, however, was neither a full Jew nor a descendant of David and thus was not genuinely qualified to reign as king. The word translated star can indicate many different astronomical phenomena, including comets, meteors, or planetary conjunctions. Matthew later (2:9) described the star as moving through the sky in order to point the magi to Jesus' precise location. This indicates that it was no ordinary star. In the east probably means "at its rising," indicating that the star mysteriously appeared in the eastern sky to signal Messiah's birth. The interest of the magi in astrology, a practice condemned in the Bible (Isa 47:13-15), probably first directed their attention to Messiah's star. In another profound display of grace, God condescended to use the magi's pagan superstitions to draw them to Jesus.

2:3. Herod was disturbed by reports of the birth of a legitimate claimant to his throne. The people of Jerusalem were equally disturbed because they feared Herod's paranoid and delusional rages. In the past he had killed even his favorite wife and sons in order to protect his rule.

2:4. Herod summoned expert scribes to learn where the OT said Messiah would be born. To this point the star had guided the wise men near to Jesus, but now the witness of the Scriptures was necessary before God caused the star to reappear and pinpoint Messiah's exact location. Thus the value of biblical revelation was upheld even as new revelations unfolded.

2:5-6. The chief priests and scribes (v. 3) knew Scripture well enough to identify Bethlehem as Messiah's birthplace (Mic 5:2; Jn 7:42), but nevertheless they later opposed His teachings. Knowledge of Scripture does not guarantee that your heart is right with God. The priestly opposition to Jesus is foreshadowed here by the fact that they made no effort to go visit Him even as the magi undertook the last leg of a long journey to do so. Micah 5:2 foretold that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of a king, a ruler who would shepherd... Israel. Although Micah said that the promised prince would "rule" over Israel, Matthew's translation says that Messiah will "shepherd" Israel. Matthew likely chose this word to reflect Micah's use in 5:4 and thus show that the entirety of Mic 5 applies to Jesus. This indicates that Jesus is eternal since Micah says "His origin is from antiquity, from eternity." Micah's prophecy also said that the shepherd's "greatness will extend to the ends of the earth."

2:7-8. Herod questioned the magi about the exact time of the star's appearance under the assumption that the star first appeared at the time of the child's birth. On the basis of this date, he ordered the execution of all male children in Bethlehem two years of age and under (2:16). This implies that the magi's journey was lengthy and involved great sacrifice. Herod's pretended desire to worship Messiah highlights his deceitfulness.

2:11. In contrast to the stable in which Jesus was born (Lk 2), Jesus' family now lived in a house. This shows that the magi visited Jesus after the visit of the shepherds described by Luke. The magi worshiped Jesus openly, as did many other people during His lifetime (8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9,17). Jesus' reception of worship reinforces His identity as Immanuel, "God with us" (1:23).

2:13-14. The angel called Jesus the child rather than "your child" when speaking to Joseph because Joseph was not Jesus' biological father. Similarly, he described Mary as His mother rather than "your wife" because he wished to identify her in relation to the greater (Jesus) rather than the lesser (Joseph). Joseph promptly obeyed when he was told to flee to Egypt.

2:15. That what was spoken had to be fulfilled indicates that the Bible is inspired by God and authoritative over history. In its original context, the calling of the son out of Egypt in Hos 11 is a reference to Israel's exodus from Egypt, not

young Messiah's trip back home. Matthew understood this, but under the Spirit's direction he recognized Jesus as the new Moses who will lead a new and climactic exodus. Just as Moses delivered his people from slavery to Pharaoh, Jesus will deliver people from slavery to Satan. Thus Matthew rightly regarded Hos 11:1 and other portions of the OT as foreshadows of Jesus and events in His life.

2:16-17. Skeptics deny that Herod ever slaughtered the boys of Bethlehem since no extrabiblical source documents this horrific event. However, the murders are consistent with his documented dealings, such as his murdering his own family. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that Herod arranged for many Jewish nobles to be murdered upon his death in order to ensure that the land mourned his passing (Ant. 17:167-69). Herod's behavior is reminiscent of Pharaoh's around the time of Moses' birth (Ex 1:15-22). This and other striking similarities to Moses' birth narrative strengthen Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the new Moses whom God promised in Dt 18:15-19. Ancient Jews thought of Moses as a deliverer (Ac 7:25,35). By highlighting parallels between Moses and Jesus, Matthew shows that Jesus was the promised Deliverer who would save His people from their sins. Herod killed all boys two years old and under in Bethlehem because the star had appeared to the magi two years previously, presumably at the moment of Jesus' birth.