

As an actor, I played a fair number of Kings. I played good kings like Arthur in CAMELOT, misguided kings like Shakespeare's RICHARD II, and horrible, bloodthirsty kings like MACBETH. But I went to public grade school where we didn't do Christmas pageants, so I never got a chance to play one of We Three Kings of Orient Are.

But that's not really not a big gap in my royal resume because there is only one earthly King in this story: Herod the Great, the father of Herod Antipas who executed John the Baptist and the founder of a whole family of rulers called Herod who were almost all so terrible that if they were alive today they would almost certainly have their own reality tv show. Matthew never says the three visitors are Kings—in fact, he never even says exactly how many of them there are.

Matthew calls Jesus' visitors "Magi"—magicians, sages, astrologers---people who studied the world around them and tried to discern deeper truths from the phenomena they observed. So the tradition of calling them the Three Wise Men is much more accurate than calling them Kings.

Even though they're not all Kings, Herod and the Magi are all pretty "wise guys." But their wisdom manifests itself in diametrically different ways-- which St. Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises* gives us a helpful way to understand.

Certainly, the Magi are wise men. Un-wise men simply could not do all the things Matthew says they did.

They **see** the star appear and **figure out** that its appearance heralds the birth of a child who is the fulfillment of religious prophecies from a tradition other than their own. **THEN** they **figure out** how to get to Jerusalem from "Anatolia" which could be anywhere from modern Iraq to Turkey. Once they're **there** they outmaneuver a man who was smart enough to outsmart everyone who was anyone in the ancient Middle East from Julius Caesar to Cleopatra. Then they find the child they're looking for and get back home—apparently each still in once piece.

I would say that the Magi probably had very respectable SAT scores.

But Herod the Great's were probably just as good (even though he probably copied some of his answers off the person sitting next to him.)

According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus Herod ruled much of what we would think of today as Israel, Jordan, and Syria for over 40 years. Herod managed that difficult task because he was wise enough to be BFF's with whoever happened to be running things in Rome at any given moment.

When Herod was about 20, he and a pack of rival warlords were tearing Palestine apart. Herod was smart enough to see that Julius Caesar was the rising star of the Roman Empire, so he made friends with Caesar's friends and got himself named governor of Galilee.

But when Caesar was assassinated by a coalition of Roman senators led by Brutus and Cassius, Herod quickly switched his allegiance to Caesar's assassins. When the assassins needed cash, Herod

was the first governor to turn in the taxes assessed for his province, which made him very popular with Cassius and Co.

When Brutus and Cassius were overthrown by Augustus and Mark Antony, Herod switched sides again and allied himself with Antony who was so grateful, that he arranged for the Senate to name Herod the King of Judea in 40 BC.

When Antony and Augustus turned against one another, Herod sided with Antony who ended up losing and committing suicide and being played by Richard Burton in a really, really long movie with Elizabeth Taylor. Herod convinced Augustus that he would be as good a friend to him as he had been to Antony. Augustus was so impressed by Herod's pleading (and his lavish presents) that he confirmed him as King of Judea and eventually gave him even more territory to rule.

Of course, this leads us to the question "So what?"

Well, it's this. I think Matthew wants us to draw a spiritual insight from this dichotomy of the two types of "Wise Men" he shows us in this story.

And I think St. Ignatius gives us a helpful way to do that.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius sets down a meditation he calls "The Two Standards." He asks the person making the retreat to discover what he or she wants to be the basic orientation of his life. Ignatius was a former soldier and he so he uses the military imagery of "standards" or battle flags.

The First Standard is held high by Satan as he recruits demons he can send out to sow misery and pain across the earth. They are to do this by luring people first to value riches, next to value the honor which those riches buy, and finally to value themselves above all in the deadly sin of Pride.

The Second Standard is the banner of Christ as he recruits disciples to preach the Gospel. The disciples are to go forth in poverty, free from the burden of worldly possessions; they are to endure

the humiliation which is generally the lot of the poor; and from those humiliations to learn true humility in which one accepts one's own limitations and make God's will the guiding power for one's own desires.

Herod chooses the standard of Satan and its progression from riches to honors to Pride.

Few men have been more devoted to earthly possessions than Herod the Great. Herod's greed was so monumental that it enabled him to do what Julius Caesar and Mark Antony could not. Herod resisted the seductive wiles of Cleopatra herself because he was so furious that the Marc Antony had given her some large tracts of land that Herod considered his. In fact, Josephus says that erod tried to convince Antony to kill Cleopatra and thatit was only his fear of Antony that kept Herod from having killing Cleopatra himself when she visited Jerusalem.

And these riches led Herod by the hand to honors. At 20, he was governor of the small territory of Galilee. Twenty years later, he walked out of the

Roman senate arm in arm with Mark Antony on one side and Caesar Augustus on the other, having been proclaimed the King of the Judea by the Roman senate.

His pride—his commitment to self above and any and all other things was so nourished by his wealth and honors—that Herod who began his career ordering his soldiers not to kill civilians in towns they conquered eventually became a monster who murdered his own children.

Herod had nine sons by several wives. (He seems to be have been one of those parents who liked using names with the same first letter. His oldest children had names like Antigonus, Alexander, Aristobulus, Archelaus, Agrippa, and Antipas (and then he lost interest and started giving his sons names like “Phil.”) He ordered the execution of Alexander and Aristobulus because he suspected them of trying to seize his crown. When one of his generals protested their innocence, Herod had the general and *his* son tortured and stoned, before having his own sons strangled. He also ordered the execution of his sons’ mother Mariamne even

though he loved so much that after killing her he used to wander through his palace calling out her name, begging for her forgiveness.

The Wise Men do not line up behind Herod at Satan's battle flag, as we can tell by the gifts they give the infant Christ.

First they give away their Gold—the classic symbol of earthly possessions. And by giving their gold to a king whose kingdom is not of this world, they challenge **us** to ask ourselves much we are willing to imitate Herod in our pursuit of earthly possessions.

Next they give away Incense—in ancient times as today symbol of the elevated, the holy, the sacred—the honored. By giving the infant Christ incense. These men who would have been highly honored in their own cultures demonstrate that they believe Jesus is more worthy of honor than they are themselves. The Magi's gift of incense to Christ recognizes that he is a divine as well as an earthly ruler. But in the context of the story of Herod's attempt to murder him, Matthew reminds us that

the divinity of Christ is the not the supernatural disdain of Zeus and Hera for human suffering—it is the persecution of the infant Moses being saved from Pharaoh by his mother and sister so that he can lead Israel to freedom. The Magi honor a King of the Jews who escapes one bloodthirsty Roman puppet as an infant so that he can be mocked, stripped, and mocked, and crucified by his successor 30 years later.

And finally the Magi demonstrate their rejection of Pride—the elevation of Self above all other values through a falsely inflated sense of one’s individual worth based solely on the ephemeral bases of riches and honor—in their odd gift of myrrh. Because myrrh is a **very** strange gift to give a baby

We don’t often hear the “myrrh verse” of *We Three Kings*. If you know it, you know why,

It runs like his

“Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume,
Breathes a life of gathering gloom.
Sorrowing, Sighing, Bleeding, Dying—
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.”

Hard to beat that for Christmas cheer, but it makes a very important point. Even at the beginning of Christ's mission the Cross already casts a shadow over the manger. The Messiah comes to a world in which those who hold the reins and purse strings of power have no intention of loosening their grip. And a Messiah who places his or her own life and needs as the paramount value which he or she serves is would never do what Jesus did. The Magi understand that as Herod never could.

The challenge for us is to decide if we are willing to follow the Magi's example as faithfully as they followed the star that led them to Bethlehem.