

WHOSE KINGDOM RULES?

A play for Christmas or Epiphany

by

DAVID NUNN

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...a fantastic play! Full of insight from which we all benefitted!

Nick Viney

CAST

In order of appearance

MELCHIOR
BALTHAZAR

1st MAN

KASPAR

2nd MAN

3rd MAN

HEROD
ADVISER
SERVANT
SCRIBE 1
SCRIBE 2
ADVISER 2
GUARD 1
GUARD 2

(Optional – non speaking)

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SCENE 1

Wise Men inquire as to the whereabouts of the new-born King of the Jews

M The end of our journey, brother Balthazar! The streets of old Jerusalem itself!

B Yes – we’ve dreamed of this moment for a long time. Now who shall we ask to direct us?

M Let’s try that man over there.

B A good idea! Hello, my good man! Can you tell us where we can find the new-born King of the Jews?

1 Do what?

K Where can we find the new-born King?

1 What d’yer mean, new-born King! There is no new-born King! Are you trying to be funny or something?

B No, no, no! We are visitors from the East and have come to worship him.

1 Well, you must have come to the wrong place then! Excuse me, I’ve got to go.

M What an odd character!

B Yes! Let’s ask that man over there. Excuse me sir. We’ve come from the East in search of the new-born King of the Jews. Can you tell us where to find him?

2 New-born King, eh! Must be another of Herod’s sons. That’s about all I can tell you.

K But haven’t you heard about his birth?

2 No. Hadn’t a clue!

M This is incredible! We’ve come all this way and no one seems to have heard of him!

B Let’s have one more try. Ah, my good man! Excuse me. Where is the new-born King of the Jews?

3 New-born King? I haven’t heard of any new-born King. But maybe you should try at Herod’s palace. If there is a new-born King, they should be the first to know about it.

M A good idea! Peace be with you!

3 Peace be with you.

M Let’s go and seek an audience with the King.

SCENE 2

In Herod’s Palace

H Ah, my loyal adviser! You seek an audience.

A Your Highness, I have reason to believe that your public reputation has fallen considerably lately.

H Popularity going down, eh! Why's that?

A The public are disgruntled over your recent executions, sire.

H Executions, eh! A man who threatens my own throne. What d'you expect me to do? Throw a party in his honour?

A But he WAS your own son, sire!

H Even worse – ungrateful wretch! Had it coming to him for a long time. Never mind – it'll all have blown over by next week.

A But there's your wife as well sire. And only LAST week!

H Wife, eh! She WAS my wife, you mean. Fine way to repay all my generosity to her – trying to have me killed! When's her burial?

A Tomorrow, sire.

H Good! Remind me to give it a miss.

A But, sire!

H You'd have thought she'd have learnt a lesson from her own son's execution!

A But, sire!

H Enough! I WILL NOT TOLERATE RIVALS TO MY THRONE!

There is a knock on the door

H You'd better see who that is.

Advisor goes to see and returns

A Three visitors from the East, to judge by their dress, sire.

H Wanting interviews and autographs, I suppose. If I granted audience to everyone who...

A They're rich, sire.

H Rich, eh?

A Very rich, sire.

H Very rich, hmm. Well...

A Extremely rich, sire.

H Yes! Well... Ahh! Right! Well – just this once. I think we could just about manage to fit them in. Send ‘em in – what’yer waiting for!

Adviser ushers in the three visitors

H I thought you said they were rich.

A Indeed so, sire!

H They don’t LOOK very rich.

A But look at their gifts, sire!

H Gifts! Ah!

A Frankincense sire, myrrh, and GOLD!

H GOLD! Ah! Forget about those two – that’s the one I’m interested in.
(He addresses Balthazar) You must be the leader. Very kind of you to bring me all these gifts. What do you want?

B Sire! The gifts are not for YOU!

H Not for ME!

B No sire! We seek the NEW-born King of the Jews.

H The new WHAAAT!

M You surely know where he is.

K We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him.

H *(Faintly)* Worship him! Oh... Ah... Yes, of course!

B Your subjects seem completely in the dark as to where he is, so we have come to ask you in person.

H Ask me! Ah... Yes... A wise move.

B You know where he is, of course.

H *(Faintly)* Know where he is? *(Recovering himself)* Of COURSE I know where he is!
(A pause while he thinks) Come back tomorrow! I’ll tell you then.

K Tomorrow!

H Tomorrow. At the same time.

ALL Yes sire! Peace be with you!

H Peace be with you too! *(To adviser)* They'll need it!

The Wise Men bow and leave

Herod and Adviser watch them go, then Herod turns to adviser:

H This 'new-born King' – they must mean the Messiah!

A It seems probable, sire.

H It's definite! They can't have come so far for the birth of anyone else!

A Highly improbable, sire!

H Did you hear what they said! A 'NEW-born King'! In MY kingdom! In MY capital! It's outrageous! It's preposterous! It's... *(He chokes)*

A They seemed very certain, sire.

H *To himself* Just wait till I get my hands on him, whoever he is – wherever he is! But who IS he? WHERE is he? *(To adviser)* Where is he?

A Where is who, sire?

H This Messiah, you fool!

A The Messiah. I really have no idea, sire.

H Then find out, fool! That's what you're paid to do!

A But who would know, sire. After all, the wise men themselves haven't been able to find out.

H Hmm. *(He thinks)* Of course! The chief priests and the scribes! They should know if anyone does!

A They're having a meeting next door, right now, sire.

H Then go and get'em! Fast!

A Yes sire. *(He leaves)*

Servant enters

Sv Dinner is served, sire.

H Let it wait!

Sv Yes, sire.

H *(To himself)* It would choke me! *(He mimicks the wise men)* 'Gifts not for you, sire. They're for the NEW-born king, sire. We've come to worship him, sire.' WORSHIP HIM! Pah! *(To servant)* Go and see if Eleazar's coming back!

Sv Yes sire. *(He goes to the door)* He's on his way, sire.

H And not before time!

Adviser enters

A Sire! I have summoned the chief priests and the scribes.

H Then show'em in. What'yer waiting for!

A Yes sire. *(He goes to the door)* Will you step this way please.

Scribes enter and bow before Herod

H Ahh! Gentlemen! I have called you since I've been doing a little... er... ah... STUDY of your scriptures lately.

S1 *(To S2)* Herod studying the scriptures!

S2 Whatever next!

H I was wondering... er... ah... do they, err... do they say anything about WHERE the Messiah will be born?

S1 Indeed so, sire.

H *(Excitedly)* They do!

S2 The prophet Micah is quite specific on the subject, sire.

H *(Excitedly)* Then what does... *(He calms down)* Then what does he say about it? Where WILL the Messiah be born?

S1 In Bethlehem, sire.

H Bethlehem!

S1 Yes sire. He wrote: 'Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means least of the ruling cities of Judah, for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel.'

H Bethlehem eh! *(To adviser)* Why it's only six miles down the road!

A Yes sire.

H *To scribes* I'm grateful to you. That was all I wished to know. I bid you farewell.

S1/2 Farewell sire. *(They leave)*

Herod and Adviser watch them go

H *To adviser* Get me those wise men, fast!

A Sire, their appointment is for tomorrow. Don't you remember?

H Fool, there's not a moment to lose! They're probably still outside.

Adviser goes to the window

A They're just leaving the courtyard, sire!

H Then get'em back – FAST!

A Yes sire. *(He goes out)*

H *To himself - he again mimicks the wise men* 'They're for the NEW-born king, sire. We've come to WORSHIP him.' WORSHIP him! I'll send them to WORSHIP him!

Adviser enters

A The wise men from the East, sire.

The wise men enter and bow

H Ahh! My dear sirs! I have really excellent news for you – and so quickly too. We're so efficient round here! Your new-born king you're so anxious about – he's really not very far from here at all!

M *(Excitedly to others)* So we were right!

B God has guided our steps in the path of Peace.

K Pray tell us sire where he is.

H Take the road south towards Hebron and Beersheba. In just six miles you'll come across Bethlehem. That's where he is. It shouldn't take long to find him – it's a very SMALL town!

M Ah, BETHLEHEM!

K The most honoured place on earth!

H As I was saying. Go to Bethlehem and make a careful search for the child – and when you have found him, er... bring me word, that I too may come and, er... WORSHIP him.

ALL Yes, sire!

H Peace be with you,

ALL Peace be with you, sire! *(They start to leave)*

M Light dawns on our path, brother Balthazar!

B True, brother Melchior! And look! The star still shines! *(They go out)*

SCENE 3

In Herod's palace – a week later

A2 You're looking worried, Eleazar.

A And so would you be if you had my job! Herod's been like a bear with a sore head for three days now. Those visitors have been gone a week and there's still no sign of them. And it's only six miles to Bethlehem!

A2 Perhaps they're staying a little longer. After all, they have come a very long way.

A And perhaps not. I've a feeling there's something terribly wrong somewhere.

A2 Do you believe the child really IS the Messiah?

A I just don't know, Simon. But there was something very special about those visitors. They had a sort of inward peace about them.

A2 Yes, I thought that too. THEY were absolutely certain about it.

A They've rattled Herod badly, I can tell you. And as they were leaving, I even heard them talking about the Prince of Peace.

A2 The baby?

A I suppose so.

A2 Well he won't get much peace if Herod gets hold of him!

A That's what I'm afraid of.

Herod enters, wild with fury

H *(Roaring)* TRICKED! TRICKED! I've been TRICKED!

A Whatever's the matter, sire!

H They've been seen! SEEN!

A Who have been seen, sire?

H Our famous visitors! They've been seen!

A But wasn't that what you wanted, sire? You've been wanting news of them all week.

H Not this sort of news! They've been seen heading east!

A Towards the Dead Sea you mean, sire?

H Yes – and three days ago too! They’ve given me the slip!

A They’ll be across the Jordan by now, sire.

H *(Roaring)* Aaaah!

A2 *(To A in a whisper)* Looks as if they knew a thing or two!

A Ssh!

H So - they found him! Found him! He’s in Bethlehem!

A Sire, do take care!

H Bethlehem! Bethlehem, I tell you! Right on my own doorstep!

A But he’s probably only a baby, sire!

H A BABY! A RIVAL you mean! A RIVAL to MY throne! *(Roaring)* I will NOT TOLERATE rivals to my throne!

A But sire!

H *(Roaring)* DEATH! DEATH to all boys in Bethlehem! Everyone under two to be killed!

A But sire!

H *(Roaring)* Guards! Guards!

G1/2 *(Running in)* You called, sire?

H *(Roaring)* DEATH! DEATH to all boys in Bethlehem! Everyone under two to be killed!

G1 But sire!

H YOU question MY orders! THEY die, or YOU die! GET OUT!

G1/2 *(Hurriedly)* Yes, sire!

H NOW we shall see whose Kingdom rules! HIS – or MINE! *(He leaves)*

Advisers watch him go in horror!

A2 Eleazar, this is terrible! What ever can we do!

A I don’t know, Simon. I just don’t know!

A2 All those poor people! And those innocent children!

A And the Messiah himself!

A2 Oh God have mercy on us! The hope of all our people is to be crushed tonight!

A *(Thoughtfully)* I'm not so sure, Simon. I'm not so sure about that.

A2 What do you mean?

A You remember our visitors? Their calm, their peace, their certainty?

A2 Yes.

A Somehow I don't think that God would have guided them all the way here just to see their hopes dashed to pieces.

A2 You mean?

A I mean that if the Messiah really HAS been born in Bethlehem, then it will take more than Herod to destroy him.

A2 You mean, God will keep him from death?

A I don't know about that, Simon. But I know that Herod's kingdom will be no match for his!

A2 *(Thoughtfully)* Hmm.

A And I've a feeling that when death DOES strike at him – and strike it will, sooner or later – it won't have any more hold over him than Herod.

A2 You mean – he can't be killed?

A Well – that's what our chief priests would say. But after tonight – well, I'm not so sure. *(A pause while he thinks)* I just can't get over those gifts – I think there's more to them than meets the eye. *(He thinks)* Gold – well that's fit for a king, all right. And frankincense – that's for a priest. Someone who stands between God and us humans to bring us together. But MYRRH! Why Myrrh? It's used for embalming a dead body! *(A pause while he thinks)* You know what, Simon? *(Pause)* I think that if the Messiah really has been born in Bethlehem, then he's been born - to die! *(Pause)* I think he's been born to DIE, so that we can LIVE! *(Pause)* In HIS kingdom. *(Pause)* Forever. *(Freeze)*

*For permission to perform the play,
suggested introductions and concluding remarks, contact DAVID NUNN*

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