

# Herod the Great: A Violent King

My wife and I attended worship with family members in a large Baptist church in Ft. Worth, Texas. It was Father's Day



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and the sermon was based on the story of Sampson. On the long drive home to Missouri we discussed why the preacher used the tragic story of a man who lived selfishly and immorally as an example for fatherhood. Sadly, that sermon reminded me of several others I have heard that were not only inappropriate but totally failed to respect or accurately interpret the biblical text. Too often we turn the story of Jesus' birth into a child's tale instead of the powerful graphic fulfillment of God's grace.

One necessary key to sound biblical interpretation is to recognize the literary form of a passage – narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, etc. Matthew is narrative in form, but contains metaphors, poetic imagery and mystical truth. To understand Matthew you must pay attention to the characters, historical background, societal norms and references to the Old Testament. The nativity story is beautiful, but it contains the elements of evil and tragedy that remind us of our desperate spiritual need for God's love and how God confronts and defeats evil.

Consider Herod the Great, whose father was an Idumean, descendant of Esau, who was the twin brother of Jacob, the sons of Isaac and Rebecca. Remember how Jacob tricked Isaac out of Esau's birthright and became the patriarch of Israel (Genesis 27)? Around 130 BC, John Hyrcanus, of the Hasmonean priestly dynasty, won independence for Israel. Rome later conquered the region and made it their territory. When Herod gained the throne he solidified his power by marrying Mariamne, a princess of the Hasmonean line. The Jewish ruling class despised Herod as a half-breed (not a descendant of Jacob), so Herod had all the genealogical records destroyed so no one could prove their "pure" lineage. Herod's father, Antipater, had managed the Jewish territory for the Romans until the assassination of Julius Caesar and resulting political turmoil. Herod seized the moment, went to Rome and persuaded the new emperor to appoint him as "King of the Jews" under Roman supervision. He

was a brutal ruler, killing everyone whom he saw as a threat, including his favorite wife and sons.

Our story begins with a cruel tyrant in Jerusalem, hated by the priests and ruling class, feared by everyone and willing to do anything to keep his throne. Mary and Joseph had left the sleepy village of Nazareth in the north to register for the Roman census in their family's original home of Bethlehem in the south. Unknown to everyone, some "magi" from Persia began a long journey westward looking for "the newborn king of the Jews" (v. 2). These oriental students of religion, magic, wisdom and astrology had seen a star announcing the birth of a Jewish king. If this were a movie, the ominous tones of background music would be sounding as the mysterious wise men come into sight of Jerusalem. When the magi reach Herod's palace, Herod is "troubled" by the threat to his power and all of Jerusalem is likewise fearful because of the king's wrath and ruthless methods when he perceives any threat to himself. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that when Herod came to power he put to death the entire Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council (Ant.14.9.4). Later, he had 45 "principle men" of the Hasmonean priest/king Antigonus killed (Ant.15.1.2). Herod tolerated no opposition.

When the magi arrive at Herod's palace seeking information about a newborn king, Herod calls in the chief priests and religious scholars. They point to Micah 5:2: "As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah ... one who is to be ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you." Never short on strategy when he perceives a threat, Herod sends for the magi and pretends to join their eager quest. He tells the magi to find this newborn king and check back with him so he can join them in celebration (vv. 7-8).

The magi heed the Jewish scholars' direction and find Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in the house where they were living, as the star directed. They offered gifts fit for royalty: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The contrast is stark: a group of foreign mystics bow before the promised Messiah from God, while the king of the Jews plots to murder him. The magi are "warned in a dream not to return to Herod" and they quietly slip away on a different route home (v. 12).

Remember, this is not a parable with various symbolic or hidden meanings. This is a graphic narrative about God's Son

## Formations

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coming into our world to be one with us so that we can know God and experience a new life as his people. Added to all the generations and experiences of the Old Testament is the possibility of a face-to-face with God. This is what Genesis to Malachi is about. We know very well how vile and ruthless people can be in our world when it comes to amassing wealth, total power and unprincipled selfishness. Whether the realm is industry, politics or religion, our lifetime is full of evil examples to this very day. The grim truth is that the world seems to remain blind to ugly reality, even celebrating the successes of evil.

Yet the story of Jesus does not begin or end with the expectations or strategies of human ego. He was born in poverty in a dusty little village southwest of Jerusalem and died on a government cross outside a city most of the world saw as forgettable. But the infant of Bethlehem became a man of incomparable honesty and generosity who would heal the blind, raise the dead, forgive utter selfishness, command nature and stand unbroken before the judgment of the world's greatest political power. He is the Savior from God.

There are simple takeaway truths in this nativity story:

- God does not see or act as we do.
- In spite of all our efforts to rule our world and chart the course of the universe, the Jesus born in Bethlehem is the only answer to the darkness within the human heart and the tragic events spawned by human choices.
- Herod is a recurring figure in history.
- The magi continue to search and study in hope of finding the ultimate answers.
- Life is shaped by ego, selfishness, and ignorance. God chose to come into our world, not as a worldly ruler or fantasizing mystic, but like us, fragile, with the odds against him, and limited by his humanity.
- God, who is quite beyond our human definitions, chose to be vulnerable for us – vulnerable!

The characters in this story tell it all: mystics from the east, a psychopathic king, Jewish scholars and a poor family from a humble village. God is right in the middle, acting as no other religion or philosophy expects, saying, "I love you!" This is the ultimate expression of power, wrapped in the incomparable grace of God!

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