

“Herod the Horrible”¹ (Matthew 2:1–23)

“Winning isn’t everything; it’s how you play the game that counts.” [Spit in disgust.] I beg to differ: It’s not how you play the game that counts; winning, my friends, is everything! I don’t lose. It isn’t an option. I will stretch the rules and try to level the playing field. I will gain an advantage any way I can. I will do whatever it takes to win and come out on top. I’m a winner!

What you don’t believe me? Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Herod . . . King Herod . . . or as I prefer, King Herod the Great. I ruled Palestine with an iron fist from 37 B.C. until 4 B.C. (Yes, that’s right, Jesus was actually born in B.C. Our dating isn’t always correct.)² My countrymen called me “the Great” because I kept the area of Palestine at a relative peace with its neighbors. I also built majestic cities that to this day still hug the Mediterranean. Furthermore, I built seven palaces and seven theaters. One of these seated 9,500 people. I built stadiums for circuses and sporting events. The largest seated 300,000 fans. I even rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple and doubled its size. A rabbinic saying declared, “Whoever has not beheld Herod’s building has not seen anything beautiful in his life.”³ I was even a humanitarian, on at least a few occasions. I once melted down my own gold plates to feed starving people during a famine. I gave the Jewish people significant tax cuts two different times.

Of course, you don’t get to be where I am by being a softie. I had to take my world by force. After all, there are no handouts in this life. You’ve got to beat people down before they rise up. This was my motto. I was one of the meanest, nastiest kings of all time. Apparently, some people called me “Herod the Horrible” behind my back. But they dared not do that to my face! I was a violent and vindictive man. I had to be. I gained my throne through a lie. I was born into a wealthy, influential Idumaeon family and considered myself Jewish, but my mother was an Arab princess from Petra. Thus, the Jews considered me no different than a half-breed Samaritan. I never quite lived down that shame. The Jews didn’t think much of Herod because he was only partly Jewish. The Romans, on the other hand, were suspicious of him because he WAS partly Jewish. Tough position to be in. To survive, he had to have the power necessary to rule that unruly backwater of the Empire. It wasn’t easy. I wasn’t loved. I had to instill fear in the people as a motivation for them to offer me their allegiance. I had to maintain order in the nation of the Jews because if he didn’t, Rome would send in their armies, and that would have been far worse for the Jews.

I saw my father poisoned for his presumed role in the plot to kill Julius Caesar.⁴ I was given the title “king of the Jews” and placed in charge of Judea. After seeing my father poisoned and enduring endless revolts against Rome, I became obsessed with protecting my throne. The slightest hint of revolt or unrest was met with swift retribution. I had three of my four sons executed when I suspected them of plotting against me. I had a sixteen year old brother-in-law who tried to make a name for himself and tried to gain power behind my back. So one day while the family was enjoying a pleasant swim, I playfully held the young man’s head under the water, until he drowned. I even murdered my own wife and mother-in-law. Caesar Augustus said, “I’d rather be Herod’s pig than be Herod’s son.” But people can say whatever they want; I’m a winner, and people don’t always like winners. They are jealous of winners and don’t understand what it takes to climb the ladder of power and prestige. I, on the other hand, am confident. I am secure. Most of all, I am a winner.

Now on to my story. I want to tell you about a strange visit I received. A number of wise men,⁵ in all their pomp and circumstance, traveled into my throne room. They were from the East. They claimed to be looking for “the king of the Jews.” They said, “We have seen His star in the East, and have come to worship Him.” I said, “The king of the Jews?” Look no further; you’ve found him. But they didn’t seem convinced. Get this! They began talking about a baby boy! A baby? A usurper to my throne who is a baby? I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I may be a bit eccentric, but these wise guys were fools. But

as much as I wanted to dismiss their words, wise men served as advisors to kings. Their advice was often heeded by kings. I felt like I had to take them somewhat seriously. As they continued to speak I felt troubled in my spirit over the news of these wise men. All Jerusalem felt troubled as well. So I gathered together all the chief priests and scribes and inquired of them where this Messiah was to be born. They said to me, "In Bethlehem of Judea," and referred to some Old Testament prophecy. I said, "This just can't be. It's all so ridiculous. I'm going to bed."

As I took off my kingly garb and prepared to hit the sack, I couldn't stop thinking about what the wise men said. Tossing and turning in my bed, I was unable to find solace or sleep. As I became entangled in my silk sheets, an evil plan popped into my mind. The next morning, I decided to secretly call the wise men and determine from them the exact time the star appeared. I then sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him."

Herod's duplicity takes over as he secretly brings in the Magi and attempts to find out when the star had appeared to them (2:7). The need for secrecy may have been to keep the Jews who were hoping for the arrival of Messiah from warning the Magi of Herod's treachery. Or perhaps if the child the Magi are seeking really is the coming Messiah, and if Herod were to eliminate the child, it would not sit well with the Jewish people. So he goes about his plans secretly so that he can be rid of the threat to his throne without the people knowing of it. It seems inconceivable that he would try to get rid of the Messiah for the sake of his own throne, but Herod was an Idumean, and any thought of a Jewish deliverer taking over his power would be ruthlessly resisted. Note too that Herod considered himself "King of the Jews."⁶

Isn't it safe to say that the birth of Christ was not good news to everyone...and that trend actually continues to today? Don't get me wrong...this is the greatest news ever given to man and it can be good news to each and every person...but often it gets in the way of our own personal agenda....it gets in the way of what we want to do...we don't see the birth of the Savior of the world....we see competition...competition over who the true King will be. That's how Herod saw it...and if the truth be told that is how a lot of us look at it to this day.

I'm not sure I even know my own motives.

Can I let you in on a little secret? The baby Jesus wasn't interested in my kingdom. That wasn't the reason that He came. He could have cared less about taking Judea over from Herod. This baby when he grows up...most of us know...he said that this Earthly stuff is not what he was interested in....because it was already his. Herod's kingdom already belonged to Jesus...whether Herod was aware of it or wanted to acknowledge it or not. Want to know another secret...that isn't really one? He is interested in your throne. He is interested in being over your Kingdom and ruling instead of you...but he's not going to take it by force.

I am mystified and outraged that the one thing for which I am remembered is a brief conversation with the Wise Men, the Magi from the East, the astrologers from Persia. To this day there are remains of cities I built still hugging the Mediterranean. I kept the area of Palestine at a relative peace with its neighbors. I protected the Jews from invasions from other countries. But I am not remembered for those things. I am remembered as one who had to stay in control. I am remembered as one who had to watch after himself. I am remembered as one who was threatened by the holy child of Jesus.

He had been the king of Judea for 40 years before Christ was born. He had kept the order, and he had developed an extensive building program throughout the country—including some incredible improvements to the temple that put him in good standing with the religious leaders. Of course, to pay for all this building, Herod taxed the people severely. But in the times when they almost starved to death, he

gave them some food. Herod had a knack for stealing from the people and then making them grateful for any morsel he would return.

I died in the same way that I lived—miserably! My many crimes began to affect my brain. After I murdered my wife I became insane and contracted a disease from a harlot. When I knew I was dying, I arrested the elite citizens of Jerusalem and ordered that they be executed at the moment of my death—just so someone in Jerusalem would be weeping when I died. I ordered my sister to lock up all the noblemen in Judea and to execute them on the day of my death so that there would be mourning in Israel.⁷ People would say I was insecure, threatened, and paranoid. Perhaps they were right.

You have to “stay in control” of your life. Anything or anyone that threatened this authority faced his wrath. He would do anything in his power to destroy whatever endangered his ability to stay in control of his life.

And DEATH was the sentence Herod decreed for Bethlehem’s sons. When he realized the Magi were not returning, the king went berserk. Every boy in or near Bethlehem, two years of age and under, was executed.

Jewish historian Josephus relates that Herod died a gruesome death: convulsions, worms, digestive tract problems, kidney failure, and gangrene. Herod realized that when he died, there would be no one who would mourn him. He summoned all the principle heads of the Jewish families in Palestine to come to Jerusalem. Refusal meant the death sentence. He had them locked up in the horse-racing grounds and then gave orders to his sister that upon his death, all were to be executed. The executions would guarantee that the whole nation would mourn at the time of his death. Fortunately, when he did die, his sister released the captive heads of households and allowed them to return home. Every one of us will go through experiences this Christmas season that should cause our hearts to grow three sizes larger. But we also know that there are experiences that can cause our hearts to shrink. The reality is no matter what your title, how long you reign, how much money you have or even how many great things you might have done; you are going to die just like Herod. Heb. 9:27 tells us that we are “destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” Herod was an extraordinarily self-centered man. He was obsessed with power, he was obsessed with money, and he was obsessed with himself. If you’re full of yourself, then there’s no room for Jesus

Let it suffice that a prolonged fever was accompanied with severe kidney failure, fluid on the lungs, congestive heart failure, ulcers and gangrene.

One, he was hoping that these guys were wrong. You see...Herod...he was on the throne...he was the King and he wanted to stay that way and he was willing to do everything within his power to make sure that he did stay there....but maybe he was secretly hoping that there was nothing to this at all...can you imagine his relief if the wise men had come back to him and said...oops...Herod...we were wrong there is no other King of the Jews....sorry about your trouble. Had this turned out to be the case then Herod could save himself the embarrassment of having looked for someone who didn’t exist...this way he would not look like the terrified ruler that he actually was...he could deny knowledge of ever having known about this. That’s one possibility.

Second...he wouldn’t have had to worry about getting involved in the search...when the child was found all he had to do was to go and kill it. It’s very important that you understand something...Herod had no problem with killing people. He killed his own sons...we are going to learn in just a moment exactly how little of a problem he had with this step...but...even for a madman it is a lot easier to kill when you never personally meet your victims...when they are treated as merely objects.

Notes

¹ This is a play off of the classic cartoon strip *Hagar the Horrible*.

² The dating of Jesus' birth is placed by most scholars at between 6 and 4 B.C.

³ Michael J. Wilkins, "Matthew" in Zondervan Illustrated Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 18.

⁴ Herod later convinced the Roman officials that his father had been forced to assist in the assassination.

⁵ Christians have assumed that there were three wise men, but this is unknown. Three gifts were mentioned, but there may have been as few as two or as many as one hundred. We just don't know.

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew. NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 98.

⁷ Fortunately, when Herod died, his sister released the prisoners. Barclay (), 20.