



HEROD THE GREAT

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At the time of Jesus' birth, Herod the Great was ruling in Judea. He used the title 'King of the Jews,' although this title was neither God given nor a natural extension of his lineage. His mother was Arabian, and his father, Antipater, was an Edomite (a descendant of Esau) who had converted to Judaism. His Jewish heritage (or lack thereof) would cause problems throughout Herod's life, despite his efforts to curry favour with the Jewish leaders and advocate for the rights of the Jews.

Equally, Herod was beholden to Rome. He was appointed by the Roman Senate at the prompting of Mark Anthony (one of Julius Caesar's generals) and with approval from Octavian (Caesar's nephew). Whilst his skill and capability undoubtedly helped, Herod's success rested on his ability to astutely navigate treacherous Roman politics (and the rise and fall of Pompey, Caesar, Cassius, Mark Anthony and Octavian), and convince the latest leader of his loyalty. Since Pompey, Caesar and his own father were all assassinated, any position would have seemed perilous.

Herod means 'hero,' but he was far from heroic. He was a tyrannical, brutal and deeply paranoid leader responsible for the murder of many.

Which Herod is Herod the Great?

Herod is mentioned several times in the New Testament, but they are not all the same person. Herod the Great was alive from 73BC to 4/5 BC. He is only mentioned in Matthew 2. The later references to 'Herod' refer to his sons and grandsons, including:

- Herod Archelaus (Matthew 2:22)
- Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:1-12; Luke 23:7-11)
- (Herod) Phillip the Tetrarch (Acts 3:1)
- Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:21-23)
- Herod Agrippa II (Acts 23:35)

1. Herod's worst fears realised (Matthew 2:3-4)

"Deeply disturbed" – to stir or agitate

Herod was highly sensitised to any threats to his rule, perhaps with good reason:

- Antipater, Herod's father, had supported Caesar in the conflict with Pompey. As a result, Antipater was able to give Herod command of Galilee. When Caesar was assassinated, Antipater was forced to convince Brutus and Cassius of his loyalty.
- When Brutus and Cassius were defeated, Herod had to align himself with Mark Anthony and Octavian.
- To become 'King of Judea,' Herod had to overthrow and arrange for the execution of Antigonus, the uncle of one of his wives.
- When hostility arose between Mark Anthony and Octavian, Herod aligned himself with Mark Anthony. When Mark Anthony killed himself, Herod's survival became dependant on his ability to prove his loyalty to Octavian.
- Herod married for political advantage, including marrying Miriam, Antigonus' niece and a Hasmonean (a group of Jewish warriors). However, Herod's choice of high priest brought him into direct conflict with his Hasmonean relatives. His mother-in-law appealed to Queen Cleopatra, but Herod considered this an attempt to overthrow him and put her under surveillance.

Jesus was a direct threat to Herod's title and position. Herod was driven by power and position rather than guided by purpose or proprietor. Our strengths, gifts and abilities are for the edification and building of the church (purpose) and are given to us by God (the proprietor), not for our own glory but for His.

Herod's position became such a fundamental part of his identity that he feared life without it (and did not trust God to take care of him or his family).

cf. John the Baptist's response: "*He must become greater and greater; I must become less and less.*" (John 3:30)

We can look at the brutality of Herod's leadership and consider it far removed from our lives, but we can all be vulnerable to the same underlying root causes: pride, inappropriate ambition, insecurity, seeking favour for personal gain, and a belief that we have a better claim to a particular role.



Let God promote you at the right time and in the right way.

2. **Herod seeks answers** (Matthew 2:4-6)
3. **Herod's duplicitous advice** (Matthew 2:7-8)
4. **God's intervention** (Matthew 2:12-15, 19-23)

God's intervention is evident throughout:

- Guiding the wise men to the precise place in Bethlehem where they would find Jesus – the wise men did not need to begin a 'careful search' as suggested by Herod, for God brought them to the right place at the right time.
- God's warning to the wise men not to return to Herod (in a dream).
- God's warning to Joseph to 'flee to Egypt' (in a dream).
- God's direction to Joseph to return to Israel (through an angel).
- God's warning to Joseph about Herod's son (in a dream).

The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

5. **A murderous mission** (Matthew 2:16-18)

Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end. (Proverbs 29:11, NIV)

Lessons for us today:

1. Our security, confidence and strength should come from God alone (Psalm 27:1).
2. We are servants and stewards, whose only boast should be in Christ alone (1 Corinthians 1:31, 9:17).
3. No earthly leader has absolute power, however tyrannical or dictatorial. There is only one King to whom every knee will bow (Philippians 2:10-11).
4. Accountability is a necessary condition for a fruitful, prosperous life (and church) (Proverbs 12:15; 19:15).
5. An enduring family legacy flows from obedience to God, not the pursuit of wealth and power (Psalm 112:1-3).
6. God's word will never fail (Luke 1:31; Isaiah 55:11).
7. God may not always do things in ways we understand, but He always weaves all things together for the good of those who love Him and in accordance with his eternal purposes (Romans 8:28).

8. God sees the beginning and the end. No man can stop his eternal plans, and no man will (Matthew 16:18-19; Ephesians 1:10-11).
9. God is trustworthy. He can be relied upon to protect us, guide us, and steer the course of our lives (Psalm 91:1-7; Proverbs 3:5-6).
10. We need to remain sensitive and responsive to God's word, and the prompting of His Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16).
11. We need godly wisdom and discernment in all things (Colossians 4:5; Proverbs 4:7; Proverbs 28:11; 1 John 4:1).
12. The only proper response to God is reverent spirit filled, truth based, whole-hearted worship (Hebrews 12:28; Psalm 29:2).

Conclusion

Herod the Great achieved many things in his lifetime, including: the founding of new cities; building fortresses; rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem; rebuilding water supplies for Jerusalem; becoming patron of the Olympic games; and – for the Romans – consolidating and re-establishing their claim over Judea. However, these accomplishments are overshadowed by his ruthless, violent behaviour towards anyone who might pose a threat. Whilst there were plots against him, Herod's life reveals something of the profound disadvantages of leadership based on self-promotion, political currency, and in pursuit of personal glory.

I once thought all these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared to the infinite value of knowing Christ the Lord. For his sake, I have discarded everything else, counting it all garbage, so that I could gain Christ. (Philippians 3:7-8, NLT)

For me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So, I really don't know which one is better. (Philippians 1:21-22, NLT)

Bibliography: Connolly, P. (1983) Living in the time of Jesus of Nazareth, Steimatzky Ltd; Begg, A. (2017) Wise Men. Truth for Life.