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MINISTRIES

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Herod the Great: A Biblical and Historical Profile

In Matthew chapter 2, we learn that after Yeshua was born, a king by the name of Herod wanted to find him (Matthew 2:8). When Joseph found out that Herod was looking for him, he fled with his family to Egypt (v. 14). Herod then ordered that all the male children of Bethlehem under two years old should be killed (v. 16). Who was this king Herod? Why was Joseph afraid of him? And why was Herod afraid of the baby Yeshua? In this teaching, we're going to examine the life of king Herod. We'll look at where he came from, what impact he had on Israel, and what kind of person he was. Finally, we will see if we can use that knowledge of Herod to make sense of his actions in Matthew chapter 2.

Before we explain who Herod was, we need to clear something up: the Bible mentions more than one person named Herod. The Herod we're going to examine is the one historians call *Herod the Great*. The Bible only mentions this Herod in one chapter, Matthew chapter 2. Herod the Great was king over all of Judea. He had a son, called Herod Antipas, or Herod the Tetrarch. This younger Herod ruled over Galilee, and he is the one who killed John the Baptist, and who questioned Yeshua prior to his crucifixion. You can find these stories about Herod Antipas in Matthew 12 and Luke 23. Herod Antipas had a nephew named Herod Agrippa. This Herod ended up ruling over all of Judea like his grandfather had. Herod Agrippa is the one who imprisoned Peter, and who killed James, the brother of John. Herod Agrippa is mentioned in Acts 12. Finally, Herod Agrippa had a son called Herod Agrippa II. This Herod is not called “Herod” in the Scriptures, but rather is referred to only as “Agrippa.” Herod Agrippa II is the one who questioned Paul before Paul was sent to Rome to stand trial; that story can be found in Acts chapters 25 and 26. Again, out of these four Herods, the only one we're focusing on in this teaching is King Herod the Great, the one mentioned in Matthew chapter 2.

The Hasmonean Dynasty

To understand the story of King Herod, we first need to go back almost a hundred years before he was born, to 167 B.C. The book of 1 Maccabees describes what happened at that time. Jerusalem was under the control of the Greeks (1 Maccabees 1:20-35). These Greeks had prohibited the Jews from offering sacrifices, and they had set up an idol in the temple itself (1:45, 54). On top of all of that, they were actively trying to eliminate anyone who practiced Judaism from the nation (1:41-42, 50-53, 57). A Jewish man named Judah, son of Mattathias, gathered an army and fought against these oppressors (3:1-2). Against all odds, Judah's army won their battles against the Greeks (3:23; 4:13-14), drove the Greeks out of Jerusalem (4:34-35), and rededicated the temple to the worship of God (4:36, 52-54). This miraculous victory is celebrated every year during the Jewish festival of Hanukkah.

After this victory, Judah's family became the ruling family in Israel. This new family line of Jewish rulers was called the Hasmonean dynasty. Judah's brother Simon became the High Priest, and after a few generations, these High Priests were also taking the title of King.

The historian Josephus notes how significant this new kingdom was:

Now when their father Hyrcanus was dead, the eldest son Aristobulus, intending to change the government into a kingdom, for so he resolved to do, first of all put a diadem on his head, four hundred eighty and one years and three months after the people had been delivered from the Babylonish slavery, and were returned to their own country again.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.11.1 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 715)

The Hasmoneans were the first Jewish kings to rule the land of Israel for over four hundred years. (Elon Gilad, "Meet the Hasmoneans: A Brief History of a Violent Epoch", www.haaretz.com) Under the rule of the Hasmoneans, their nation expanded. Starting with control over only a small region of land around Jerusalem, these kings would go on to conquer Perea, Samaria, Galilee, Idumea, and Iturea as well [Map Slide 1]. The Hasmoneans ruled over a fully independent Israel; they issued their own coins (Kenneth Atkinson, *A History of the Hasmonean State: Josephus and Beyond* [T & T Clark, 2016], p. 40), made their own laws and treaties (Atkinson 37-38), and practiced their own religion, mostly unrestrained by foreign powers.

Scholar Kenneth Atkinson writes:

The history of the nine decades of the Hasmonean rule of Judea (152-63 B.C.) is the remarkable tale of a family whose zeal for their ancestral faith helped them survive a turbulent period of Middle Eastern history and create an independent state surrounded by hostile powers.

-Kenneth Atkinson, *A History of the Hasmonean State: Josephus and Beyond* (T & T Clark, 2016, p. 178)

In spite of their independence, this Jewish kingdom was not exactly a paradise. In 125 B.C., when the Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus conquered Idumea, he forced all of its inhabitants to become

circumcised and convert to Judaism (*Antiquities* 13.9). Idumea was another name for Edom, and its inhabitants at that time were Edomites. The negative consequences of this forcible conversion of the Edomites would be felt after just one generation, as we will soon see. Religious tensions within Judaism began to rise very high at this time as well; this was the time that the sects of the Pharisees and Sadducees were rising to prominence, and they sometimes found themselves in conflict with the Hasmoneans and with each other. For example, Josephus records one occasion of a dispute between the Pharisees and the Hasmonean High Priest, John Hyrcanus I:

It was this Jonathan who chiefly irritated him [Hyrcanus], and influenced him so far, that he made him leave the party of the Pharisees, and abolish the decrees they had imposed on the people, and to punish those that observed them.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.10.6 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 713)

These kinds of disputes sometimes led to outright civil war. It is during one of these civil wars that Herod's family rose to prominence.

Herod's Family

Herod's father was named Antipater. Antipater was born in 114 B.C., and he became the governor of the region of Idumea (Louis Ginsburg, "ANTIPATER," www.jewishencyclopedia.com). Antipater married Cypros, a princess from Nabatea, which was Idumea's eastern neighbor (Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 1.8.9). Antipater and Cypros had five children, one of whom was Herod. The exact date of Herod's birth is unknown, but it was probably around 72 B.C. Not long after Herod's birth, Antipater found an opportunity to gain more power.

In 67 B.C., a civil war broke out between two Hasmonean brothers who both claimed the right to be king. These brothers were John Hyrcanus II and Judah Aristobulus II, who we will refer to as *Hyrcanus* and *Aristobulus*. At first, Hyrcanus took the throne and the position of High Priest, but Aristobulus objected and led a revolt (Atkinson 146). Aristobulus's forces defeated Hyrcanus's forces in battle, and Hyrcanus agreed to give up his position, and allowed Aristobulus to become both King and High Priest (Atkinson 147). However, this is where Antipater saw an opportunity to expand his own power. Antipater convinced Hyrcanus to ally with the nation of Nabatea, Antipater's friends, and together they started a war with Aristobulus (Atkinson 149).

As this war progressed, both Hyrcanus and Aristobulus began petitioning other foreign armies for support. The army whose help they wanted most was the Roman army. The Roman general Pompey had just conquered Syria, which is immediately north of Israel, and both brothers petitioned him for help (*Antiquities* 14.3.1-2). Pompey eventually sided with Hyrcanus, and in 63 B.C., Pompey's army broke through the fortified wall of Jerusalem and captured Aristobulus. Hyrcanus was restored as the High Priest, but Pompey did not permit him to take the title of King. Instead, Pompey declared Judea to be under Roman rule, and Hyrcanus would serve as an "ethnarch," a ruler under Roman authority. As Josephus writes:

...and [Pompey] restored the high priesthood to Hyrcanus, both because he had been useful to him in other respects, and because he hindered the Jews in the country from giving Aristobulus any assistance in his war against him...and he made Jerusalem tributary to the Romans, and took away those cities of Celesyria which the inhabitants of Judea had subdued, and put them under the government of the Roman president, and confined the whole nation, which had elevated itself so high before, within its own bounds.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.4.4 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], pp. 746-747)

Through all of this, Antipater conveniently found himself in a more powerful position, where he was in charge of the Judean army, and in charge of levying taxes on the entire nation (Louis Ginsburg, "ANTIPATER", www.jewishencyclopedia.com). He would later use this position to advance himself even further.

In 49 B.C., Julius Caesar began his campaign to become ruler over all of Rome. His main opponent in his quest was the general Pompey. After Caesar defeated Pompey in battle, Pompey fled to Egypt, and Caesar pursued him (Cassius Dio, *Dio's Roman History, Book 42*. www.gutenberg.org). While Caesar was in Egypt, Antipater led forces from Judea to assist him (*Antiquities* 14.8.1). These forces were a great help to Caesar, and once Caesar had obtained the rulership he was seeking, he rewarded Antipater for his service. In 47 B.C., Julius Caesar made Antipater a Roman citizen, and granted him the title of Roman Procurator over the land of Judea (*Antiquities* 14.8.3, 5). As Procurator, Antipater was now officially a Roman ruler. His job was to keep the peace in the region, and to deliver taxes to Rome. As Josephus records:

...as soon as Antipater had conducted Caesar out of Syria, he returned to Judea. He then immediately raised up the wall which had been thrown down by Pompey; and, by coming thither, he pacified that tumult which had been in the country, and this by both threatening and advising them to be quiet; for that if they would be of Hyrcanus's side, they would live happily, and lead their lives without disturbance, and in the enjoyment of their own possessions; but if they were addicted to the hopes of what might come by innovation, and aimed to get wealth thereby, they should have him a severe master instead of a gentle governor, and Hyrcanus a tyrant instead of a king, and the Romans, together with Caesar, their bitter enemies instead of rulers...

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.9.1 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 759)

Antipater immediately made two of his sons governors over smaller portions of the land; his son Phasael became governor of Jerusalem, and Herod became governor over the region of Galilee (*Antiquities* 14.9.2). This is where Herod's political journey begins.

Herod's Rise to Power

As governor of Galilee, Herod aggressively prosecuted outlaws and robbers. Upon catching these criminals, Herod would have them immediately executed (*Antiquities* 14.9.2). The Romans were quite pleased with Herod's actions, but this policy was illegal by Jewish standards. According to Jewish law, the Sanhedrin, that is, the council of the elders, was the only group that could authorize the death penalty (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 1:4). Herod was therefore called before the Sanhedrin to stand trial for usurping their authority. Herod answered the call, but appeared at his trial surrounded by his own armed forces. As Josephus records:

But when Herod stood before the Sanhedrin, with his body of men about him, he affrighted them all, and no one of his former accusers durst after that bring any charge against him, but there was a deep silence, and nobody knew what was to be done.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.9.4 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 761)

Since the Sanhedrin was intimidated by this show of force, they did not convict Herod of any crimes.

At this time, there were many different cultures coexisting in Israel. The Jews were the majority of the population, but there were also Samaritans, who did not accept Jewish religious authority, and a growing number of Greek, Roman, and other pagan communities as well. The rulership of Herod's family was largely accepted by these other cultures, but it was not accepted by many of the Jews. In 43 B.C., Herod's father Antipater was murdered. In 40 B.C., a Hasmonean named Antigonus II, the son of Aristobulus II, led a revolt against Roman rule (*Antiquities* 14.13.3). Antigonus was backed by the army of the Parthians, who were a powerful nation from the east. Antigonus's revolt was successful; the Roman army was driven out of the land, and Antigonus was made King and High Priest of Judea. Hyrcanus was captured and taken to Babylon as a captive of the Parthians. Herod's brother, Phasael, was also captured, and he subsequently committed suicide (*Antiquities* 14.13.10). Herod, however, managed to flee the country, and he eventually made his way to Rome to request assistance from the Roman Senate.

Herod had powerful allies in Rome, including Mark Antony, the famous Roman general. These allies spoke to the Senate on Herod's behalf, and the Senate listened to them. Not only did they help Herod, but they declared Herod to be the new King over all of Judea. To be clear, they were not granting independence to Judea; rather, they were declaring Herod to be the rightful Roman ruler over the land, much like his father Antipater had been. However, Herod would receive the title of King instead of Procurator. Josephus records:

So a senate was convoked; and Messala first, and then Atratinus, introduced Herod into it, and enlarged upon the benefits they had received from his father, and put them in mind of the good-will he had borne to the Romans. At the same time, they accused Antigonus, and declared him an enemy, not only because of his former opposition to them, but that he had now overlooked the Romans, and taken the government from the Parthians. Upon this the senate was irritated; and Antony informed them further, that it was for their advantage in the Parthian war that Herod should be king. This seemed good to all the senators; and so they made a decree accordingly.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.14.4 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 787)

In 37 B.C., Herod returned to Judea with a Roman army at his side. After three years of bloody conflict, Herod defeated Antigonus and took his place as King of Judea. Antigonus was captured and sent to Rome, where Mark Antony promptly put him to death (*Antiquities* 14.16.4).

Herod's Reign

When Herod took the throne, he made a number of gestures of goodwill toward the Hasmonean family, whose throne he had usurped. However, as we will see, none of these gestures proved sincere. Herod married Mariamne, the niece of Antigonus and granddaughter of Hyrcanus. Speaking of Hyrcanus, Herod also secured his release from captivity and allowed him to return to Judea (*Antiquities* 15.2.1-4). Herod appointed a Babylonian Jew by the name of Ananelus to be the High Priest, but when he faced scrutiny for this decision, he replaced Ananelus with a Hasmonean, Aristobulus III, the brother of his wife Mariamne (*Antiquities* 15.3.1). Herod was rightfully very suspicious of the Hasmoneans, so he ordered men to spy on both Aristobulus and his mother Alexandra at all hours of the day. After Alexandra expressed her frustration with this arrangement to the wife of Mark Antony, Herod hired an assassin who killed the High Priest Aristobulus (*Antiquities* 15.3.3).

Likewise, after Hyrcanus returned to Judea, it did not take long for Herod to bring charges of conspiracy against him, and have Hyrcanus executed (*Antiquities* 15.6.2). After killing her brother and grandfather, Herod had a policy of keeping his wife Mariamne locked in the palace when he was travelling to other countries, and his orders were to have her killed if he ever failed to return home from one of his journeys. Eventually, Mariamne found out about these orders, and she started to openly speak against Herod. Herod responded by charging her with adultery and then having her executed as well (*Antiquities* 15.7.1-4). Ultimately, Herod gave the Hasmonean family an olive branch to their face, but a knife in their back.

During his reign, Herod took on many large construction projects. While Herod always pointed to these projects as symbols of his benevolence, religious Jews couldn't help but notice how they all helped to expand Roman influence in the land. Herod built fortresses throughout the land to house his armies, and to provide him a place to hide in case the people should revolt against him again (*Antiquities* 15.8.5). Along the Mediterranean coast of Samaria, Herod built the city of Cesarea (named, of course, after Caesar). In Cesarea, Herod built a large harbor to accommodate goods and visitors from across the Mediterranean Sea. Cesarea also housed a theater where music and drama were performed, and a hippodrome, where people would watch nude athletic competitions and violent gladiator combat. Herod also built a temple in Cesarea dedicated to the worship of Augustus Caesar, who the Roman Senate had declared to be a god. As Kenneth Holum of *Biblical Archaeology Review* states:

On festival days, bulls were slaughtered and their parts burned on the altar of the Caesarea temple in celebration of Augustus and Roma, and choirs sang hymns of praise for Herod and his imperial patron. On such occasions Caesarea's urban crowd, gathered on the harbor quays, swelled also to include the ship captains, crews, dockhands and other personnel of the port, emphasizing the maritime link between Herod's kingdom and Rome.

-Kenneth G. Holum, "Building Power," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, September/October 2004, Volume 30 Issue 5

In fact, this temple was the first of three that Herod built for the explicit purpose of worshipping Caesar (David Jacobson, "Herod's Roman Temple," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March/April 2002, Volume 28 Issue 2). However, Herod's most ambitious building project was the reconstruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The entire old temple was torn down, even its foundation, and the new one was constructed much wider and taller, with an extensive system of courtyards, walls and gates surrounding it (*Antiquities* 15.11.3). To give an idea of just how expansive this project was, the temple's inner structure was completed in eighteen months, but construction on the rest of the complex continued for many decades after Herod's death (Jacobson). As David Jacobson writes:

This was the largest temple complex built in classical antiquity.

-David Jacobson, "Herod's Roman Temple," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March/April 2002, Volume 28 Issue 2

Herod started this temple project for two main reasons: first, Herod wanted his name attached to the largest and grandest religious structure in the world. Second, it was an attempt by Herod to win the favor of the religious Jews, who still hated him. However, even this temple was not spared from Roman infiltration; its architecture was modeled after the style of the pagan temples in Rome, even containing an attached marketplace, and sporting Corinthian-style columns at its entrance (Jacobson). One of the gates that led to the temple grounds was decorated with a large golden eagle statue, a symbol of Rome (*Antiquities* 17.6.2). At every opportunity, Herod made Israel look more and more like the Roman province that it had become.

Speaking of Roman provinces, Herod donated large sums of money to projects *outside* of Israel. He was always seeking to impress and earn the favor of powerful Romans and Greeks. In the Greek city of Athens and the Roman city of Rhodes, Herod helped finance massive building projects. In fact, in Athens, three statues of Herod were set up to honor him for his generosity toward the city (Ralph Krumeich & Achim Lichtenberger, "Searching for Portraits of King Herod," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, November/December 2019, Volume 45 Issue 6). Herod was a great patron of the Olympic games, and helped finance Olympic events both in Cesarea and in foreign cities (*Antiquities* 16.5.1-3). Herod made frequent visits to foreign provinces, where he would lavish gifts upon the rulers of those areas; he did this for Mark Antony, Augustus Caesar, and many other prominent Romans during his reign. When Marcus Agrippa, who was Augustus Caesar's right-hand man, came to Judea to see how the region was faring, Herod spared no expense for his entertainment. As Josephus writes:

He [Herod] entertained him [Agrippa] in his new-built cities, and showed him the edifices he had built, and provided all sorts of the best and most costly dainties for him and his friends, and that at Sebaste and Cesarea, about that port that he had built, and at the fortresses which he had erected at great expenses, Alexandrium, and Herodium, and Hyrcania. He also conducted him to the city Jerusalem, where all the people met him in their festival garments, and received him with acclamations. Agrippa also offered a hecatomb of sacrifices to God; and feasted the people, without omitting any of the greatest dainties that could be gotten.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 16.2.1 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 859)

Herod also sent many of his own children to Rome for their education (*Antiquities* 15.10.1). Herod clearly idolized Rome, and did everything he could to gain Roman acceptance.

As we mentioned before, Israel's Jews, especially religious Jews, hated Herod. He had come to power by killing the last Hasmonean king, and that with a Roman army at his side. He had then proceeded to eliminate much of the rest of the Hasmonean family. All of his building projects caused Roman culture to grow more prominent in the land, even to the point of constructing pagan temples where idols were worshiped. These projects were also expensive, and to fund them, Herod imposed heavy taxes upon the people (*Antiquities* 17.8.4). And remember, these taxes did not only finance construction in Israel, but in foreign nations as well. All ideas of an independent, sovereign Jewish nation were being completely destroyed, and Herod was the man at the center of this destruction. As you may have guessed, Herod survived several assassination attempts (*Antiquities* 15.8.3-4, 17.4), and Jews were always thinking about how to get rid of this illegitimate gentile king.

Herod knew that the Jews hated him, and he responded to this hatred by becoming even more tyrannical. Herod required citizens to take an oath of allegiance to him (*Antiquities* 15.10.4). Herod had a vast network of spies in the land, who reported to Herod whenever they heard people criticizing the government (*Antiquities* 15.8.4-5, 15.10.4). Anyone accused of sedition was either executed or imprisoned for life, and accusations were made frequently, sometimes resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people at a time. Josephus records one of these mass-punishments in these words:

...upon Herod's making a strict scrutiny after them, by bitter and severe tortures, certain women that were tortured confessed what they had seen done; the authors of which fact were so terribly punished by the king, that their entire families were destroyed for this their rash attempt.

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.8.4 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 837)

Even Herod's own family was not exempt from his jealousy; Herod had not only one of his brothers, but three of his own sons executed for treason (*Antiquities* 15.3.9, 16.10.7, 17.7.1). In the last days of his life, when Herod was very ill, he ordered that many prominent Jews be gathered in his hippodrome, so that they could be killed when Herod died. Herod ordered this slaughter because he feared that the people of Israel would celebrate the day of his death, and he wanted to ensure that they would mourn on that day instead. Josephus comments on Herod accordingly:

Now any one may easily discover the temper of this man's mind, which not only took pleasure in doing what he had done formerly against his relations, out of the love of life, but by those commands of his which savored of no humanity; since he took care, when he was departing out of this life, that the whole nation should be put into mourning, and indeed made desolate of their dearest kindred, when he gave order that one out of every family should be slain, although they had done nothing that was unjust, or that was against him, nor were they accused of any other crimes...

- Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.6.6 (Translation from William Whiston, *Josephus: The Complete Works* [Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library], p. 930)

Fortunately, this order was not followed, and these innocent Jews were released after Herod died.

The exact date of Herod's death is disputed, but historians generally agree that it happened some time between 5 B.C. and 1 A.D. Whichever year it happened in, it was not very long after the events described in Matthew chapter 2. Now that we have some background information, and an idea of who Herod was, let's take a look at this chapter, and see if we can make some sense of Herod's actions.

Herod in the Bible

Matthew 2

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And

he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Given what we now know about Herod, we can understand why he was so interested in this report about a prophesied “king of the Jews” being born. Herod was seen as an illegitimate gentile king, who had overthrown the rightful rulers of the land. He was constantly worried about the Jews revolting against him. If Jews came to believe that Yeshua was not only a legitimate king, but the prophesied Messiah, then surely that would motivate them to rally together and take up arms against Herod.

Also, given Herod’s history, Joseph fleeing the country makes a lot of sense. Herod had been the king for over thirty years by this time, and his style of rulership had been well established. Joseph knew exactly what would happen if Herod ever found Yeshua.

Herod’s order to kill the baby boys of Bethlehem is thought by some scholars to be fictional, because Matthew is the only existing historical document that mentions this order. However, this event may actually not have been considered to be very significant. Bethlehem was not a large town; in fact, some scholars estimate the entire population of Bethlehem at the time to be just a few hundred people, which would mean that only a handful of baby boys were even there (Gordon Franz, “The Slaughter of the Innocents: Historical Fact or Legendary Fiction?” www.biblearchaeology.org). Compared to the other atrocities Herod was committing, historians may not have thought that this event was even worth mentioning. In any case, ordering that some children be killed would not have been out of character for Herod, who had already done plenty of equally despicable things for the sake of his throne.

We can also address one more question, and that is, why did Joseph go to Nazareth when he returned from Egypt? Why not go back to Bethlehem? After Herod died, his kingdom was split among three of his sons. Archelaus, the son mentioned in Matthew 2:22, had inherited Samaria, Judea, and Idumea; Herod Antipas had inherited Perea and Galilee, where Nazareth was; and Philip had inherited the northernmost regions (*Antiquities* 17.11.4). When Archelaus came to power, he was met with violent resistance by some of the Jews of Jerusalem, and both he and the governor of Syria responded with violence of their own (*Antiquities* 17.9.2-3). This civil unrest lasted for several years before it finally subsided. It is understandable why Joseph would not want to live anywhere near Jerusalem at that time, and instead chose to settle in Galilee, where life was not quite so perilous.

Conclusion

So, who was Herod the Great? In short, he was a vain, wicked, and brutal man. He sought power, glory, and the praise of men, and was willing to go to almost any lengths to acquire them. He cared more about appealing to Roman sensibilities than to Jewish religion. He oppressively taxed the people he ruled over and squandered much of their money on projects designed to increase his personal fame. He threatened and spied upon on his own people as though they were foreign enemies. And, he murdered thousands of his own citizens during his terrible reign, including some of his own children. Historians and theologians alike have condemned his many evil deeds; in fact, the only people who seemed to like Herod were Roman aristocrats who only knew Herod as the Jewish king who gave them nice tours and lots of money, not as the brutal dictator who thought nothing of taking the lives of his detractors. It is no wonder that Herod feared what Yeshua might become.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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