

Herod the Great
Epiphany
(Josephus, *War of the Jews*; Mt 2:1-12)

“In the days of King Herod, behold, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is the newborn king of the Jews?’ When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled” (Mt 2:1-3). Who was this man, encountered by the Magi in their search for the Christ? The first-century historian Josephus gives a detailed account of his life in his book, *War of the Jews*.

King Herod the Great lived from 73 B.C. to 4 B.C. (Jesus was thus not born in the year “zero,” but around 4 B.C., because Herod was still alive at his birth.) Herod is known as “the Great” because he advanced the Roman province of Judaea economically, and carried out multiple building projects which gave the region great prestige.¹

The greatest of his many projects was the renovation of the Temple in Jerusalem. Herod leveled the top of Mt. Moriah using quarried stones, some weighing over 600 tons, to create an enormous plaza. That foundation still exists, with part of its western wall being a site of pilgrimage for Jews. It took 46 years to completely rebuild the Temple, a task that was finished after his death, when Jesus was an adult. The Gospels tell how the apostles marveled at the incredible structure (Mk 13:1-2; also Mt 24:1-2 & Lk 21:5-6). Yet, as Jesus prophesied, in another 40 years, the Romans would destroy it, not leaving one stone upon another.

Herod was established as king of Judaea by the Roman Senate in 37 B.C. It was an unusual choice, because he was not Jewish. He was an Idumaeon, a descendant of Edom, one of Israel’s ancient enemies. Religious Jews never accepted his legitimacy, which is why Herod did everything necessary during his reign to hold onto power. In order to secure his throne and try gain favor with the Jewish religious leaders who preferred another relative, he banished his first wife Doris with their three year-old son Antipater III, and married his teenage niece Mariamne instead. With her he had two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus.

Herod was paranoid and brutal. He became jealous of his new young wife, and eventually put her on trial for suspected adultery. Mariamne’s mother Alexandra, to save her own position, testified against her daughter, and Herod executed her. Alexandra the mother-in-law assumed she could establish herself as the new queen – a terrible miscalculation – for which Herod also executed her, without even a trial. The following year, he executed his brother-in-law Kostobar.

¹ One famous project is his magnificent palace and fortress, called the “Herodium” and still seen today, built on the top of a hill south of Jerusalem. Another famous fortress-palace is located at Masada by the Dead Sea, where Jewish rebels made their final stand against the Romans in 72 A.D. Herod built many palaces, fortresses, aqueducts, and architectural marvels throughout the region, many of which are still partially standing.

Because he had killed their mother Mariamne, Herod now became suspicious of his two sons with her, Alexander and Aristobulus. So he advanced his other son Antipater, whom he had originally banished, to be next in line for the throne. In 12 B.C., Caesar Augustus tried to reconcile Herod with his two sons, to no avail. In 7 B.C., Herod had Alexander and Aristobulus tried and executed for treason. In 5 B.C., he also brought his first son Antipater to trial for treason, and finally executed him just five days before his own death in 4 B.C.

Meanwhile, he had approved his son Philip from another marriage to be the next successor, but that was changed to his son Antipas from his fourth marriage. Just before he died, he changed his successor again to Archelaus, another son by his fourth wife. Matthew recounts how this Archelaus succeeded his father as king in Judaea (Mt 2:22). The Romans divided Herod's rule into four regions. Philip would become Tetrarch of the region of Iturea, while Antipas would end up as the Tetrarch of the region of Galilee (cf. Lk 3:1). It is this "Herod Antipas," son of Herod the Great, who would one day arrest and execute John the Baptist, for criticizing his marriage to Herodias, formerly the wife of his brother Philip!

Their father Herod the Great ended up going through ten wives altogether! His family tree is a tangled mess of polygamy and incest; his rule a sordid tale of paranoia, blood, and butchery. But it was finally coming to an end.

For many years Herod suffered a severe abdominal illness that got worse and worse, until it eventually caused his death. From the description given by Josephus, doctors think it was a chronic kidney disease combined with a gangrene that infected his pelvis and lower abdomen. He was in excruciating pain, and towards the end worms were eating away his rotting flesh.

Even this did not stop him from holding onto power at all costs. It was winter, and Herod lay dying in the magnificent palace-resort he built in the desert oasis of Jericho. Since he knew that everyone would celebrate his death, he called an assembly of all the leading men of the nation to join him in Jericho. He planned to have them killed, so that at his death the nation would in fact mourn, and entrusted this order to his sister Salome. She did not carry it out.

This was the man who met three foreign ambassadors at some point in that final year of his life in Jerusalem. Knowing how paranoid he was about his successor, it is not surprising that Herod was deeply "troubled" (Mt 2:3), and all Jerusalem with him, when these foreigners talked about some other child than his becoming the future king.

Herod asked the chief priests and scribes about this. He himself didn't really know the Scriptures, but the people did. They told him that according to the prophets, the king of Israel was a Son of David, and he would be born, like David,

in the town of Bethlehem.² Herod was hell-bent on being that Jewish Messiah, “the Great,” and creating a new dynasty. Thus he told the Magi to bring him details of the child: “*Search for him diligently, and when you find him, tell me so that I may go and give him homage too*” (Mt 2:8).

He spoke with the Magi “*secretly*” (Mt 2:7), because he knew what he had in mind to do. Though Josephus never mentions Herod’s massacre of the infant boys around Bethlehem shortly before his death, this action (Mt 2:16), fully accords with his ruthless paranoia, manifested in so many other acts of depraved violence and bloodshed throughout his career.³

Herod always suffered under the insecurity that he was not a true Jew, nor was he the legitimate king, despite rebuilding the Temple and many other “great” accomplishments. The faithful Jews never fully accepted him, and always considered him an imposter. In fact, when the Jews in Jerusalem got word that Herod was finally dying in Jericho, some zealous young men tore down Herod’s golden eagle from the top of the Temple (for which they were executed). They knew God was sending them a true King who would come from the house of David, and He would end this travesty set up by the Romans.

The first century historian Josephus never mentions the Magi or the massacre of the innocents, or the star which led the Magi to Judea. But he does recount how Herod died after a lunar eclipse—something that made news throughout the region, which everyone remembered. In the ancient world, people paid very close attention to the heavenly events surrounding a person’s life, especially someone important.

For the faithful—those Jews who studied the Scriptures, and those Magi who studied the heavens—there was an awareness that “Great” Herod’s demise meant the true King (Mt 2:2) was about to arise. Let us, then, fulfill in an honest way, what Herod promised deceitfully: Let us “*Search for him diligently,*” so that we too “*may go and give him homage.*”

² Among these religious men in Jerusalem would undoubtedly have been the old man Simeon, who later had the privilege of meeting Mary and Joseph when they brought the baby Jesus to the Temple for dedication (Lk 2:25-26). The same Holy Spirit who guided the three Magi, had revealed to Simeon he would see the Messiah before he died. How beautiful it is to think that the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem may have given Simeon the confirmation he needed, that the Messiah had indeed arrived!

³ Some so-called historians claim the massacre of the innocents, and the story of the Magi, is pure legend. Without any justification except their anti-Christian bias, they accept the things Josephus recounts about Herod in his late first-century historical document called the “*War of the Jews,*” but they refuse to accept the things Matthew recounts in his mid-first-century historical document on the life of Jesus Christ, even though both authors agree perfectly on Herod’s character.