

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF HEROD THE GREAT
MATTHEW 2:1-18

INTRODUCTION

Herod had the best that life has to offer. In his day he was probably the richest man in the world. He was the most powerful man in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. He had beautiful women. He was respected as a military leader. He had the best education that was available. He was athletic and enjoyed good health for most of his life. He was a builder who was responsible for creating beautiful structures, many of which have lasted to this day. He was famous. What more could a man want out of life?

Yet when Herod died, he was a miserable, pathetic, paranoid shell of a man. The people of his realm rejoiced at his passing. Today he is known primarily as a minor character in the more dramatic story of the life of a baby who was born in his realm at the end of his life. This morning we are going to look at Christmas through the eyes of Herod.

I. THE MAN BEHIND THE EYES

First, we are going to consider THE MAN BEHIND THE EYES. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE MAN BEHIND THE EYES) We are introduced to Herod's connection with the Christmas story in Matthew #2. If you would like to follow along in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, you can find the story beginning on p. 807. (MATTHEW 2:1) Verse 1 of Matthew 2 tells us, "**Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem...**"

In 63 BC Rome incorporated the region of Judea into its empire. (JUDEA MAP 1) The emperor Pompey gave a man named Antipater considerable administrative powers over this region. Later Julius Caesar gave Antipater the title "procurator." With Caesar's approval Antipater made his son Herod governor of Galilee in 47 BC. (GALILEE MAP 3)

In this role Herod demonstrated considerable military skill in dealing with rebels in the area and administrative ability in organizing the government of the region. He also demonstrated considerable ruthlessness. In dealing with one group of rebels he slaughtered 3000 people, including women and children. The Romans didn't care as long as they didn't have to deal with any rebellions.

After his father Antipater died, Herod went to Rome. In 40 BC with Marc Antony on one side and Octavian, who would become Caesar Augustus, on the other side Herod was named king of Judea. (HEROD'S KINGDOM) For the next 36 years Herod would control this region and protect Rome's interests in the east.

Herod was not ethnically Jewish. His grandfather had converted to Judaism. So the grandfather's children and grandchildren practiced the Jewish faith and were regarded

as Jews. The problem that some religious Jews had with Herod being king was not because of doubts about him being a genuine Jew. The problem was that he was not a descendant of King David. Only a descendant of David could be approved by God to be the legitimate king of Israel.

Ethnically Herod's ancestry through his father was Idumean. (IDUMEA MAP) The Idumeans were descendants of the Edomites, who were descendants of Esau. Esau was the twin brother of Jacob. Esau and Jacob were the sons of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham.

Back in Genesis #25 we have this description of the situation of these two sons in the womb of their mother Rebekah: (GENESIS 25:22) **"The children struggled together within her, and she said, 'If is it thus, why is this happening to me?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. (GENESIS 25:23) And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb;/ and two peoples from within you shall be divided;/ the one shall be stronger than the other,/ the older shall serve the younger.'"** Esau was the older brother. His descendants in the end were to serve Jacob and his descendants.

Jacob was to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Down through Old Testament history the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau would harass and attack and fight the Israelites. Now a descendant of Esau was going to try to do away with a baby who would stake a claim to be a descendant of King David and the legitimate king of Israel.

The mother of Herod the Edomite was from the Nabateans (NABATEA MAP), who comprised an Arabic tribe. The Arabs then, and still today, trace their ancestry to Ishmael, the son of Abraham through the servant girl whom Sarah gave to her husband to bear a child. Isaac, the other son of Abraham, was to be born to Sarah in her old age. Ishmael was not to receive the special promises that were originally given to his father Abraham.

In Genesis 16 the angel of the Lord said to the mother of Ishmael (GENESIS 16:11), **"Behold, you are pregnant/ and shall bear a son./ You shall call his name Ishmael,/ because the Lord has listened to your affliction./ (GENESIS 16:12) He shall be a wild donkey of a man,/ his hand against everyone/ and everyone's hand against him,/ and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."**

Ever since that time the descendants of Ishmael have struggled with the descendants of Isaac. Still today the Arabs and Jews are arguing over who has the legitimate right to occupy the Holy Land. To whom does Jerusalem and the Temple Mount belong?

Ethnically Herod was half Arab and half Edomite. At the end of his life this Arab Edomite struggled to keep the throne of Israel within the control of his family. In the process he tried to eliminate a descendant of Isaac and Jacob who was destined to be Israel's legitimate king. (HEROD'S KINGDOM)

The politics of the eastern Mediterranean were complicated in this era, as they still are today. The fact that Herod remained in power for 36 years is a testimony to his mastery of political power. One example: When Julius Caesar was killed in 44 BC, the struggle for control of Rome came down to a fight between Mark Antony and Octavian, who was to become Caesar Augustus. When Mark Antony and Octavian started fighting each other, Herod backed Mark Antony. He was the wrong choice in this conflict. Antony and his ally and lover in Egypt, Cleopatra, were badly defeated in 31 BC. In that kind of situation the typical expectation was that the winning guy would kill all of the leading supporters of the loser, which in this case would include Herod.

But Herod immediately went to seek out Octavian in Rome. He wore humble clothes. He told Octavian, who would become Caesar Augustus, the obvious. He had backed the wrong guy. But Herod pointed out that he had always been loyal to Rome. He had the ability to keep Judea under control so that it wouldn't be a problem for Rome. He promised his loyalty to Octavian. Octavian bought it, and the two were to become friends.

Herod was also rich, filthy rich. One scholar estimates that he personally owned half of Judea. He had investments and business deals throughout the Roman Empire. One lasting testimony to his wealth was his building projects. If you ever have the opportunity to visit Israel, you will keep coming across the remains of his building projects (HEBRON TOMB), such as this structure he built over the tomb of the patriarchs in Hebron.

As a builder Herod makes Donald Trump look like a minor leaguer. Historians and archaeologists have so far learned of at least 70 building projects that Herod undertook. Some of these individual projects involved many buildings (MACHAERUS) and other structures like this mountain fortress in Jordan, called Machaerus where John the Baptist would be executed. Some of the projects were paid for through taxes. But many of them were funded out of Herod's own checkbook. In ancient times many major projects were built by slave labor. Herod paid all of his workers in cash.

(JERUSALEM TEMPLE) His most famous project was rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. It was a project that would continue beyond his death. Herod doubled the size of the temple court. He rebuilt the walls and the temple itself. The temple was regarded as the most beautiful building in Israel. Herod had an aqueduct built that brought fresh water from south of Bethlehem into the temple itself.

(FORTRESS ANTONIA) On the north side of the temple courtyard he built a fortress that could be used to make sure that things stayed under control in the temple, especially during the feasts. He named it the Fortress Antonia, after the wife of the emperor, a smart thing to do to keep on good terms with Rome. It was to this place that a Roman officer would later bring the Apostle Paul when he rescued the Christian leader from a mob in the temple.

(JERICHO PALACE) To the east of Jerusalem, near Jericho, Herod built a palace that became known as the Winter Palace. It was a complex of many buildings. It had structures on both sides of a wadi that were joined by a bridge. There was a swimming pool, of course, that was supplied by water from another aqueduct.

(HERODIUM 3) This is a fortress palace that Herod built just a few miles east of Bethlehem. There was a small hill here. But Herod had tons and tons of dirt added to it to make it bigger. (HERODIUM POOL) Outside of it you see the remains of the largest artificial lake in the world at the time. Herod had an aqueduct that carried water from south of Bethlehem to keep it filled. Supposedly he would have meetings on the island in the middle with high officials where he would not have to worry about anyone else listening in.

(HERODIUM 4) In the top of this fortress called Herodium Herod had a garden, a Roman bath and a large palace. A tower in the palace extended upward an additional forty feet. When Herod was here, he stayed in the tower. From the top on clear days he could see the Mediterranean to the east and to the Dead Sea to the west. He could see from here most of his kingdom. Herod was eventually buried here at Herodium. An Israeli archaeologist a few years ago discovered what he believes to be Herod's burial place.

(MASADA) Herod also built two palaces on Masada, the famous mountain fortress near the Dead Sea.

On the Mediterranean coast was the seaport of Caesarea. (CAESAREA) Later this city became the seat of government for Roman governors like Pontius Pilate. Herod built port facilities with breakwaters and wharves. He built a palace, a freshwater pool, a hippodrome, and a theater which is visible at the bottom of this picture. Of course there was an aqueduct (CAESAREA AQUEDUCT) that supplied fresh water. Parts of that still stand today. Such was the legacy which this man left who claimed the title "King of the Jews."

But there was a dark side to the life of this impressive Jewish king. (PROJECTOR OFF) This supposed Jew also built temples to the Roman emperor and to the Roman goddess Roma. Herod had ten different wives, though only one at a time. These women, of course, produced a number of children. As Herod got older, the kids jockeyed for power. Herod became increasingly paranoid. He had one of his wives killed. Later he had a set of in-laws killed. One associate he had poisoned. Another he had drowned. There were other leaders and advisors that he also did away with.

One of his sons was Herod Antipas, who would eventually be given authority over Galilee and Perea by the Romans. This son of Herod the Great would kill John the Baptist and would interview Jesus on the day of His crucifixion.

Herod eventually charged two of his sons with treason and had them executed. In the end Judea became a police state. Herod suffered from syphilis, and he got sicker and

sicker and more paranoid and cantankerous. Five days before he died, he had another son killed. On his death bed he ordered 300 leading citizens of Jerusalem imprisoned. He gave instructions that when he died, these people were to be killed so that all of Jerusalem and Judea would have reason to mourn on the anniversary of his death. Fortunately for the 300, that order was not carried out. Herod died without friends and unloved. The date of his death has been traditionally regarded as 4 BC. Some recent scholarship is arguing for a later death date of 2 BC. Most residents of Judea rejoiced to see him gone.

II.

With that background in mind let's look at WHAT HEROD'S EYES SAW (PROJECTOR ON--- II. WHAT HEROD'S EYES SAW) in regard to the Christmas story as recorded in vv. 2-18 of Matthew 2. It was perhaps a year or less before his death that these magi, these wise men, showed up looking for one who had been born king of the Jews. These wise men were probably top government advisors from some kingdom to the east of Judea who dabbled in astrology and divination and the occult. Some scholars make a strong case that they were Arabs. Somehow as a result of their study of the stars they came to the conclusion that a special Jewish king had been born.

This was news to Herod. Caesar Augustus had given Herod the right to determine who his successor would be. He intended it to be one of his sons. Wise men showing up from the east asking about the birth of some special child with a claim to a throne was bound to upset him. Thus we read in v. 3 (MATTHEW 2:3), **“When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him...”**

Why was all Jerusalem troubled? The people weren't so much upset about the idea of another king. They were upset about how Herod would react. What crazy, evil thing would he do now?

Herod understood that these wise men believed that Israel's Messiah had been born someplace in Judea. So Herod called in the chief priests and rabbis. They knew what the Bible said about the birthplace of the Messiah. So they, with no hesitation, quoted Micah #5 v. 2 (MATTHEW 2:6) to him. That verse said that Bethlehem would be where the Messiah would be born. All good students of the Hebrew Scriptures knew about this promise.

Verses 7 & 8 tell us (MATTHEW 2:7), **“Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. (MATTHEW 2:8) 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.’”** The time of the first appearance of the star would give Herod an idea about how old this child was. Jesus had been born somewhere between a few months and a little over a year prior to the visit of the wise men. Of course Herod just wanted to find out who this kid was who might make some kind of claim to his throne. Once he was identified, he would be killed.

Bethlehem (BETHLEHEM JERUSALEM MAP) was only about five miles south of Jerusalem. So it only took a couple of hours for the wise men to get to Jesus' birthplace if they walked, less if they had some kind of animals to carry them. The fact that they followed a star suggests that they traveled in the evening.

According to v. 11 (MATTHEW 2:11), **“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.”** It was probably later that night that one or all of them--- the Bible doesn't say how many there were--- had a dream.

Verse 12 (MATTHEW 2:12): **“And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.”** Probably they headed back home the next day. From what we know about Herod, it was wise that they avoided further contact with him.

Shortly afterward, Joseph had a dream. Verse 13 (MATTHEW 2:13) says, **“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.’”** I suspect that they took off the next day for Egypt. Ultimately their stay in Egypt would be a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy (HOSEA 11:1) that the Messiah would come out of Egypt. They would be sustained during their stay by the valuable gifts that the eastern wise men had left them.

Herod may have given the wise men a day or at most two to report back to him about the birth of this supposed king. When there was no news from Bethlehem by the end of the second day, Herod probably took action. From his palace at Jerusalem he sent some troops to Bethlehem to take care of business. Verse 16 (MATTHEW 2:16) tells us, **“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.”**

Bethlehem today is a city of 29,000 people. Historians and archaeologists guess that Bethlehem had only a couple of hundred people in it at the time of our story. So the scholars guess that perhaps there were between ten and twenty boys under two years old in Bethlehem and the outlying area. Bumping off a few kids didn't warrant any mention by secular historians. To the parents of those children it had a different impact. The hero of the story, however, got away.

III.

(III. WHAT OUR EYES SHOULD SEE) Consider then for a few moments WHAT OUR EYES SHOULD SEE. What lessons are there here for us?

A.

The first lesson that I see is that WORLDLY VALUES DO NOT PRODUCE A SUCCESSFUL LIFE. (IV. WHAT... A. WORLDLY VALUES...) In terms of the things that the world around us often values so highly Herod, for most of his life, had it all. He was wealthy. He was healthy, up until his latter years. He was powerful. He was educated. He had lots of women. He was effective at his job. He was famous.

But by the end of his life he was a pathetic creature. He was feared by all. He was hated by many. He had few, if any, close friends. His family was estranged from him. Pretty much everybody was glad to see him gone.

Money, education, health, fame, power, pleasure are not bad things in and of themselves. They can be tremendous blessings. But they are incapable of satisfying our deepest needs. Ultimately only God can satisfy those needs. And Herod didn't really have a personal relationship with the true God. His religious life was superficial.

Relationships with people can also serve to meet many of our deepest needs. But meaningful relationships require mutual love. Herod didn't really love people. He only loved himself. Because of that he saw people as things to be manipulated, things to be feared, things to meet his needs. Herod was unsuccessful in life partly because he didn't cultivate meaningful relationships with other people. He especially failed in his life with his family. You can't start knocking off wives and kids and other relatives and expect to have any kind of meaningful family life. Worldly values do not produce a successful life.

Virginia Congressman Frank Wolf had 14 terms in Congress. He is a Christian man who acquired a reputation for fighting for the human rights of mistreated people around the world. When he was chosen to be *World* magazine's "Man of the Year," Congressman Wolf responded, **"I will consider my earthly existence to have been wasted unless I can recall a loving family, a consistent investment in the lives of people and an earnest attempt to serve the God who made me. Nothing else makes much sense."**

B.

The second lesson that comes from our study of Herod (IV. WHAT... B. THE PURSUIT...) is that THE PURSUIT OF WORLDLY VALUES LEADS TO CONFLICT WITH GOD. When wealth or power or pleasure or fame becomes the driving force in our life, then our ethical standards begin to slide. Whether we realize it or not, we will buy into the philosophy that the end justifies the means. If the pursuit and accumulation of money is really our goal in life, then we will cut corners in order to get it. At first it may be small things--- little white lies, not telling the whole story, exaggerating the truth. But eventually it gets bigger. It becomes lying to the IRS, lying to other people, cheating, and using people.

Herod saw himself as a religious person. He spent a lot of his own money to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. He used his influence to see that Jews in other parts of the Roman Empire were able to worship without persecution. But because of his blatant violations

of the most basic beliefs of Judaism one has to suspect that his real reasons for religious support had to do with his desire for fame and the maintenance of his power and position. When the real Messiah of Israel came along, Herod didn't even hesitate to try to kill him. Herod's pursuit of worldly values led in the end to his attempt to kill the God-man Jesus. When we fall into making the pursuit of worldly values our goal in life, we also are in danger of fighting against God.

C.

The third lesson that comes out of this story (IV. WHAT... C. GOD'S PURPOSES...) is that GOD'S PURPOSES CANNOT BE THWARTED. On paper all of the advantages in Herod's effort to do in the baby Jesus were in the king's column. He had absolute authority in Judea. He had inside information about the birth of Jesus. He had all kinds of military power at his disposal. He didn't care about public opinion. There wasn't any press to give him a hard time. Bethlehem was very close to his headquarters. Bethlehem was an insignificant town. Jesus was a baby or small child obviously incapable of defending himself. His parents were probably still teenagers with little money and no influence. Jesus didn't stand a chance.

But God's purposes cannot be thwarted. It was Herod who really didn't stand a chance. God sent an angel to warn the parents of Jesus to get out of town. He sent foreigners from far away to provide the money to sustain this young family while they were refugees in Egypt. Ultimately God was seeing that Old Testament prophecy should be fulfilled in having His Son come out of Egypt.

If we want to come out as winners in the end, we need to make sure that we are on the right side. We need to make sure that we are cooperating with God's purposes. We have to be convinced that God's purposes will be accomplished. In the short run we may not be rich. We may not be powerful. We may not be famous. We may not experience a lot of luxury. But the Bible says that the payoff is yet future. Retirement waits for us in the life to come. People can work against God and His will, but God's purposes cannot be thwarted. It behooves us to be involved with His program and purposes.

D.

The last lesson (IV. WHAT... D. GOD ACCOMPLISHES...) is that GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS PURPOSES THROUGH SMALL THINGS. It wasn't through the powerful King Herod that God accomplished His most important purposes. It wasn't through the Roman emperor that God accomplished His most important purposes. They did have minor roles in the larger drama. But Herod was trying to work against God's purposes. Caesar Augustus was focused on His own glory and agenda. It was through a baby born in a small town to a couple of poor teenagers from the sticks of Galilee that God was really at work to accomplish His purposes.

God at times uses big things and people in positions of power. But you can't come away from reading the Bible without realizing that God tends to be on the side of the little guy, the underdog. He accomplishes His purposes through David not Goliath. He is on the

side of Joseph who is left to rot in a prison in Egypt. He is on the side of Elijah who is all alone against 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. He is on the side of a band of eleven disciples of Jesus, mostly fishermen, from the sticks of Galilee who stand in opposition to the political and religious establishment of Israel and who proceed to turn the world upside down. God accomplishes His purposes through small things, through small churches, through small people. God will also accomplish His purposes through us, if we let Him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Christmas story is incomplete without Easter. The Bible tells us that Jesus grew up and demonstrated by His words and deeds that He was the Messiah, that He was God come in the flesh. Eventually He was crucified on a Roman cross. Outwardly it seemed at that point that God's purposes had been thwarted by the Jewish and Roman establishment. But when Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, He proved that His claims were true. He died to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind. His promise was that we will have forgiveness of sins and eternal life if we will accept the offering that He made in our behalf. The one responsibility with which we are left is to trust in Jesus as our Savior. The obligation that He left us is to accept the gift of forgiveness and eternal life by faith in Him alone.

God will accomplish His purposes through us if we cooperate with Him. The starting point is making sure that we have a relationship with God. The Bible says that this comes only from trusting in Jesus as our Savior. I hope that you have come to the point of recognizing that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. If and when you come to the point of choosing to place your faith in this Savior, you will be able to look at Christmas with new eyes. And indeed you will be able to look at all of life with eyes that have been transformed by the grace of God.