



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Matthew 2: Kings in Conflict

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MATTHEW 2 RECORDS THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING CHRIST'S BIRTH. THOUGH THE SURFACE STORY IS FAMILIAR TO MOST, IT IS UNDERSCORED BY A POTENTIALLY OVERLOOKED POLITICAL DRAMA THAT OFFERS INVALUABLE LESSONS FOR THOSE IN LEADERSHIP TODAY. LET'S CONSIDER HOW A POWERFUL WORLDLY KING, NAMED HEROD, RESPONDED TO THE ARRIVAL OF THE HEAVENLY KING, JESUS.

THE HERODIAN DYNASTY

There are many "Herod's" mentioned in the New Testament. All of them were part of an influential family dynasty that ruled Israel for over a century.¹

47 BC – 4 BC Herod the Great
King of Israel (Matthew 2:1-17)
Killed Bethlehem babies (Matthew 2:1-17)

4 BC – 6 AD Herod Archelaus
Ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea (Matthew 2:22)

4BC – 34AD Herod Philip
Tetrarch over northeastern, mainly non-Jewish, territories (Matthew 14:3b, Luke 3:1)

4BC – 39 AD Herod Antipas
Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (Luke 3:1)
Had a plan to kill Jesus (Luke 13:31-33)
Killed John the Baptist (Matthew 14:3-12)
Judged Jesus at his trial (Luke 23:7-12)

37 A.D. – 44 AD Herod Agrippa I
Killed the Apostle James (Acts 12:1-2)
Imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:3-11)
Died from intestinal worms (Acts 12:23)

50 AD – 70 AD Herod Agrippa II
Tried the Apostle Paul (Acts 25:13-26:32)

HEROD ... THE GREAT?

The Herod spoken of in Matthew 2 is known as Herod the Great. Herod's father was Antipater, an Idumean who was ruler of Judea and also a political ally and close friend of Julius Caesar. Before his death, Antipater divided his territory among his four sons, with Herod as governor over Galilee. Herod played his political cards well, traveling to Rome and convincing the Senate that he was the one to rule the greater region under their watch. In 40 B.C. they appointed him as King of Judea, a position he would hold throughout the rest of his life.

Herod the Great accomplished much good. He was adept at oratory and diplomacy. As a young man he proved to be a decisive military leader who could turn the tide of a battle from defeat to victory. He was also the only ruler in the history of the area who ever succeeded in keeping peace and order.

He was also a wise politician. When the economy was struggling, he returned tax money to the people. When there was a severe famine in 25 B.C., he responded by melting down the gold plates in the palace and giving the money to the poor.

Herod was especially known for his magnificent construction and public works projects. He built miles of aqueducts. He built a theatre in Jerusalem, an amphitheater, a hippodrome (race track), and two incredible mountain-top palace fortresses (Herodion and Masada). He also built the beautiful port city of Caesarea, restored Samaria, and improved cities including Beirut, Antioch, Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, and Rhodes. He even contributed to buildings in Athens and the Olympic games. Most importantly, he oversaw the renovation of the Temple in Jerusalem, of which the rabbis said, "Whoever has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building."²

However, Herod had one exceedingly terrible flaw in his character - he was insanely suspicious and self-protective, with a determination to eliminate anyone he suspected might threaten his power. He had ten wives, but was especially distrustful of one named Miriamne. He ultimately executed both her and her mother. He also killed Miriamne's teenage brother, Aristobulus, by arranging for him to "accidentally" drown at a Jericho pool party. He also executed three of his twelve children, including his eldest son Antipater, prompting

CAPITOL BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: WEDNESDAYS @ 7:30 A.M., ASSEMBLY RULES CONFERENCE ROOM (3171)

STAFF/LOBBYISTS: WEDNESDAYS @ 12:00 NOON, ROOM 125

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the Roman Emperor Augustus to comment that it would be safer to be Herod's pig than his son!

Herod's brutality reached its climax when he was seventy years old and approaching death. He gave orders that a collection of the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem should be arrested and imprisoned. At the moment he died, he ordered, they should be killed. He said grimly that since no one would mourn his passing, he would see to it that tears were shed when he died.³

KINGS ON A COLLISION COURSE

Matthew 2:1-3 *"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him."*

Once we grasp the depths of Herod's jealousy and brutality, we realize that the mention that "he was troubled" about the arrival of the new "King of the Jews" (vs. 3) must have been a tremendous understatement. It is also easy to see why "all Jerusalem with him" was also troubled, since the people were all too familiar with his viciousness, which in this case included the horrific murder of all the male infants and toddlers in Bethlehem, a small village five miles south of Jerusalem.

LESSONS FROM HEROD

- 1. Leaders are especially susceptible to pride.**
Herod had so much going for him: he was from a famous family, an excellent leader, intelligent, politically savvy, capable, well-connected, and powerful. All of this lured him to narcissism. If you are good at what you do, watch out for pride. There is only room for one ultimate King.
- 2. Being spiritual or believing the Bible is not enough.**
After all, Herod was very religious, consulted with priests, and even restored the Jewish Temple. But, he made himself an enemy of God. The question is not, "are you

religious?" It is, "are you humbly trusting in God's son Jesus Christ, and loving God and others as He commands?"

3. People matter a lot.

It is right to criticize Herod for being ruthless to his adversaries, but let's not then condone today's common practice of twisting of the truth in an attempt to destroy an opponent politically.

4. Rationalizing is wrong.

No doubt Herod justified his selfish, deceitful, behavior as necessary for the greater good. How many leaders today do something similar? ("Sure I wasn't completely ethical, but it was necessary so that I can stay in office and continue to help people.")⁴

5. Don't minimize Jesus.

I wonder if Herod considered that Jesus might actually be the Messiah? Ultimately, maybe without realizing it, he ended up fighting against God Himself. How many people today think they are doing right when they are really resisting the Lord? Jesus is King, and he calls us to learn of him and yield everything to him.

6. It's all temporary.

The many magnificent building projects that Herod invested his life in are but rubble today. It's unfortunate that Herod spent so much time focused on the present but so little preparing for his eventual departure. It is wise to remember that even our life's greatest work is but for a season. What are you doing to prepare for eternity?

¹ For more about the Herods, see first century historians Josephus and Tacitus. Their writings are freely available online.

² H.W. Hoehner, "Herodian Dynasty," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Intervarsity, 1992), John MacArthur, "Fools and Wise Men - Part 1," teaching on *Matthew 2:1-3* (Feb. 12, 1978).

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster, 1975), 28-29.

⁴ For excellent insight into Herod as political leader, click here or type in these addresses for a dramatic audio presentation. Part 1: <http://discovertheword.org/2010/12/21/let%e2%80%99s-look-at-the-birth-of-jesus-from-a-new-perspective/>
Part 2: <http://discovertheword.org/2010/12/22/a-dramatic-presentation-of-an-interview-with-herod-the-great-king-of-the-provinces-where-jesus-was-born/>