

HEROD

INTRO: Today is the day we know as Epiphany day. Let me introduce this day from a message I did some years ago to help us understand why we commemorate this day. "The day we commemorate on January the sixth is called *Epiphany* from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, meaning manifestation. It is one of the three oldest traditional festival days celebrated by Christians. These three are Christmas, Easter and Epiphany. In the West Epiphany commemorates the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles, namely the magi or wisemen of the East. Apparently, in the Eastern churches it also commemorates His manifestation of divinity at His baptism. But in the West it commemorates the visit of the magi."

On this day we commemorate the visit of the Magi, the first Gentiles to see Jesus. Here Christ was first manifested, epiphania, to the Gentiles. Let us go to Matthew 2 to see this manifestation (read 2:1-12). What I want to do this morning is show us some of the political scene into which Jesus Christ was born. We will do this by taking a look at this man named Herod, of whom we have just read. I am modifying a message I did a good number of years ago.

Now, understanding Herod will give us some of the political milieu of the time when Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem. You see, just like today, politics played a very significant role in the lives of the Jewish people in Israel. And if there is one danger above others in politics it is the hunger for power. It has been said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Herod was a man who understood politics and Herod was a power hungry man. Not only was he power hungry, he was an immoral and ruthless man.

Let's set Herod in Biblical perspective, from a prophetic point of view. In Daniel chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, had a dream. Then he called for all the magicians and astrologers and required that they make known to him the dream and the interpretation. They were told that if they did not make the dream known to him and the interpretation then they would all lose their heads. Well, you know the story, how Daniel and his friends prayed about this and how Daniel told the king the dream and the interpretation (Read Daniel 2:24-45).

The head of gold represented the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. About this and how Daniel told the king the dream and the interpretation (Daniel 2:24-45).

The head of gold represented the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. This reign took place from 626 BC to 539 BC. The chest and arms of silver represented the reign of Medo-Persia. The dates are from 539-330 BC. The belly and thighs of bronze represent Greece and Greece ruled from 330 BC until 63 BC. The last empire to rule the world was Rome. Rome ruled the world beginning 63 BC for a period of approximately 450 years. So, Rome began to rule the world just about 63 years before Jesus was born. Herod was a child at that time and he would later become known as the king of the Jews, but under Roman rule.

I. HEROD BEFORE CHRIST'S BIRTH

So, for our first point this morning, we want to look at Herod before the birth of Christ. You see, when Jesus was born, Herod was already the ruler over the land of Israel. He ruled over the land of Israel but was under the authority of the Roman ruler.

So, let us begin by getting some idea of the politics involved for Herod to become ruler of this land under Rome. Herod's father's name was Antipater. Antipater was a Jew of Idumean descent and he gained great political power. He had 4 sons and a daughter, and one of those sons was Herod. Now before we go on let me clarify something. The Herod the Tetrarch mentioned in Matthew 14:1 and other references is not this same Herod. He is Herod's son who ruled after Herod died. The Herod that was ruler when Jesus was born, died shortly after Jesus' birth. Then Acts 12:21 mentions another Herod. This is yet another Herod, Herod Agrippa I. Then in Acts 25 and 26 another Herod is mentioned, and he is Herod Agrippa II. The man of our study this morning is the first Herod, known as Herod the Great. The name 'Herod' means 'hero' or 'heroic'.

On March 15, 44 BC, Julius Ceasar, one of the most celebrated persons of ancient Rome, was assassinated in the Senate. In 43 BC, Antipater, Herod's father was murdered. Antipater's opposition seized this opportunity to gain power in Israel. Phasael, a son of Antipater was taken captive and committed suicide. Herod, a shrewd man, managed a daring escape. Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary says this, "Outwitting Cleopatra, and reaching Rome through perils of winter voyaging, Herod set his case before Octavian and Antony. It is a remarkable tribute to his charm, daring, political acumen, and consummate

diplomacy, that he won the support of both triumvirs who were soon to divide in disastrous rivalry" (348).

So in 40 BC Herod was given the title "King of the Jews." The NBD says it took him three years of fighting to earn the right to the title. It further says, "...but when he had done so he governed Judea for 33 years as a loyal 'friend and ally' of Rome.

The NISBE says that Herod's reign can be divided into three sections: Consolidation (37-25 BC); Prosperity (25-14 BC); Domestic Troubles (14-4 BC). It is this last era of his life we are interested in this morning, because it is in that time that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It is also during this time that he is mentioned in Matthew 2. So we see that for eighteen years Herod was plagued by domestic or family troubles.

Herod had ten wives, that is cause enough for domestic troubles. Every wife wanted one of their sons to be Herod's successor. Only the sons of the first five wives had a chance at being Herod's successor. Herod had two favorite sons. These were born of his second wife, Mariamne I. These two sons were Alexander and Aristobulus. Now Herod's only sister had a daughter named Bernice. We read of her in Acts 25:13, 23; 26:30. Bernice was married to her brother Herod's son Aristobulus. But Salome, a very wicked woman and the sister of Herod hated both Aristobulus and Alexander and their mother, Mariamne I. So at one point she spoke ill of Mariamne and succeeded to have Herod kill his second wife.

Salome and her brother, also Herod's brother, warned Herod that these two sons of Mariamne were out for revenge. Their plan, they said, was to bring charges against Herod before Ceasar by which Herod was to lose his right to the throne. Herod then recalled Antipater, the only son of his first wife Doris, from exile. Antipater was to help Herod deal with the two troublesome sons of Mariamne I. Herod now redid his will and named Antipater as his sole successor. Antipater did everything he could to secure his position. Through this Alexander and Aristobulus were brought to trial. What happened was that Alexander and Aristobulus were reconciled to Herod. Whereupon, Herod again redid his will, putting these two sons back into it.

Well, internal troubles continued. At another time Alexander and Aristobulus again came into Herod's disfavor. But Archeleus (Matt. 2:22) interceded on behalf of his son-in-law, Alexander, and peace was made again. Still later these two sons were reported and brought to trial in what is Beirut, Lebanon today. After this trial Herod had them both killed by strangling in Samaria. Ironically, Samaria was where he had married their mother, Mariamne I, thirty years earlier.

Again Antipater was named sole successor to Herod's throne. Antipater was anxious to take the throne and sought to poison his dad. Somehow things went wrong and Pheroras died instead. Herod learned from Pheroras' female slaves of the purpose of the poisoning and that he had been the one intended to die. Herod, under false pretenses called for Antipater, who came without suspicion and was immediately imprisoned. Now Herod drew up his fifth will in which Antipas, son of the Samaritan wife, Malthace, was named sole successor to the throne.

So, with all that political information, let us now look at Herod at the time of Christ's birth in Matthew 2.

II. HEROD AT THE TIME OF CHRIST'S BIRTH (Matt. 2:1-18)

Though Herod had enough troubles by this time, new troubles arose for Herod. He contracted various incurable diseases. For a time the warm spring baths of Callithroe helped his ailments. While he was in the midst of such physical ailments, to add trouble to misery, certain news came to Herod that troubled him deeply. Certain men had come from the east to enquire of the birth of a new king in Israel. It is here that we need to read Matthew 2:1-12 (read).

Well, Herod waited for the return of the Magi but they did not return. In the mean while Joseph, Jesus' step father is warned by an angel and he takes his wife and Jesus and flees to Egypt (read 2:13-14). Well, Herod, when he realizes the Magi have left without informing him of where this new king was born takes measures to ensure his kingdom (read 2:15-18). Herod, a man to whom life was cheap, immediately he sought to squelch this new threat to his throne. Wouldn't it be something to go through all the trouble he had to

obtain and maintain this kingdom, only to have some Jew born in some obscure town, and have Him replace the leadership of Herod? Unthinkable! There is no possible way that this power hungry, vicious, selfish, ruler will allow something like that.

I want you to look at verse 18 of Matthew 2 again (read). If you should go to Israel today. And if you should walk to a place called Yad Vashem you would see in one place a statue of a woman bent forward in grief. It is an image, I was told, of Rachel weeping for her children.

I want us to feel this verse this morning. I wonder how many of you have children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews in this area who are under 2 years old? I wonder if you can imagine a ruthless leader send his soldiers, have the all rounded up and executed? What must it have been like around Bethlehem when all the children 2 years old and under were slain. I wonder if you can imagine just a little bit if all the children in La Crete, 2 years old and under were slain? How many graves would have to be dug? What mourning would take place. I wonder if you can feel the pain these parents must have felt? What must it have been like to bury so many little children? I wonder if you can let **yourself into this text** and understand and sympathize? You see, this actually happened.

Now I take you back to Herod and his miseries. He has done everything he could to secure his throne. He has slain wives or sons and squelched any other opposition. Now I want you to try to picture these two people who were both called King of the Jews. Picture for a moment the life of Jesus Christ, the king born as a baby whom the Magi came to see. Then picture for a moment King Herod, dressed in his glory. Do you see the contrast?

I want you to picture how these two kings built their kingdoms. Picture Herod with red sword, a ruthless soldier. Picture Jesus with the Word of God and some fishermen for disciples. Picture Herod in fine purple in a palace. Picture Jesus with no place to lay His head. Picture proud Herod with his great speeches. Picture Jesus on the mountainside teaching the people. Picture Herod and the incredible cities and palaces he built. It would stagger you if you could see some of those places. His fortress at Masada or the temple in Jerusalem, to name a few. Then picture Jesus who did

not even own His own piece of property or house. Who do you think will win?

When one observes King Herod, and his way of operation, and then King Jesus and His ways; there is a stark contrast between the ways of man and the ways of God. I wonder, has all the fight for self and self glory gone out of you and I? Have we learned not trust in our own understanding or our own doing, but in all our ways acknowledge Him? There is the true way of victory.

III. HEROD AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH (Matt. 2:19-23)

I want to take a look at the end of the life of Herod now. He is almost seventy years old. No one could more truly say with Jacob of old, "...few and evil have been the days of the years of my life..." He has ruled with physical force. Only one person has been the chief consideration of his life, Herod. And now he has come to the time of life when physical force is abating and no amount of money or prestige can return it to him.

Herod knew that when he died there would not be mourning, there would be rejoicing and happiness. So he determined that no matter how hated he was when he died, there would be mourning. So some time before his death he had many of the chief Jewish people captured and imprisoned in the hippodrome. Then he instructed his sister Salome and her husband Alexis to slay these men at the moment of his death so that there would be mourning at his death rather than partying. Josephus, the Jewish historian, writes this of Herod's death: "But now Herod's distemper greatly increased upon him after a severe manner, and this by God's judgment upon him for his sins: for a fire glowed in him slowly, which did not so much appear to the touch outwardly, as it augmented his pains inwardly; for it brought upon him a vehement appetite to eating, which he could not avoid to supply with one sort of food or other. His entrails were also exulcerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his colon. An aqueous and transparent liquor also had settled itself about his feet, and like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly. Nay, further, his privy-member was putrefied and produced worms; and when he sat upright he had difficulty of breathing, which was very loathsome, on account of the stench of his breath and the quickness of its returns; he had also convulsions

in all parts of his body, which increased his strength to an insufferable degree" (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVII, chapter 6, pg. 365).

Some years ago I traveled with a Low German pastor who had come from Russia and had spent several years in prison for his faith in Christ. I translated for him in several churches and he told a lot of stories. He told us how he was called to visit a very sick KJB officer one day. Nobody wanted to visit this officer. He was dying in somewhat the same conditions as Herod did. He said this officer was rotting alive. He said the stink was so bad it was almost unbearable, but he went.

And the KJB officer called him to his bed and there he spoke with this Christian, whom he at one point would have imprisoned. And he asked Edward if God coul

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