

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 wise-men of the East. Apparently, in the Eastern churches it also commemorates His manifestation of divinity at His baptism."

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).

1 ¶ 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,

2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

9 ¶ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

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).

24 ¶ Therefore Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He went and

said thus to him: "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; take me before the king, and I will tell the king the interpretation."

25 Then Arioch quickly brought Daniel before the king, and said thus to him, "I have found a man of the captives of Judah, who will make known to the king the interpretation."

26 The king answered and said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "Are you able to make known to me the dream which I have seen, and its interpretation?"

27 Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, "The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king.

28 "But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream, and the visions of your head upon your bed, were these:

29 "As for you, O king, thoughts came to your mind while on your bed, about what would come to pass after this; and He who reveals secrets has made known to you what will be.

30 "But as for me, this secret has not been revealed to me because I have more wisdom than anyone living, but for our sakes who make known the interpretation to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your heart.

31 ¶ "You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome.

32 "This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze,

33 "its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay.

34 "You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces.

35 "Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from

the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

36 "This is the dream. Now we will tell the interpretation of it before the king.

37 "You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory;

38 "and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the field and the birds of the heaven, He has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all – you are this head of gold.

39 "But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth.

40 "And the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron, inasmuch as iron breaks in pieces and shatters everything; and like iron that crushes, that kingdom will break in pieces and crush all the others.

41 "Whereas you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; yet the strength of the iron shall be in it, just as you saw the iron mixed with ceramic clay.

42 "And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly fragile.

43 "As you saw iron mixed with ceramic clay, they will mingle with the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay.

44 "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.

45 "Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold – the

great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure."

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 and Herod entered the scene shortly after the rule of Rome began.

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. By the way, the name 'Herod' means 'hero' or 'heroic'.

Now before we go on let me clarify something. The NT mentions a number of different Herods. First is the Herod of Matthew 2. The *Herod the Tetrarch* mentioned in Matthew 14:1 and other references in the Gospels is not this same Herod. He is Herod's son and 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, known as 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.

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. Phasaël, 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 that last era we are interested in this morning, because it is in that time that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It is during this time that he is mentioned in the passage we read earlier. So we see that for eighteen years Herod was plagued by domestic or family troubles. He had ten wives and they all 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 Caesar 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, who is mentioned in Matthew 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 now 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 2:7-9 again (read).

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

9 ¶ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

Well, Herod waited for the return of the Magi but they did not return. In the mean while Joseph, Jesus' step father was warned by an angel and he took his wife and Jesus and fled to Egypt (read 2:13-14).

13 ¶ Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

14 When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,

Well, Herod, when he realized that the Magi have left without informing him as to where this new king was born took measures to ensure his kingdom (read 2:15-18).

15 and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

16 ¶ Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."

Herod, a man to whom life was cheap, immediately 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 in order to give it to one whom he chose, 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 do not know how to give you a picture of what it must have been like around Bethlehem when all the male children 2 years old and under were slain. So I must leave you to your imagination. But I wonder if you can imagine just a little bit if all the children in La Crete, 2 years old and under were slain? 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 the *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 kingly

glory, but ruthless and very wicked. Do you see the contrast?

I want you to picture how these two kings built their kingdoms. Picture Herod with red sword, a bloodthirsty 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 gone out of you and I? Have we yet learned not to trust in our own understanding or our own doing, but in all our ways to acknowledge Him? There is the true way of victory.

III. HEROD AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH (Matt. 2:1, 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. He was a narcissist of the extreme sort. 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.

And do you know what troubled him now? He is going to die. He knows that. But Herod knew that when he died there would be no mourning. No, rather there would more likely be rejoicing and happiness. So some time before his death he had many of the chief Jewish people captured and imprisoned in the large hippodrome. Then he instructed his sister Salome and her husband Alexis to slay these men at the moment of his death. Why? 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).

A good many years ago I traveled with a man by name of Edward Ewert. He told of a time he was called to go visit a KJB officer. I do not remember if this was before or after the iron curtain went down. But he went there, though nobody wanted to go there because the KJB officer was dying. And he said the stench from this dying man was almost unbearable. And Edward went there to share the Gospel with this once enemy of the Gospel.

Well, Herod died and Jesus lived to fulfill what God wanted Him to do. And so let us read Matthew 2:19-23:

19 ¶ But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

20 saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead."

21 Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go

there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.

23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was

CONCL: What a message is the life of Herod! I ask you this morning, how much is it worth to gain great honor and prestige and positions of power in unrighteous ways? The Bible puts it like this: What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

This Epiphany day, when we commemorate the visit of the Magi to Herod and then Jesus, I remind you of the contrast of these two kings. Let us look at our own lives. Who are we living for? Is it king Me? Or is my life committed to service for God? I remind us this morning of the outcome of these two lives. Herod died a horrendous death. He is still dead physically but he has been tormented in hell for two thousand years. And Jesus was killed by those seeking their own good. He was resurrected. For 2000 years He has been in the business of building His Kingdom.

HEROD
January 6, 1999

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II. HEROD AT THE TIME OF CHRIST'S BIRTH

III. HEROD AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH

CONCL:

