

HEROD OR CHRIST?

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

Steve Zeisler

I want to ask a Christmas question in this message. I hope it will be a question by which we can examine ourselves and think more clearly about the ways of God. This Christmas question is the one asked of Herod by the magi in Matthew 2: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?"

This question is best considered in context. We have been studying the book of Acts together. Chapter 12 marks a major break in the story. I want to take us there first and then move to the Christmas question in Matthew 2. There is a connection between these two accounts, and it has to do with the family of the Herods. Their role in both texts can serve as a warning for us.

Let's read the final paragraph of Acts 12. It tells us of Herod Agrippa I, whom we met in the first verses of chapter 12 (Discovery Paper 4757). He summarily executed James, the first of the apostles to be martyred, nonchalantly imprisoned Peter with the intention of executing him, and would have continued destroying Christians had he been allowed to. Verses 20-25:

Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king's country. On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. The people kept crying out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.

But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.

Observe the great summary given to us in verse 24: "But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied." That happened despite the violent resistance of Herod and Rome and the Jews, who despised the gospel. This word will be the final word of every chapter of the church's story, whether we can see it from our vantage point or not. The enemy will not prevail, the word of the Lord will continue to do its work, new hearts will be won for Christ, and the church will be established, until the end. So our observation of the events of chapter 12 can encourage us that God is faithful and will continue to be.

What can we learn from Herod and the entire Herod clan? What were the Herods like? What did they stand for? They clearly represent a particular kind of opposition to God. What, therefore, is the outcome of choices that people like them make?

God's foes cannot stand

Herod's death is presented here. This Herod, Agrippa I, is a member of the third generation of Herods who are mentioned in the New Testament. This man died in humiliation. It was a terrible end of ruin and decay, an announcement from heaven as the angel struck his body that he was rejected, and all who are like him are rejected.

Josephus also describes this scene, and he goes on at some length about the terrible pain Herod experienced as he died being eaten by worms. We don't know exactly what took place medically. Calvin, commenting on this scene in Acts, imagines that Herod was even as he spoke already a corpse decaying from the worms eating it, that he was dead and gone before he even knew it. We are supposed to recoil from this, to see judgment and ruin, to note that the outcome of this man's life and all that his family stood for was condemnation by God.

John Stott gives a wonderful summary of the events of chapter 12:

"At the beginning of the chapter Herod is on the rampage, arresting and persecuting church leaders. At the end he himself is struck down and dies. The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing. It closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish His own in their place. Tyrants may be permitted for a time to boast and bluster, oppressing the church and hindering the spread of the gospel, but they will not last." (1)

Herod's death is both a warning and an encouragement--such foes of God's word will not stand. It warns us not to be too impressed with royal apparel, raised rostrums, the power to effect short-term economic benefit, and the swords of soldiers. The angel struck ignoring the soldiers. It's easy to be impressed by the kings of this world, with their arrogance and self-love, but we should not be and must not be.

Note that Herod was living the oldest lie of all. In the Garden the devil had said to the first humans, "By rebelling against God, you too can become God. You can remove him from the throne and occupy it yourself!" (Genesis 3:1-5.) Herod's love of the crowd's chant--"The voice of a god!"--condemned him.

But if this is the way the Herods ended, how did they begin? The family of the Herods serves as an image, if you will, of rebellion against God and self-appointed royalty, not only here but in the gospels and elsewhere in the book of Acts. What might we learn by going back to the text where the first Herod is introduced to us? We come now to our Christmas question in Matthew 2. Here we will meet the grandfather of Herod Agrippa I, Herod the Great.

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?”

Verses 1-2:

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.”

The question of the magi resonates. Where is the One born King, the One who has the right to rule? Where is the royal authority of God’s anointed, the Savior and Lord?

In one sense it is odd that one should have to ask such a question. Kings ought to be obvious. They ought to be in the highest, most visible place. They ought to have retinues, fanfare, P.R. departments always pointing to them. But this One born King of the Jews, the One given from God, is characterized by none of those things. He is obscured from our view at times. His rule is subtle, not self-promoting.

The creation had no problem observing, believing in, and responding to the rule of Christ; in fact there was even a special star that came into existence to sit over the place where the king was laid in his infancy. The angels had no problem with the rule of Christ. Choirs of angels sang at his nativity and continue to do his bidding. Even the demons, in fear, knew the rule of Christ and were under no illusion as to his authority. The only ones who don’t know are people like us. We need to unlearn some things, to clear away the barriers, before we can discover and embrace the royal rule of the word, power, authority, love, and gifts of God.

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” is therefore a good question for us to be asking. Where is Christ in the degenerating world we live in? Why do the things that are unlovely and broken and twisted seem to be gathering force, and the things that are beautiful seem to be getting ruined? Where is Christ in a world in which violence has such a free hand to do its terrible work? On a more personal scale you might ask, “Where is the One born King in my life? Where is he in my priorities and direction? What place does he have in my thinking? What command does he have of my time and attention and thoughts and responsibilities?”

It’s important to observe that in these opening verses of Matthew, the first ones who asked the question came with the intention of worshipping the King. We will discover the presence of God if we are already determined to worship him. The wise men from the east wanted to give him their lives, and so they found their way into his presence.

Finally, this text with its Christmas question also concerns itself with the role of Herod the king. Let’s bring this terrible figure into the foreground so that we can learn from him, and indeed from all his family.

The rival of the true King

Verse 3:

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

Twice in a very short span Matthew is required to observe that Herod was the king. Herod wanted to be the king and insisted on royal appellations for himself. So the question “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” was a direct attack on his position. “What do they mean, ‘King of the Jews’? I am king!” He was troubled by their question.

We are going to skip over the account of how the chief priests and scribes searched the prophets and discovered that Bethlehem was the place where Messiah would be born. Told of this, the wise men went to Bethlehem and found him, worshiped him, and gave him gifts. Then they were warned by God not to go back to Herod. Herod had said, “When you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him,” but he was lying through his teeth, intending all along to murder the baby once he found him. Verse 16:

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi.

Herod is styled “the Great,” and is referenced in other historical writings for undertaking many projects that he put his name on. But throughout the wide world the thing he will always be remembered for is that he slaughtered innocent babies savagely, without compunction, because of the claim that someone else was king, and he was determined that he would be king.

What is the point of highlighting this rivalry between kings? What can we learn from a closer observation of the Herod family and even of our own hearts? In order to find the One born King of the Jews, the royal Servant of God,

we have to say no to the alternatives. Jesus' lordship rivals that of all others. If he is Lord, then no one else is. That means that everything in us that wants to promote us, expand our importance, exalt us, put us in charge, must give way to the lordship of Jesus. Entire societies of people want to promote themselves and generate kings like Herod. But in order to find our way to Christ and intimacy with him, we have to say no to the rivalry in our own hearts and to that in the world with all it offers--pomp, power, flash, armies, money. These things last only for a season; in Acts 12 it all finally led to ruin. Where is the One born King of the Jews? He is found by people who have decided neither to be king themselves, nor to allow anyone but Christ to have that place in their hearts.

What do we know of the Herod family that should cause us to recoil from ever following them? First, Herod the Great claimed priestly authority, but he wasn't from a priestly tribe. He wasn't even completely Jewish, being a descendant of both Israelites and Edomites. He claimed the title of king, but he was a commoner who had no royal standing at all. The title that he clung to so tightly was given to him by Rome. The Romans had various titles for the governors of their provinces, and sometimes when they wanted to honor one of them above the others they would let him call himself a king, but he was a king only as a puppet of the emperor. So when Herod set up his phony throne in Jerusalem, it was only a grotesque mimicry of the royal line of David.

Herod the Great had ten wives and twenty children. Some of his wives were as twisted and evil as he was. He banished some of them and killed others. He executed both wives and children upon a whim. Those of his children whom he didn't kill, he encouraged to hate and fear and destroy one another in their rivalry for the throne. Caesar once said that he would rather be Herod's pig than his son. So Herod's large family was only a grotesque mimicry of the family of Jacob, whose children grew to be the great tribes of Israel that would bless the world.

Next we observe that Herod built cities, theaters, palaces, strongholds, all of them honoring gods and powers, even Yahweh, the God of Israel. Herod the Great fashioned himself as the sum of cultures, combining in himself the best of Rome, Greece, and Israel, as if he could break down the barriers between cultures, as if he could choose from among them and draw into himself the best of all the world. But in this Herod was only a grotesque mimicry of the church, in which barriers truly are broken down for love's sake, and the gifts of friendship and companionship are given freely, honoring the Lord.

Herod was extremely suspicious, for good reason. He built and fortified a series of strongholds to protect himself from a long list of enemies who wanted him dead. These citadels included the famous natural fortresses Masada and the Herodium, the latter of which is near Bethlehem. The Herodium was high, well defended, and filled with all that was necessary to withstand a siege: food, water, and so on. We can easily imagine Herod striding around this fortress, full of his own pomp and paranoia, looking down on Bethlehem where, unknown to him, a stable had sheltered the infant Savior.

The Bible tells of four generations of Herods, all of whom were characterized by excess, violence, lust, intrigues, incest, and paranoia. When we give way to the motivations inside us that prefer us to God, it's the same thing as making a Herod king. The world appoints Herods as kings, but the claim of Christ to rule stand absolutely opposed to all such Herods everywhere, in every era of history.

Between Herod the Great and Herod Agrippa I was Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist executed one evening when he was sexually aroused and drunk (Matthew 14:3-11; Mark 6:17-28). It was Antipas who joined his soldiers in mocking and tormenting Christ the night he was crucified (Luke 23:7-11).

Herod Agrippa II, mentioned briefly in Acts 25-26, was the consort of his sister with whom he was openly living in incest, condemned by all around, as he pretended to be someone important.

Why draw out the end of the story for the Herods? It's because we are asking the question the magi asked. If we want to find the presence of Christ, the rule of Christ, the hope he gives, and his strengthening love, then we are going to enrage his opponents. We are going to have to choose to follow him against all kinds of opposition, both interior and in the world. In order to know and love Christ, we have to disavow the Herods of the world.

I hope you will see yourself as one of the magi, the wise men looking for the King of the Jews. We are required to look for him. The Lord rarely forces himself on any of us. He is often willing to quietly wait for us to turn to him. He doesn't promote himself as loudly as all the others promote themselves.

We must be willing to worship him when we find him. If we are not determined to give him ourselves, then we won't discover him.

Finally, we are required to acknowledge that there are violent and terrible alternatives that end badly, and that in order to discover and follow and love and serve Christ, we have to make choices against both what is unworthy in our own hearts and what the world offers us.

NOTES

(1) John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World*, © 1990, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. P. 213.

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