

Bite Size Bible Study

Christmas Story – 8 Herod #225

By Pastor Lee

This is the last in a series on the Christmas Story. This segment is dedicated to Herod's Atrocities.

You may wonder why we include this evil action within the miracle of the birth of Jesus. But in this fallen world there is evil along with the good. God sometimes used the evil deeds of people for the good that may come from exposing it for what it is.

It is no wonder that this story is not included in the Christmas Story during this season. However, there are things that we can learn from the despicable acts of the so called "Herod the (not so) Great".

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

*"A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."*

Matthew 2:13-18 NIV – from Jer. 31:15 NIV

Ramah (from Hebrew: "height") was, according to the Hebrew Bible, a city in ancient Israel in the land allocated to the tribe of Benjamin. It was located near Gibeon and Mizpah to the West, Gibeah to the South, and Geba to the East.

Genesis 35 tells us that Rachel (Jacobs favorite wife) died in childbirth on the road from Bethel to Bethlehem, and 1 Samuel appears to indicate that she was buried in the vicinity of Ramah.

Jeremiah 40:1, which speaks of Jeremiah being found among the captives being held at Ramah prior to their deportation to Babylon. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, Ramah became the staging area from which the Babylonians sent the people of Judah into exile.

The question then becomes, why did Matthew include such an unspeakably repulsive story in his Gospel?

Herod was an exceedingly complex person. Racially, he was an Arab. His father was from an Arab tribe in the southern part of the Holy Land called Idumea. His mother was from Petra, which was the capital of the Nabatean kingdom, an Arab kingdom that inhabited the northern part of Arabia in the first century. One of Herod's brothers was named Faisal, and a second Yusef. His sister was called Salama. The only child in the family with a Greek name was Herod himself.

Religiously, Herod was Jewish. In about 135 BCE the Jewish ruler Hyrcanus conquered the Idumaeans and on pain of death forced them to become Jews. Hyrcanus then appointed Herod's grandfather, Antipater the elder, governor of the province. That made Herod a "Jew." Culturally, Herod was Greek. Greek culture had spread widely throughout Palestine by that time, and Greek was the lingua franca of the international community. Indeed, Greek was Herod's first language, and Herod was noted for various attempts to turn Jerusalem into a Greek city. Politically, Herod was Roman. In all the major conflicts during his tenure in power, he sided with Rome. Being racially Arab, religiously Jewish, culturally Greek and politically Roman, Herod was a complex man.

In his early days he was described as good-looking and powerfully built. He personally led his army in the field of battle in ten different wars. One of the high points of his nobility was when he sided with Antony and Cleopatra against Octavian in the struggle for control of the Roman Empire. After winning decisively against Antony, Octavian (who became Caesar Augustus) traveled to Rhodes to plan his next move. Herod quickly made his way there to meet the new Roman victor and was granted an audience.

For most of his life Herod had been a personal friend of Antony and had supported him against Octavian. How would he manage with the new Caesar? Herod appeared without a crown and boldly confessed to all the support he had given Caesar's enemy. He also admitted that he had remained loyal to Anthony even in his defeat. Herod climaxed his presentation by saying, "What I ask of you is to consider not whose friend, but what a good friend, I was." Caesar decided that Herod was a man he could trust and told him to put his crown back on his head. Herod returned to Palestine with a more secure throne than he had previously enjoyed.

But with the years Herod gradually disintegrated. In all he married ten women. Sons for him were often seen as potential political rivals, and two of his favorites were strangled by his order in a fort in Samaria. Later he became suspicious of the political loyalty of his favorite wife, Mariamne, and had her killed. After that he was

known to wander through the palace calling her name and sending the servants to fetch her. When they failed to do so he would have them beaten.

Herod was brilliant and brutal. Toward the end of his life, he grew seriously ill with several painful diseases. In his very last days, he arrested the crown prince and imprisoned him in the dungeon of his palace. When, in pain, the old man, Herod, tried to take his own life and was prevented by a guard, confusion broke out for a brief time. Word passed through the palace that the king was dead. On hearing the news, the crown prince cried out to be released so that he could assume power. Herod survived his suicide attempt and ordered the death of the crown prince. Five days later Herod himself died (in 4BCE). His last order was to command his troops to arrest thousands of notables from across the country and sequester them in the stadium in Jericho. Upon Herod's death the notables were to be executed so that there would be mourning in the land when the king died. Herod knew only too well that no one would weep for him. Fortunately, the order was not carried out. With such a record it is understandable that as an old man Herod could have ordered the slaughter of the babies of Bethlehem. It was a brutal world into which Jesus was born, and Herod was nothing if not a man of his times.

The birth of Jesus is always remembered and retold in soft colors with beautiful music playing in the background. The slaughter of the innocents is never a part of any church's "Christmas pageant."

The faithful expect and are generally offered a story limited to joyful angels, excited shepherds and generous wise men. The texts that are read are full of promises of peace mixed with visions of a beautiful child, a holy mother, a courageous father and some humble animals.

There appears to be a conspiracy of silence which refuses to notice the massacre. But Matthew includes it. The oft-observed reason is that Matthew is presenting Jesus as the new Moses. Moses was born in the midst of an occasion of the "slaughter of the innocents" as Pharaoh ordered the killing of all male Hebrew babies

(Ex 1:8-22). In turn, Matthew relates a parallel story about Jesus. But there may have been another important reason for its inclusion.

Those who lived in the Middle East across the second half of the twentieth century experienced frequent warfare. In Lebanon, particularly, there were seven wars in a thirty-five-year period. One lasted for seventeen years. Others were quick yet brutal. People saw friends and family killed by bullets and explosives and all the other horrors of modern war.

How do people retain their faith under such conditions? One answer is that they remember both the Christmas story and the cross. Mindless, bloody atrocities took place at the birth and death of Jesus. After reading those stories, the reader is not caught unawares by the human potential for terror that shows its ugly face time and time again.

At the beginning of the Gospel and at its conclusion, Matthew presents pictures of the depth of evil that Jesus came to redeem. This story heightens the reader's awareness of the willingness on the part of God to expose himself to the total vulnerability which is at the heart of the incarnation. If the Gospel can flourish in a world that produces the slaughter of the innocents and the innocent on the cross, the Gospel can flourish anywhere. From this awareness the readers of the Gospels in any age can take heart.

Unspeakable brutality characterizes the beginning and the end of Jesus' life. His ministry was within that setting and to a violent world that continues to date.

References used in the writing of this series include:

- Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes** by Kenneth E. Bailey
 - Who's Who in the Bible** by Comay & Brownrigg
 - Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary** General Editor Chad Brand
 - Believer's Bible Commentary** by William MacDonald
 - Who's who in the Bible** by Philip Comfort & Walter Elwell
 - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/> (various articles)
 - <https://www.biblegateway.com>
- Plus a number of articles not quoted in the series

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