

The People Who Missed Christmas: Herod

Scripture: Matthew 2:1–18

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Meet another man who missed the first Christmas: Herod. Matthew 2 tells his story. He was very different from the innkeeper. He wasn't ignorant; he was very well informed:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, 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." And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him." (Matthew 2:1-8)

Herod pretended he wanted to worship Jesus Christ, but he was fearful of this One who was called the King of the Jews. He didn't want any competition for his throne. The phrase "he was troubled" (Matthew 2:3) uses a word that means "agitated, stirred up, shaken up." It conveys the idea of panic. His supremacy was in jeopardy. He had no use for any other king of the Jews.

If the innkeeper's problem was preoccupation, Herod's was fear. Herod was an Idumean; he wasn't even a Jew. His father, Antipater, had done some favors to Rome. As payment, the Herod family was given the right to rule Judea, which was under Roman occupation. Herod was a consummate politician; he continued to do everything he could to gain favor with Rome. In return, the Roman senate gave him an army. Herod was able to extend his empire from Judea to Jordan to Syria to Lebanon. He even called himself "King of the Jews," and he was known by that title until his death.

It's no wonder he panicked when he heard someone else had been born who was being called King of the Jews. He was immediately threatened—even though Jesus was a baby and he was an old man.

Herod was ruthless. His chief appeal to Rome was the merciless efficiency with which he was able to extract taxes from the people. He had murdered all the Hasmoneans, the sons of the Maccabees, who had led a revolution against Greece's rule. He wanted to make sure they didn't do it again, so he simply slaughtered them all. He had ten wives and twelve children. One of his wives, Mariamne, had a brother, Aristobulus, who was the high priest. Herod was afraid of Aristobulus so he murdered him. Then he killed her too.

His paranoia was legendary. He was afraid one of his two sons might take his throne, so he murdered both of them. His entire life was one of plotting and execution. Five days before his death he executed all his descendants who might have laid claim to the throne. In one of the final acts of his evil life, he had all the distinguished citizens of Jerusalem put in prison and commanded that they be slaughtered the moment he died. "These people will not weep when I die," he said, "and I want them weeping, even if they weep over someone else." So even at his death there was a great slaughter.

Herod was such a brutal, merciless man that it is not difficult to imagine how he would choose to vent his rage when he learned a child had been born who, according to prophecy, was the true King of the Jews. He was furious when he realized the magi were not going to report back to him.

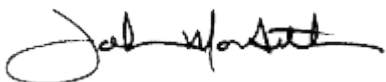
Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more." (Matthew 2:16-2:18)

In his mad effort to wipe out one child, Herod had scores of children slaughtered. God had already warned Joseph and Mary, and they had fled to Egypt with Jesus. So Herod failed. Not only did he miss the first Christmas, but his rebellion also propagated a great tragedy. All this was because of fear—jealous fear.

There are Herod types even in our society. Herod's fear was that someone else would take his throne. Lots of people are like him. They won't allow anything to interfere with their career, their position, their power, their ambition, their plans, or their lifestyle. They are not about to let someone else be king of their lives. They see Jesus as a threat, and so they miss Christmas.

People don't mind taking time off work to commemorate Jesus' birth. They will even embrace Him as a resource when they get in trouble. They might gladly accept Him as a spiritual benefactor. They are even willing to add Him to their lives and call themselves Christians, but not if He insists on being King. That might be a threat to their lifestyle or career, or whatever else they are hanging on to. They are as fearful and as jealous of losing their own selfdetermination as Herod was of losing his throne. They will guard at all costs their own priorities, their own values, their own morals. They won't come to Christ if He threatens to cramp their style. They will not accept His right to rule over them. They want to run the show.

The world is full of people who cry out, "We do not want this man to reign over us" (cf. Luke 19:14). People want to determine their own careers, make their own decisions, master their own fates, chart their own destinies. And so we have a world of kings who are not about to bow to Jesus Christ. Such people are governed by the same kind of jealous fear that drove Herod. Like him they miss Christmas.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John W. Stott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*The Miracle of Christmas*](#).)

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