

# Characters of Christmas



Written By  
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**M**atthew, a former tax collector, a man known for digging into details, makes sure we know the geo-political situation of the birth and infancy of Jesus when he writes these words:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king,  
(Matt. 2:1).

Focus, please, on that prepositional phrase. It informs us, from what we know of King Herod the Great, that Jesus, the Messiah, could not have been born during a more politically complex, chaotic, and carnal time in world history. From what Josephus tells us about this utterly godless, vile, power-hungry man, and from what Matthew discloses about him in the rest of Matthew 2, we can conclude that God, the Father, purposefully and providentially waited until the least optimal time to fulfill the seven-hundred-year-old precise prophecy concerning the *exact* location of the Messiah's birth in Micah chapter 5, verse 2. (As a sidelight, don't tell me the Bible lacks evidence demonstrating it is a divine book. What's the statistical probability Jesus just happened to be born *here*? And that He also just happened to be from the Davidic line and from the tribe of Judah, the regal tribe per Genesis 49:8-12, heightens the power of the math pertaining to Christ's identity.)

Why did He do this? Why does a jeweler showcase a magnificent, costly diamond against the backdrop of black velvet? Answer? To cause you to be amazed and overcome at the diamond's brilliance. In this analogy, King Herod is the black velvet and Jesus, the Christ, is the diamond. We, therefore, cannot walk away from the geo-political setting of the Christmas story and not be comforted in God's providential work, and we cannot fail to be in awe of how Jesus, the true King

of Kings, stands head and shoulders above all earthly kings . . . no matter how wealthy, powerful, cunning, and ruthless they were, and are.

Matthew's historical analysis of King Herod in relation to King Jesus readily causes us to come face to face this Christmas with a timeless divine truth:

### In Tough Times God Does His Most Tender Work (Matt. 2:1-18)

You might need to read that again. Why? Because we, also, live in politically and spiritually tough, trying times, times many of us have never seen before, times we have only read about in other countries, times when darkness is embraced as light, times when evil, selfish people work overtime to silence and cancel the voices of those who speak truth, especially spiritual/moral truth. I'm sure I don't need to give you all the dismal, disheartening details for they are readily available to anyone who surfs the net, listens to the radio, watches the news, or picks up a newspaper. What I do need to give you is hope, hope that this Christmas God is *providentially and powerfully working* to accomplish His kingdom goals and nothing or no one will stop Him.

God gives us this hope by means of a stark contrast between two kings: Herod and Jesus. Yes, just when the world situation could not have appeared any more hopeless, just when Roman power controlled the world with an iron totalitarian fist, and just when Herod, their willing political follower, could not have acted any more like a freedom-killing dictator, God said to His dear son in heaven, "Son, the time is *perfect* for your birth as the messianic king has arrived." Jaw dropping, isn't it?

To understand, therefore, how God works spectacularly in troublesome days to accomplish kingdom goals, goals when realized leave us seeing His loving, caring hand, we must dig into the contrast the Spirit of God has put before us of King Herod and King Jesus. To accomplish this, we will look at the life of Herod from history and from Matthew's record. Once we complete this exercise, we will logically compare our findings to what the Scriptures prophetically teach us of the Christ.

### Exhibit One: King Herod

Herod's father, Antipater, was an Idumean. Idumeans, from the ancient country south of Israel called Edom, were Arabs (his mother, Cypros, was Arabian by birth) and not Jews; however, when their country was defeated by the Jewish Hasmonean kingdom, they "embraced" Jewish beliefs. After Julius Caesar defeated General Pompey in Egypt, Antipater strategically and shrewdly deserted the General and aligned himself with General Julius Caesar. Caesar turned and gave Antipater the coveted title of a Roman citizen, and he made him the Roman procurator/governor of Judea in 44 B.C. Antipater quickly turned in 43 B.C. and made one of his four sons, Phasael, governor of Jerusalem, and Herod, governor of Galilee. His dynastic dream had just begun, and Herod got his first taste of political power . . . and he loved it.

When Antigonus, the Jew of Hasmonean "royal" lineage, besieged Jerusalem in 40 B.C. with the help of the Parthians, he set himself up at the new King of Israel and the new High Priest. Herod's brother, Phasael, committed suicide, and Herod fled to Rome after he secured his family in the mountain fortress of Masada. While in Rome, General Mark Antony, General Octavian, and the full Senate declared that Herod was the rightful King of the Jews. He returned with their military assistance and in the spring 37 B.C. he defeated Antigonus at Jericho, and, then, had him

beheaded by the Romans. This summarily ended Jewish Hasmonean rule and firmly established Herodian rule.

Herod's rule from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. can be divided into three sections.

From 37 B.C. to 26 B.C. he acted in classic Roman fashion by liquidating his political opponents. He started by first getting rid of 45 of the most prominent Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and seizing their property as his own. He married his second of ten wives, Mariamne I, right before Jerusalem's fall because she was the royal granddaughter, on his mother's side, to the High Priest, Hyrcanus II. This strategic move was designed to give him more royal acceptance with the Jews, but it didn't ultimately as we shall see in a moment.

In 35 B.C., immediately after Mariamne's brother, Aristobulus, officiated as the Jewish High Priest (per General Antony's request) at the Feast of Tabernacles, Herod feared the people loved this Hasmonean too much and he might use this adoration to re-take the throne, so he had his servants drown him in a swimming pool in Jericho while they all cooled off.

In 32 B.C., civil war erupted between Octavian and Herod's best friend, Mark Antony (who was also the brother-in-law of Octavian). When Octavian defeated Antony at the Battle of Actium in the Ionian Sea off of Greece in 31 B.C., Antony fled, by boat, to his lover, Cleopatra, in Egypt. Herod, much like his father, quickly deserted his friend and convinced Octavian that he would be a loyal, willing vassal. Octavian accepted him and went on to empower him as Israel's (false) king. He also became known, in 27 B.C., as Augustus (sacred/revered) Caesar, the ruler and founder of the Imperial Roman Empire. Herod went on to act in typical Herodian fashion by killing his wife's grandfather, Hyrcanus, because he feared the Hasmonean might establish his royal rights to the throne. Killing Hyrcanus, out of fear he might re-exert Hasmonean regal power, did nothing to help the politically-driven marriage with Mariamne. It caused his wife to hate him, along with their two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus.

In 29 B.C., Herod shockingly murdered his most favored second wife Mariamne because he believed she had been unfaithful to him.

From 25 B.C. to 14 B.C., Herod enjoyed a period of great prosperity. He built Caesarea Maritima, one of the three largest ports in the Eastern Mediterranean, he brought water from the Carmel mountains some twenty miles away to this city by means of an elaborate aqueduct, he strengthened many fortresses, he built a magnificent royal palace in Jerusalem to name a few of his building exploits. His Herodian temple in Jerusalem, of course, was his most amazing achievement since it was one of the largest and most elaborate buildings in the world. The massive Antonia Fortress, named after his friend Mark Antony, housed troops which guarded the northern wall of the Temple. Three defensive towers located just west of the Temple were named after his brother, Phasaël, Miriam, one of his wives, and Hippicus, another friend. They loomed above the city below.

From 14 B.C. to 4 B.C., Herod's kingdom was racked with instability and intrigue. Herod's sister, Salome, hated Mariamne's two Hasmonean sons, Alexander and Aristobulus because she wanted her son to be Herod's replacement as king. Talk about a dysfunctional political family. She sowed seeds of distrust between Herod and these two sons. Herod responded in 14 B.C. by bringing his firstborn son, Antipater, whose mother was Doris, out of exile to curb the possible regal desires of his two sons by his deceased wife, Mariamne. He changed his will a second time to make Antipater his sole heir. Later he recanted and changed his will to add his two cherished sons back into the will. However, in 11 B.C., Antipater, energized by the slanderous influence of Herod's sister, Salome, convinced the king that his Hasmonean sons were plotting to overthrow

him. After much infighting between all the sons of the ten wives who desired to be King, Herod had Alexander and Aristobulus, the two with Hasmonean “royal” blood, terminated (by strangulation) in Sebaste (Samaria . . . where he had married their mother thirty years before) in 7 B.C. Eventually, he wrote Antipater out of his will, and commanded that this problem son be executed when he, the king died. This is exactly what occurred, too, sad to say. Talk about a sick, paranoid, and power-hungry man . . . and I am only scratching the historical surface. Herod’s life, unlike that of Christ, sadly fulfills the “modern” adage coined by the late Lord Acton (1834-1902): power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

And to think, all of this occurred when, according to Matthew, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. If Dr. Harold Hoehner is correct in his excellent book *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Jesus was born in the winter of 5 B.C., which was a year before Herod finally died. What a time for the Christ to come to the earth! Herod was a ruthless, lying, heartless, unpredictable, unstable, and power-hungry tyrant who did anything and everything to remain King of the Jews. His was anything but. Matthew’s narrative reminds us of his character from a biblical perspective:

<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> "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." <sup>3</sup> And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Why was he troubled? Here was another possible claimant to his throne, another possible check on his political power, and he could have none of this. So what did he do? What he always did. He gathered information under false pretense so he could eliminate his possible royal opposition.

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, <sup>6</sup> '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.'"

How interesting. Herod called all the religious leaders together, the Pharisees and Sadducees who merely tolerated his presence, to ascertain the site of this so-called Messiah’s birth. They dutifully quoted the 700-year-old prophecy from Micah 5:2. All of these leaders had revelatory truth about the Messiah and they collectively chose to disregard it. How tragic. Power blinds does it not? What blinds you?

Now that Herod knew where this would-be king would be born, he next held a private meeting to determine when he arrived on the planet.

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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."

Fat chance. Herod did not want to worship the Christ' child, he, in the spirit of the Anti-christ, wanted to terminate him. What evil designs.

God, however, had total control of the dangerous and potentially dangerous situation:

<sup>9</sup> And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. <sup>10</sup> And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned *by God* in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way.

God certainly had Herod's number, didn't He? God just used a revelatory dream to warn these godly wise men of Herod's true intentions so they would leave without contacting him.

God, then, providentially moved to get the true King, Jesus, out of Bethlehem by telling his father, by means of a precise revelatory dream, the political plans of King Herod. So much for the sinister, skilled, and seasoned political leader's to outfox God's kingdom and redemptive plans:

<sup>13</sup> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." <sup>14</sup> And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt; <sup>15</sup> and was there until the death of Herod, that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Out of Egypt did I call My Son."

God providentially used this tumultuous situation to move His Son down to Egypt to fulfill the prophet Hosea's ancient prophecy (Hos. 11:1), which stated the Messiah would come from Egypt, as Moses had, as Israel's new and perfect Savior and King.

Armed with the place and time of the Messiah's birth Herod, unfortunately, acted in classic Herodian fashion:

<sup>16</sup> 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 (Matt. 2).

Not long after this ruthless action of killing the innocent babes of Bethlehem in order to preserve his sick political power, Herod drew his last breath. I can't imagine what that day must have been like as he finally had to stand before the living God and give account for how he had lived his whole life in selfish service to himself and his twisted desires and not God.

Through Herod's reign of tyrannical terror from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C., God purposefully waited until the sin of his political exploits reached their dark zenith in order to reveal His Son, the true King of the Jews, and the true King of all Kings, Jesus, the long-awaited Christ. Against the blackness of Herod's reign, and against the toughness of the time, we see most clearly now the

tender hand of God working and moving to accomplish His kingdom and redemptive plans for sinners like you and me. Just when it looked like times could not get tougher is when the babe was born in Bethlehem, the house of bread. And, indeed, He was the Bread of Life (John 6:35, 48). Let us consider the brilliance of His royal glory as contrasted against that of Herod.

## Exhibit Two: King Jesus

God's plan to bring the true King of Kings to the earth to rule and reign over Israel and all mankind is clearly articulated in the Old Testament.

From Genesis 49:8-12, we learn that the messianic king will come specifically through the tribe of Judah, not through the Herodian line or through any other line. Jacob's prophetic blessing to his son, Judah, tells us this much:

<sup>9</sup> Judah is a lion's whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him up? <sup>10</sup> "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him *shall be* the obedience of the peoples. (Gen. 49).

The NIV correctly translates "Shiloh" from the Hebrew as "until he to whom it belongs." This denotes the final king of Israel, the Messiah, who will, by means of the establishment of His glorious kingdom secure peace on the planet by enjoying the "obedience of the peoples."

From Second Samuel 7, we learn that God gave ancient Israel an unconditional covenant concerning regal rule specifically through the line of David.

<sup>12</sup> When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. <sup>14</sup> I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, <sup>15</sup> but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took *it* away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. <sup>16</sup> And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever (2 Sam. 7).

God promised David, not leaders like Herod, that he would have descendants to bring the Davidic empire to fruition. He also promised him an eternal Davidic empire, something entirely impossible with a mere man like David. This unique covenant also promised David's son, Solomon, that he would build God's temple, that his throne would be established forever, and that he would be disciplined for sin but that this would not abrogate God's royal agreement. Jesus, of course, fit the bill because He was, through his father, Joseph, from the line of David by means of this parental relationship (Matt. 1:7, 12, 16). As the God-man, Jesus was, and is, the only one equipped to fulfill the "forever" nature of this covenant. Interestingly enough, when Jesus returns to earth at the end of the tribulation, the great messianic second Psalm is quoted to denote His right to be the King of Kings (Rev. 19:15). Herod, nor any other ruler who has ever been born, is alive today, or will be born in the future can claim what God has decreed to Jesus, the Christ.

From the Old Testament prophets, we have a wealth of information about the inexorable nature of God's Davidic plan as associated to the Messiah, Jesus. Daniel, by means of divine inspiration, informed Nebuchadnezzar that in the vision God showed him how he was the first of

four final world empires (Dan. 2:38). The final fourth empire, Rome, which is the kingdom Herod identified with to his detriment, would one day be revived in the form of a brittle ten nation confederacy (never before seen in the Roman Empire). At the end of time, God would send the Messiah, the Stone, to destroy all false and inept world governments (Dan. 2:35). Daniel goes on to add this prophetic insight:

<sup>44</sup> And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and *that* kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever. (Dan. 2).

This kingdom is the Davidic kingdom with the Messiah (Dan. 7:18, 27-27; 9:24-27) on His throne (Isa. 2:1-5; 9:1-7). Obviously, nothing or no one on planet earth can thwart the messianic kingdom plan of God Almighty. What He will “set up” nothing or no one can ever destroy. Herod sought, by means of the Devil’s instigation, I’m sure, to finally destroy God’s plans; however, at an extremely dark time in world geo-political and spiritual history, God did a tender, tremendous thing. He brought His Son to earth and protected Him so He could go on and achieve God’s redemptive and kingdom goals. How great is He? Great.

What do the prophets say about the character of the Messiah hundreds of years before His glorious birth in Bethlehem? Much.

- He would love law and order (Isaiah 2:3).
- He would bring world peace (Isaiah 2:4)
- He would be the true and righteous Judge of all judges (Isaiah 11:3-5).
- He would be gentle and compassionate. Traits which ran opposite those of Herod.

<sup>1</sup> Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one *in whom* My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. <sup>2</sup> He will not cry out or raise *His voice*, nor make His voice heard in the street. <sup>3</sup> A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. (Isa. 42).

Unlike Herod, the Messiah’s life delighted the Father. Unlike Herod, the Messiah had the power of the Spirit in His life. Unlike Herod, the Messiah lives for justice, not injustice in order to preserve His power. Unlike Herod, the Messiah will treat the weakest among us with compassion and care.

It is no wonder that *Joy to the World*, written by Isaac Watts in 1719 with Psalm 98 in mind, is the most sung Christmas carol. The final stanza puts all that we’ve said today in bold relief:

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glorious of His righteousness,  
And wonders of His love,

And wonders of His love,  
And wonders of his love, and wonders, wonders, of His love.

His love is wonderful. Why? He loved us enough to come and be the *tender* Savior and King when the world had just about lost hope that divine help was coming as God had prophesied. Ah, now we see His royal brilliance most clearly, don't we? The question this Christmas, could not be any clearer: Will you serve Him by placing your faith in Him as your personal Savior and King?

And if you thought darkness was about to swallow up moral and spiritual light for good, if you thought the geo-political situation is just spinning out of control with no hope in sight, if you thought modern day Herods were never going to be held accountable and answerable to anyone for their actions, you need to think again. Again I ask, why? Because in darkest days is when God performs His most amazing work. Matthew's story about Herod and baby Jesus tells us this much. So, have hope.