

Herod the Great 1

Was Herod really that great?

Say 'Herod' and we think of a villain, a real Bible baddy. Herod was King of Judea between 47 and 4 BCE and known as Herod The Great.

Let's explore the decisions and actions Herod took and reflect on what happens when we make bad decisions. Eventually, the results of Herod's decisions shaped Jesus' young life and that of many others living at the time. Here is a paraphrase of Matthew 2: 1 – 12 ...

Some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east, and we have come to worship him." When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, as was everyone else in Jerusalem. He asked the chief priests and the teachers of the Law "Where will the Messiah be born?"

"In the town of Bethlehem in Judea," they answered. "For this is what the prophet wrote: 'Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah; for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel.'"

Herod had a secret meeting with the visitors to find out exactly when the star appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem saying; "Search carefully for the child. When you find him, let me know, so that I may go and worship him."

They left, saw the same star they had seen in the East and were overjoyed. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. They went into the house, and seeing the child with his mother Mary, knelt down and worshiped him. They gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.

There are two Herods in the Gospels. Herod the Great was ruling when Jesus was born but his son Herod Antipas was ruling when Jesus was an adult.

Lord God,
Help us to learn from hard times.
Help us to remember you're always with us.
Help us to understand that our decisions and actions have consequences.
Amen.

Who was Herod and what did he do?

Herod was the leader of Judea and had been raised a Jew. He would have been familiar with the stories of the Old Testament. Herod was most likely to have been born in a palace, around 71-73 BC. Herod's father was very popular with the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar. So, when the Romans needed to appoint a new King of Jews, they turned to Herod as a supporter of the Roman Empire.

Not everything that Herod did was too bad. Historians believe Herod was responsible for rebuilding the Second Temple in Jerusalem, though it seems this was completed so that he could, 'have a capital city worthy of his dignity and grandeur' according to modern historian [Shaye Cohen](#).

Herod is one of many characters from the Bible who appear in other ancient books – famously 'The Antiquities of the Jews' by Flavius Josephus (37CE - c.100 CE). But Herod is notably recorded in the Christmas Story in Matthew's Gospel as being far from great for the actions and decisions he took. These decisions had a great effect on the life of Jesus' family - and many other families too.

Did Herod actually rebuild the Temple? Or was it that he merely paid for it? What do you think?

What was Herod's motive for bringing about rebuilding the second Temple?

What does this motive tell us about the kind of person Herod was?

Lord God,

Give us the wisdom to learn from the characters of the Bible.

Help us understand what motivates people.

Help us see everyone as important and equal in your eyes.

Amen.

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News comes in all sorts of ways

Matthew's Gospel describes the wise men's encounter with Herod...

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Herod lived in luxury in a palace with servants to fulfil his every whim. Nothing was too much for Herod. If he wanted it, he got it. If he didn't like something or someone, they were gone, never to be seen again. Nothing was going to spoil this privileged and luxurious lifestyle for Herod.

How did Herod feel when the Magi arrived in search of a new king? Do you think that he would have been best pleased? Especially when hearing the words, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?' But Herod was a clever man, he knew the consequences of flying off the handle and he kept calm. Matthew tells us that Herod was 'disturbed' by the news. We know that Herod had the whole kingdom at his disposal. When Herod was frightened, so was everyone in Jerusalem. He also knew that a baby had not been born in his royal palace.

Lord God,

When we are faced with news we don't want or don't like,

Be with us and help us to make good judgements and keep calm.

Amen

How would *you* describe Herod's emotions or moods?

How might you have felt in Herod's place?

Listen to what the prophet says...

The high priests and teachers would have known the prophecy of Micah 5:2,4 very well as scholars in the scriptures. In Matthew's Gospel the words of Micah, which were written at least 750 years earlier, made it clear. Herod was not going to be the ruler of Judea much longer. He must have been furious.

*He asked the chief priests and the teachers of the Law "Where will the Messiah be born?"
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'Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah;
for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel.'"*

There is no way Herod would tolerate a baby born to be king. But again, he was devious in his actions to find this 'new king' and would no doubt deal with it in the way he dealt with everything he disliked.

Herod certainly would not have wanted to let his guard down or his mask slip. The wise men or Magi were called back to Herod and told, *'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'* Imagine the Disney or James Bond villain delivering their best line in a film. Nothing in his recorded words would have concerned the wise men after all, King Herod said he wants to worship the new king too.

How do you think the wise men would have felt and thought about these events?

Why are Herod's words false?

How do we judge the words of today's rulers?

Lord God,

When we feel insecure or threatened,
help us turn to you for guidance.

Amen.

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Happily ever after or not?

After they had found Jesus, the wise men were warned in a dream not to report back to Herod. Similarly, Joseph was warned in a dream that Herod intended to kill Jesus, so he and his family fled to Egypt.

We know the wise men made their way to what they believed was a place fit for a new king to be born, Herod's palace in Jerusalem. How wrong they were!

Matthew's Gospel tells us how Herod reacted to the wise men not returning to the palace with all the details of the baby king's whereabouts. His fear, anger and anxiety about losing his position and kingdom was the start of a period of great misery and death for many of his citizens...

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent soldiers who killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

Lord God

Give me help to think and reflect on important decisions I must make.

Guide my thinking with compassion for others.

Amen

Herod must have lived in fear for the rest of his life.

For Herod, it wasn't happily ever after.

Could Herod have reacted in a positive way to the news the Magi brought him?

Can we learn from Herod's actions and thinking?

Where in our world can we find examples of rulers behaving inappropriately towards citizens?

How do we respond to the plight of refugees and oppressed people today?