

If you have limited time to prepare, this 3-step outline is a helpful tool for leading a small group discussion:

1. Read the text from Sunday's message.
2. What did you find most helpful/confusing/new/ that you did not understand from the message?
3. What were your big takeaways? How will you put these into practice in your life?

Getting Started

- As you reflect on Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 surrounding the Christmas story, what characters are you most drawn to and why? What questions do you still have? What fills you with awe and wonder every time you read these accounts?

Outline for this month:

- 12/1 The Story of Two Kings (Matthew 2:1-9; Isaiah 9:6)
- 12/8 ...to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders (Matthew 2:1-9; Isaiah 9:6)
- 12/15 ... his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 1:21-23)
- 12/22 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:7)
- 12/24 Good News of Great Joy (Luke 2:10)

Discussion

Read Matthew 2:1-9.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose^[b] and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

- As you read through the historical summary of Herod the Great (at the end of this guide), discuss how he must have felt when the Magi came asking where they could find *the one born to be king of the Jews*.
- Herod was not from the tribe of Judah from which the kings of Judah would come to sit on the throne of David. He was thought to have been Idumean, a descendant of the Edomites, offspring of Esau and enemies of Israel. Discuss how this conflict that started between Jacob and Esau was at work even at the time of the Incarnation of Jesus.

- Herod knew that there could not be two kings so he did all he could to maintain his position of control. In many ways we are no different. We desire to be kings and queens and strive to be the rulers of our own lives. Describe the ways that you too often place yourself back on the throne of your life instead of allowing Jesus to reign in His rightful place.
- What is one thing you plan to do this Christmas season to worship Jesus as your King?

Prayer

Pray for this Friday's Christmas Live outreach (12/6, 6:30-8:30pm). It will be a wonderful time of celebration to kick-off this season. Pray for those who will come from our community who may not know Jesus as the one who was born to be the King of kings. Through the telling of the Christmas story with the live nativity, the singing of Christmas carols, and the sharing of the Gospel, may hearts be drawn to receive God's Indescribable Gift!

HEROD THE GREAT (Ἡρώδης, *Hērōdēs*). The king of Judaea at the time of Jesus' birth.

Introduction

Josephus referred to Herod as Herod "the great." This term probably referred primarily to the fact that he was the oldest son of Antipater. A shrewd politician, Herod was also great as a soldier, an orator, and a builder. Aside from his appearance in Matthew's nativity narrative, Herod the Great's building projects serve as the backdrop for many New Testament events.

History

The three time periods of Herod's reign include:

1. 37–27 BC: Consolidation. Herod impressed Rome with his ability to pacify the Jews whose homeland he occupied. Herod was capable at collecting taxes and quelling uprisings.
2. 27–13 BC: Peace and prosperity. Herod rebuilt forts, instituted the games, and began rebuilding the Jerusalem temple.
3. 13–4 BC: Domestic strife within the land and misunderstandings with Rome. Marked by Herod's increasing instability. He was plagued by problems with his 10 wives and his children.

Rise to Power

Herod was born in the 70s BC. His family was Idumean. Herod and his father, Antipater, were both loyal to Rome. Antipater was an adviser to Hyrcanus II. The family's loyalty and connections with Rome allowed Herod to receive a governorship in Galilee at age 25. He set out improving relations with the Jews, spreading Hellenism very slowly. He also established a military composed of foreign soldiers, centralized his bureaucracy, and began building projects throughout the region. After his father's assassination, Herod fled the land in 40 BC. He returned to Rome, and was officially crowned king of Judaea. Returning in 39 BC, Herod eventually regained control of the land from the Parthians (ca. 37 BC). He ruled for the next 33 years.

Herod's Building Projects

Ritmeyer, who surveyed the Temple Mount platform, stated: "Herod the Great—master builder. Despite his crimes and excesses, no one can doubt his prowess as a builder." Four of Herod's significant building projects include:

1. The port at Caesarea—located on the Mediterranean coast of northern Israel. It was to be the harbor from which Herod and others would sail to and from Alexandria, Egypt, and Rome.
2. The Herodium—located just south of Jerusalem. In Book I of his *Wars*, Josephus describes that as Herod's armies fought with the Jews, he dispatched a multitude of them in this region south of Jerusalem. At this place, "he afterward built a citadel, in memory of the great actions he did there, and adorned it with the most costly palaces, and erected very strong fortifications, and called it, from his own name Herodium." (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 1.13.8).

3. Masada—one of the most well-known of Herod's fortress palaces and a focus of Josephus, who details its fall to the Romans in AD 73.
4. Renovation of the Jerusalem temple—described as one of Herod's "most imposing achievements" (Ritmeyer, "Reconstructing," 31).

Paranoia and Tyranny

Herod became a paranoid tyrant, worried that he would lose his kingdom. The fortresses he built reflect this paranoia, as they provided refuge when he felt threatened. Josephus recorded Herod's execution of his two sons due to rumors of mutiny: "He also sent his sons to Sebaste, a city not far from Caesarea, and ordered them to be there strangled ... And this was the end of Alexander and Aristobulus" (Josephus, *Jewish War*, 1.27.6).

Herod married 10 women and fathered 15 children by them. The names of his wives were Doris, Mariamme I, Mariamme II, Malthace, Cleopatra, Pallas, Phaedra, and Elpis (the names of the remaining two wives are unknown; Packer, *Nelson's Illustrated Encyclopedia*, 635). According to Josephus, Herod was so protective of his favorite wife, Mariamme I, that he instructed his soldiers to kill her if anything were to happen to him while traveling abroad. Herod's motives for marrying the young Hasmonean Jewess were partly to gain approval with the Jews. Along with her beauty, Mariamme I is said to have had a temper and a constitution to speak her mind.

After Herod had both of Mariamme I's parents killed, her arguments—and the wishes of his sister—caused him to have her tried and executed. After her death, Herod was terribly distraught and became ill. Herod later ordered the execution of two of his sons with Mariamme I, Alexander and Aristobulus, over suspicion that they were jockeying for his position as ruler of the kingdom.

Demise

At the end of his life, Herod suffered from a severe illness. Josephus described Herod's symptoms: "For a fire glowed in him slowly, which did not so much appear to the touch outwardly as it augmented his pains inwardly; for it brought upon him a vehement appetite to eating ... His entrails were also exulcerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his colon; an aqueous and transparent liquor also settled itself about his feet, and a like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly" (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.6.5). He was buried in the Herodium.

Herod issued two commands to be performed upon his death:

1. To execute the recently imprisoned Jewish elders so that the people would be mourning during his death.
2. To execute his son Antipater.

Upon Herod's request, his lands were divided among three of his sons:

1. Archelaus was left the throne.
2. Antipas was to be tetrarch of Galilee.
3. Philip was to be tetrarch of Gaulanitis.

Influence on the New Testament

Herod's most prominent role in the New Testament is his appearance in Matthew's nativity account (Matt 2). This account reflects Herod's influence and jealousy. His attempt to discover the rival "King of the Jews" resulted in the murder of innocent children in the Bethlehem region.

Many of Herod's building projects serve as backdrops for events of the New Testament. Bethlehem—the birthplace of Jesus—is located near the Herodium. The magnificence of Herod's temple is clearly displayed in the Gospels. At one point, Jesus' disciples commented about the architecture of Herod's temple: "As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings.' And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down' " (Mark 13:1–2, NASB). The temple played a significant part in the life and ministry of Christ:

- Christ came to this temple in Jerusalem three times a year, every year, from the time he was 12 years old until He died.
- During His ministry, Jesus preached in this temple (John 7–10).
- Jesus celebrated Jewish feasts there.
- Jesus predicted the temple's destruction (Luke 19:43–44; 21:6).

Herod's building projects also provide the backdrop for Acts—particularly the city of Caesarea, which was visited by Peter, Paul, and was the home of Philip (Acts 8; 23:33; 21:8). Paul was brought to trial in the city of Caesarea, which Herod had built and whose port he had engineered.

After Herod's death, his son Antipas served as tetrarch over Galilee (Mark 14:1; Luke 3:1). He is the Herod most referred to in the Gospels; he reigned during Jesus' years of ministry. Antipas probably inherited some of his father's shrewd ways, since Jesus referred to him as a "fox" (Luke 13:32). Herod Antipas is also mentioned at the trial of Jesus (Luke 23:6–12). Herod's son Philip is also mentioned as the tetrarch of the northern region of the kingdom (Luke 3:1).¹

¹ Winstead, M. B. (2016). [Herod the Great](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.