

Matthew's Gospel Chapter 2 The Hatred of Herod

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Greetings to you all and welcome to this talk from *Truth for Today*, which is the second in the series on Matthew's Gospel. Today we have reached chapter two with the talk being entitled "The Hatred of Herod." The usual and accepted title for a talk on chapter two of Matthew would be "The Christmas Story," for it concerns the visit of the wise men, often incorrectly referred to as the three kings. The number three relates to the gifts, for it is assumed that each "king" would bring a gift, therefore three gifts, three kings. The only conflict with this account is that the Bible does not identify them as kings. We shall learn in a minute or so that the scene of the visit was not a stable, yet every primary school that organised a nativity play in years gone by would dress three boys in curtains and cardboard crowns to act as the kings presenting gifts in a stable. As it is now the end of August, and months away from the Christmas season, no further reference to stables, sheep and donkeys will be made, as my topic is specifically Herod's looming menace and baleful influence on the early life of the Lord Jesus.

Verses one and two of Matthew's second chapter rivet our attention on what Christian's believe is the most significant event in the history of the universe. I state now, at the commencement of our time together, that all Scriptures quoted will be from the English Standard Version:

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.""

Let us note, at the outset of this talk which concerns the hatred of Herod towards the Christ, that the first significant visitors or amongst the first to the infant Jesus were a party of Gentiles. *This is more than a hint of what the future held for the worship of the God and Father of the Lord Jesus. Up to this juncture, non-Jews were unable to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus along with the coming of the Holy Spirit, Gentiles would eventually form by far the largest portion of the church of the living God, thus enabling them to worship Him in spirit and in truth.*

From verses one and two we know when and where the birth of Jesus occurred. According to verse six, Bethlehem was prophesied as the place of Messiah's birth, though the immediate event that had brought this to pass was a Roman census, causing Mary and Joseph to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The timing of the Lord's birth brings us into contact with our subject of this talk which is, of course, Herod the king. It would seem obvious that the wise-men would have called at Herod's palace expecting the royal child to be in residence there. *I stop for a moment to consider verse eleven of the second chapter of Romans, where it states: 'For God shows no partiality.' It was quite reasonable for the wise-men to have first made enquiries of the king, but, as another Scripture says: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.' (Isaiah 55:8) Another example of God's ways being so different from ours is*

found in Luke's Gospel chapter three and verses one and two, where seven very important and prominent people of the contemporary world are mentioned, yet God chooses John, the son of Zechariah, who lived in the wilderness to be His messenger. Even the place Bethlehem was not considered important when placed against the mighty metropolis of Jerusalem, though it was the royal city of the great king David. I repeat again, truly God's ways and thoughts are much different than ours.

We come now to the 'when' of the birth of Jesus which is simply recorded as '... in the days of Herod the king' (verse 1). The Apostle Paul recalls the moment of the Lord's birth in a slightly different way in his letter to the Galatians:

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4: vv.4-5).

It was no accident of history that the Lord was born into this world when Herod was King. He was placed upon the throne by the Romans and in addition to not being a true Jew, he was not esteemed by the nation at large. With the title of this talk in mind it is well worth citing Dr. Alfred Edersheim's judgment of Herod:

"But we can understand the feelings of the people towards the King. They hated the Idumaeen; they detested his semi-heathen reign; they abhorred his deeds of cruelty. The King had surrounded himself with foreign councillors, and was protected by foreign mercenaries from Thracia, Germany and Gaul." (1)

From this extract, and other sources, we must acknowledge Herod's corruption and cruelty, but we must also, however, take note of his achievements in the way of erecting public buildings, including the rebuilding of the second Temple in Jerusalem. [By the time of the Lord's birth, Herod was approaching the end of his life when, perhaps, his official epitaph would be that he had served the Romans well by keeping the peace and establishing order.](#)

We do not need to spend a great deal of time on the "wise men" who travelled to Jerusalem from the east. Wise, when applied to these travellers to Jerusalem, is not an adjective necessarily descriptive of intelligent judgment, but rather someone with the knowledge to read the stars. Their study of the stars had provoked the journey to Judea to enquire about the birth of a king. From verse two of our chapter, these visitors ask about the one who was born king. He was not born to be king, as Dorothy L. Sayers described him in her radio play broadcast at the height of the Second World War, but he was born as a king.

From verses three and four of our chapter we learn of the furore that the wise men's enquiry produced at the court of the king:

["When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he enquired of them where the Christ was to be born."](#)

Herod was right to be troubled, for he knew that he was only on the throne by virtue of his links with the Romans. He was now approximately seventy years of age having been king for over three decades. If a rival claimant appeared, especially one like unto the Messiah, he knew trouble would flare up. The only plan was to rid himself and his family of a possible claimant to the throne. [Before he could do this, he had to ascertain where he could find the rival king; a task that was done for him by his council of advisers. Their familiarity with the Scriptures enabled them to quote Micah 5 v.2 where Bethlehem is given as the birth place of the Messiah. Sadly, though they could](#)

correctly identify the natal place of the Messiah they also demonstrated their unbelief by rejecting the possibility that the baby at Bethlehem was the Christ of God. Let us make sure that we never fall into the same error by ignoring the plain message of Scripture.

Verses seven and eight show how the wise men were unwittingly drawn into Herod's diabolical plan:

“Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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.””

It was not worship that was at the forefront of Herod's mind but murder, as we shall see later in the chapter. It was not to be, however, for the wise men were warned of God in a dream, so did not return to Herod. Whenever Satan sought the death of the Christ his schemes went awry. God the Father decreed the hour and day of the Lord's crucifixion. How dreadful that a rich and powerful king could contemplate killing a young child simply to hold on to his power and status. The events covered in the rest of the chapter are all shaped by Herod's hatred of the infant Jesus.

Verses 10 to 12 cover the charming action of the wise men as they enter the house, where the young child dwelt, to present their gifts. Please note now the family is no longer in a stable. How different was the attitude and actions of the wise men compared with that of Herod. It is reverent respect that floods the scene not the vicious hatred of an earthly monarch. [We will not delay too long in the house, yet we cannot close our eyes upon the wise men opening their treasures to present unto Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.](#) Their action brings its own challenge to us. What precious things have we ever offered to the Lord? I also wish to point out, that from this passage, that it was the child who the visitors saw first, as we can read in verse 11. All the way through this chapter Matthew is concerned mainly with Jesus, for each time mother and child are mentioned (verses 13, 14, 20, 21) it is Jesus who is mentioned first. He is the One who dominates the attention of Matthew and I pray that He is the One who dominates our attention.

Up to this point, the subject of the narrative has been the appreciation of the wise men for the significance of the star, which caused them to travel many miles to demonstrate their conviction that the baby at Bethlehem was a new born King. Now for the rest of the chapter it is not a star that invokes travel, but rather the malignancy of the brutal King Herod. At the same time, there is another unseen hand that guards and guides the new parents with their precious Child. Verse thirteen gives the reason for their hurried move away from Judea:

“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.””

If we had time, it would be profitable to spend a few minutes talking about divine guidance, as it is imperative for us to realise that, in our day, God can still lead us along the way He wants us to go. For anyone who needs help with such things I suggest they look up a *Truth for Today* talk on our website numbered T0479, when Ian Britton spoke at length on God's guidance. For us today we must notice that Joseph, who had responsibility for his family, immediately obeyed the message of the dream. Until he had the dream, he was probably unaware of the immediate danger. Once he knew, he reacted immediately by leaving Judea for the safety of Egypt. Again, we must emphasise the part played by the evil Herod, as he plotted to kill the infant Jesus. There were other times in the life of the Lord when attempts were made on His life. Two such examples are Luke 4 vv. 29 -30:

“And they rose up and drove [Jesus] out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away.”

Secondly from John 8 v.59:

“So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”

I repeat again that it had to be “the fullness of time” before the Lord died, which means God’s time not that of men.

When Herod saw that the non-return of the wise men had thwarted his plan to destroy the One who challenged his control of the throne, he was incandescent with rage, for few had disobeyed the autocratic ruler during his reign of over thirty years. Immediately he brought a fiendish scheme into operation, a scheme that remains infamous to this day, commonly known as the slaughter, or massacre, of the innocents. We read about this in verse 16:

“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.”

From the phrase “...he sent and killed all the male children...” he involved others in his wickedness. How many times, in the history of this world, have servants of the state, or of powerful rulers, been involved in dirty work as they were here at the behest of Herod? I know it was a different world, but the same things happen today, when bombs are built into back packs and exploded in crowded places. Perverse doctrines, or selfish abusive regimes, can be substituted for Herod’s rage. Many prayer requests, or newsletters from Christians in other countries, carry news of persecutions and violence. In the middle ages the Christian church too was not always innocent in the struggle for political supremacy.

There are three examples in our chapter of a phenomenon that I ought to have mentioned previously. It is that the Gospel writers quote many Old Testament passages that prophesy events in the Lord’s life. In our chapter these can be seen in verses 6, 15 and 18, where such Old Testament Scriptures relative to the event are quoted. For brevity’s sake, I cite only verse 18 which appertains to the massacre that we have just been discussing:

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

This Scripture, which originally is from Jeremiah 31 v.15, emphasizes the heart-ache and grief of the mothers in Bethlehem, when the soldiers had finished their indiscriminate slaughter. This prophecy does not acquit Herod in any way of the awful crime of multiple murder. Just because Matthew shows us that God fulfils the revelations in His word does not abrogate Herod of his depraved works. Rather does it reveal the ultra-wickedness and evil generated in the mind of a cruel tyrant. There is much that could be said about the incidence of these three prophetic quotations in verses 6, 15 and 18, though the only point I wish to make, at this time, is that it was God’s “fullness of time” that was behind every detail of the entrance into this world of the Lord Jesus. Regarding the massacre, we are still left with the question, “Why does God allow such things?” Similar sentiments are often expressed in the wake of tragedies today. I have no answer

other than to repeat the words of the Lord Jesus when He said in prayer to His Father: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.” We await that Kingdom with patience.

As we have seen, Joseph took the young child with Mary to Egypt immediately after being warned of God in a dream. The motivating factor necessitating this was the burning fury of Herod when he realised that the wise men had deceived him and were not returning. We must not fall into the error of considering that a family fleeing to another country was a light matter. They were refugees without any visible means of support. No doubt Joseph maintained his family with his carpentry skills, yet, even if Matthew tells us nothing about the Egypt experience, it is to the credit of Joseph that, when he learned of the death of Herod, he was able to bring them back in safety to the land of Israel. We need to salute the obedience of Joseph, a figure who is often ignored in the gospel narrative. He had been told by God (verse 13) to wait in Egypt until he received intimation to return to Israel. His obedience in leaving Bethlehem at God’s behest was matched by his submission to God’s instructions not to return, for as long as Herod lived and reigned there was ever the prospect of violence at his hands. Joseph must have been very relieved when he received the message from God to return. If he didn’t know before he knew after his dream that God’s power and concern for his family extended into a foreign land not just within the borders of Israel. This is, I suggest, one more example of Joseph’s simple faith and trust in God. The immediate stimulation for travelling home to Israel was God’s command in the dream reporting the death of the despotic king. Notice in verse 15 that Matthew recalls a Scripture from the eleventh chapter of Hosea regarding the return from Egypt. Yet another prophetic statement to embellish the Apostle Paul’s statement when he wrote that it was in God’s fullness of time that Jesus was born into this world.

Perhaps I have isolated Herod, in the previous paragraphs, as the sole source of the danger that caused Joseph to flee the land of Israel. If I have then, verse 20 corrects this impression with the phrase: “...for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” From this it is obvious that Herod was the leader of a group of corrupt councillors, identified in this phrase from verse 20, as “those who sought the child’s life.” I should have taken note when we were considering verse 3 which I have already quoted, that all Jerusalem was troubled, not only Herod, when he received the news of the new born king. I bring this thought out for the enmity and bitterness against the Lord was manifest many years later when He began His public ministry. In those years, the hostility was shown by the Herodian’s who were supporters of Herod Antipas.

Such comment takes the story ahead of our chapter that concludes with Joseph returning to the land of Israel in obedience to God’s instruction, though the malevolence of the Herodian dynasty still pervaded Judea in the person of Archelaus, one of the sons of Herod the Great. Joseph did well to draw back from settling in Bethlehem, or elsewhere in Judea. Anywhere within the writ of Herod Archelaus was a dangerous place, for though Scripture does not say much about him contemporary sources inform us that he was a cruel and incompetent ruler. Consequently, Joseph settled his family in Nazareth, a town in Galilee, where he lived before setting off to Bethlehem (Luke 2:4): and it was in this town that Jesus was brought up (Luke 4:16).

Verse 23, the last verse of our chapter impresses that fact in no uncertain way:

“And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: “He shall be called a Nazarene.””

Though no Old Testament prophet ever predicted that He would be called a Nazarene, F.B. Hole, one of the commentators I refer to regularly, provides a possible source:

“So in verse 23 it is “the prophets”, and not one particular prophet. They had said He should be an object of contempt, which in our Lord’s time was expressed in the epithet “a Nazarene.” (2)

Nathaniel, in conversation with Philip, made a telling remark regarding the scorn attached to the name of Nazareth (John 1: 46). Consequently, the title “Jesus of Nazareth” was initially a term of derision and disrespect. We see it again when Pilate’s inscription of “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” was nailed to the cross. No such phobias crossed the mind of the blind beggar when he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by (Luke 18:37). So great is God’s grace that the Lord took that despised title to heaven and spoke to Saul, later to be Paul the Apostle, from the splendour of eternal glory as Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 22:8). I am sure that all of us who believe in the Lord Jesus are pleased to meditate upon this title, which he received partly through the enmity of the Herodian family.

May God bless each one of us as we wait with patience for that glorious day when the Nazarene will reign supreme. Can I add that you have been listening to a broadcast from *Truth for Today* number T1265 entitled “The Hatred of Herod” in a series on Matthew’s Gospel. May you know God’s peace this day and thank you for listening.

- 1.The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah volume 1 1902 page 127
- 2.The Gospels and Acts page 4

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