

## *Herod*

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Pullman, WA  
December 29, 2019

*God has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
and exalted those of low degree;  
God has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich God has sent empty away.*  
—Mary's Song, Luke 1:52-53

Ancient Witness: Matthew 2:12-18

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.*

Periodically, there have been times of great disparity and inequality, times of opulence and desperation. Such is the Dickensian world of *The Tale of Two Cities* and the time of Herod the Great. These are times when the stock market sets record after record, and the wealthiest 1% live in luxury, while suffering increases, the ranks of the poor grows, and half a million fall into bankruptcy each year with medical bills they cannot afford. The time of Herod: the best of times for a few and the worst of times for the many.

If we are going to understand the true meaning of Christmas, we'll need to understand the social and economic reality of the time of Herod.

Herod's rule was characterized by a period of unprecedented growth and construction. He built relentlessly—cities, palaces and fortresses, some of which still stand today. The most ambitious of Herod's projects was the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, which was probably an attempt to gain popularity among his subjects in Judea, who held him in contempt.

It took 10,000 men 10 years just to build the retaining walls around the Temple Mount on top of which the Muslim shrine, the Dome of the Rock, still stands today. The Western Wall (Wailing Wall) is merely part of that 500 meter long retaining wall, designed to hold a huge platform as large as 24 football fields. It remains the largest human-made platform in the world.

Herod paid for all of this building by squandering the profits from all the trade and through crushing taxes upon the people. The projects cost the people what they didn't have, imposing a burden on the poor and working poor just so he could lavish the rich.

When people complained he would sometimes resort to violence and secret police. He was a brutal and insecure man. But that was part of the job description.

His first job was governor of Galilee, appointed by his father, Antipater. After he ruthlessly crushed a revolt there he was rewarded by becoming the client-king of Judea in 37 BCE under Caesar Augustus, the first Roman Emperor.

As a tetrarch, a title the Romans gave him, his job was to extract wealth from the people for the empire and its war machine, as well as to get tough on crime and rebellion with an iron fist.

When he finished the Temple, he placed a huge Roman eagle over the main entrance, which religious Jews saw as a sacrilege. When a group of Torah students smashed this image of oppression and idolatry, Herod had them hunted down, dragged in chaos to his palace in Jericho, where they were burned alive. To make sure he wouldn't have any more problems, he put to death 46 leading members of the rabbinical court, the Sanhedrin, and appointed his own High Priests.

Herod's persecution was infamous and even extended to his own family. Since his own Jewish credentials were suspect, he married Miriam. But when her brother, Aristobulus, became popular, this threatened Herod so much that he had him drowned. He later became jealous of his own sons and has them murdered, as well. Even Augustus said, "It is better to be Herod's dog than one of his children." Finally, he even had his wife murdered. He was paranoid, mean and violent—typical client-King material.

So this was the situation. They were the best of times and the worst of times. Because of widespread suffering, there was pushback, protests and resistance. Richard Horsley, a biblical scholar and historian, noted

*the Galilean and Judean peoples, more than all others subjected by the Romans, persisted in mounting repeated resistance to Roman rule.*

So this resistance had been growing and growing in the area for years and years.

And while the infancy narratives of Jesus that we seen in Luke and Matthew might not be historically accurate, they do show the socio-political reality. Horsley calls them "legends that reflect history." (*The Liberation of Christmas*) And what we know is that there was a movement building among the people—among peasants and shepherd from the countryside and small villages, and that women played a prominent role in this movement. There were songs of liberation—protest songs—in the Gospel of Luke, such as the Magnificat:

*God has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
and exalted those of low degree;  
God has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich God has sent empty away.*

With the increased taxation on the working poor to support Herod's building projects, New Testament scholar William Herzog writes,

*The peasants of Galilee thus came under increasing economic stress. Many were forced to borrow to plant their crops, a move that set them on a path that often led to loss of land through the use of debt instruments.*

And when they lost their land due to foreclosure, the land ended up in the hands of the Herodian aristocrats. The rich made a killing. So this was a time of unrest, and when Herod died in 4 BCE, hope for liberation were raised and even more revolts emerged.

Historical accounts show that when Judea became an imperial province under direct Roman rule, the the year 6 CE, a tax census was undertaken. (Luke report this census occurring at Jesus' birth, which is technically not accurate.) For many this was unbearable, because this assessment relegated many to the status of slavery. So Caesar's decree let to even a greater yearning for a liberator, a Davidic king, a Messiah, to free them from this oppressive rule.

Some turned to armed resistance. It was a time of intense social and political unrest. There were groups of rebel bandits, like those who were crucified next to Jesus. There was also the Zealot movement, an organized insurgency that finally erupted in a full scale revolt in 66 CE.

So here's the situation: Christmas emerges out of a powder keg—a desperate yearning.

When I hear the prophet's words recounted by the people, "Unto us a child is born," I think that what they were saying was "It won't be long now. It will happen *in this generation!* The movement is building, and the time of Herod is coming to an end."

And then comes the brutal reaction of tyranny. The threatened despot in power responds with greater viciousness. The text is sometimes called, "The Slaughter of the Innocents."

*And Herod sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under.*

And so Jesus and his parents flee this violence into a foreign land. Just as so many families less violence in their own countries, desperately seeking refuge and asylum in a foreign land.

So who is Herod—the Puppet-King—today? It seems to me Herod is the politicians and leaders who do the bidding and enforcement for the New Caesar. And this New Caesar, the throne behind the throne, is the oligarchs and plutocrats that pull the strings of governments across the globe. They pay no taxes and amass mind-boggling wealth.

The New Caesar, it seems to me, is Corporate Rule. And the Herods are those who dance to their tune. As Chris Hedges wrote,

*Corporations are not concerned with the common good... They throw poor people out of homes, let the uninsured die, wage useless wars for profit, poison and pollute the ecosystem, slash social assistance programs, gut public education, trash the global economy, plunder the U.S. treasury and crush all popular movements that seek justice for working men and women. They worship money and power.*

Meanwhile, Herod dutifully builds monuments and shrines to the gods of wealth and violence, extracting wealth with massive tax cuts for Caesar, while then demanding \$5 billion for a wall, scapegoating and abusing asylum seekers, taking food stamps from 750,000 people (at this moment), removing millions from healthcare, and targeting social security and medicare for cuts.

The spirit of Herod still lives, and it will not hesitate to sacrifice the lives of innocent people.

And so, it's the best of times for a few and the worst of times for the many. The stock market is setting records, but wages are at an all time relative low, overwhelming debt is increasing for college and credit cards, and half the people have no savings at all for retirement.

But unto us a new generation is born! The Good News of Christmas come in the time of Herod. And it proclaims "peace on earth and good will to all people." All people.