

Light Brings Salt

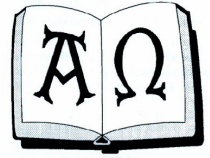
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Jerusalem and Bethlehem

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One of the lesser-known stories in the context of the "Christmas story" is that told by the providential contrast between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Jerusalem, the expected "City of the Great King," was not to be the place of Messiah's entrance into His earthly kingdom, but the lowly village of Bethlehem. Just as David, the biblical type of Israel's promised Ruler, was born into a simple shepherd family in Bethlehem, so the birth of his antitype, King Messiah, was predicted in this humble place (Micah 5:2). At the time of David's birth in Bethlehem a self-willed king (Saul) reigned in Jerusalem. Following this pattern, at the time of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem an even greater tyrant (Herod) occupied the Judean throne in Jerusalem.

Herod was a "king of the Jews," but was not a Jewish king. Neither Jewish nor royal, he was born to a common Idumaeen family. He has sometimes been referred to as a "half-Jew" because the Idumeans been forced to practice Judaism when they were brought under subjection by Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus (at the end of the second century B.C.) and because his first wife was the Hasmonean princess Mariamne. However, Herod had no loyalty to the Jewish people, living and worshipping as a pagan in conformity with Roman law. It has been said of Herod's life that, "[he]

stole to the throne like a fox, reigned like a tiger, and died like a dog."

Throughout his life his personal and political ambitions, as well as his obsessive paranoia, were reflected in his extensive building campaigns. Some of these were palace-fortresses designed as a place of retreat (both from problems with the Jews and from fear of assassination by rivals). One of these places of retreat was built in the Judean desert on a hill on the outskirts of Bethlehem. This fortress had been constructed after Herod put an end to Hasmonean rule by defeating his political rival the Judean King Antigonus. The choice of the spot revealed Herod's infamous pride, for it had been from this site years earlier that Antigonus had expelled Herod from the realm. Herod transformed the hill into an artificial mountain, filled with seven stories of living rooms, storage areas, cisterns, a bathhouse, and a courtyard adorned with flowering plants. Below the mountain was a colonnaded reception area with pools. Known as the Herodium (after the name of Herod), it was completed in 23 B.C. and therefore cast its long shadow over the city at the time of Jesus' birth.

Of all the threats to Herod's troubled reign from Jerusalem, he viewed the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem as the greatest. Human rivals he could handle, killing many of his wives and children in fear of their possible alliance against him. But this rival was something more, being foretold by the Jewish prophets and

proclaimed by present-day foreign powers as "one born King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:1-6), a title and heritage Herod could not claim, but jealously guarded. According to verse 16, Herod added to his, other crimes the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem "two years old and under" in a futile attempt to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy of Messiah's rule. Herod soon died a severe and untimely death and Jesus returned to Israel to fulfill His Messianic purpose climaxed in Jerusalem under Herod's son Antipas.

Herod Antipas was filled with fear by Jesus presence in Jerusalem. Plagued by a guilty conscience because of his beheading John the baptizer, who he knew to be a prophet, he was terrified that Jesus may have been John raised from the dead to avenge himself on the king (Luke 9:9). As a result, the gospel writer states that Herod "desired to kill Jesus" if he could (Luke 13:31). However, when he finally met Him face-to-face, Jesus would not speak to him and the only statement Herod could make was to mock Jesus' claim to kingship by dressing Him in a royal robe (Luke 23:11).

By contrast, Jesus, born in an animal's trough in relative obscurity in the shadow of the Herodium, "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Although the Herod's occupied the throne of Israel by political appointment and continued it through political assassination, Jesus, the legitimate King, did not seek to overthrow their despotic rule at His first advent (John 18:36), but promised a time in which Israel would be restored under the Messianic "Son of Man" after false rule had been divinely judged at His second advent (Matthew 24:30; 25:31-32; Acts 1:6-7; cf. Daniel 7:13).

The Herods had sought to eliminate Jesus because they knew Rome would see Him as another Jewish insurrectionist and

feared the political consequences that failure to deal with such a threat would bring. However, within a few hundred years the very Rome the Herods feared would make Christianity the official religion of the empire! Too, in Bethlehem, at the place where Herod the Great sought to kill the young Jesus, and in Jerusalem where Herod Antipas cooperated in Jesus' crucifixion, the world today comes to visit the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, structures began by Helena, the mother of Rome's first "Christian" emperor in the 4th century A.D. Moreover, while the Herods could do nothing against the gospel of Christ, the gospel of Christ had a significant impact on the Herodian dynasty. In Romans 16:10 the Apostle Paul sends greetings to those in "the household of Aristobulus," a probable reference to members of the Herodian family who had come to faith through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such is the power of Jesus Christ who came into this world so that sons of men could become sons of God through faith (John 1:12; Galatians 3:26; Hebrews 2:10).

What began in Bethlehem with Christ's first coming will be climaxed in Jerusalem by His second coming when in the Kidron Valley (Valley of Jehoshaphat) He judges the armies of the world assembled to attack the Holy City (Zechariah 12:2-4; Joel 3:2, 12) Each year as we celebrate the advent of the Savior my own heart more greatly anticipates His return in glory to take His Church to heaven! May this year bring us all nearer to that great Day!

Thought for the Day

"To the ACLU lawyers, and such like, trying to muzzle Christian expression at Christmas, there is just one thing to say: Get a life." —Bill Murchison