

What's the Message – Lesson 90

Today we meet Herod the Great, and a royal cast from Rome.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord we pray today that we will see in the lives of the famous people we meet here, that those who strived to gain power and a lasting legacy beyond their own time instead left only ruins and an empty shell. We also pray that You would enable us to see that what was created, and has lasted for over two thousand years, is the result of Your guiding hand at work. Amen.

Last time we saw that the great Roman general, Pompey, had conquered Judea. But before he accomplished that fact, he had first conquered the Seleucid kingdom of Syria. Pompey was now the most powerful man in the Roman world, but he would soon face a challenge from his father-in-law, a man we know as Julius Caesar. However, before that struggle was settled, some small scale skirmishes in Palestine led two young men to become firm friends for life. These two men would become major players in the story we are about to unfold. They were Mark Anthony (at age 20), and Herod (at age 16).

As you know, Caesar won the fight and Pompey had to run for his life. He went to Egypt, where he was murdered. Not knowing of Pompey's death, Caesar pursued him there, and was himself nearly killed for his efforts. But someone came and rescued Caesar just in the nick of time, riding at the head of his troops like in an old western movie. And the hero of the moment turned out to be our old friend Antipater, who thus earned the lasting friendship of Caesar, not only for himself, but also for his son Herod. Antipater, as you would expect, was duly rewarded for his timely help in saving the life of Caesar.

It was during this campaign that Egypt became a Roman province, and Caesar met Cleopatra. She entangled the victorious warrior in her web for a few years, but the relationship between Caesar and Antipater would be more lasting. Because of the friendship between Caesar and Antipater, the Jews now received concessions they had not known for many years. They paid no tribute, had religious freedom, and lived according to their own laws.

To show their gratitude, they renewed their internal arguments and did everything they could to unseat Antipater. Zealots, nationalistic fanatics who wanted to try to throw off Rome, stirred up trouble everywhere they could. False messiahs who promised a political fulfillment of the prophets' messages rose up, and bands of guerrillas fought in the countryside.

And in Rome, Caesar was murdered. Shortly thereafter, amidst a new peak of turmoil, Antipater was poisoned, and Herod was running for his life. Early in his flight, Cleopatra tried to seduce him and entangle him in her web, but Herod spurned her and she hated him for it the rest of her life. Cleopatra's hatred, however, turned out to Herod's benefit a few years later.

Now the friendship between Mark Anthony and Herod comes into play. Mark Anthony and Octavian (who later became known as Caesar Augustus) set out to avenge the murdered Julius. Herod went to Rome and was there named king of Judea. With the help of Mark Anthony he defeated the nationalistic Jews who opposed him and became king in fact.

Most of us, however, know so little about Herod that we don't understand how this brutal man could win over the respect and support of other leaders. But Herod was well-equipped to be a leader. We are told that he was tall and handsome, with a charm that could help him to sway opinions even in the most uncompromising circumstances. He was athletic and had great endurance. He was a fine horseman, an expert wrestler and a first-class shot. He had been educated in a hard and practical school, and had learned many useful lessons. He became an efficient and successful warrior and a fearsome leader in battle. Unfortunately, he learned some vicious lessons as well, for it was a brutal age.

As it seems it must always be the case when there are two strong men, eventually there comes a split between them. And with the scheming of Cleopatra, so the inevitable occurred between Anthony and Octavian. Herod, of course, offered his assistance to Anthony, but Cleopatra in her hatred insisted that Anthony not accept Herod's help. As a result, Herod did not take part in the battles that followed.

Octavian won out, Anthony and Cleopatra committed suicide, and before the dust had settled, Herod was established once more on top, a true and loyal friend of the new Caesar.

Now Herod is free to utilize the vast wealth that was coming his way from the prized dates and balsam that grew only in the area around Jericho, the copper mines of Cyprus, and especially the Arabian trade routes that came through the mysterious and fabulous city of Petra. With this wealth he was able to indulge in amazing and ingenious construction of great fortresses – in particular, the Masada and the Herodium – the seaport of Caesarea Maritima, a seaport that was built on the Mediterranean Sea where no natural seaport had ever existed, and especially, the majestic Temple in Jerusalem. But none of these could win over the hearts and minds of the people, for all these buildings, as imposing as they were, were still seen only as monuments to Herod, and were not accomplishments of the Jewish people. And although Herod had reached the very peak in political power, a tragic decline began in his personal and family life.

Herod had ten wives, and the one he loved most, Mariamme, hated him and played on his jealousy. As if this were not enough, the tug of war between Mariamme and Herod's sister Salome and his first wife Doris had more plots and counterplots than a modern-day TV soap opera, including espionage, blackmail, and torture. But these schemes only added to Herod's paranoia and madness, eventually resulting in several of his wives, most of his sons, and numerous other relatives and friends being executed. Caesar supposedly once said that it was better to be one of Herod's pigs than to be his son. Then, after the death of Mariamme, Herod would go about the palace calling her name, sending his couriers to fetch her. His jealousies, suspicions of others, and madness went from bad to worse, and he was now sick in both mind and body. There are differing opinions as to the nature of the physical disease, perhaps it was arterio-sclerosis, but by the year 5 B.C. Herod was a very sick man with little time left to live. When he heard there was a new king of the Jews born, he lashed out in one last frantic, horrible effort to hang on to the throne and ordered the slaughtering of the babes of Bethlehem.

And now you rightly ask, "what's this got to do with our study of the Bible? Wasn't it just history? A sometimes boring listing of facts that can't be remembered, even though it did have quite a cast of

famous characters? So what does all this have to do with New Testament Bible study?

We will try to tie it all together for you next time in our final lesson on this period of 400 years between the book of the prophet Malachi and the Gospel of Matthew.

Our next study will summarize the four centuries between the Testaments, and is entitled, "In the fullness of time."