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From King to Villain: Herod the Great's Transition from Historical Figure to Dramatic Antagonist

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Abstract

King Herod the Great's reputation in 17th-century England was so vile that several theologians and writers took it upon themselves to write biographies of him, styling him as one of the worst men who ever lived. He had become a monolithic example of evil, tyranny, and unrighteous wrath divorced from the historical reality. Modern historical consensus on Herod is that he was a troubled ruler with paranoia and a temper, but little more. Meanwhile, followers of the Christian faith know him for orchestrating the Massacre of the Innocents—an event wherein an untold number of baby boys in Bethlehem were murdered in an attempt to kill the newborn Jesus Christ. This reception study asserts that Herod the Great's historical image was manipulated by Christian authors from Matthew to the 16th century Catholic church to reinforce ideas about good, evil, and Jesus Christ's status as the messiah. This case demonstrates a potential pitfall for historians, where bias and misinformation originates not from a figure's contemporaries or predictable enemies, but from later authors with little investment in the figure beyond their convenience in making a point.

The study explores the evolving attitudes and opinions of Herod the Great, emphasizing how his story was used to serve various authors' goals. It begins with an exploration of the historical figure as portrayed by Josephus, and follows up with an investigation into the historicity of the Massacre of the Innocents, concluding that there is insufficient evidence that the event occurred. The paper then explores Herod's evolving reputation and the influence of the Massacre, beginning with embellishments made in the Apocryphal Gospels and perpetuated by early Christian authors, before finally leading into an exploration of the way in which English Mystery Plays used Herod as a dramatic and moralistic device—forever distorting his image and leading to outlandish claims about his wickedness.

Introduction

Herod the Great ruled the province of Judaea c. 37-4 BCE. His rule as a client king for Rome involved political wrangling and violence to maintain power in the midst of civil wars and conflicts. All the while, Herod completed a number of ambitious building projects and civil works, traditionally hallmarks of benevolent rulers—or at least rulers interested in the wellbeing of their subjects. In the grand scheme of things, amidst the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Empire, and surrounded by much bigger conflicts than his own, Herod's reign was relatively uneventful. He endured his share of controversy and resistance, and was by no means a kind or even necessarily competent king, but he did little that stands out amongst the rulers of the day.

In spite of this apparently mild reign, a number of English writers in the 17th-century appear to have had rather strong opinions of the king. One biographer describers Herod as the author of "horrid cruelties, scarce ever parallel'd (sure never exceeded) by any Age,"[1] while another's work on Herod is titled "The wicked life and wofull [sic] death of Herod the Great," bearing the subtitle from Proverbs 10:7, "The memory of the Just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot."[2] A number of such books appeared around the 16th and 17th centuries, predominantly authored by Christian writers in England. Why? This paper argues that the wickedness of Herod was embellished by Christian authors, beginning with the author of the Gospel of Matthew, escalating with early Christian theologians and the Apocrypha, and culminating with the English Mystery Plays' comically exaggerated portrayals. These authors used Herod to convince their audiences of the messianic status of Christ, the truthfulness of the

[1] Roger L'Estrange, *The Life of Herod the Great* [...] *account of his fatal and miserable end* (London: White Hart in St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1677), 2;

[2] Samuel Clarke, "The wicked life and wofull death of Herod the Great [...] the story of the Jews during all the time of his reign" (London, 1664), 1.

book of Revelation, and the importance of choosing good over evil respectively, with little care or attention given to the truth of the historical figure—making that truth nearly impossible to find in the present day.

The brief history of Herod above draws primarily from the works of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian writing some 70 years after the death of Herod. He writes two major works relevant to Herod, *The Jewish Wars* and *The Jewish Antiquities*, with the latter providing a more critical view of the king. Josephus is the principal surviving source for Herod's reign, providing a complete and nuanced, albeit not always flattering, image of him. However, none of what Josephus describes, even in his more critical work, warrants the brutal condemnation provided by the 17th-century English writers. The missing piece lies in the story that would define Herod's reign for literal millennia—a story that, despite Josephus' willingness to show the blots and shames of Herod, is conspicuously absent from his work or any contemporary historical text prior to this story's emergence. Chapter two of the Gospel of Matthew, which scholars estimate was authored around 80-100 CE, describes an event that would later be known alternatively as the Massacre of the Innocents or the Slaughter of the Innocents, and it is in this passage of Matthew that the first seeds of Herod's legacy as among the most vile men to ever live emerges.[3]

The Gospel describes the arrival of wise men to the court of Herod following the birth of Jesus Christ. These men explain that they have seen signs that the Messiah, King of the Jews, had been born in Judaea, and they wanted to find and worship him. Herod's court determines that the child must have been born in Bethlehem, and the king sends the wise men to find the baby, asking them to return afterward so he may worship Christ as well. However, the wise men are informed by an angel that Herod intends to betray them, and they never return, while Jesus,

[3] Dennis C. Duling, "The Gospel of Matthew", in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 298-9.

Mary, and Joseph flee to Egypt after a similar vision. Enraged at being eluded by the wise men, Herod "sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under."[4]

Matthew portrays Herod's paranoia as so great that he would murder every infant in Bethlehem just to ensure a usurper could not arise. Though this story is not corroborated by other contemporary sources (not even the Gospel of Luke, which also details the birth of Christ but leaves out the entire series of events initiated by Herod), Christian authors' belief in a literal Gospel Truth led them to interpret it as historical fact. Indeed, many of the writers mentioned previously attempted to seamlessly integrate Matthew with Josephus, who was widely read by early Christian writers and became the principal source for Herod even among that audience.[5]

Yet still, among other historical threats to Christianity and even other Biblical figures like the Pharaoh who sought Moses' life by killing infants, Herod does not seem to stand tall above the crowd of wickedness. Matthew's narrative alone does not explain the ire held for Herod by Christians, and indeed, it is a relatively plain and mild story compared to those that would emerge about Herod. In the time between Herod's actual reign and the 17th-century writers, he would go from being described as a relatively minor, if paranoid, ruler to a villain known simultaneously for being weak and cowardly, cruel and vindictive, foolish and short-sighted, and viciously crafty.

Much of this demonization would arise from the gradual escalation and embellishment of the Massacre of the Innocents, as Herod became an instrument of moral caution and a compelling antagonist for writers of Christian literature centered around The Nativity. By the

[4] Matthew 2:16, NRSV

[5] Heinz Schreckenberg, "The Works of Josephus and the Early Christian Church", in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity,* ed. Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 315.

1500s, Herod would be depicted on stage in various English Mystery Plays as a villain who orchestrated the murder of as many as 144,000 infants before gloating to the audience about the small price of protecting his rule—and then falling into horrific disease and decay as divine punishment. Herod's legacy became defined not by historical records of his actions and character but by the Christian narratives that elevated his wickedness as a villain against Christ and a lesson of morality for their contemporary audience.

Vitally, Herod was not the central point of interest in these plays—even in those titled for him. The plays were written to teach their audience of common folk lessons about their religion, and generally good against evil. The Christians were not writing *about* Herod, nor were they particularly invested in him as opposed to Christ and the saints—but their use of him as a moral and narrative tool would impact his reputation and legacy for decades, in ways that are difficult to trace due to the depth of influence their works had on their contemporary culture. The evolution of his story demonstrates a particular danger for historians, wherein embellishments and inaccurate information enters the culture and narrative surrounding a figure without an obvious motive that can be traced back to enemies or contemporaries to them.

The Historical Herod

Outside of the writings of Josephus, separating the historical figure of Herod from the embellishments and condemnations of later writers can be difficult. This is partially a timing problem—Matthew's author was chronologically a contemporary of Josephus, and his work would circulate around the same time, albeit with a different audience. If we focus on the most violent event in Herod's reign, all references to the Massacre of the Innocents can be traced back to Matthew. Thus, it is somewhat difficult to come to a meaningful conclusion about the event's

historicity. Strictly speaking, sources that attest to it outnumber those that do not—but since those that attest to it use Matthew as their primary source (often proudly), that provides little meaningful insight. Thus, setting aside that particular incident to examine later, we are left to rely heavily on Josephus for the clearest image.

Josephus was a Greek historian and Jewish priest, born ca. 37 CE and publishing works between 75 and 95 CE. As such, he did not live as a contemporary to Herod (who died around 4 BCE), but he based his details of the reign at least partially on the writings of Nicolaus of Damascus, a courtier of Herod whose works are largely lost to us. Josephus presents the most complete and contemporary account of Herod's reign in his two largest works, *The Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities*.[6] Josephus' character and motivations are complex, as he provided a nuanced perspective on the Jewish Revolt (66-74 CE). He served the leaders of Jerusalem, was captured at Jotapata, and was later freed and taken in by Titus Vespasianus (son of newly ascendant Emperor Vespasian). He was thoroughly Jewish in culture and belief, but also believed that God was beginning to favor the Romans and that the Jews should not continue to resist.[7]

His two works have notably different tones and arguably different audiences. *The Jewish War* tries to serve both his Roman and Jewish audiences and strives to balance his somewhat conflicting identities. In particular, he characterizes the revolt as the actions of a handful of rebels who were punished by God, and encourages cooperation between the Romans and the Jews. In this regard, he strives to paint the Romans in a positive light, which indirectly includes Herod, a figure viewed fondly by the Romans.[8] However, *Jewish Antiquities* advocates for

[6] It is also the most accepted work, particularly by early Christians, making it uniquely relevant to examining the evolution of Christian thought on Herod.

[7] Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. Louis H. Feldman, Ralph Marcus, and H. St J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

[8] This is a recurring theme in Josephus' works; his theology is based in part on the idea that those who do not obey Jewish tradition and law will be punished *during their lives,* and he draws attention to events and individuals whose fates he believes to be the result of divine punishment.

Jewish philosophy and culture against the Roman background, retelling much of Jewish history and advocating for his own culture and beliefs to the Roman audience. All the while, for the smaller Jewish audience of the work, he advances his theological belief in divine punishment for Jews who do not obey the laws.[9] Each of these works pays considerable attention to Herod, with Josephus repeating himself in recounting many events but doing so with a different tone in each work.

The differences in these two works heavily influence the way Josephus describes Herod. Due at least in part to *The Jewish War*'s efforts to point the way to reconciliation for the Jews and Romans, it paints Herod in a fairly positive light—a man who straddled the line between Jew and Roman, as a Jewish king placed in power by the Romans. It by no means skimps on the details of Herod's paranoia and dark acts, but it does not pass total condemnation onto him. *Antiquities*, on the other hand, seeks to emphasize Josephus' thesis of earthly punishment for wickedness. Steve Mason, biblical scholar and historian, describes *Antiquities'* extra attention to Herod and his family: "Much of the new coverage serves to point out the moral and religious shortcomings of Herod's family. This new theme is plainly geared to illustrate one of *Antiquities'* theses—that, according to the ancient and noble traditions of the Jews, those who stray from the laws come to a disastrous end."[10] Mason further argues that Herod and his family were essentially "easy" examples for Josephus—most had indeed met disastrous ends, and Josephus had exceptional detail and evidence to make that point.

Thus, *Antiquities* paints a Herod who is much more visibly flawed, and condemns him from a religious and moral angle. Josephus describes Herod's sickness and death as explicitly a

[9] Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 92.

[10] Ibid., 92. Josephus claims that this was at the age of fifteen; there is some contention on this point, and Josephus' timeline suggests twenty-five is more plausible. See the Marcus translation, Book XIV Section 159, footnote d.

punishment from God, a notion which would be latched onto by later Christian writers. But while most later authors would attribute it as a punishment for the Massacre of the Innocents, Josephus simply attributed it to a general wickedness and disobedience to Jewish law not unique to Herod. However, even in *Antiquities*, Josephus' more critical work, Herod is not described as the most wicked man to ever live, nor is attention to his successes and victories dropped. Josephus maintained a relatively nuanced perspective and painted Herod as a complicated, though ultimately wicked, figure.

Though a complete survey of Herod's reign and family according to Josephus is not necessary for this investigation, a few particular incidents are worth examining, as they speak to Herod's character and ability. He was appointed governor of Galilee at a young age, and sprang into action, catching and killing a bandit leader and many of his raiders on the border of Syria, ingratiating himself with them and proving his competence.[11] However, Herod's family, including his father Antipater and eldest brother Phassel, were becoming increasingly powerful in Judaea, such that the leading Jews began to fear their influence. They accused Herod of being a reckless youth and aspiring dictator, and further accused him of murder for killing the bandits without giving them a trial.[12] The conflicts that followed were complex, as Herod is simultaneously described sympathetically as a man caught in the crossfire of political wranglings beyond his station, but also as an arrogant, enraged, and petulant child who has to be consistently dissuaded from releasing his wrath upon even the individuals who would help him.

Amidst it all, however, Josephus continually emphasizes Herod's ability to ingratiate himself with the Romans—and it is by these acts that he would rise to power despite his constant

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[11] Josephus, *Antiquities* XIV.158-9 [Josephus citations throughout this paper are using the book number and the Marcus translation section number].

[12] One of many places where Josephus' story differs between *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities*; in the former, he is dismissive of Herod's accusers as "malicious persons", and does not elaborate on their reasoning. See Marcus, XIV.165, footnote b.

conflicts with Jewish leadership. In 41 BCE, a number of Jewish leaders demanded that Mark Antony depose Herod and Phassel, who had inherited power after Antipater was assassinated.[13] Antony, however, sided with Herod and his brother, naming them tetrarchs and giving them rulership over the Jews. Antony even went so far as to imprison fifteen of the Jewish leaders who had opposed Herod, but Herod interceded and asked that their lives be spared.[14] Similar sequences of events occurred throughout Herod's rise to power, with the Romans at his side and influential Jews often in direct opposition to him.

Perhaps the most dramatic and symbolically significant example of Herod's alliance with the Romans comes with his proper ascendance to the throne. In 40 BCE, the Parthians invaded Judaea, killed Phassel, and captured John Hyrcanus II, leader and king of Judaea and ally of Herod. Herod himself fled to the Romans and asked for help from Antony. Antony proposed that the Romans name Herod king, as he was loyal to them, so that Judaea's position would allow it to act as a powerful outpost against the Parthians. According to Josephus, Herod had not come seeking kingship, but nonetheless, it was granted to him: "Now when the Senate was adjourned, Antony and Caesar [Octavian] went out with Herod between them, and the consuls and other magistrates leading the way…Thus did Herod take over royal power."[15]

Herod arrived seeking aid from his Roman allies, and walked out of the Senate a king with two of the most powerful men in Rome on either side. Josephus is clear—Herod was no usurper. He rose to power by allying himself with the Romans effectively and consistently. Later, when Herod feared for his reign due to growing conflicts in Rome, he would side with the rising

[13] Mark Antony: At this time, Triumvir (one of the successors of Gaius Julius Caesar) and proconsul; with Judaea's client status, Antony effectively had final say over such matters.

[14] Josephus, *Antiquities* XIV.324-9. This dramatic interaction is only present in *Antiquities*, Josephus' work that is normally more critical of Herod. Josephus also notes later that Herod had bribed Antony, though the timing is unclear. Additionally, conflicts continued, and the Romans did slay some of Herod's opponents, ostensibly against his wishes.

[15] Ibid., XIV.388-9.

Octavian against Antony—putting him on the good side of Caesar Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. However, while these events do paint Herod in a positive light, as at least a competent diplomat and ruler, Josephus does not shy away from showing Herod's darker side—particularly once he becomes king and the paranoia begins to set in.

Indeed, setting aside these particular events (which reflect more on Herod's competence than his morality), Herod's character as described in *Antiquities* is not overwhelmingly positive—to be clear, curiosity about the degree of condemnation and ire he attracted from Christian writers is more derived from the fact that he is relatively tame compared to his contemporaries, but condemnation for his violent and cruel acts is deserved. Even *War*, Josephus' more flattering work, details Herod's frequent fits of violent rage, particularly against his family. One particular series of incidents aptly describes his paranoia, rage, and mad obsessions. Herod's brother-in-law Aristobulus sought the position of Hasmonean High Priest and was already popular amongst the people. Herod resisted but eventually was forced to concede after his mother-in-law got Mark Antony involved.[16]

However, shortly after, Aristobulus' popularity became too much to bear. At a festival, "there arose among the people an impulsive feeling of affection toward him [Aristobulus]…Being overcome, they gradually revealed their feelings…As a result of all these things Herod decided to carry out his designs against the youth."[17] That evening, Herod ordered some of Aristobulus' friends to "playfully" hold him under the water while swimming, and they drowned him. Josephus is explicit about Herod's responsibility in these actions, and further describes how the king attempted to distance himself from them by putting on a convincing show

[16] Ibid., XV.23-40
[17] Ibid., XV.52-4

of mourning for his brother-in-law. The first of many familial murders, Josephus makes it clear that Herod is not innocent, and that the king has no interest in admitting his own guilt.

However, it would not be long before some put the evidence together, and Herod was eventually called to Rome to be put on trial for murder before Antony—and it is here that his madness begins to truly show. Herod's wife, Mariamme (Aristobulus' sister), was exceptionally beautiful, and his "love" for her was absolutely overpowering. Fearing that he might not return from Rome alive, Herod ordered his uncle, who would be ruling in his absence, to have Mariamme executed should Herod not return, "For, he said, he was very much in love with his wife and feared the outrage it would be to his memory if even after his death she were pursued by another man because of her beauty."[18] While Herod was gone, a rumor spread that Antony had had Herod executed—and when Herod did return and learned that his wife was still alive even though they believed he was dead, he was enraged and ordered his uncle executed and his mother-in-law imprisoned.[19]

Such bizarre and dramatic affairs of romance and family are frequent in Josephus' account of Herod's reign. The events that began with Aristobulus and Herod's other in-laws would begin a cascade of paranoia and violence, as those around Herod would grow to simultaneously fear and hate him, causing him to fear them and commit greater acts of paranoia and violence, resulting in a deep spiral. Another bout of jealousy mixed with influence from his sister would drive Herod to ultimately execute his wife, though his mad passions led to him

[18] Ibid., XV.65-7.

[19] The events are somewhat more complicated—his uncle had shared the order that Mariamme be killed if Herod did not return; when Herod learned that Mariamme knew this, he took it as evidence that his uncle had slept with his wife, and was consumed with fits of mad rage, quickly pivoting between tearfully embracing his wife and tearing his hair. In the end, however, Herod had his uncle executed and mother-in-law imprisoned for what ultimately originated from his jealousy and paranoia.

conclude that his hesitation originated from the fact that "he was afraid that if she died he would unwittingly inflict greater punishment (upon himself than) upon her."[20]

Herod had similar dealings with potential threats to his throne, to which he almost always responded with violence. To his credit, on more than one occasion, assassination attempts appear to have been made, and several individuals, whom he feared or executed for treason, almost certainly did wish to unseat him—though often for arguably justified reasons related to his past violent outbursts.[21] Other plots and discontent with Herod related to his poor adherence to Jewish Law, as well as his excessive and severe punishments for anyone who could potentially be viewed as a threat to his throne.

In Herod's final days, his wickedness begins to catch up with him in the eyes of Josephus. His previous acts of violence and familial manipulation began a spiraling cycle, and much of his story became a series of schemes and plots by his family. Herod responded to these with further rage and violence, ultimately leading to even more distrust and hatred from his family. This would continue as Herod slowly descended into madness and physical sickness, which Josephus believed was the will of God as a punishment for his wickedness.

> But Herod's illness became more and more acute, for God was inflicting just punishment on him for his lawless deeds. The fever he had…produced internal damage. There was also an ulceration of the bowels…and a moist, transparent suppuration of the feet. And he suffered similarly from an abdominal ailment, as well as from a gangrene of his privy parts that produced worms…it was said by the men of God…that all this was the penalty that God was exacting of the king for his great impiety.[22]

It is important to emphasize that the impiety and wickedness that Josephus is describing is *not* the Massacre of the Innocents. Despite his ardent belief, particularly in *Antiquities*, that

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[20] Ibid., XV.212

[21] One example includes a number of conspirators planning to stab Herod to death at the theatre. The plot was discovered and the conspirators executed, but the informant who discovered the plot was murdered and thrown to the dogs by the populace, many of whom feared and hated Herod. *Antiquities* XV.282-91.

[22] Ibid., XVII.168-71

Herod was a truly wicked man, Josephus makes no mention of Herod slaughtering infants to protect his throne. Rather, Josephus believes Herod is being punished for his other misdeeds and murders, as well as a general disregard for Jewish tradition which Josephus believed would ultimately lead to the downfall of any powerful man. However, while Josephus makes no mention of the Massacre and thus cannot connect this punishment to it, later Christian writers would seize on this vivid description of Herod's sickness and death, and declare it to be a direct and immediate response to Herod's attempt at slaying the Christ child.

Overall, Josephus paints Herod as a complicated figure, but the bad easily outweighs the good, particularly in the later part of his reign. It is not a surprise that a story of Herod killing infants to protect his throne emerged, and it may even have originated from the fact that he would eventually execute his sons. Though its veracity is doubtful, a quote sometimes attributed to Augustus on this matter states that "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son," implying that it would be safer to be an animal forbidden for a Jew to consume than to be Herod's family.[23] But nonetheless, Josephus makes no mention of the mass slaughter of infants—which, given his overall opinion of the king, his status as our most contemporary historical source, and his general willingness to include a multitude of grim stories about Herod's wickedness, casts some doubt on the historicity of the Massacre of the Innocents. However, absence from one particular source is not enough to conclude that an event did not occur; thus, an investigation into that event's key source is needed.

[23] This is sometimes attributed to Augustus as a reaction to the Massacre of the Innocents, as some sources claim that Herod's sons were victims of the Massacre itself. Both of the sons killed in this execution were adults and nowhere near Bethlehem, but the connection is nonetheless drawn frequently.

The Gospel of Matthew: The Question of the Massacre

Ultimately, the primary question regarding the reception of Herod's reign centers around the truthfulness of the Massacre of the Innocents, which goes entirely unmentioned by Josephus. The primary source from which the story of the Massacre appears to originate is the Gospel of Matthew, which describes the event briefly in its second chapter. However, there is broad historical consensus that Matthew alone provides insufficient evidence for the Massacre.[24] The primary reasoning for this derives from modern scholarship on the Gospel of Matthew's authorship, which indicates that the author had strong motivations to create parallels between Christ and Jewish Messianic figures (namely Moses), as well as emphasize any Old Testament prophecies that Christ may have fulfilled. By including the Massacre of the Innocents, the author of Matthew is able to considerably strengthen parallels between Christ and Moses, and simultaneously is able to claim that Christ fulfilled three additional Old Testament prophecies that Luke's infancy narrative, which does not include the Massacre, could not.

A first and vital point to address is the actual authorship of the Gospel of Matthew, as well as when it was written. The assumption that it was written by the disciple Matthew would place its author as a more contemporary source to Herod's reign than even Josephus.[25] However, considerable scholarly investigation has concluded that this is unlikely—rather, the Gospel of Matthew was likely written by an individual with thorough knowledge of Jewish law and tradition, with a vested interest in connecting Christ's story and teachings with the Old

[24] While there are a number of other early Christian works that reference the Massacre, they generally either reference Matthew directly as their source, or are Apocrypha purporting to be their own primary sources but that have since been dated as originating centuries later. The Apocrypha and related early Christian works will be discussed later.

[25] While dating is somewhat unclear regarding the life of Christ, estimates for the crucifixion tend to settle around around 30-33 CE, while Josephus was born around 37-38 CE, meaning that Matthew would most certainly be older and may have been alive during Herod the Great's reign.

Testament.[26] This is primarily derived from a few points of analysis: first, over seventy-five percent of the verses in Matthew are shared with the Gospel of Mark, which is itself dated ca. 70 CE by its historical context and which is widely considered to be the first gospel written.[27] Second, a number of additional contextual clues indicate that, like Mark, it was probably written after the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE), with references to the destruction of the temple and the separation of church and synagogue.[28]

These facts, combined with the fact that the author is well-versed in Jewish tradition, assumes his readers are as well, *and* he repeatedly attempts to lend credence to the idea that Christ is the Jewish Messiah, have led to the conclusion that The Gospel of Matthew was written between 80-100 CE by an anonymous Israelite male who was writing for a primarily Jewish audience with an interest in using his strong background in Jewish law and the Old Testament to convince readers of Christ's messianic status and authority in interpreting the Torah.[29] This is vital to understanding the place of the Massacre of the Innocents, as its inclusion in the Gospel works towards achieving a number of the author's apparent goals and appeals to his audience.

Matthew 2 quotes three separate Old Testament scriptures, explicitly noting them as prophecies fulfilled by Christ's infancy, and carefully structures the narrative to fulfill two additional Old Testament prophecies that go unmentioned by the other gospels. He also creates a strong parallel between Christ and Moses, a figure who already held a messianic status among the Jewish population. The story of the Massacre of the Innocents, and indeed the inclusion of

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[26] This terminology is derived from a Christian-centric viewpoint. However, there are further complications with terms like "The Hebrew Bible". As such, for clarity, the term "The Old Testament" will be used to refer to the 24 books of the Tanakh, often split into 39 books in common Christian canons.

[27] Jerry Ruff, Sr, ed. *Understanding the Bible: A Guide to Reading the Scriptures* (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 2008), 56-7; Duling, 298-9.

[28] Ibid., 298.

[29] Ibid., 302-3. Much of this is derived from the writing itself; the author displays a strong grasp of the Greek language, a considerable amount of knowledge on issues of Torah law. The gospel seeks to connect with a Jewish audience, while making bold claims about the fallibility of Jewish leaders and trying to provide evidence for Jesus' messianic status from within the framework of Jewish tradition.

Herod at all (who is present only by temporal reference in Luke), allows for the fulfillment of three additional prophecies—two of which Matthew explicitly quotes in his telling of the story.[30]

The first quotation appears in Matthew 2:13-15, where an angel instructs Joseph to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt, fleeing from Herod, which thereby will allow another prophecy to be fulfilled once it is safe to return: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."[31] Notably, interpreting this line of Hosea as a prophecy at all is somewhat shaky when examining Hosea in context, but the interpretation of the verse as referring to the Messiah is plausible.[32] It was plausible to Matthew, as he explicitly interpreted it as a prophecy.

After they flee, Matthew then describes Herod slaughtering any child who could conceivably be Christ—creating an incredibly potent parallel between Christ and Moses. The Pharaoh, with whom Herod is paralleled, is similarly said to have killed baby Israelite boys out of fear of a leader arising from among them, forcing the infant Moses to be taken far away.[33] Beyond just providing this parallel, however, the Massacre allows Matthew to describe the fulfillment of another Old Testament prophecy: "Thus says the LORD; a voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping; Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children; because they are no more."[34] The exact connection Matthew is trying to make between Ramah and Bethlehem is unclear, though Schweizer suggests that it is possible Matthew was describing Mary and Joseph hearing the cries as they fled, passing through Ramah on their journey to Egypt.[35]

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[30] Luke 1:5, NRSV: "In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest…"
[31] Hosea 11:1, NRSV.
[32] Eduard Schweizer and David E. Green, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 42.
[33] Exodus 1:15-22, NRSV.
[34] Jeremiah 31:15, NRSV.
[35] Schweizer and Green, 41-2.

The final quotation appears at the end of the chapter, after Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt, then emerged after Herod's death but during his son's reign. They settle in the town of Nazareth, thereby fulfilling another prophecy from the book of Judges: "for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth."[36] Notably, this specific piece of the narrative conflicts with Luke, who describes Joseph and Mary as having been from Nazareth originally and only traveling to Bethlehem for a census.[37] While either narrative allows for both the Nazarene and the Bethlehem prophecies to be fulfilled, Matthew's version is arguably a more dramatic, embellished version that allows for the incorporation of dream visions: another parallel to Moses and a favorite of Matthew's.[38]

These major prophecy fulfillments play a significant role in Matthew's attempts to reach his audience. By repeatedly calling attention to the ways in which Christ, from his very birth, was the Messiah, he imbues the figure with significant authority to a reader with a background and belief in Jewish law and tradition. While the existence of this motive alone by no means indicates that he fabricated his narrative, it does cast light on the points of divergence between his work and Luke's—and is vital to consider when investigating the historicity of Matthew, and in particular the story of the Massacre.

While Josephus provides ample evidence that Herod was a flawed, and at times brutal, ruler, the core event that defined perceptions of the king for millennia was the Massacre of the Innocents—an event which is only testified to in Matthew. Given his goal of legitimizing Christ's status as the Messiah to a Jewish audience, the author of Matthew had strong motivations to make every effort to connect Christ to Jewish customs and traditions; more

[36] Judges 13:5, NRSV.
[37] Luke 1-2, NRSV.
[38] Robert H Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 26, 32-3.

specifically, prophecies. He does this throughout his gospel, but *especially* in chapter 2, by calling out ways Christ fulfilled messianic prophecies from the Old Testament.

The inclusion of the Massacre of the Innocents fits that narrative beautifully and builds on another common motif of Matthew's writing: the parallelization of Christ and Moses. Without the Massacre, two of the major Old Testament prophecies which Matthew quotes could not be demonstrated to be fulfilled by Christ, and the one remaining prophecy would have significantly less power behind it. Furthermore, the Massacre is the most prominent event in Matthew's infancy narrative that ties him to Moses, an infant on the run from a wicked earthly ruler. While we cannot say definitively that Matthew would go so far as to fabricate or alter the narrative to achieve these goals, it is clear he is interested in highlighting these parallels and prophecies. His narrative explicitly conflicts with Luke's view on the matter.[39]

Taken together, the evidence suggests that the Massacre of the Innocents did not happen. While it cannot be definitely proven to be fictional, it nonetheless remains that the only contemporary primary source to make any reference to the event is a source with several goals that were advanced by the inclusion of the story; a source that benefits greatly in its ability to make its point with authority by including it. Whether Matthew entirely concocted it for that purpose, or an embellishment of an oral tradition, or otherwise originated elsewhere is uncertain—but it is certain that Matthew cannot be considered a reliable historical source on the issue of Herod.

However, *even this* does not fully explain the matter of later Christian writers' hatred for the king. Again, several historical and Biblical figures would rival Herod's wickedness even if

[39] Even if one were to assume willingness to fabricate details on the author's part, it cannot be ignored that there were a number of events in Herod's reign that could easily have been twisted by his enemies to sound something like the Massacre—most prominently, his execution of his sons near the end of his reign, which later writers would often conflate with the Massacre, claiming that it was in the slaughter that his sons were killed.

one were to assume that the Massacre had occurred just as Matthew had described it.[40] Ultimately, it would not be Matthew's story alone that drove those 17th and 18th century English writers to condemn Herod, but rather the stories that would grow out of it—stories wherein Herod was alternatively controlled by Satan, or was a man of hellish wickedness in his own heart; a weak and pathetic king who had to use violence to sustain himself, or a sadistic maniac who reveled in the slaughter.

Importantly, these later stories would begin to embellish the figure of Herod in other ways, adding details of which Matthew makes no mention. By the 16th century, in England, King Herod would be known as the man who either gleefully or cowardly murdered *144,000* infants.. Still, to understand the figure of Herod that would emerge later, we need to understand how the memory of him would evolve, beginning with early Christian writers.

Herod's Reception: Early Christian Writers & The Apocrypha

Embellishments and elaborations on the Gospel of Matthew appeared early. Some of the most significant additions and complications to the story appear to arrive within a century or two of Matthew, with the New Testament Apocrypha. Broadly speaking, the Apocrypha consists of any texts attributed to the disciples and apostles of Christ that were at some point decreed inauthentic or otherwise unfit to be placed alongside other books of the Bible. Many of these

[40] Some Biblical figures with wickedness comparable to Herod: Haman, a Persian official described in the book of Esther, orders all Jews in the entire Persian empire be killed. In the book of Judges, Abimelech murders his 70 brothers to become king of Shechem; notably, this is about 50 more people than the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, which collates several historical and religious estimates regarding the Massacre, estimates that Herod would have killed based on the size and population of the region. In Exodus, Pharaoh of Egypt who Matthew explicitly parallels with Herod, in addition to killing infants to protect his authority, refuses to release the Israelites from slavery and repeatedly opposes God, bringing the 10 Plagues upon Egypt.
"Holy Innocents," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (McGraw Hill: Catholic University of America, 1967).

works were written in the centuries following Christ's death, with a variety of audiences and motives—but generally in the interest of furthering and directing popular piety.[41]

Of particular relevance to Herod are many of the apocryphal birth and infancy gospels. It is in some of these texts that we find the first distortions of Matthew's version of the Massacre, and we find evidence of some of the historical confusions and misconceptions that would likely play a part in driving later condemnation of Herod. The first of such gospels for our purposes is *The Protevangelium of James* (PJ), which purports to be the work of the step-brother of Jesus by Joseph's first marriage.[42] It is one of the most popular and influential of the apocryphal works, and it appeared to garner wide acceptance, with over a hundred Greek manuscripts surviving, some as early as the third century CE. It would eventually be found as unacceptable by St. Jerome due to some of its assertions about Christ's family and declined in popularity, but its influence appears to have lasted long after in exegetical works and Christian culture.[43]

PJ tells the story of Christ's birth with much more detail than Luke or Matthew and attempts to reconcile the two, combining their details into one story and adding elaborations of its own. Herod's rage at being deceived by the wise men leads to the order for execution, as in Matthew: "he was angry and sent his murderers and commanded them to kill all the babies who were two years old and under."[44] After this, Herod searches for Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. Herod believed that there was a possibility that John (yet unborn) was to be the Messiah. Herod demanded to know where Elizabeth, John's mother, was, but Zacharias did not know. The two argued, and Herod murdered him at the altar of the temple.[45]

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[41] Elliot, J.K.,*The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 50.

[42] The complexities of this claim are too dense to detail here, but in short: the author sought to reconcile the notion of Mary's perpetual virginity with Biblical references to siblings of Christ, and did so by asserting they were step-siblings, born to Joseph by a previous wife. Elliot, 49-51.

[43] Ibid., 50-2

[44] *The Protevangelium of James* 22:1

[45] Ibid., 23:1-3

PJ describes the priests finding the blood of Zacharias "turned to stone," but never finding his body. The people of Jerusalem mourned, but no mention was made of anyone learning that Herod was responsible.[46] While this particular embellishment would not carry far beyond PJ, it was the beginning of influential works adding to Herod's rage and wickedness: not merely ordering the execution of infants, but personally murdering the high priest and father of a baby Herod feared at the altar of the Jewish temple. Given the popularity of PJ, the connection between Herod the Great and John may have contributed to later misconceptions regarding Herod's relationship with John the Baptist.[47] Additionally, PJ does not specify the location where Herod sent his murderers (unlike Matthew), and his confrontation with Zacharias takes place in the temple—heavily implying that the Massacre was not restricted to children in Bethlehem specifically.[48]

PJ would be drawn upon by other apocryphal gospels, including *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and *The History of Joseph the Carpenter.*[49] At the same time, some of the gospels fell victim to a problem of mistaken identity that would plague many writers who sought to portray Herod—namely, that surrounding the life of Christ, there are *three* Herods. The first is Herod the Great, whom we have discussed thus far. Second is Herod the Great's grandson, known as Herod Antipas, who succeeded Herod the Great, ruling from 4 BCE to 39 CE. Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea as a tetrarch and is sometimes referred to as Herod the Tetrarch in the gospels. It is this Herod whom Christ interacts with personally; Herod Antipas executes John the Baptist, he is described as a coward by Christ, and he ultimately is offered by Pontius Pilate to

[46] Ibid., 24

[47] Historically, there was none; John would have been an infant at the oldest when Herod the Great died. Herod's grandson, however, was also named Herod, and would have John executed.

[48] This is further evidenced by the fact that, in this version, Mary does not actually give birth in Bethlehem, but rather in a cave in the desert only half-way to Bethlehem, and would only arrive there and place Christ in a manger after learning of Herod's decree. Ibid., 17; 22:2

[49] Elliot, 84, 111.

judge Christ, but chooses to do nothing.[50] While he only appears a handful of times, in each appearance, he is a direct antagonist to Christ and Christianity as a whole.

The third and final Herod from this period is Herod Agrippa, born around 11 BCE and dying in 44 CE, who was the ruler of Judaea from 41 to 44 CE and would be the last King of Judaea before the Great Jewish Revolt. He has no known interactions with Christ directly and is largely irrelevant to the New Testament outside of one dramatic appearance—which may very well be the source of a great deal of confusion and condemnation for Herod the Great. In Acts 12, Herod Agrippa began to interfere with the young Church in the interest of pleasing his Jewish subjects. He killed James, John's brother, then captured and imprisoned Peter. Peter escaped, and Herod Agrippa had his jailors executed. He then gave a speech before his people, which they considered to be from the voice of a god. In retaliation, an angel of God struck Herod: "Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died."[51] This Herod has no involvement with Christ, but is significant in early Church history for his opposition to Christian leaders, and conflating him with Herod the Great would create a figure worse than either to a Christian audience.

These incidents with Herod Antipas and Herod Agrippa likely played no small part in hatred for Herod the Great, as several writers appear to struggle to separate them. Even Josephus may have gotten them confused—Agrippa lived closer in time to the historian, and was more intertwined with Roman politics. His sudden and agonizing death was known to the Romans, and it is possible that the death at the hands of maggots that Josephus describes for Herod the Great was a confusion of sources on Josephus' part, and was entirely drawn from Agrippa's death.[52]

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[50] Acts 13:1 (referenced as Tetrarch); Mark 6:14-28 (Executes John); Luke 13:32 (Called a "fox" by Christ); Luke 23:13-15 (Is offered Christ by Pilate)

[51] Acts 12:23, NRSV

[52] Carolyn Elaine Coulson-Grigsby, "'Wormys mete is his body': Enacting the Diseased Spirit of Herod the Great on the Late Medieval English Stage" (PhD Diss., University of Connecticut, 2006), 56 footnote 41.

To be clear, the potential for writers to have confused the multiple Herods is not conjecture. One particularly potent incident appears in another of the infancy Apocrypha: *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*. *Joseph the Carpenter* tells the story of Joseph's death, adding to the collection of legends surrounding Christ's earthly parents. It borrows heavily from *The Protevangelium of James* and is written in the voice of Jesus himself, telling the story of his father. In it, the author describes a Herod that appears to be a combination of all three:

> But Satan went and told this [the birth of Christ] to Herod the Great, the father of Archelaus. And it was this same Herod who ordered my friend and relative John to be beheaded…Now Herod died by the worst form of death, atoning for the shedding of blood of the children whom he wickedly cut off, though there was no sin in them.[53]

Notably, this conflation breaks down even within the narrative itself, as this Herod somehow dies before Mary, Joseph, and Christ return from their flight into Egypt, but is also alive years later to execute John the Baptist.

Though *Joseph the Carpenter* is known to exist in several languages, the extent of its influence is not as well established as *The Protevangelium of James*. Though its exact audience is uncertain, it is one of the earliest instances of a particular characterization of the Massacre that would appear later—namely, Satan himself influenced Herod, and that he was therefore not the sole author of the Massacre, but was being influenced by outside forces. *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, dated around the 4th or 5th centuries CE, is not alone in making this claim.[54]

In an investigation of the "Satanization" of Herod, Mindiola explores the writings of Oecumenius and Tyconius, both early Christian theologians who explored the book of Revelation and the Apocalypse as a whole. Oecumenius' commentary, in particular, is one of the oldest existing commentaries on Revelation, while Tyconius authors several influential works,

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[53] *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* 8-9
[54] Elliot, 111 (Details on The History of Joseph the Carpenter, its reception and dating)

including his *Book of Rules,* that established a system for deriving universal law and attempts to represent the Church as it existed in this time.[55] Tyconius also wrote a commentary on Revelation, using his rules to glean insight into the deeper meanings of the text.[56]

Both authors, in their investigation of Revelation, come to similar conclusions about Revelation 12. This chapter tells the story of a pregnant woman fleeing from a great dragon that seeks to destroy the child she bears. The text is explicit in that the dragon in question is Satan, the serpent deceiver of the world, and that he persecuted the woman, but she was saved by the Earth, so the dragon instead made war with "the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God."[57] Mindiola explains that both Tyconius and Oecumenius interpret the chapter as being about the birth of Christ, with the woman being Mary and her child being Jesus. Through that lens, the most obvious literal persecutor is Herod—but the text is very clear that the dragon that seeks to destroy the child is Satan himself.

It is through this lens that both Tyconius and Oecumenius come to the conclusion that Satan himself is acting through Herod, and more, that Herod is a symbol of all opposition to the Church: "In the person of Herod, he targets all of the enemies within [the Church], since he spoke of 'all', when only Herod was dead."[58] In this regard, both authors have a similar outlook to that of *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, wherein Herod was not acting alone but under the guidance and influence of Satan. These notions of Herod being influenced and guided by others would be recurring in later Christian writings, despite Matthew making no implicit or explicit

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[55] "Oecumenius," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Note that there are multiple authors who use the title Oecumenius between the 6th and 9th centuries CE. In this case, he is exclusively being referenced as the author of "On the Apocalypse".

[56] E. Hermanowicz, "Tyconius", in *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[57] Revelation 12:17, NRSV

[58] Tyconius, *Ap.* 4.12. Mindiola performs an in-depth analysis of both Tyconius' and Oecumenius' interpretation of these verses and their surrounding events, both in how they align and how they differ.

mention of any outside influence beyond Herod's own rage. While neither Tyconius nor Oecumenius conflate Herod with Satan on a literal level, they nonetheless assert that such an action was not authored by the mind of man—which does not excuse Herod's actions but does alter the context in which they exist.

Stepping back, the primary elaborations and embellishments to Herod's story (particularly that of the Massacre) from this period are subtle but would carry forward. We see the immediate arrival of embellishments that further mar Herod's character, from accusing him of personally murdering Zacharias in the temple to conflating him with his grandson and insisting that he not only tried to kill Christ, but killed John the Baptist and would later mock Christ before his crucifixion. Meanwhile, a connection begins to emerge between Herod and Satan—not merely in a "Satan is the author of all evil" sense, but in a very literal narrative where Satan directly influences or acts through Herod in an attempt to "defeat" Christ. While the exact context of this connection would waver, it nonetheless is the beginning of the idea that Herod was not acting alone in his decision to murder the innocent children of Bethlehem but may have been guided to such actions by others.

Vitally, these various accretions and embellishments have no single shared motive. Oecumenius and Tyconius write in the interest of clarifying Revelation, and their involvement with understanding Herod is somewhat incidental to that goal. The various authors of the Apocrypha each had their own motives, though the authors of the two explored here appeared to be primarily interested in advancing the belief in Mary and Joseph as divinely appointed figures with greater glory than that which is displayed in the synoptic gospels—and to that end, describing Herod, their chief antagonist, becomes a natural part of that narrative. The apparent confusion by the trio of Herods appears to be just that: confusion. But regardless of the absence

of one unified motive, these various Christian writers would all contribute to the evolving image of Herod the Great, and in doing so, laid the groundwork for the dramas to come.

Herod's Reception: The English Mystery Plays

The Mystery Plays were dramas popular in England from the 13th to 16th century, usually depicting Biblical events from the creation to the crucifixion, and even the apocalypse.[59] Many of these were "cycles", which would consist of a series of plays beginning with the fall of Man in the Garden of Eden, and ending with Doomsday. The Plays were part of the Church's ongoing efforts to guide the English speaking commoners and teach them about the core tenets of their religion—importantly, in their own language, as the Latin spoken in liturgical services and Anglo-Norman French spoken by the nobility were not accessible to these audiences. The Plays sought to lay out the most fundamental ideas of the Christian faith, including the conflict of good against evil over the eternal soul, and the need for moral behavior in order to reach heaven.[60]

The influence of these plays on English culture cannot be overstated, and they are referenced in works still revered today, from Shakespeare to Chaucer. These plays created the image of Herod that the 17th-century English writers drew upon—and the plays certainly had an image of Herod to offer. The plays deride and slander historical figures disliked by the Church in the interest of emphasizing the potential heights of human wickedness. They borrow ideas and concepts from the early Christian works on Herod, creating a figure that appears to be an amalgamation of the three Herods discussed previously, and one possessed by alternatively

[59] "Mystery Plays", in *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, eds. Margaret Drabble, Jenny Stringer, and Daniel Hahn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[60] William Tydeman, "An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.

hubris-driven madness or literal demons.[61] Building on those works, the English Mystery Plays create a figure who is absolutely vile.

Herod was among the most notorious villains in these Mystery Plays, depicted in various ways—most famously, as a raving lunatic, displayed prominently in the Towneley Plays and the York Cycle. In the former, Herod's madness and mood swings appear early and dramatically. In one instance, after soldiers inform him that the Magi will not be returning to his court, he explodes in rage, then calls them honorable, and then finally calls them traitors. "Wé, fy! / Fy on thee devil! … You are knights to trust / Nay, scoundrels ye are, and thieves! … Traitors and well-wars / Knaves, but knights none!"[62] But his characterization is not always that of a man with uncontrollable emotions. Other times, he appears as a cold and calculating tyrant. In the N-Town Plays, Herod decides he must kill the babies of Bethlehem and the surrounding regions before even meeting the Magi personally, just based on the rumors spreading throughout his realm.[63] This is done not out of fear or shame, but as a nearly instinctual response to the

[61] Regarding the jump from ~500s CE to 1500s CE: prior to the Mystery Plays, the reputation of Herod appears to have been in a holding pattern for about a thousand years. For the most part, works that reference him do so similarly to the early Christian works discussed previously. Thus, while it may seem like a hefty jump to assert that they would have any direct influence on playwrights nearly a millennium later, the early attitudes to Herod appear to be consistent, as these plays begin with notions of Herod that are distinct from the image presented in Matthew, but would then spiral out beyond what any of the early Christian writers would insinuate.

Roscoe E. Parker, "The Reputation of Herod in Early English Literature", *Speculum,* vol. 8, no. 1, 1933, 59-67. Parker embarks on a similar investigation, starting from the Mystery Plays and searching for other influences than Matthew on their versions of Herod, concluding that the most potent influences were the Apocrypha and early Christian theology.

[62] "Herod the Great", in *The Towneley Plays* ed. Garrett P. J. Epp (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), lines 217-238. "Translation" to Modern English done myself, with some word translations provided by Epp. The original text is as follows: "Wé, fy! / Fy on thee dewill! … Ye ar knyghtys to trast. / Nay, losels ye ar, and thefys! … Tratoures and well wars, / Knafys, bot knyghtys none!"

[63] Alan J. Fletcher, "The N-Town Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 165. The N-Town Plays is a Play Cycle with some uncertainty in its exact origins, "N-Town" is used to refer to whatever town it may have been performed in or written for (and it may not have been written for any specific place, but rather intended to be toured). The Magi (Kings, in this play) appear and speak before Herod declares his intent, but it appears to be an introduction to the audience—Herod and the Magi do not speak directly until they are led to his hall later.

existence of a rival to his throne.[64] "Boys now blabber, stories of an evil child / In bed he is born, by beasts such a boast is told! / … Shields and spears shall I there sow / My knights shall ride together / For to kill male children."[65] The Plays each emphasize Herod's wickedness and status as the chief antagonist to Christ in the days of his birth, but they do so in differing ways, with various visions of what such an evil would look like.

The Plays also use different forms of characterization and narrative to emphasize Herod's wickedness. Some, like the Chester and N-Town plays, emphasize his slow, disgusting decline and death as divine punishment, drawing from Josephus' insistence that Herod's death was directly from God but emphasizing it as a direct response to the Massacre of the Innocents.[66] His own evil acts and behavior still play a major part, particularly in the N-Town Plays where he is responsible for the inception of the Massacre—but a strong emphasis on how God punishes him for those things, and would punish other evildoers, takes the stage in the end. In the N-Town Plays, an embodiment of death itself arrives to collect Herod's corpse, and speaks to the audience on his punishment:

> **MORS:** Of King Herod all men beware / That hath rejoiced in pomp and pride
> For all his boast of sheer bliss / he lies now dead here on his side …
> Now he is dead and cast in torment / In hell's pit ever to live!
> His lordship is lost / Now he is as poor as I [Death]
> His body is worm food / His soul in hell painfully / By devils is torn to pieces.[67]

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[64] Coulson-Grigsby, 177. This interpretation is shared by Coulson-Grigsby, who performs an incredibly detailed analysis on the ways in which the various depictions of Herod differed, using different character traits to epitomize evil. She notes that this Herod acts on his own thoughts and is the originator of the idea of the Massacre, in contrast to other plays.

[65] "Play 18: Magi," in *The N-Town Plays* ed. Douglas Sugano (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), lines 86-91. Original text is as follows: "Boys now blaberyn, bostynge of a baron bad / In bedde is born, be bestys such bost is blowe! / … Scheldys and sperys shall I ther sowe, / My knyghtys shalle rydyn on rowe, / Knave chylderyn for to qwelle."

[66] Coulson-Grigsby, 1-2.

[67] "Play 20: Slaughter of Innocents; Death of Herod," in *The N-Town Plays* ed. Douglas Sugano (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), lines 246-258. Original text:
MORS: Of Kynge Herowde all men beware / That hath rejoycyd in pompe and pryde, / For all his boste of blysse ful bare / He lyth now ded here on his syde… / Now is he ded and cast in care / In helle pytt evyr to abyde! / His lordchep is al lorn. / Now is he as pore as I: / Wormys mete is his body; / His sowle in helle ful peynfully / Of develis is al to-torn.

Herod's death and afterlife are repeatedly described as tortuous and disgusting, and Death is clear: *all men* must beware, for this is the fate that awaits them should they act on evil impulses.

One of the most potent and lasting depictions of Herod comes from the Towneley Cycle, as known as the Wakefield Cycle—one of the cycles that emphasizes Herod's actions and abuse of languages to demonstrate wickedness.[68] The cycle is composed of thirty-two "pageants" or plays that seem to have originated in Wakefield, near Yorkshire. The most complete manuscript of the cycle dates it as one of the later Mystery Cycles, though the play may have been in "production" long before.[69] Of particular relevance are two pageants within the cycle: the *Offering of the Magi*, which depicts the Magi's search for the Christ child and their interactions with Herod in the process, and *Magnus Herodes* (Herod the Great), which is dedicated entirely to Herod and the Massacre of the Innocents.

These two plays depict Herod in a manner that would endure in English culture and even scholarly minds for centuries—a vulgar, despondent madman in the throes of a complete emotional breakdown. It is likely this kind of Herod that Shakespeare referenced in *Hamlet*, when the Danish prince tells an actor not to overdo his impassioned speech, saying that to do so "out-Herods Herod. Pray you avoid it."[70] In the *Offering of the Magi,* Herod learns of the foreigners who are seeking the King of the Jews, and devolves into a rant where he

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[68] Coulson-Grigsby repeatedly emphasizes that while the raving lunatic depiction of Herod would dominate English culture and memory, and even scholarly discussions, it was *not* the universal depiction—and while he is consistently evil, the nature of that evil changes. However, for the purposes of understanding how Herod came to be perceived after these plays, this abundant depiction is arguably the most relevant.

[69] Peter Meredith, "The Towneley Cycle", in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 134-6. The name "Towneley" is borrowed from the family who held the most complete manuscript when it became of scholarly interest in the nineteenth century.

[70] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2.14-5 (Act, Scene, Lines). The use of "this Herod" pertaining to the version of Herod that is a vulgar and raving madman, visible in the Towneley plays *as well as* the York Cycle; there is no clear evidence that Shakespeare was making reference to the Towneley play specifically, but the description invokes this imagery rather than the more wiley Herods described later.

simultaneously accuses them of being madmen, and admits that in his depressed state, he himself has begun to go mad.[71] While his presence is relatively brief, and his actions relatively limited, his lunacy and rage already portray him as a vile human being who is holding on by a thread.

Coulson-Grigsby, who performs an elaborate investigation of the subtle distinctions between the different Herods in the Mystery Cycles, notes that this Herod is emotionally unstable and undergoes violent mood shifts—from despair, to fear, to wrath—but is still somewhat lucid and capable of acting of his own volition, which is not always true in his Mystery Cycle depictions. She further notes that the kind of madness Herod is beginning to portray is reminiscent of the madness described by Tertullian that is indicative of demonic possession.[72] The Towneley Cycle depicts a Herod who is not only wrathful, but insane in such a way that the audience would recognize as a signs that he had let in darker evils than man can muster, much like the influence of Satan, on which that Tyconius and Oecumenius speculated on.

In *Magnus Herodes*, the Towneley Herod comes into his own as an incredibly wicked figure, expressed through his violent and vulgar language. As mentioned, this behavior indicates to the Christian audience of the period that Herod possesses a kind of irrationality and madness that would be perceived as both innately sinful, and a sign that he had welcomed darker evils into their mind. This Herod has a messenger address the audience directly, *threatening* them not to mention the new infant king he has been hearing about. He is insecure and fears usurpation from all sides.[73] He rants and rages to his "subjects" (the audience), his messenger, and his soldiers, being so overcome with wrath that he repeatedly describes physical symptoms—literally feeling that he will burst from anger, and that he cannot breathe.[74]

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[71] "The Offering of the Magi", in *The Towneley Plays* ed. Garrett P. J. Epp (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), lines 283-330.

[72] Coulson-Grigsby, 247-9.

[73] "Herod the Great," lines 40-52.

[74] Ibid., lines 247-250; 340-351.

This madness comes to a head when, in a desperate attempt to stop the king's ravings, a counselor suggests a solution: "Throughout Bethlehem / and every other place / Make soldiers prepare / And put to death / All male children / Of two years age / And within; / This child may ye kill."[75] In this play, the Massacre of the Innocents is not Herod's idea, but rather the idea of one of his subjects who fears him and his rage.[76] What follows is one of the most potent embellishments of Herod and the Massacre that would occur: the addition of numbers. Already, the Herod portrayed here has more evil acts and traits to be feared and despised than those of the Herod described in Matthew, or any of the early Christian works; however, none of his actions strictly *exceed* those of the other Herods. However, the Towneley Herod does not just slay some unspecified number of children to protect his throne—his soldiers execute one hundred and forty-four *thousand* infant boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas, all to sate his wrath and calm his fears.[77]

The Towneley Cycle presents perhaps one of the most sickeningly evil Herods, relative to earlier writings and the other Mystery Cycles. However, he is not just "evil"; he is complex. He embodies most of the somewhat contradictory characteristics described previously; he is mad and raving, but also cold and deceptively cruel. He is pathetic and insecure, but his incredible power and authority allows him to quell his fears with unfathomable violence. In the midst of it all, he kills 144,000 children because of myths and rumors that a usurper *might* arise from within their ranks; rumors that his fear and acts of violence would only exacerbate. Even if one takes

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[75] Ibid., lines 367-374. "Translation" to Modern English done myself, with some word translations provided by Epp. The original text is as follows:
"Thrugoutt Bedlem / And ilk othere stede / Make knyghtys ordeyn / And put unto dede / All knave chyldren / Of two yerys brede / And within; / This chyld may ye spyll"

[76] This fact, along with the recurring implications that Herod's madness itself is the consequence of demonic possession, strongly parallels with the conclusions of Oecumenius and Tyconius—namely, that Herod is a wicked man, even though he may not have been the one to come up with these evil actions.

[77] "Herod the Great," lines 703-706: "A hundreth thowsand, I watt [think], And fourty ar slayn, And four thowsand. Therat. Me aght [I ought] be fayn [glad]."

The Gospel of Matthew as a complete historical fact, this version of Herod is so far removed from it that it borders on satire and parody.[78]

Scholarly work on the Mystery Plays as a whole, and morality plays in general, suggests that this is not necessarily the result of misinterpretation of Matthew or the historical record—rather, the gulf between the Herod of Matthew and the early Christian writers, and the visions of Herod presented in the N-Town Plays and the Towneley Plays, was likely the result of intentional embellishment and dramatization on the part of the authors. The plays needed to appeal to the broadest English audience possible—they were to be entertaining and, more importantly, educational in the most vital parts of their theology. They taught the stories that the Church considered most important, and they did so in ways that would linger in the memories of their audiences and convince them to adhere to the messages within.

While their purpose was primarily religious, the fact that these plays were written to appeal to and convince an audience of laypeople heavily influenced their style and narrative structure. In theory, loyalty to the scriptures and Church doctrine would seem to be paramount, but, in reality, the ultimate concern was getting the messages of good against evil and heaven against hell across. While little is known about the authors of these plays, the growth of these cycles out of the preceding centuries of secular drama and liturgy combined with analysis of the extant works indicates that the authors were very willing to exaggerate and dramatize any piece of scripture or Church history if it would be more memorable to the audience.[79]

Medieval theatre historian William Tydeman notes one prominent example of this, found in the dichotomies between “heroes” and “villains”, or more accurately saints and sinners. The saints and God-loving characters in these plays speak simply and clearly, with the intent of

[78] Tydeman, 27.
[79] Ibid., 26.

making their ideas easier to digest, and their attitudes more palatable to low-class English speakers than that of a pretentious scholar. Meanwhile, the wicked figures who defy God do so in flamboyant ways that are almost comical, and they become examples of the epitome of evil that mankind can achieve.[80]

It is in these plays that the most significant embellishments and departures from Matthew's original depiction of Herod arose, for one purpose: to create a villain and antagonist to the Christ child; a villain who would demonstrate the human potential for evil, while serving as a cautionary tale, telling the audience that no man can act against God and escape punishment, on Earth or after. In this regard, Herod departs from being primarily a historical and biblical figure, and becomes a literary and allegorical one. This is not to say that the playwrights did not believe what they wrote, or were uninterested in loyalty to the Bible; rather, they seem to have viewed such embellishments as necessary to capture the attention of the uneducated populace, and saw no issue in portraying a wicked man as *deeply* wicked, or a righteous man as vibrantly righteous.[81]

The precise nature of Herod as an allegorical and literary figure in these plays is made clearest in the variety of portrayals that exist. While all are unquestionably evil beyond what Matthew describes, they display different and somewhat contradictory visions of evil. In this regard, Herod becomes a vessel for what kind of wickedness the author believes to be the most potent opposition to Christ, and there is no universal agreement on what such evil looks like. But

[80] Tydeman's thoughts are complete and difficult to adequately summarize: "There is a demotic orientation which overrides the routines of organized worship…the virtuous being endowed with a welcome robustness of utterance…rendering goodness palatable. The vicious may lack subtlety, but their overt defiance of God's will renders them comic as well as sinister, and they stand out as graphic emblems of the human perversions of which evil is capable. There is little hesitation shown in deriding those authoritarian figures—emperors, kings, prelates, governors—who set themselves up in opposition to the Supreme Being." Tydeman, 26.

[81] Ibid., 26-7.

for the playwrights, it is real, and the people must be warned of it, and of the consequences that away all those who give in to it.

Conclusion

Herod the Great was a real person, a complicated human being, about whom we have a considerable amount of historical information. He was by no means a perfect ruler, and was likely responsible for many cruel and capricious acts that would be the start of his reputation. However, perceptions of him in the eyes of 17th and 18th century English writers seem wildly out of proportion relative to what our historical records actually describe. But these notions do not appear out of thin air. The Gospel of Matthew describes Herod briefly, but in doing so attributes to him a terrible act: the indiscriminate murder of an unknown number of infants in an attempt to slay the Christ child before he can become King of the Jews. This act, though unsubstantiated by other historical records, would become one of the defining points of his reign.

However, even if one takes the Gospel of Matthew and its events as historical fact, the assertions made about Herod's character and his place relative to all other wicked men of history seem absurd. This is no small part because the English writers, who made such seemingly outlandish claims as Herod being the author of "horrid cruelties, scarce ever parallel'd (sure never exceeded) by any Age"[82] were not operating simply off of Matthew, but rather from centuries of cultural tradition that viewed Herod was one of the quintessential villains of Christianity and the world at large. This tradition appears to have begun with early Christian writings, including apocryphal works that attribute greater evils to Herod in the interest of contrasting him with Mary and Joseph, and that frequently confuse Herod the Great with his relatives Herod Antipas and Herod Agrippa, each of which had negative reputations of their own

[82] L'Estrange, 2.

amongst Christians. Meanwhile, theologians like Tyconius and Oecumenius, who theorized that Satan himself acted through Herod, introduced the idea that Herod may not have been acting, or even thinking, alone in committing the Massacre.

These developments come to a head with the rise of the late Medieval Mystery Plays in England, where authors sought to make dichotomies between good and evil incredibly clear, plain, and captivating in their own right—even at the expense of textual accuracy and loyalty. While they likely did not believe they were "lying" or misrepresenting their texts, they were aware that to captivate an audience of laypersons, they would need compelling characters and clear morals.[83] Thus was born a version of Herod that is comically evil—culminating with the Towneley Herod, who raves and rages until he cannot breathe, who is portrayed as mad to the point of implying demonic possession, and who, at the suggestion of a terrified counselor, orders the execution of 144,000 infants.

Regardless of their motives and justifications however, the version of Herod these plays created would persist—and while the dramatic heights of his villainy would by no means become the definitive truth in the English mind, it becomes hardly a surprise that English Christians in the centuries that followed would find truth in describing Herod's actions as among the worst to ever be committed by man. For the Mystery Playwrights, Herod was a literary and allegorical figure for use in their narratives and moral plays—but that distinction was lost on the writers and self-styled historians who would be influenced by these plays; and thus for centuries, the historical and allegorical Herods became near inseparable, and the historical record is still muddied because of it.

[83] Tydeman, 27.

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