

Herod's Political Genius: Recovery from His Support of Cassius & Mark Antony against Augustus; Ability to Know What to Do under Pressure: Consulting the Priests & Scribes to Learn Birthplace of Messiah, Matt 2:4

Nevertheless, Herod is a political genius. On two occasions he came to the aid of men who would ultimately be defeated by Augustus during his advance toward becoming the first emperor of the Roman Empire. After the assassination of Julius Caesar a power vacuum occurred in Rome. Gaius Octavius, later to be known as Augustus, was in competition for control of the Empire with several noted figures. He was only 18 when Caesar died but his genius enabled him to ultimately replace his uncle as ruler of Rome.

That which presently controlled the west was the Second Triumvirate of Augustus, Mark Antony, and Marcus Lepidus. The east was occupied by Brutus and Cassius, both of whom were part of the conspiracy that assassinated Julius Caesar.

Cassius and Herod were friends. In the struggle for power Herod bet a good bit of his fortune on Cassius by loaning him the money to raise an army to fight Augustus and Antony.

That confrontation occurred at Philippi in late 42 B.C. In two battles the armies of both Brutus and Cassius were defeated capped off by each man committing suicide.

But Herod was a shrewd politician who knew how to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear:

Immediately Herod does a very smart thing. He takes off for Rome and he goes to see Anthony and Octavius, and he levels with them. He walked in and explained to them that he was a friend of Cassius, Cassius was a Roman, and he was a friend of the Roman Empire. Antony said, "This man has been my friend, I will stand by him forever." And he told Octavius about the wonderful things that Herod had done. Octavius thought he was great and from that time thought Herod was one of the greatest men he had ever known and he became one of his greatest friends.¹

Later Herod gave Antony the money to finance a fleet of ships that Antony used against Augustus at the Battle of Actium. Again, Herod invested in the loser and again he had to meet with Augustus to explain himself. He delivered his mea culpa to the victor on the island of Rhodes:

Herod again leveled with Augustus and he told him that he had paid for Antony's fleet and were it not for the fact that Cleopatra hated him so much he would have been with Antony in that battle because he always stuck with his friends. Augustus said, "You have been my friend, and because you have been honest with me, put your crown back on, you are still king of the Jews."²

Herod was always faithful to Rome and by application he was always faithful to Palestine. He did not intend to allow these Parthians to carry out a plan that would allow them to regain control of his country. He had fought a long battle with the religious Jews and had, as far as he knew, prevented them from regaining control through the line of David. But this news was to Herod a threat to the stability of Palestine and he felt he must act quickly.

¹ R. B. Thieme, Jr., *Matthew*, MP3 CD (Houston: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 1965), 438-005.

² Ibid.



Herod's trepidation was immediately transformed into a sober-minded counterattack to eliminate this latest threat to his autonomous rule of Palestine.

Herod's ability to quickly shift mental gears was one of his greatest assets as a ruler:

The personality of Herod was impressive, and he was possessed of great physical strength. His intellectual powers were far beyond the ordinary; his will was indomitable; he was possessed of great tact, when he saw fit to employ it; in the great crises of his life he was never at a loss what to do; and no one has ever accused Herod the Great of cowardice. There were in him two distinct individualities, as was the case with Nero. Two powers struggled in him for the mastery, and the lower one at last gained complete control. During the first part of his reign there were evidences of large-heartedness, of great possibilities in the man. But the bitter experiences of his life, the endless whisperings and warnings of his court, the irreconcilable spirit of the Jews, as well as the consciousness of his own wrongdoing, changed him into a Jewish Nero: a tyrant, who bathed his own house and his own people in blood.

The demons of Herod's life were jealousy of power, and suspicion, its necessary companion.³

Herod's trepidation stimulated his innate ability to know exactly what to do to resolve his dilemma. He hatched a scheme to learn the location of this Davidic progeny and then utilize the Magi to lead him to the child.

This is a sad commentary on the spiritual status of Herod and the people of Jerusalem. The Magi have just announced that the long-awaited Messiah has been born. They have asked for His whereabouts so they can go to worship Him. They were no doubt stunned that the current king of the Jews did not know and had to ask the priests and scribes to find out.

Matthew 2:3 - When Herod the king heard this, he had great trepidation, and all Jerusalem with him. (CTL)

v. 4 - Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. (NASB)

Herod did not know where the Messiah was prophesied to be born but he knew where to go to get the answer. So he called in two groups of authorities on the Old Testament:

"Chief priests" refers to the hierarchy, made up of the current high priest and any who had formerly held this post and a substantial number of other leading priests. The "teachers of the law," or "scribes" were experts in the Old Testament and in its copious oral tradition. Because much civil law was based on the Old Testament and the interpretations of the Old Testament fostered by the leaders, the "scribes" were also "lawyers." (pp. 86-87)

The vast majority of the scribes were Pharisees; the priests were Sadducees. The two groups barely got along. But Matthew does not say the two groups came together at the same time; Herod, unloved by either group, may well have called both to guard against being tricked. If the Pharisees and Sadducees barely spoke to one another, there was less likelihood of collusion.⁴ (p. 87)

³ Henry E. Dosker, "Herod," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 1381.

⁴ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1984), 8:86-87.



Imagine the astonishment of the Magi. They have endured a thousand-mile trip over mountain ranges, deserts, and rivers on horseback to come worship the Messiah and the people He is born to rule don't know where He is.

The current king of the Jews doesn't know so he calls in the spiritual hierarchy to find out. They obviously aren't interested because if they were they would have already informed Herod and the people about the blessed event.

